

# A JOB WELL DONE

When work becomes more about money and less about meaning, it may be time to consider a pivot. **Leanne Delap** talks to three people who changed tack and found their calling

**T**HERE COMES A moment in our lives when we do a gut check. We take stock of what we do all day, and determine its value to ourselves and to the world. Legacy is too loaded a word, and too grand a concept, to parse. What I'm talking about is simpler: The good feeling we get from our work, weighed against the time and energy it takes to do it.

During the pandemic, many Americans decided their jobs were exacting an emotional toll, leading to what economists have dubbed "the Great Resignation." The stampede for the office door wasn't as prevalent in Canada, since our "quit rates" were essentially unchanged compared to pre-pandemic levels (according to a November report from CIBC economist Avery Shenfield).

But a November 2021 Statistics Canada Labour Force Survey showed more Canadians reported leaving their jobs because they were "dissatisfied" than at the beginning of the pandemic, although it was still fewer than those who cited the same reason in 2019. It somehow feels true, though: Even Prince Harry, in an interview with *Fast Company* magazine, applauded the Big Quit as "something to be celebrated," because "many people around the world have been stuck in jobs that didn't bring them joy, and now they are putting their mental health and happiness first."

While quitting may sound tempting, most of us are not to the palace born and have bills to pay, so we have to consider the repercussions. If your reckoning happens in mid-career and leads to the realization that meaning has more merit than money, two experts say it's not only possible, but important, to forge a deeper connection between your principles and your work. "We see people 45-plus who are looking to find purpose and live their best life," Mark Brion and Krista Roesler write in a joint email.

"At middle age, people know more about themselves, because they have experienced a lot of life," say the co-founders of Toronto's Psych Company, which offers psychotherapy and life coaching. "They also have a lot more confidence in their capabilities."

They reference U.S. psychologist Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of five basic human needs, from his seminal 1943 paper "A Theory of Human Motivation." By 45, most people have satisfied the more concrete needs at the base of the pyramid – physiological (food, shelter), safety (money and health), love and belonging (family

and friends), and esteem (self-confidence and feeling valued) – and they are ready to fulfill the more abstract need for self-actualization. "At this point in life, one is best prepared to start more in-depth investigations into what purposeful career may be lying around the corner, to fully engage them for the latter half of their careers," Brion and Roesler say.

They have a few solid recommendations to get you started on a new path. First, do a cost-benefit analysis of the life change you are considering, and weigh the pros and cons. Next, do some experiential learning to figure out your new calling. "You can job shadow, volunteer and begin to do some informational interviews to get the process started. You can also learn more about what your life purpose is by paying attention to what makes you jealous of others. This is a sign you would like some of it in your life too."

Finally, envision how you want to feel in your new job. "Visualization is scientifically supported – in fact, when we properly visualize our goals, new neural pathways are created to support the new realities that we create in our minds. If there's anything worth being creative about, and trying to imagine, it's what we want in and out of our careers."

What you gain from finding your purpose is passion and fulfillment: "You get to live a life of peak experiences," they say.

Here, three case studies of Canadians who followed their hearts to seek deeper meaning in their work lives.

## #1 THE IMPACT PRODUCER

**SHOLEH FABBRI** remembers how great she felt when she was working on a couple of fundraising projects before she made her big pivot. "There was an opportunity for me to help with a silent auction for victims of the bush-fires in Australia," where she had lived and worked before her 13-year stint at Global TV's *Entertainment Tonight Canada*. Then, as everything shut down in early 2020,



Fabbri, in production during a virtual case-study panel

SHOLEH FABBRI

Fabbri, the show's executive producer, pulled together a five-night fundraiser "Canada Together: In Concert," featuring Shania Twain, William Shatner and Christopher Plummer, which raised \$300,000 for Food Banks Canada.

"Those two things began to land for me," she says. "In my head, I started to explore what I was going to do." Still, breaking away from her fast-paced life was hard. "I'd covered Cannes, the Oscars, the Grammys, cool things to talk about at cocktail parties. But, what was I doing with all that glamour and excitement?"

"It took the wall falling down on my head," the 44-year-old says about leaving her big TV job after a management change. "I was super scared – what was I outside of that? – worried and nervous and anxious. I went from having a team of 70 to just me."

She took a few months off, completed some online courses and volunteered with Native Child and Family Services in Toronto, all "things completely unrelated to producing television." Fabbri saw a therapist, too. "That was crucial. I wanted to really figure out where my head was at, do a bit of grieving around leaving a job, figure out who am I outside of that space and start paying attention to what lights me up. Where was I most excited?"

She also saw a career counsellor and started taking ▶



Peake, working with local artisan Zaitun Ayiru in Uganda

TREANA PEAKE

people out for coffee. On one coffee date, a peer asked, ‘Have you ever thought about impact producing?’ Fabbri had never heard of it.

‘I was about to walk away from my field, but that made me think I could evolve my job in a whole new way,’ she says. ‘The breadth of my experience had value.’ It recharged her, and made her think about how to make impact producing her job. After getting feedback from her peers on Clubhouse, the audio-based social media app, she launched Good Measure Productions in February 2021.

So what is impact producing? It is about ‘transforming inspiration into impact,’ she says. In other words, building the infrastructure for people to engage in activism by connecting them with concrete, real-world steps. She cites a documentary she produced about endangered cetaceans on the Atlantic coast called *The Last of the Right Whales*, which launched in Canadian theatres in January and will air on CBC in the fall, as an example. ‘We are building screenings, community panels, education guides, discussion guides, letter-writing campaigns, an active social media campaign to build momentum of the conversation.’

There are lots of details to be worked out, but Fabbri is happy she ‘paid attention to the whispers’ urging her to make a change. Today, she is in a completely different headspace, fuelled anew by building something meaningful from the ground up. Before that, ‘I was running on fumes.’

## #2 THE DESIGNER WHO GIVES BACK

Vancouver-based Treana Peake, 48, launched her fashion label, Obakki, in 2005, and showed her collection of made-

in-Canada, award-winning sustainable clothing, selling all over the world, from New York to Paris to Japan. She had been doing development work since high school, and launched a foundation of the same name that drills water wells and provides medical care, educational support and livelihood initiatives in vulnerable areas of Africa, funded with sales from her label. She integrated the experience into her fashion work as a way ‘to talk about hardship in the world, philanthropy and development issues by using a different creative medium.’ She told stories, for example, by incorporating prints made by refugees in settlement camps in Uganda.

But Peake, who met Nickelback rocker Ryan Peake at a Grade 9 dance in their hometown of Hannah, Alta., and married him in 2000, says there was still ‘a detachment between what I wanted to be doing and how I was making an impact.’

In 2019, she stopped ‘doing fashion the way the industry wants it to be done,’ and got off the hamster wheel of producing multiple collections, co-ordinating large wholesale buys and producing all that speculative inventory. She realized, ‘I can have more than fashion in Obakki; it can be more than clothing.’ Other than a showroom in Vancouver, Obakki is now sold online, direct to consumers, and the website is a platform for customers to give back.

The new version of Obakki is a high-end housewares line with a mix of prices and international sourcing, and she does small, capsule fashion collections only when it feels right. The website features ‘purpose-driven’ items by artisans Peake works with in Uganda, Kenya, Mali and Mexico, and the profits from their sale are reinvested in community development projects. ‘We work with the whole community on their goals.’

These giveback pieces are shown and sold alongside those by more established artisans from countries such as Italy, Japan, Belgium and Australia. The juxtaposition, she says, ‘elevates everything.’ It also enables her to charge what the purpose-driven pieces are worth. ‘We can assign the value,’ she says, ‘and a pot from Uganda is \$200, because that is what it is worth in this market.’

Looking at retailing ‘through a development lens,’ Peake says, ‘allows me to put people before profit.’ This approach reaps rewards for her, as well. ‘I get asked a lot, ‘You are such a happy person and why is that?’ It is not that I don’t have stress or conflict in my life, I do. Life is a mixture of happy and sad. But what really makes me happy is that I have purpose: I know exactly what I’m doing and what I’m doing it for.’

Melhus with his local guides, post-tour of the Great Wall in China



DAVE VINCENT & PAUL MELHUS

### #3 THE TRAVEL CONNECTORS

Paul Melhus took a career leap when he was in his mid-50s. He and his life partner, Dave Vincent, have been software entrepreneurs and business partners since they graduated from Montreal's McGill University in 1983.

At the end of a trip to Beijing in 2006, they realized they hadn't seen the Great Wall. They didn't want to do the so-called Disney version and join flocks of tourists who go to see the part of the wall closest to the city, so they hired someone to drive them two hours out of town. "We passed this group of 20 women. Two of them came after us, and offered us an impromptu tour, something they do when there isn't any farming. We were skeptical, but they spent two hours with us, and we learned something about the history and their lives." At the end, there

was an imperative to buy tchotchkes to pay for the service.

The idea for Tours By Locals came to Melhus and Vincent on the plane ride home, and they continued to talk about it for two years. The 2008 recession gave them the opportunity to build out the business, which connects travellers with locals for a more uncomplicated experience. "It was a stressful time, with the world crashing down around our heads, but exiting from another business in the end freed us up to build up the content."

Their insight paid off. "It was how I want to travel," says Melhus. "To choose who I want to do a private tour with, to not have to worry about carrying money." Tours By Locals takes care of the payments online, with a team to vet guides and to troubleshoot. "It doesn't feel like such a commercial transaction."

In 2019, when some 5,000 guides around the world gave 123,000 individual tours, a big chunk of investment capital came in. Then in March of 2020, bookings dropped by 98 per cent. Melhus, the CEO (Vincent is CTO), refocused on Canadian domestic tours, and kept as many staff as possible. They also set up a \$500,000 relief fund to keep local guides afloat around the world. "In Madagascar, they didn't have CERB," says Melhus. "I'm an

optimist. I made the call to keep it going. This is about travelling slower."

The traveller benefits, because they "actually interact with a local person to get to know them," and, for the guides, these are good-paying jobs. The average tour costs \$650, but guides set their own prices, ranging from \$100 to \$1,000 a day, depending on the country, and take home 75 per cent of the fee. "I want to create a business that is ennobling for the tour guides," he says, noting that many people who depend on tourism in developing countries live on the margins, where "the tourism sector means hanging out outside cruise ship terminals."

For Melhus, it's also about legacy. "At some point, I'm going to be eaten by a bear," says the 69-year-old. "I want to create an entity that lives on after I leave." 