

“Stupid Jobs are Good to Relax With”

by Hal Niedzviecki

Springsteen kicked off his world tour in Toronto’s Massey Hall a while back. Along with record company execs and those who could afford the exorbitant prices scalpers wanted for tickets, I was in attendance. As Bruce rambled on about the plight of the itinerant Mexican workers, I lolled in the back, my job, as always, to make myself as unapproachable as possible – no easy feat, trapped as I was in a paisley vest and bow-tie combo. Nonetheless, the concert was of such soporific proportions and the crowd so dulled into pseudo-reverence, I was able to achieve the ultimate in ushering – a drooping catatonia as close as you can get to being asleep while on your feet at a rock concert.

But this ushering nirvana wouldn’t last long. For an usher, danger takes many forms including wheel-chair bound patrons who need help going to the inaccessible bathroom, vomiting teens, and the usher’s worst nemesis, the disruptive patron. And yes, to my semi-conscious horror, there she was: well dressed, blonde, drunk and doped up, swaying in her seat and...*clapping*. Clapping. In the middle of Springsteen’s solo dirge about Pancho or Pedro or Luisa she was clapping.

Sweat beaded on my forehead. The worst was happening. She was in my section. Her clapping echoed through the hall, renowned for its acoustics. The Boss glared from the stage, his finger-picking folkiness no match for the drunken rhythm of this fan. Then, miracle of miracles, the song ended. The woman slumped back into her seat. Bruce muttered something about how he didn’t need a rhythm section. Placated by the adoring silence of the well-to-do, he launched into an even quieter song about an ever more desperate migrant worker.

I lurked in the shadows, relaxed the grip I had on my flashlight (the usher’s only weapon). Springsteen crooned. His guitar twanged. It was so quiet you could hear the rats squirreling around the ushers’ subterranean change rooms. The woman roused herself from her slumber. She leaned forward in her seat, as if suddenly appreciating the import of her hero’s message. I wiped the sweat off my brow, relieved. But slowly, almost imperceptibly, she brought her arms up above her head. I stared, disbelieving. Her hands waving around in the air until...boom! Another song ruined, New York record execs and L.A. journalists distracted from their calculations of Bruce’s net worth, the faint cry of someone calling, “Usher! Do something!”

For several years now, I have relied on stupid jobs to pay my way through the world. This isn’t because I am a stupid person. On the contrary, stupid jobs are a way to avoid the brain numbing idiocy of full-time employment. They are the next best thing to having no job at all. They will keep you sane, and smart.

I’m lazy sometimes. I don’t always feel like working. On the stupid job, you’re allowed to be lazy. All you have to do is show up. Hey, that’s as much of an imposition on my life as I’m ready to accept. Does the Boss go to work everyday? I don’t think so. He’s The Boss.

Understanding the stupid job is the key to wading your way through the muck of the working week, and dealing with such portentous concepts as The Youth Unemployment Crisis and The Transformation of the Work Place. So sit back and let me explain. Or, as I used to say behind the scowl of my

shining grin: Hi, how are you this evening? Please follow me and I will show you to your seat.

“Out of Work: Is There Hope for Canada’s Youth?” blurts the October issue of *Canadian Living*. My answer? There is more hope than ever. I’m not talking about ineffectual governments and their well-intentioned ‘partners’ the beneficent corporations all banding together to ‘create’ jobs. After all, what kind of jobs do you think these corporations are going to create? Jobs that are interesting, challenging and resplendent with possibilities? Hardly. These are going to be *stupid* jobs. Bring me your college graduates, your aspiring business mavens, your literature lovers and we will find them rote employment where servility and docility are the best things they could have learned at university.

But hope, hope is something altogether different. Hope is the process whereby entire generations learn to undervalue their work, squirm out of the trap of meaningless employment, work less, consume less, and actually figure out how to enjoy life.

I hope I’m right about this. Because the reality of the underemployed, overeducated young people of Canada is that the stupid job is their future. As the middle-aged population continues to occupy all the ‘real’ jobs, as the universities continue to hike tuition prices (forcing students to work and study part-time), as the government continues to shore up employment numbers with make-work and ‘retraining’, there will be more stupid jobs than ever. And these stupid jobs won’t be reserved for the uneducated and poor. In fact, the fertile growth of the stupid job is already reaping a crop of middle-class youngsters whose education and upbringing have, somehow, given away to (supposedly) stalled prospects and uncertain incomes.

These are your grandchildren, your children, your sisters, your cousins, your neighbors. Hey, that might very well be a multi-coloured bow-tie wrapped around your neck.

I took a few tenuous steps down the aisle. All around me, luxurious people hissed in annoyance and extended their claws. Clapping woman was bouncing in her seat. She was smiling. Her face was flushed and joyous. The sound of her hands coming together was deafening. I longed for the floor captain, the front of house manager, the head of security, somebody to come and take this problem away from me. I hit her with a burst of flashlight. Taking advantage of her momentary blindness, I leaned in: Excuse me Miss, I said. You can’t do that. What? she said. That clapping, I said. Listen, she slurred. I paid three hundred dollars to see this. I can do what I want.

My flashlight hand wavered. Correctly interpreting my silence for defeat, she resumed her clapping. Springsteen strummed louder, unsuccessful in his attempt to drown out the beat of luxury, the truth of indulgence. I faded away, the darkness swallowing me up. For a blissful moment, I was invisible.

A lot of young people think their stupid jobs are only temporary. Most of them are right, in a way. Many will move on from being, as I have been, an usher, a security guard a delivery boy, a data coordinator, a publishing intern. They will get marginally better jobs, but what they have learned from their stupid jobs will stay with them forever. Hopefully.

If I’m right, they will learn that the stupid job – and by extension, all jobs – must be approached with willing stupidity. Set your mind free. It isn’t necessary, and it can be an impediment. While your body runs the maze and finds the cheese, let your mind go where it will.

Look at it this way: You’re trading material wealth and luxury for freedom and creativity. To simplify this is to say that while you may have less

money to buy things, you will have a lot more time to think up ways to achieve your goals without buying things. It is remarkable how quickly one comes to value the time to just sit and think. Oddly, many of us seem quite proud of having absolutely no time to think about anything. The words 'I'm so busy' are chanted over and over again like a mantra, an incantation against some horrible moment when we realize we're not *so busy*. In the stupid job universe, time isn't quantifiable. You're making so many dollars an hour, but the on-job perks include day-dreams, poems scribbled on napkins, novels read in utility closets, and long conversations about the sexual stamina of Barney Rubble. How much is an idea worth? An image? A moment of tranquility? A bad joke? The key here is to embrace the culture of anti-work.

Sometime after the Springsteen debacle, I was on delivery dropping newspapers at various locales. I started arguing with my co-worker the van driver about work ethic. I suggested we skip a drop-off or two, claiming that no one would notice and even if they did, we could deny it and no one would care. He responded by telling me that no matter what job he was doing, if he accepted the work, he was compelled to do it right. I disagreed. Cut corners, I argued. Do less for the same amount of pay. That's what they expect us to do, I said. Why else would they pay us so little? Not that day, but some weeks later, he came to see things my way.

What am I trying to tell you? To be lazy?
To set fire to the corporation?

Maybe. Our options might be limited, but they are still options. Somewhere in the bowels of Massey Hall it has probably been noted in my permanent record that I have a bad attitude. That was a mistake. I wasn't trying to have a bad attitude. I was trying to have no attitude.

For a couple of years I hired on as a security guard at the One of a Kind Craft Show, held twice a year in Toronto's Automotive Building at the CNE. Here the middle classes (whoever they are) flocked to buy baubles priced outrageously under the guise of being hand-made. The most successful crafts-people were the ones who sold items that all looked exactly the same. The Christmas Tree Ornament Lady packed in the big money. What she made in one hour, I made in two days. Her handcrafted mass produced ornaments were a kind of torpid corollary to the long hours I spent trolling the aisles watching the employed hordes buy items about as one of a kind as Roch Voisine.

The people who worked with me were fascinating to study. We were all university graduates (or students) with artistic pretensions. We loved to tell jokes on our walkie-talkies. There was a lot of pot smoking. The use of code words over the radio was predominant. Whenever something had to be done, it was difficult to track one of us down. Many of us were outside in the parking lot getting high. We worked fifteen hour days. The pay was low, but the hours amassed. I didn't have to explain my stupid jobs philosophy to anyone there. They were way ahead of me. They were my professors. Like the ushers at Massey Hall, they were painters and artists and designers and musicians. But many of them had no skill, no craft; this latter group deserves special mention in the stupid jobs pantheon. These are urban creatures, aberrant socialites well versed in anarchist thought, the best punk bands in Saskatchewan, and what's on cable at 3:30 am. They can't imagine working 9 to 5, have strange ideas, and probably deserve paycheques just for being their loquacious selves.

What I should have told my friend in the delivery van was that when working the stupid job, passivity is the difference between near slavery and partial freedom. It's a mental distinction. Your body

is still in the same place for the same amount of time (unless you're unsupervised). But your mind is figuring things out. Figuring out how many days you need to work to afford things like hard-to-get tickets to concerts by famous American icons. Or figuring out why it is that at the end of the week, most people are too busy or too tired to do anything other than spend their hard earned dollars on fleeting moments of cotton candy ecstasy as ephemeral as lunch hour. Personally, I'd take low level servitude over a promotion that means I'll be working weekends for the rest of my life. You want me to work weekends? You better give me the rest of the week off.

Meanwhile, it's not like my life is all that great. I might claim to have determined the best way to live, but I remain - like so many others would be social engineers - caught in the trap of my own contradictions. Every year at the end of the Craft Show the worst offenders were barred from ever working the Craft Show again. I didn't get banned. I'm still a little embarrassed about it.

Montreal has one of the highest unemployment rates of any city in Canada. Young people in that city are as likely to have full-time jobs as they are to spend their nights arguing about Quebec separation. Not coincidentally, some of the best young Canadian writers, comic artists and underground periodicals are from that city. We're talking about the spoken word capitol of North America here. Creativity plus unemployment equals art.

The burgeoning stupid job aesthetic is well documented in another youth culture phenomenon, the vaunted zine (photocopied periodicals published by individuals for fun, not money). Again, it doesn't take genius to make the connection between the youth culture of stupid jobs and the urgency and creativity zine publishers display when writing about their lives. "So why was I dishonest and subversive?" asks Brendan Bartholomew in an

article contributed to the popular Wisconsin zine *Temp Slave*. "Well, I've been sabotaging employers for so long, it's become second nature. It's in my blood. I couldn't stop if I wanted to."

Slacking off, stealing stuff, doing as little as possible, relishing my lack of responsibility, this is what the work-place has taught me to do. This is the stupid job mantra. It isn't about being poor. The stupid job aesthetic is not about going hungry. Canada is a country of excess. You cannot have a stupid job culture when people are genuinely, truly, worried that they are going to starve in the streets.

Nevertheless, the tenets of the stupid job revolution are universal - work is mainly pointless; if you can think of something better to do, you shouldn't have to work; it's better to have a low paying job and freedom than a high paying job and a 60 hour work week. It was Bruce's drunken fan who highlighted the most important aspect of what will one day be known as the stupid job revolution; with money, you think you can do whatever you want, but you rarely can. Without money, you can be like Bartholomew - a post-modern rat, a stowaway writing his diaries from the comfort of his berth at the bottom of the sinking ship.

My father's plight is a familiar one.

He started his working life at thirteen in Montreal. He's fifty-five now. His employer of twelve years forced him to take early retirement. The terms are great, and if he didn't own so much stuff (and want more stuff) he could live comfortably without ever working again. But he feels used, meaningless, rejected.

On his last day, I helped him clean out his office. The sight of him stealing staplers, blank disks and post-it note pads was something I'll never forget. It was a memo he was writing to his own soul (note: they *owe* me).

But the acquisition of more stuff is not what he needs to put a life of hard work behind him. I wish that he could look back on his years of labour and think fondly of all the hours he decided not to work, those hours he spent reading a good book behind the closed door of his office, or skipping off early to take the piano lessons he never got around to. Instead of stealing office supplies, he should have given his boss the finger as he walked out the door. Ha ha. I don't care what you think of me. And by the way. I never did.

Despite his decades of labour and my years of being barely employed (and the five degrees we have between us) we have both ended up at the same place. He feels cheated. I don't.