

THE MARKS WE LEAVE

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A typical episode of *Tabloid Wars*—a reality TV series that follows reporters and editors from the *New York Daily News*—starts with the hectic sights and sounds of the newsroom. The office is packed with people and files. Employees are organized like canned sardines, and fluorescent lamps struggle to light up the entire room. The sounds of TV news broadcasting, telephones ringing, keyboards tapping, and people talking amalgamate and become a cacophony. Excitement and delight float in the air when there is a murder, especially a gory one. The scene is chaotic and almost inhumane in its craziness.

Each day reporters and editors fight against the 10:30pm deadline. Reporters run, interview, feed the information to editors, and repeat. Editors listen to reporters, write, edit, and repeat. After a day's frantic hustling, they go home for a shower and a four-hour sleep, and then they return to do it all over again. To deal with the pressure of beating their rivals at the *New York Post*, these newspeople need stamina, skill, and total devotion. Their work takes away their space and time for reflection, as they are completely preoccupied with informing others about the world.

Every Wednesday during my summer journalism class we watched an episode of the *Tabloid Wars* to get a taste of life in the newsroom—a career I may want to pursue. Every week, it left me worried and a little scared. What do these newspeople get out of their careers in return for their devotion? What am I about to step into?

Their rushed lifestyle and utter devotion to their careers are similar to those of typical company men in corporate America. In Ellen Goodman's essay "The Company Man," Phil, one of the six vice presidents, was a hopeful candidate for the presidency of the company. He, like all workaholics, valued work over family, relationships, and even himself. He spent all hours of the day in the office without realizing how much he neglected his wife and children, and even his own well-being. Finally, one Sunday, a day when most

families gather to spend time together, at 3:00am, a time when most people are asleep, Phil passed away. His death seemed as tragic as his life in that he was not remembered by anyone—the president of the company began the search for his replacement on the very afternoon of his funeral. What’s worse, everyone seemed to have known how he would end up and watched him, step by step, walking to his grave. All of the extra hours he spent working or worrying about his work seemed to come to nothing. We pity Phil’s life, his loyalty to the corporation deserving more than just an indifferent remark at his funeral that “he will be missed.” We feel sorry for his family, his children growing up without fatherly love. Yet, even as we acknowledge what a miserable life he lived—he could spare no time for family, for fun, for love, Phil represents just a mildly more extreme case than that of many workers in our competitive society. Many people neglect their emotional responsibilities to devote themselves to status and social acceptance—something seemingly priceless—in their careers.

There is a shade of Phil inside of many of us—the reporters in the newsroom, the high school students spending their holidays in college classrooms, and many other strivers prioritizing work over family and well-being. Each person is born with a limited amount of energy, and in order to excel in the competition society imposes on us, we each face a choice. Phil apparently couldn’t excel at both work and family, and he chose the one that often garners others’ recognition—wealth, status, and respect, all the trappings of social acceptance. On the other side of the spectrum, yet not so different from Phil, lives Annie Dillard, giving her all to achieving her ambitions alone. In her essay “Transfiguration,” Dillard indicates her state of solitude as she describes how she befriends her cat and examines insects’ corpses as a pastime. She realizes that something is missing and therefore goes camping in the woods, hoping to figure out how she wants to live. During her trip, she sees a moth flying into a burning candle; it puts up a miraculous fight. At last, the moth becomes a wick and burns as a part of the candle. The candle, with two burning wicks, draws light to her, both literally and metaphorically, and gives her a moment of epiphany: she was right to live in solitude and to pursue her passion and career as a writer.

Choosing a life path is never straightforward, since each human being is born with contradictions, and life is complicated. Even the most work-orient-

ed people long for the company of their families, and even the most secluded people sometimes crave the presence and friendship of others. Brian Doyle writes in his essay “Joyas Voladoras” that even the most extroverted people are often “utterly open with no one” for fear of a constantly harrowed heart (30). We shelter ourselves from pain, as Doyle puts it, by “brick[ing] up [our] hearts” (30). However, no matter how impregnable our walls are, some of the most mundane moments of our life can trigger their collapse. Annie Dillard says at the end of her essay that she keeps three candles on the table and lights them up when there are visitors: “The flames move light over everyone’s skin, draw light to the surface of the faces of my friends. When the people leave I never blow the candles out, and after I’m asleep they flame and burn” (400). She is implying that even though she may still live an isolated life accompanied by bugs and her cat, she wants both friendship and an audience. She wants her work to be read, to become the candle to enlighten others, just as the moth did to her. She wants to extend her influence even after her death, just as her inspiration, the writer Arthur Rimbaud, did by affecting her with his works of literature.

To live a life is to leave marks. The marks we leave may be the only way we have to prove that we existed. We are comforted by the hope that our efforts may someday leave a deep impression on the world, thereby making us known. The marks we leave on family and friends also indicate our capacity for love. These marks can reassure us as we look into vortex of oblivion and ponder what will remain after we die.

Perhaps Phil deserves pity as much as criticism. Whether by nature or nurture, he was “a perfect Type A” and therefore chose the life of a workaholic (629). He made his mark with his extraordinary work ethic. Goodman says he worked like “the Important People” (629). He was one, at least on certain levels. The effort he put into his career was extraordinary, and he did receive respect from the colleagues who saw him as one of the viable candidates for president of the company. He likely put all his heart into his career, not only for status and fame, but also for a better life for his children, especially his youngest son. The agony Phil’s youngest son will likely feel when he recalls the attempts he made trying to be close to his father, however, is another mark that Phil left.

Phil made a choice between family and career, not being able to attend to both. Perhaps he found charts and numbers easier to grapple with than emotions and relationships. Wealth is concrete and measurable, while a family relationship is elusive and unpredictable. Perhaps he valued peer respect over familial intimacy. He plunged into his career with all the justified reasons but forgot to reflect. He likely started off wanting to provide a better life for his family without realizing that he was sprinting with his head down, blocking out so much else.

There is no perfect answer to what our lives should be like. Everyone strives for different experiences and accomplishments. Living in the newsroom is living a life on the edge, and it is thrilling, albeit cruel at times. Reporters find value in their careers when they help others deepen their impressions of the world. However, newspeople can easily grow numb and indifferent as they get used to the adrenaline rush. A laid-back, family-oriented lifestyle, on the other hand, requires humility about one's own ambitions and tolerance for repetition and boredom.

Humans are born with about seventy-five years of life to live. Physically, our life-cycle is pre-determined. However, we get to decide what to do with ourselves, intellectually. No matter how mild or ferocious our metabolisms may be, we have to allow time for ourselves and our families, even if only a minute or two, to stop whatever we are doing and take a step back. The lives we are living are very likely to get derailed from our intentions; often we don't detect these derailments until long after they have happened. Our ambitions and priorities change over time, but without reflection, those changes will be neglected. We have to constantly reflect on our lives with a critical eye and reevaluate the state of our beings, so as to remind ourselves who we are and why we started.

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