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## Revolt of the Robots

### How we can find meaning, purpose and pride when the workplace no longer offers them

Why bother designing robots when you can reduce human beings to machines? Last week, Amazon acquired **a patent for a wristband** that can track the hand movements of workers. If this technology is developed, it could grant companies almost total control over their workforce.

A fortnight ago **the Guardian interviewed a young man called Aaron Callaway**, who works nights in an Amazon warehouse. He has to place 250 items an hour into the right carts. His work, he says, is so repetitive, antisocial and alienating that

*"I feel like I've lost who I was ... My main interaction is with the robots."*

And this is before the wristbands might be deployed.

I see the terrible story of Don Lane, **the DPD driver who collapsed and died from diabetes**, as another instance of the same dehumanisation. After being fined £150 by the company for taking a day off to see his doctor, this "self-employed contractor" (who worked full-time for the company and wore its uniform) felt he could no longer keep his hospital appointments. As **the philosopher Byung-Chul Han argues**, in the gig economy,

*"every individual is master and slave in one ... class struggle has become an internal struggle with oneself."*

Everything work offered during the social democratic era – economic security, a sense of belonging, social life, a political focus – has been stripped away: alienation is now almost complete. **Digital Taylorism**, splitting interesting jobs into tasks of mind-robbing monotony, threatens to degrade almost every form of labour. Workers are reduced to the crash dummies of the post-industrial age. The robots have arrived, **and you are one of them.**

**So where do we find identity, meaning and purpose, a sense of autonomy, pride and utility?** The answer, for many people, is volunteering. Over the past few weeks, I've spent a fair bit of time in the NHS, and I've realised that there are two public health systems in this country: the official one, performing daily miracles, and the voluntary network that supports it.

Everywhere I look, there are notices posted by people helping at the hospital, running support groups for other patients, raising money for research and equipment. Without this support, I suspect the official system would fall apart.

And so would many of the patients. Some fascinating research papers suggest that positive interactions with other people promote physical healing, reduce physical pain, and minimise anxiety and stress for patients about to have an operation. Support groups save lives. So do those who raise money for treatment and research.

Last week I spoke to two remarkable volunteers. Jeanne Chattoe started fundraising for Against Breast Cancer after her sister was diagnosed with the disease. Until that point, she had lived a quiet life, bringing up her children and working in her sister's luggage shop. She soon discovered powers she never knew she possessed. Before long, she started organising an annual fashion show which, across 13 years, raised almost £400,000. Then, lying awake one night, she had a great idea: why not decorate her home town pink once a year, recruiting the whole community to the cause? Witney in the Pink has now been running for 17 years, and all the shops participate: even the butchers dye their uniforms pink. The event raises at least £6000 a year.

*"It's changed my whole life," Jeanne told me. "I eat, live and breathe against breast cancer ... I don't know what I would have done without fundraising. Probably nothing. It's given me a purpose."*

She has acquired so much expertise organising these events that in 2009 Against Breast Cancer appointed her chair of its trustees, a position she still holds today.

After his transplant, Kieran Sandwell donated his old heart to the British Heart Foundation. Then he began thinking about how he could support its work. He told me he had

*"been on the work treadmill where I've not enjoyed my job for years, wondering what I'm doing."*

He set off to walk the entire coastline of the UK, to raise money and awareness. He now has 2800 miles behind him and 2000 ahead.

*"I've discovered that you can actually put your mind to anything. ... whatever I come across in my life I can probably cope with it. Nothing fazes me now."*

Like Jeanne, he has unlocked unexpected powers.

*"I didn't know I had in me the ability just to be able to talk to anyone."*

His trek has also ignited a love of nature.

*"I seem to have created this fluffy bubble: what happens to me every day is wonderful. ... I want to try to show people that there's a better life out there."*

For Jeanne and Kieran, volunteering has given them what work once promised: meaning, purpose, place, community. This, surely, is where hope lies.

So here's my outrageous proposal: replace careers advice with volunteering advice. I've argued before that much of the careers advice offered by schools and universities is worse than useless, shoving students headfirst into the machine, reinforcing the seductive power of life-destroying

**corporations**. In fairness to the advisers, their job is becoming almost impossible anyway: the entire infrastructure of employment seems designed to eliminate fulfilling and fascinating work.

But while there is little chance of finding jobs that match students' hopes and personalities and engage their capabilities, there is every chance of connecting them with good opportunities to volunteer. *Perhaps it is time we saw volunteering as central to our identities and work as peripheral: something we have to do, but that no longer defines us.* I would love to hear people reply, when asked what they do,

*"I volunteer at the food bank and run marathons. In my time off, I work for money."*

And there's a side-effect. The world has been wrecked by people seeking status through their work. In many professions – such as fossil fuels, weapons manufacture, banking, advertising – your prestige rises with the harm you do. The greater your destruction of other people's lives, the greater your contribution to shareholder value. But when you volunteer, the respect you gain rises with the good you do.

We should keep fighting for better jobs and better working conditions. But the battle against workplace technology is an unequal one. The real economic struggle now is for the redistribution of wealth generated by labour and machines, through **universal basic income**, the **revival of the commons** and other such policies. Until we achieve this, most people will have to take whatever work is on offer.

But we cannot let it own us.

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