

Muddling Through

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It is the fall of 2021, and I am writing this from a place of grieving. The grief I am writing from is personal and specific, as well as collective and vague. There are the beloveds who have been lost (to death, distance, disconnection). There is the void created by people I haven't held in my arms or held in conversation in years. There are the once familiar ways of being in the world suspended, routines upended, plans cancelled. There is this sensation of being affected, in ways that feel acute and new, by the human, societal, cultural, and environmental losses of the last two (hundred?) years and experiencing through that a kind of shared grief.¹ I think that many of us are in this place right now. Perhaps you are in this place. It is not an easy place to write from, let alone to write about "business anthropology."

Some days, I have the hope that in the middle of this loss there is great insight to be found, but the reality is that insight can be hard to come by in the often stuck and messy place of loss. When it comes, it comes in ways that feel less *ground-breaking* – new, original, unique, and ambitious – and more *ground-finding* – it feels like I am going down, down to the bottom, perhaps finding ground safe to stand on. More than

¹ Family social scientist Pauline Boss' (2000) term "ambiguous loss" has been used to describe this pandemic experience.

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insight, I am uncovering new depths of feeling: sadness, anger, small joys, even hope on some days. This is a place where my intellectual toolkit does not serve me well; it is a place instead just to feel. Therefore, consider what follows testimony, not argument.

For me, the pandemic started as a time of reckoning. Reckoning with my personal and professional life (in my case, an anthropologist in various research leadership roles for technology companies; see Hale 2018; 2016), the people in my life, and with the country and world I live in. It started when we first went in to lock down. Back when we were disinfecting groceries, I had the urge to reach out to my old girlfriends (not all, just the nice ones) to see if they were okay and to tell them I was thinking of them. My friends called me strange; I suppose not everyone took the opportunity of a global pandemic to check in with their exes.

But I did see people pulling together: the Italians singing from their balconies out of isolation, making music with strangers bound by a shared experience. I kept waiting for my neighbors to fling open their windows in song, ready to chime in. They never did. Instead, we stood outside our front doors and howled like wolves for essential workers at 8 pm sharp. When and why did that stop? It is one of the many mysteries of the last two years.

From there, the reckoning evolved quickly into a new reality that needed to be dealt with on a practical level. School was practically non-existent and my work, instead of grinding to a halt, became even busier. That time felt like a cruel joke being made on working parents: trying to work, get the kid onto Webex, and then get dinner on the table – only to do it all over again the next day. I call this time the “muddling through time.”

I have a reminder of that time in the form of a post-it note my daughter wrote and placed on my desk, probably while I was in the seventh meeting of that day. The note says: “when will you be done? I want [sic] to eat with you.”

The note still sits on my desk. It brings on pangs of guilt: the feeling of not being fully present at work or at home when both collapsed into one. But after the guilt comes sweetness: the memory of time and space we shared working, studying, and existing in close proximity – I am grieving for that time, too. My daughter giggles at her handwriting, comparing it to her markedly more mature penmanship two years later. This and her love of wolves, which has grown through the last few years, are reminders of the time that has passed and how she has changed through the pandemic.

While I don’t have a physical marking like handwriting to track it by, I have also gained new perspectives on myself. Early on in the pandemic, when people were panic buying toilet paper, I instead panic bought exercise equipment. I did not tell anyone, embarrassed about

what this said about my priorities. I worried more about what a disruption to my exercise routine would do to my mental health than running out of toilet tissue. One of the pieces of equipment I bought was the Beastmaker 1000. The Beastmaker 1000 is a wooden hangboard crafted artisanally in the UK and used by climbers to train their grip strength by hanging off its variously sized “finger pockets,” “slots,” “crimps,” and “jugs.” Right after I bought mine it sold out. Apparently, I was not the only one determined that this pandemic would not mean a backslide in my hard-won climbing skills.

I used the Beastmaker twice. Hangboarding is f*&cking hard. Now, I walk under the Beastmaker several times a day, as it is mounted above the door to my bedroom. I have to admit to myself that, as it turns out, I am no beast.

One of the habits I acquired during the pandemic, as work and life merged into one, was cursing openly at work. I apologized initially, but I stopped after I read somewhere that cursing was a sign of intelligence. More importantly, I lost my desire to cover up the bullshit. Covering up the fact that things are not “fine” is a form of bullshit I no longer have any desire or patience to maintain. One consequence is that I am newly compelled to write the personal into my work.

Speaking of bullshit, during my mid-pandemic reckoning, and prompted by his untimely death, I picked up David Graeber’s book *Bullshit Jobs* (2018) for the second time. The first time I read it, it had made me uncomfortable on several levels. This time, with the experience of the pandemic, I found new words for my discomfort.

Graeber’s book is about the rise of pointless, “bullshit,” jobs. To Graeber, what characterizes a bullshit job seems clear: it is work that is futile, unnecessary, and, as a result, unsatisfying and spiritually empty. The work exists often to justify its own existence and, secretly, those in the job know the job is futile. The phenomenon of rising “bullshit jobs” is compounded by a cultural narrative that attaches self-worth and societal worth to work, but simultaneously limits definitions of value. According to Graeber, jobs that focus on fixing problems that should not exist in the first place are, by definition, bullshit jobs (2018: 125).

An underlying contrast in the book is that between broadly two kinds of jobs: bullshit ones and non-bullshit ones (in the former, according to Graeber, we find the management consultants, corporate lawyers, and brand managers; in the latter, teachers, garbage collectors, plumbers). Graeber has a lot to say about the former, but not so much about what makes the non-bullshit jobs so; except to distinguish “bad” jobs from bullshit jobs, where bad jobs are often physically or emotionally hard and undervalued, but essential to the functioning of society and decidedly not bullshit. The more essential, the worse they tend to be paid. There is an inverse relation between pay and necessity, and between

worthwhileness (non-bullshittiness) of the job. The more objectively important the job is, the less it is paid. The highest paid jobs tend to be the most bullshit.

During the pandemic, many people realized the role of “essential” workers and gained a new appreciation for how they (a diverse and large group) kept things going. I like to think that the neighbors who howled at 8 pm are now voting for living wages, teacher pay increases, the ability for workers to organize, and better benefits for essential workers, but I do not know of any study looking at this question.

What caused me discomfort was not Graeber’s concept of a bullshit job; instead, it was one of the criteria for characterizing a job as bullshit. Graeber states that the job is bullshit if the worker believes it to be. But he says little about people who clearly are in pointless jobs, but do not believe themselves to be. And there lies my first issue. Obviously, some people are in jobs that others might consider pointless, but they themselves do not. Does this mean that it is not bullshit? Does believing your work to be worthwhile mean that it cannot be a bullshit job?

I would venture to speculate that, like me, most readers of this publication, many of whom may have joined academia with a deep sense of conviction or left academia because of a conviction that was equally strong, feel a deep meaning in our work. After all, being an anthropologist, whether in business, academia, or anywhere else, starts with a deep commitment to *something*, whether it is shared humanity, science, truth, the “underdog,” or something else. The pay is not usually great, especially at the beginning when career prospects are meager, elusive, and exclusionary, and the working environments can be difficult or downright hostile. And then there are our families, friends, and acquaintances who continually ask some version of that dreaded question: “what do you do again?” Yet, we pursue these paths, some create them, paving the road for others after them. Pretty non-bullshitty, in my opinion.

For the past decade and a half, my work identity was built on the idea that I could make businesses, organizations, and governments care more about ordinary people.² My twitter profile still says something about me being a “workplace anthropologist building inclusive, ethical products.” This essay is not really about whether this pursuit is worthwhile or whether it can ever be successful. The jury is still out, in my opinion.³ But even if many of us are deeply convinced about the

² I stopped saying “ordinary” people at work a few years ago, because a sales person I worked with said this made people sound boring. To anthropologists, of course, it is precisely the ordinary, taken for granted, that is fascinating or worth questioning.

³ For my part, I have probably failed more times than I have succeeded, but the successes have felt worthwhile. There are some who believe that it is impossible to change the beast from within and accounts of tech quitters are gaining more visibility. But there is a small country sized population of us, in Silicon Valley, in

importance of our work in the ideal, I would bet that few of us feel that there is *no* bullshit in our jobs. This brought me to my second discomfort: how much bullshit makes a bullshit job?

I have found that it is both cathartic and benefits others to name the bullshit. For a couple of years pre-pandemic, my former colleague and “field husband” Matt Bernius and I taught an introduction to Design Anthropology in a workshop at the Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association. Our workshop participants were mostly Anthropology graduate students and recent PhDs realizing that the academic field they had fallen in love with and dedicated the last several years (or decades) of their lives to did not love them back quite as much – at least not with real prospects of gainful, stable employment.

In this workshop, we taught participants about Design Thinking, a method (or “creative problem solving approach”) that organizations, businesses, and governments use to create new products and services or improve existing ones. It is based in part on discovering the “needs and challenges” of people by talking to them (this is still quite subversive if the biggest decision making criteria is how to make more money and make shareholders happy, not how to build equitable societies). It is famously facilitated by such copious amounts of brightly colored sticky notes that, at one point, I aspired to make a sticky note dispensing belt, but the project was added to the list of abandoned lockdown craft projects. In our workshop, participants would learn the basics of Design Thinking and put the theory into practice on a warp-speed project for a fictional or real (the AAAs) client in small teams.

Matt and I would openly tell our participants, “Yes, this is bullshit and it’s some of the better bullshit we have.” What we meant, I think, was something like “We recognize that these are some pretty hollow, snazzy terms and that the best way to do research isn’t this, but this is a way that you can get organizations to focus on the right thing: humans.”

We showed participants how to package an academic research career into the right words and timelines, what words to use to get a job, talked about our mistakes and failures, told them how to speak to business people and hiring managers, shared what personal and professional struggles they might face. We opened our social networks to them, made professional introductions, and mentored them sometimes beyond the confines of the workshop. We talked openly about the mental health impact of academia, and mental health in the context of academia, as well as leaving it, and our own personal financial and life decisions behind these transitions. We hoped to normalize the experiences that many of our workshop participants were facing by putting them into a

business, in tech, in government, who are still trying in different ways. We need more testimony about what it is like doing this both from those still within and from those outside.

systemic context and to help them feel less alone by sharing our own stories and getting them to share with each other. What sticks out for me about these workshops was the atmosphere of anxiety that participants walked in with and the palpable relief and vulnerability, and even joy, that participants experienced in the workshop and sometimes put into words in their workshop evaluation surveys.

At the time, I think that what we were calling out as “bullshit” was the fact that this Design Thinking “method” entailed a repackaging of basic research and that the means by which you could produce something “actionable” for businesses and organizations to use involved a great deal of simplification and intellectual, methodological, and, at times, ethical shortcuts. Even if one believes that the goals are ultimately worthwhile, the means to get there can be bullshit.

In retrospect, I think that we also wanted to convey that the process of getting employed in this sector was, in many ways, also bullshit. By naming it, we hoped to take some of the ambiguity out of the process and give some power back to the next generation of business anthropologists. It felt liberating and positive to be able to talk openly and help others. Are these bullshit jobs? They certainly contain a high degree of bullshittery.

Graeber suggests that the realization that one is doing bullshit work is deeply devastating, based on the depressing testimonies of his informants. My experience suggests that even if a lot of work is not bullshit, even a *bit* of bullshit can be quite soul-sucking. Even if the job is to counteract a bullshit system, or especially when it is, and especially when it requires bullshitting of its own, it can feel depressing. While Graeber writes that bullshit jobs are proliferating, he has less to say about the fact that bullshitization is spreading regardless of whether the person believes it to be bullshit. The various administrative tasks that seem to increase year by year for many of us, the endless meetings we are subject to which only seem to create more work, shifts in strategy that require rework, “re-organization” exercises, performance reviews and promotion justifications when outcomes are already known, “feedback” collection that is never actioned on, come to mind among others. Graeber does not offer a formula to say what percentage of bullshit equals a bullshit job. If, like me, you read his book worried that your job was indeed bullshit, he offers nothing to assuage you.

The merging of work and home life allowed me to better distinguish between the bullshit and non-bullshit parts of my job. The stress was caused by an acute realization of what was keeping me from switching to home mode and the pointlessness of it (usually some very urgent slack message I had to answer while trying to cook dinner). At the same time, verbalizing the collapse and gaining insight into my co-workers’ home lives allowed me to see the non-bullshit more clearly.

From my own perspective, a knowledge worker whose job could be done anywhere with a decent Wi-Fi, I marveled in early lockdown that some people were having lots of new found free time, while my work got busier than ever while I was also promoted overnight to the position of homeschool and PE teacher/IT support/personal chef. Simultaneously, while millions lost jobs and/or faced sudden economic insecurity, I was fortunate to work in a sector that committed to “taking care of its people” as soon as the pandemic hit. This included offering new perks like company-wide mental health days, free access to meditation apps and mental health services, an extra paycheck, funds for child and elder care, and emergency relief funds. As a manager, I did not just pass on the news to my team, I believed in it and felt responsible for their care. It was not bullshit.

As our researchers were panicking about their ability to complete studies that, in the past, would have happened face-to-face in usability labs and in customers’ offices, in this new remote world, my team drafted emails for them to send to the participants in their research, acknowledging shared humanity, offering reassurances that normal productivity was not required and suggestions on how to create safe and inclusive spaces despite the new circumstances. “Don’t worry if your dogs bark, your toddler needs attention, or your roommate walks in on your call in their underwear,” we said, “we are all in the same boat.” I devised a plan to retrain and redeploy contractors from our corporate recruiting team who were at risk of losing their jobs as research recruiting coordinators to support our studies. We invited one researcher who had turned her bedroom closet into her makeshift usability lab in order to be undisturbed by the two other household members also working from home, to reflect on her experiences in an organization-wide newsletter and share what it looked like in the closet. One colleague shared that the reason he had blocked off his Fridays as “care-giver days” was not for parenting, as I had assumed, but to help his non-English speaking family members with interpretation and advocacy in their healthcare and government interactions. One of my team members’ toddler made a regular appearance at our weekly team meetings and we joked that we could not start the meeting without her. My daughter was able to see different sides of me from walking in on, or sitting under my desk, during meetings, reflecting back to me how I speak differently with my boss, my team, and executives – and one time popping up behind me as I gave a conference talk. I made the mistake of telling her that hundreds of people would be watching from all over the world.

Colleagues shared about their mental health struggles, struggles with addiction, shifting family dynamics, and the interpersonal renegotiations happening in all households and communities. Colleagues who lived on their own shared about their loneliness and everyone shared new ways of finding connection. These were tender moments. I

learned more about my co-workers' home lives, who they were outside of work, their creative and joyful endeavours, their struggles and their day-to-day rituals than I might have otherwise. By now, my colleagues have grown accustomed to seeing my daughter and, happily, the novelty effect has worn off for her as well.

I know intellectually and personally that using the language of "care" to describe the company-employee relationship can serve to obscure power dynamics and exploitation in the service of profit. Using the term "care" also gets in the way of the efforts to elucidate such dynamics in the true "care economy," rife as it is with systemic inequities in who tends to receive care versus who provides it and the unequal, exploitative experiences within those "care" relationships. As a manager, I am also painfully aware of my own role in furthering the language of care when it is not real care.

Nevertheless, we experienced and practiced real care. It was the opposite of bullshit. This time was an opportunity to offer care and solidarity to others, especially those we have been led to believe are far removed from us (manager-employee for example). It helped illustrate that those separations were tenuous in the first place. It also brought alive how work has long been robbing us of the time we wish to spend on non-work and connection. I am not suggesting that the pandemic was necessary to experience care and connection. But it gave a glimpse of something different, a different way.

Lately, I have come to see my work, and perhaps life, as a dance of navigating the bullshit and the non-bullshit and helping others do the same – sometimes eliminating bullshit along the way while also uncovering new bullshit and aiming to not add new bullshit. Along the way, I glimpsed and was reminded of something better, and so, the muddling through continues. My daughter says that I should have written about wolves instead.

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