

Rising to your level of misery

By [MaryAnn McKibben Dana](#)

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They can't pay you enough money to do a job you hate.

I have a lot of lasting memories of my grandfather—homegrown tomatoes, “Heart and Soul” duets on the piano—but that’s the primary piece of wisdom I remember him passing along to me. And it’s a good one.

I was thinking about Grandpa’s advice when I read a recent piece in the *New York Times*, “[Rising to your level of misery at work.](#)” In it Arthur Brooks talks about the tendency to get promoted past the place where you find joy and passion in your profession:

People generally have a “bliss zone,” a window of creative work and responsibility to match their skills and passions. But then the problems start. Those who love being part of teams and creative processes are promoted to management. Happy engineers become stressed-out supervisors. Writers find themselves in charge of other writers and haranguing them over deadlines. In my years in academia, I saw happy professors become bitter deans, constantly reminiscing about the old days doing cutting-edge research and teaching the classes they loved.

Brooks says many people respond to this happiness gap by drinking heavily. What he recommends instead is finding a way back to that bliss point. As my mother said recently, “Whenever I was feeling sad, I had a friend who told me to remember the last time I was happy and then return to what I was doing then.” I like it.

But it’s not easy. Maybe the last time you were happy was before the chronic illness struck or during your marriage that has now ended. In the case of work, sometimes shifting things away from misery means lost income you’ve come to count on. More deeply, we’re conditioned to see success as a function of progress. Moving back is synonymous with failure.

This article was tugging at me for several days last week until I finally figured out why: both my husband and I have been in this situation in recent years. In his case, he revised his job description to better reflect his gifts and his value to his industry. In my case, I have been invited to apply for positions that would make sense on a certain assumed trajectory: *You've been a pastor of a small church? How about a larger church?* In one case, I got pretty far along in the process before realizing that the job, as wonderful as it was, was not mine to do. Of course, not every job is pure bliss—even the bliss zone has its headaches. But as I joked to a friend soon after taking myself out of the running, “That’s a good ulcer. It’s just not my ulcer.”

In my husband’s and my case, we didn’t make these moves because of some special cleverness on our part. It was the practice of sabbath over the course of many years that showed us the way and helped us clarify what we love, what we value, and what we want our lives to look like. That’s what makes it such an important practice. I’ve preached on the story of the Hebrew people as slaves in Egypt and how Pharaoh heaped more and more work on them. And I said, “Sabbath isn’t about being well-rested so you can go back to Pharaoh’s job site. Sabbath is about realizing that *you don’t want to make those bricks anymore.*”

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