

BAIT AND SWITCH

THE (FUTILE) PURSUIT OF THE AMERICAN
DREAM

BARBARA EHRENREICH



“Ehrenreich is a keen observer of American culture.”

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“*Bait and Switch* . . . resembles a novel by Evelyn Waugh, in which a middle-aged social critic with supersonic verbal skills, a Voltaire pretending to be a Candide, disappears into a zombie zone of career counselors, résumé writers, networking and job fairs.”

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The (Futile) Pursuit of the American Dream

Barbara Ehrenreich

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author's note

Most names in this book have been changed in the interest of privacy. The exceptions, in the majority of cases, are public speakers who were introduced by name and people I interviewed who agreed to have their full names used.

Bait and Switch

Introduction

Because I've written a lot about poverty, I'm used to hearing from people in scary circumstances. An eviction notice has arrived. A child has been diagnosed with a serious illness and the health insurance has run out. The car has broken down and there's no way to get to work. These are the routine emergencies that plague the chronically poor. But it struck me, starting in about 2002, that many such tales of hardship were coming from people who were once members in good standing of the middle class—college graduates and former occupants of midlevel white-collar positions. One such writer upbraided me for what she saw as my neglect of hardworking, virtuous people like herself.

Try investigating people like me who didn't have babies in high school, who made good grades, who work hard and don't kiss a lot of ass and instead of getting promoted or paid fairly must regress to working for \$7/hr., having their student loans in perpetual deferment, living at home with their parents, and generally exist in debt which they feel they may never get out of.

Stories of white-collar downward mobility cannot be brushed off as easily as accounts of blue-collar economic woes, which the hard-hearted traditionally blame on “bad choices”: failing to get a college degree, for example, failing to postpone child-bearing until acquiring a nest egg, or failing to choose affluent parents in the first place. But distressed white-collar people cannot be accused of fecklessness of any kind; they are the ones who “did everything right.” They earned higher degrees, often setting aside their youthful passion for philosophy or music to suffer through dull practical majors like management or finance. In some cases, they were high achievers who ran into trouble precisely because they had risen far enough in the company for their salaries to look like a tempting cost cut. They were the losers, in other words, in a classic game of bait and switch. And while blue-collar poverty has become numbingly routine, white-collar unemployment—and the poverty that often results—remains a rude finger in the face of the American dream.

I realized that I knew very little about the mid- to upper levels of the corporate world, having so far encountered this world almost entirely through its low-wage, entry-level representatives. I was one of them—a server in a national chain restaurant, a cleaning person, and a Wal-Mart “associate”—in the course of researching an earlier book, *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*. Like everyone else, I've also encountered the corporate world as a consumer, dealing with people quite far down in the occupational hierarchy—retail clerks, customer service representatives, telemarketers. On the levels where decisions are made—where the vice presidents, account executives, and regional managers dwell—my experience has been limited to seeing these sorts of people on airplanes, where they study books on “leadership,” fiddle with spreadsheets on their laptops, or fall asleep over biographies of the founding fathers.¹ I'm better acquainted with the corporate functionaries of the future, many of whom I've met on my visits to college campuses, where “business” remains the most popular major, if only because it is believed to be the safest and most lucrative.²

But there have been growing signs of trouble—if not outright misery—within the white-collar corporate workforce. First, starting with the economic downturn of 2001, there has been a rise in unemployment among highly credentialed and experienced people. In late 2003, when I started this project, unemployment was running at about 5.9 percent, but in contrast to earlier economic downturns, a sizable portion—almost 20 percent, or about 1.6 million—of the unemployed were white-collar professionals.³ Previous downturns had disproportionately hit blue-collar people; this time it was the relative elite of professional, technical, and managerial employees who were being

singled out for media sympathy. In April 2003, for example, the *New York Times Magazine* offered a much-discussed cover story about a former \$300,000-a-year computer industry executive reduced, after two years of unemployment, to working as a sales associate at the Gap.⁴ Throughout the first four years of the 2000s, there were similar stories of the mighty or the mere midlevel brought low, ejected from their office suites and forced to serve behind the counter at Starbucks.

Today, white-collar job insecurity is no longer a function of the business cycle—rising as the stock market falls and declining again when the numbers improve.⁵ Nor is it confined to a few volatile sectors like telecommunications or technology, or a few regions of the country like the rust belt or Silicon Valley. The economy may be looking up, the company may be raking in cash, and still the layoffs continue, like a perverse form of natural selection, weeding out the talented and successful as well as the mediocre. Since the midnineties, this perpetual winnowing process has been institutionalized under various euphemisms such as “downsizing,” “right-sizing,” “smart-sizing,” “restructuring,” and “de-layering”—to which we can now add the outsourcing of white-collar functions to cheaper labor markets overseas.

In the metaphor of the best-selling business book of the first few years of the twenty-first century, the “cheese”—meaning a stable, rewarding, job—has indeed been moved. A 2004 survey of executives found 95 percent expecting to move on, voluntarily or otherwise, from their current jobs, and 68 percent concerned about unexpected firings and layoffs.⁶ You don’t, in other words, have to lose a job to feel the anxiety and despair of the unemployed.

A second sign of trouble could be called “overemployment.” I knew, from my reading, that mid- and high-level corporate executives and professionals today often face the same punishing demands on their time as low-paid wage earners who must work two jobs in order to make ends meet. Economist Juliet Schor, who wrote *The Overworked American*, and business journalist Jill Andresky Fraser, author of *White Collar Sweatshop*, describe stressed-out white-collar employees who put in ten- to twelve-hour-long days at the office, continue to work on their laptops in the evening at home, and remain tethered to the office by cell phone even on vacations and holidays. “On Wall Street, for example,” Fraser reports, “it is common for a supervisor to instruct new hires to keep a spare set of clothes and toothbrush in the office for all those late night episodes when it just won’t make sense to head home for a quick snooze.”⁷ She quotes an Intel employee:

If you make the choice to have a home life, you will be ranked and rated at the bottom. I was willing to work the endless hours, come in on weekends, travel to the ends of the earth. I had no hobbies, no outside interests. If I wasn’t involved with the company, I wasn’t anything.⁸

Something, evidently, is going seriously wrong within a socioeconomic group I had indeed neglected as too comfortable and too powerful to merit my concern. Where I had imagined comfort, there is now growing distress, and I determined to investigate. I chose the same strategy I had employed in *Nickel and Dimed*: to enter this new world myself, as an undercover reporter, and see what I could learn about the problems first-hand. Were people being driven out of their corporate jobs? What did it take to find a new one? And, if things were as bad as some reports suggested, why was there so little protest?

The plan was straightforward enough: to find a job, a “good” job, which I defined minimally as a white-collar position that would provide health insurance and an income of about \$50,000 a year, enough to land me solidly in the middle class. The job itself would give me a rare firsthand glimpse into the midlevel corporate world, and the effort to find it would of course place me among the most hard-pressed white-collar corporate workers—the ones who don’t have jobs.

Since I wanted to do this as anonymously as possible, certain areas of endeavor had to be excluded such as higher education, publishing (magazines, newspapers, and books), and nonprofit liberal organizations. In any of these, I would have run the risk of being recognized and perhaps treated differently—more favorably, one hopes—than the average job seeker. But these restrictions did not significantly narrow the field, since of course most white-collar professionals work in other sectors of the for-profit, corporate world—from banking to business services, pharmaceuticals to finance.

The decision to enter corporate life—and an unfamiliar sector of it, at that—required that I abandon, or at least set aside, deeply embedded attitudes and views, including my longstanding critique of American corporations and the people who lead them. I had cut my teeth, as a fledgling investigative journalist in the seventies, on the corporations that were coming to dominate the health care system: pharmaceutical companies, hospital chains, insurance companies. Then, sometime in the eighties, I shifted my attention to the treatment of blue-and pink-collar employees, blaming America's intractable level of poverty—12.5 percent by the federal government's official count, 25 percent by more up-to-date measures—on the chronically low wages offered to nonprofessional workers. In the last few years, I seized on the wave of financial scandals—from Enron through, at the time of this writing, HealthSouth and Hollingers International—as evidence of growing corruption within the corporate world, a pattern of internal looting without regard for employees, consumers, or even, in some cases, stockholders.

But for the purposes of this project, these criticisms and reservations had to be set aside or shoved as far back in my mind as possible. Like it or not, the corporation is the dominant unit of the global economy and the form of enterprise that our lives depend on in a day-to-day sense. I write this on an IBM laptop while sipping Lipton tea and wearing clothes from the Gap—all major firms or elements thereof. It's corporations that make the planes run (though not necessarily on time), bring us (and increasingly grow) our food, and generally “make it happen.” I'd been on the outside of the corporate world, often complaining bitterly, and now I wanted in.

THIS WOULD NOT, I knew, be an altogether fair test of the job market, if only because I had some built-in disadvantages as a job seeker. For one thing, I am well into middle age, and since age discrimination is a recognized problem in the corporate world even at the tender age of forty, I was certainly vulnerable to it myself. This defect, however, is by no means unique to me. Many people—from displaced homemakers to downsized executives—now find themselves searching for jobs at an age that was once associated with a restful retirement.

Furthermore, I had the disadvantage of never having held a white-collar job with a corporation. My one professional-level office job, which lasted for about seven months, was in the public sector, at the New York City Bureau of the Budget. It had involved such typical white-collar activities as attending meetings, digesting reports, and writing memos; but that was a long time ago, before cell phones, PowerPoint, and e-mail. In the corporate world I now sought to enter, everything would be new to me: the standards of performance, the methods of evaluation, the lines and even the modes of communication. But I'm a quick study, as you have to be in journalism, and counted on this to get me by.

The first step was to acquire a new identity and personal history to go with it, meaning, in this case, a résumé. It is easier to change your identity than you might think. Go to Alvarado and Seventh Street in Los Angeles, for example, and you will be approached by men whispering, “ID, ID.” I, however, took the legal route, because I wanted my documents to be entirely in order when the job offers started coming in. My fear, perhaps exaggerated, was that my current name might be

recognized, or would at least turn up an embarrassing abundance of Google entries. So in November 2003 I ~~legally changed back to my maiden name, Barbara Alexander, and acquired a Social Security card to go with it.~~

As for the résumé: although it had to be faked, I wanted it as much as possible to represent my actual skills, which, I firmly believed, would enrich whatever company I went to work for. I am a writer—author of thousands of published articles and about twelve nonfiction books, counting the coauthored ones—and I know that “writing” translates, in the corporate world, into public relations or “communications” generally. Many journalism schools teach PR too, which may be fitting, since PR is really journalism’s evil twin. Whereas a journalist seeks the truth, a PR person may be called upon to disguise it or even to advance an untruth. If your employer, a pharmaceutical company, claims its new drug cures both cancer and erectile dysfunction, your job is to promote it, not to investigate the grounds for these claims.

I could do this, on a temporary basis anyway, and have even done many of the things PR people routinely do: I’ve written press releases, pitched stories to editors and reporters, prepared press packets, and helped arrange press conferences. As an author, I have also worked closely with my publisher’s PR people and have always found them to be intelligent and in every way congenial.

I have also been an activist in a variety of causes over the years, and this experience too must translate into something valuable to any firm willing to hire me. I have planned meetings and chaired them; I have worked in dozens of diverse groups and often played a leadership role in them; I am at ease as a public speaker, whether giving a lengthy speech or a brief presentation on a panel—all of which amounts to the “leadership” skills that should be an asset to any company. At the very least, I could claim to be an “event planner,” capable of dividing gatherings into plenaries and break-out sessions, arranging the press coverage, and planning the follow-up events.

Even as a rough draft, the résumé took days of preparation. I had to line up people willing to lie for me, should they be called by a potential employer, and attest to the fine work I had done for them. Fortunately, I have friends who were willing to do this, some of them located at recognizable companies. Although I did not dare claim actual employment at these firms, since a call to their Human Resources departments would immediately expose the lie, I felt I could safely pretend to have “consulted” to them over the years. Suffice it to say that I gave Barbara Alexander an exemplary history in public relations, sometimes with a little event planning thrown in, and that the dissimulation involved in crafting my new résumé was further preparation for any morally challenging projects I should be called upon to undertake as a PR person.

I did not, however, embellish my new identity with an affect or mannerisms different from my own. I am not an actor and would not have been able to do this even if I had wanted to. “Barbara Alexander” was only a cover for Barbara Ehrenreich; her behavior would, for better or worse, always be my own. In fact, in a practical sense I was simply changing my occupational status from “self-employed/writer” to “unemployed”—a distinction that might be imperceptible to the casual observer. I would still stay home most days at my computer, only now, instead of researching and writing articles, I would be researching and contacting companies that might employ me. The new name and fake résumé were only my ticket into the ranks of the unemployed white-collar Americans who spend their days searching for a decent-paying job.

The project required some minimal structure; since I was stepping into the unknown, I needed to devise some guidelines for myself. My first rule was that I would do everything possible to land a job, which meant being open to every form of help that presented itself: utilizing whatever books, web sites, and businesses, for example, that I could find offering guidance to job seekers. I would endeavor

to behave as I was expected to, insofar as I could decipher the expectations. I did not know exactly what forms of effort would be required of successful job seekers, only that I would, as humbly and diligently as possible, give it my best try.

Second, I would be prepared to go anywhere for a job or even an interview, and would advertise this geographic flexibility in my contacts with potential employers. I was based in Charlottesville, Virginia, throughout this project, but I was prepared to travel anywhere in the United States to get a job and then live there for several months if I found one. Nor would I shun any industry—other than those where I might be recognized—as unglamorous or morally repugnant. My third rule was that I would have to take the first job I was offered that met my requirements as to income and benefits.

I knew that the project would take a considerable investment of time and money, so I set aside ten months⁹ and the sum of \$5,000 for travel and other expenses that might arise in the course of job searching. My expectation was that I would make the money back once I got a job and probably come out far ahead. As for the time, I budgeted roughly four to six months for the search—five months being the average for unemployed people in 2004¹⁰—and another three to four months of employment. I would have plenty of time both to sample the life of the white-collar unemployed and to explore the corporate world they sought to reenter.

From the outset, I pictured this abstraction, *the corporate world*, as a castle on a hill—well fortified, surrounded by difficult checkpoints, with its glass walls gleaming invitingly from on high. I knew that it would be a long hard climb just to get to the door. But I've made my way into remote and lofty places before—college and graduate school, for example. I'm patient and crafty; I have stamina and resolve; and I believed that I could do this too.

In fact, the project, as I planned it, seemed less challenging than I might have liked. As an undercover reporter, I would of course be insulated from the real terrors of the white-collar work world, if only because I was independent of it for my income and self-esteem. Most of my fellow job seekers would probably have come to their status involuntarily, through layoffs or individual firings. For them, to lose a job is to enter a world of pain. Their income collapses to the size of an unemployment insurance check; their self-confidence plummets. Much has been written about the psychological damage incurred by the unemployed—their sudden susceptibility to depression, divorce, substance abuse, and even suicide.¹¹ No such calamities could occur in my life as an undercover job seeker and, later, jobholder. There would be no sudden descent into poverty, nor any real sting of rejection.

I also started with the expectation that this project would be far less demanding than the work I had undertaken for *Nickel and Dimed*. Physically, it would be a piece of cake—no scrubbing, no heavy lifting, no walking or running for hours on end. As for behavior, I imagined that I would be immune from the constant subservience and obedience demanded of low-wage blue-collar workers, that I would be far freer to be, and express, myself. As it turns out, I was wrong on all counts.

Finding a Coach in the Land of Oz

Where to begin? My first foray into the world of job searching, undertaken at my computer on a gloomy December afternoon, is distinctly intimidating. These days, I have gathered from a quick tour of relevant web sites, you don't just pore over the help-wanted ads, send off some résumés, and wait for the calls. Job searching has become, if not a science, a technology so complex that no mere job seeker can expect to master it alone. The Internet offers a bewildering variety of sites where you can post a résumé in the hope that a potential employer will notice it. Alternatively, you can use the net to apply directly to thousands of companies. But is the résumé eye-catching enough? Or would it be better to attempt face-to-face encounters at the proliferating number of "networking events" that hold out the promise of meaningful contacts?

Fortunately, there are about 10,000 people eager to assist me—"career coaches"—who, according to the coaching web sites, can help you discover your true occupational "passion," retool your résumé, and hold your hand at every step along the way. The coaches, whose numbers have been doubling every three years, are the core of the "transition industry" that has grown up just since the midnineties in a perhaps inevitable response to white-collar unemployment.¹ Unlike blue-collar people, the white-collar unemployed are likely to have some assets to invest in their job search; they are, in addition, often lonely and depressed—a perfect market, in other words, for any service promising prosperity and renewed self-esteem. Some coaches have formal training through programs like the Career Coach Academy's fifteen-week course; others are entirely self-anointed. You can declare yourself a coach without any credentials, nor are there any regulatory agencies looking over your shoulder—which means that, for the job seeker, it's the luck of the draw.²

I find Morton on the web, listed as a local career coach, although—as I will soon learn—most coaching is done by phone so there is no need for geographic proximity. Morton has been there, in my thought. The background material that he sends me shows a history of what appear to be highlevel, defense-related jobs, including, somewhat datedly, "Senior Intelligence Analyst and Branch Chief Responsible for Analyzing Soviet Military Research." He has given seminars at Carnegie Mellon University and spoken frequently at Kiwanis and Rotary clubs. Surely he can guide my transformation into the marketable middle-level professional I aspire to be. Besides, he assures me, I will not have to pay for our first, trial session.

I have no trouble recognizing him at Starbucks in Charlottesville's Barracks Road Mall; he's the one wearing the "JMU" baseball cap, as promised, a description that encouraged me to come in rumpled gray slacks and sneakers. The top is better, though—black turtleneck, tweed blazer, and pearl earrings—which I am hoping will pass as "business casual." Flustered by being five minutes late because my normal route to the mall was blocked by construction, I stumble over my new name in the handshake phase. He appears not to notice. In fact, he doesn't seem to be much into the noticing business or perhaps already regards me as a disappointment.

After exchanging some observations on the pre-Christmas parking situation at the mall, I lay out my situation for him: I do public relations and event planning, I tell him, but I've been doing it on a freelance basis and am now seeking a stable corporate position with regular benefits, location flexibility. How to present myself? Where to begin? I pull out the résumé that I completed over the weekend and

slide it across the table toward him. In the worst-case scenario, he will grab it and quiz me on it while holding it in such a way that I will be unable to refresh my memory with an occasional glance. But he regards the stapled papers with only somewhat more enthusiasm than if a fly were advancing across the table toward his arm. Maybe he can tell without reading it, by the very format of the pages—the lack, as I now see it, of bullets and bolding—that it isn't worth a serious coach's attention.

But he is bringing something out of his briefcase—an 8½×11 inch transparency—which he places methodically over a sheet of white paper so that I can read: “Core Competencies and Skills,” or “the four competencies,” as he refers to them. These are Mobilizing Innovation, Managing People and Tasks, Communicating, and Managing Self. This must be what I need—an introduction to the crisp, linear concepts that shape the corporate mind. I am taking notes as fast as I can, but he assures me that he will leave me with copies, so I am free to focus on the content.

The next transparency features a picture of a harness racer and horse, and reads:

Clear mind, skillful driver
Sound spirit, strong horse.
Strong body, sound carriage.
Mind, body, spirit work as one . . .
Path to victory is clear.

The syntax is a bit disturbing, particularly the absence of articles, which gives it a kind of ESL feel, but if modern-day executives can derive management principles from Buddhism or Genghis Khan, as the business sections of bookstores suggest, surely they can imagine themselves as harness racers. The horse, driver, and carriage, Morton is telling me, symbolize Head, Heart, and Gut, but I miss which one is which. This is going to be a lot harder than I anticipated. Already, the four competencies are leaking away from memory, or maybe it should be self-evident that Mobilizing Innovation equals Head or possibly Gut.

With the next transparency, things take a seriously goofy turn. It's titled “Three Centers of Intelligence” and illustrated with characters from *The Wizard of Oz*: the scarecrow, representing “Mental,” the tin man, representing “Emotional,” and the lion, representing “Instinctual.” When he teaches his course on “Spirituality and Business,” Morton is explaining, he does this with dolls. That was his wife's idea. She said, “You should have dolls!” and you know what? She went out and found them for him. I profess to being a little sketchy about my *Wizard of Oz*, and Morton digresses into the back story on the tin man, trying to recall how he got such a hard “shell.” All I can think is that I'm glad he didn't bring the dolls with him, because Starbucks has gotten crowded now and I wouldn't want it to look like I'm being subjected to some peculiar doll-based form of therapy.

But while I am still struggling to associate the tin man with Emotional and so forth, we move away from Oz to the Enneagram, which is defined in a transparency as:

- A description of personality types
- Based on ancient learning about motivation
- A diagram easily learned and applied
- Provides clues about moving toward balance

The visuals here feature a figure composed of a number of connected triangles enclosed in a circle. I feel a dizziness that cannot be explained by the growing distance from breakfast, and not a single question occurs to me that might shed some light on the ever-deepening complexity before me. Somehow, the Enneagram leads to “The Nine Types,” which are also the “nine basic desires or

passions.” Perhaps sensing my confusion, Morton tells me that, in his course, the Enneagram takes a lot of time to get across. “It’s more or less a data dump.”

I furrow my brow and nod. All around us, money is being exchanged for muffins in mutually agreeable amounts, and the corporate world continues to function in its usual mindlessly busy, rational way. But the continuance of the corporate enterprise is not something, I realize for the first time, that you can necessarily take for granted. Not if its underlying principles emanate from Oz.

It’s a great relief when the higher math of the Enneagram gives way, in the sequence of transparencies, to the familiar *Wizard of Oz* creatures, now seen decorating a series of grids labeled “Emotional Centered Types,” “Mentally Centered Types,” and “Instinctual Centered Types.” On the left side of each grid are five entries, the most intriguing of which is “distorted passion,” described by Morton as a “bad passion,” or one that you have to recognize and overcome. For example, the lion has as one of its distorted passions “Lust for life. I want to experience and control the entire world,” while the scarecrow is potentially burdened with “Avarice—I keep knowledge to myself to avoid being seen as incompetent.” I interrupt to ask why keeping knowledge to oneself is called avarice, and he replies evenly, “Because it’s keeping something to yourself.” Then I notice among the distorted passions, “Gluttony—I can never get enough experience.” In among the wanderings of Dorothy in Oz and the “ancient learning” of the Enneagram, Morton—or the inventor of the Enneagram—has managed to weave the Seven Deadly Sins.

What all this leads up to is that I have to take a test, the Wagner Enneagram Personality Style Scales (WEPSS), which will reveal my personality type and hence what kind of job I should be looking for. I already told Morton what kind of job I’m looking for, but obviously not in a language that fits into his elaborate personal metaphysics. I’ll take the test at home, send it to him, and then meet for an evaluation. The whole thing will cost \$60.

SO THE SEARCH for a career coach who can actually help me with the mechanics of job searching continues. I register at the CoachLink web site, which nets me three e-mails offering coaching services and one phone call. I go with the phone caller, Kimberly, whose web site describes her as “a career and outplacement consultant, trainer and writer”—for showing initiative—and agree to a weekly half-hour session by phone at \$400 a month, or \$200 an hour. My “homework,” due on our first session, is to “fantasize” about my ideal job. What would my day be like at this ideal job?

It’s not a bad assignment. Everyone should take some time for utopian thinking, and what better occasion than when you have nothing else to do? So I fantasize about a small- to medium-size company with offices in a wooded area, mine looking out on a valley and rolling green hills. An espresso cart rolls around every morning and afternoon; there’s an onsite gym to which we’re encouraged to retreat at least once a day, and the cafeteria features affordable nouvelle cuisine. None of that goes into my written fantasy, however, which focuses on finding a balance between the intense camaraderie of my “team” and periods of creative solitude in my office, which of course has a door—no cubicles for me. I put myself in charge of my team, over which I wield a collegial, “empowering” form of leadership. I am utterly fascinated by my work, whatever it is, and frequently carry on till late at night.

Kimberly, when our first session rolls around, is “excited” by my résumé, “excited” by my fantasy and generally “excited” to be working with me. I get high marks for the fantasy job: “You’re very clear about what you want! Many clients don’t get to this stage for months. I think you’re going to be a quick study.” Already, the excitement level is beginning to exhaust me. In my irritation, I picture h

as a short-haired platinum blonde, probably wearing a holiday-themed sweater and looking out from her ranch home on a lawn full of reindeer or gnomes.

As for how she sees herself: “I’ve gone through some branding processes, and I realize the brand you’re getting from me is wildly optimistic, fiercely compassionate, and totally improvisational.” I am to think of myself in the same way—as a “brand,” or at least a product.

“What do you do in PR?”

I let a beat go by, not sure if this is a test of whether I am actually what I claim to be. But this turns out to be her MO—the teasing question, followed by the dazzlingly insightful answer: “You *sell* things, and now you’re going to sell yourself!”

Looking down at my sweatpants and unshod feet, all of which is of course invisible to Kimberly, I mumble about lacking confidence, the tight job market, and the obvious black mark of my age. This last defect elicits a forceful “Be really aware of the negative self-talk you give yourself. Step into the take-charge person you are!”

Now comes the theoretical part. She asks me to think of two overlapping circles. One circle is me, the other is “the world of work,” and the overlapping area is “the ideal position for you.” “What you need is confidence,” Kimberly is saying. “You have to see the glass as half-full, not half-empty.” I draw the overlapping circles as she speaks, then redraw them so that they are almost entirely overlapping, thus vastly expanding my employment prospects.

Our half an hour is drawing to a close, I note with relief. She thinks I will need three months of coaching, meaning she will need \$1,200. This will be a lot of work for me, she says, because she practices “coactive coaching,” which is “very collaborative.” “I want you to design me as your best coach,” she says, perhaps forgetting that she has already been not only designed but “branded.” If I were “designing” her, I’d throw in a major serotonin antagonist to damp down the perkiness, and maybe at some point I will find a tactful way to suggest that she chill. The session has left me drained and her more excited than ever: “We’ll dance together here!” is her final promise.

I FEEL THAT I’m not finished with Morton. I should at least take the test so he’ll get his \$60 and I will perhaps redeem the hour already spent with him. There are 200 questions on the WEPSS test, each in the form of a word or phrase which I am to rate from *A* to *E* in terms of its applicability to me; for example: *dry*, *pleasure seeking*, *strength*, *peacemaker*, and *vengeful*. I sit down at the dining room table with the intention of zipping through the test in ten minutes or less, but it’s not as easy as it looks. Am I *special*? From whose vantage point? What about *looking good*, which certainly depends on how much effort has gone into the project? Or *what’s the difference*—how can that describe anyone? Most of the terms are adjectives like *judgmental*, but there are plenty of nouns like *fantasy* and even a scattering of verbs like *move against*. Could I describe myself as almost never, occasionally, or almost always *move against*? Am I sometimes, never, or always *wow* or *no big deal*?

Even where the syntax fails to offend me as a writer—or, as I should now put it, a “communications” professional³—the answers are by no means obvious. *Harmonious*, for example: sometimes, but it depends on who or what’s around to harmonize with. *Avoid conflict*? If possible, but there are times when I seek it out, and in fact enjoy nothing better than, a good table-thumping debate. How about *powerful* or *happy*? I am, I realize, not the kind of person who, well, ever speaks of herself as “not the kind of person who . . .”

The very notion of personality, which is what we are trying to get at here, seems to have very

limited application to me and quite possibly everyone else. *Self* is another dodgy concept, since I am, when I subject this “I” to careful inspection, not much more than a swarm of flickering affinities, habits, memories, and predilections that could go either way—toward neediness or independence, for example, courage or cowardice. The best strategy, I decide, is to overcome *hesitant*, *worrying*, and *correctness seeking* and give what seem like the right, or most admirable, answers. I check “almost always” for *disciplined*, *high ideals*, *independent*, and *principled*, while firmly rejecting *lazy*, *abrasive*, *procrastinate*, and *laid-back*.

A week later, after Morton has had time to “grade” my personality, we meet at his home to go over the results. It’s a modest ranch house in a residential area I have never visited, decorated in a style I recognize as middle-class Catholic, circa 1970—prints of nineteenth-century pastoral scenes, a teddy bear on a child-size rocking chair, a Madonna overlooking the armoire. In other words, perfectly normal—at least until we arrive at the dining room table, on which three foot-high dolls are perched—a scarecrow, a tin man, a lion, and—what movie is this?—a plastic Elvis.

I decided in advance to lead off with my criticisms of the test, because if I give them after the results he may think I’m using them to deflect any criticisms of me that have emerged in his analysis. How in the world, I ask him, could I say whether *marketing* (that’s one of the test terms) applies to me? It’s a noun, for heaven’s sake, and while I may be “good at marketing,” I am not, by any stretch of the imagination, “marketing.” I tell him there’s no excuse for such sloppiness, and that I realize that in saying so I may well be revealing something about my personality: something rigid and unforgiving.

Completely unfazed, Morton picks up the Elvis doll, whose legs are sticking out at a right angle to his trunk in some hideous form of rigor mortis, and tells me that he uses it to make the point that “there is about as much similarity between the doll and the real Elvis as there is between you and your personality type.” I want to object that the doll does resemble the real Elvis, in his youth anyway and before his unfortunate weight gain; at least anyone could see that it is not a Barbara doll. But that misses the larger questions of what I am doing here if the test is meaningless and what it has to do with finding a job anyway. Besides, he’s putting Elvis down on a side table now, leaving us alone with the Oz crew.

We move on to the results. It turns out that my scores “could fit almost any personality type.” I’m highest in Original and Effective, and when you plot that out on an Enneagram, the diagonal lines connect me to Good and Loving. This makes me a tin man with a little lion thrown in, he says, fingering the appropriate dolls. Next, he brings out the baffling transparencies, which have been sitting here all along in a file folder. This time I resolve to get to the bottom of things, but when he flashes the transparency labeled “The Enneagram Symbol,” with its nested triangles, all I can come up with is, “What is the circle doing here?” It’s there, he explains, “for graphic unity”—meaning that he just likes the look of it?—and also to show that “we are talking about a whole person.” And the big triangle? I continue, losing heart. “Those are the three centers of intelligence.”

It turns out, though, that my Original, Effective, Good and Loving traits are not the point. The point is to understand my “nonresourceful” side, which seems to be my bad side, because this is what I need to do something about. Some people, Morton says, addressing the brown and wintry lawn outside the dining room window, resist hearing about this side. One woman, a schoolteacher, broke into tears when she learned about hers. In my case, the nonresourceful side includes being overly sensitive and prone to melancholy and envy, not to mention the bad traits that come up when you draw diagonals from Loving and Effective. What this comes down to, in a practical sense, is that, given my highly emotional and artistic personality (where did *that* come from?), I probably “don’t write very well.”

The “suggested activity,” in my case, would be “intensive journaling workshops” to polish my writing skills.

There is nothing to do but mumble my thanks, write out the check, and leave. I think of my father, whose personality traits included brash, cynical, bombastic, obnoxious, charming, kindly, and falling down drunk, yet who managed to rise from the copper mines of Butte to the corporate stratosphere, ending up as vice president of research for a multinational firm. Did he ever take a personality test or submit to executive coaching? Or were things different in the fifties and sixties, with a greater emphasis on what you could actually *do*? What would he have made of Morton, the dolls, and the ancient wisdom of the Enneagram? I drive home with his deep guffaws echoing in my head.

MORTON DOES HAVE one useful tip to offer: if I want help with my résumé, I should see Joanne, whose e-mail address he will e-mail me. Joanne turns out to be available at the same fee as Kimberly, and meets me at a coffeehouse only ten minutes from home—not the ideal venue since I’ve been to it before and there is a remote chance of encountering someone who knows me. I am expecting an impeccably dressed southernlady type, not the rumpled, makeup-free, fiftyish woman who greets me. She’s done “development” in the nonprofit world, she tells me, but has shifted—she says nothing about the circumstances prompting the shift—into executive coaching and is just coming from “a strategic planning meeting at Pepsi.” I bond at once; she is the anti-Kimberly, noninvasive and utterly down-to-earth. Although I’m not sure whether their functions overlap, I decide it’s best not to tell Joanne about Kimberly or vice versa.

Of my three coaches so far, Joanne is the first to give me some real reason for hope. She picks up on the word *speechwriting* buried in my first, feeble attempt at a résumé, and tells me to ramp it up as a salable skill, and I realize, yes, that’s something I can actually do. Up to this point, crisscrossing my contempt for Morton and Kimberly’s psychobabble, has been a deep strain of anxiety that I may, in fact, have nothing to offer, no skills of any relevance to the wide world of moneymaking. My PR and event-planning experience is, after all, derived from the more easygoing end of the nonprofit world and may not fully apply to the corporate setting. But speechwriting is speechwriting—from the initial joke or anecdote, through the marshaling of facts, to the exhortatory finale—and I’ve been doing it for decades. What no one needs to know is that all the speeches I’ve written were delivered by myself.

Joanne has other useful advice: Take *I* and *my* (as in “my responsibilities included . . .”) out of the résumé, which, I’m beginning to see, should have an odd, disembodied tone, as if my life had been lived by some invisible Other. Break everything I claim to have done down into its smaller, constituent, activities, so that, for example, I didn’t just “plan” an event, I “met with board to develop objectives” and went on through the various other phases of the job to “facilitate post-event evaluations.” What can I say? It certainly fills up space. And then her most ingenious tip of all: go to the professional association web sites for my putative professions and pick up the buzzwords, or professional lingo. If she doesn’t know I’m a complete fake, and I don’t think I’ve given her any reason to suspect that I am, she nonetheless has a remarkably clear idea of how to perpetrate the fakery. Which may just be the essence of résumé writing.

I am not, of course, pinning all hopes on my coaches. For one thing, I have been fleshing out my new identity: opening a checking account for Barbara Alexander, ordering her a credit card, having business cards made up for her at Kinko’s. She already, of course, has an e-mail address. As for clothes, she will have to share mine, and at this point I am still clueless enough to imagine that the outfits I use for lecturing on college campuses will pass muster in the business world. I expunge *Ehrenreich* from the greetings on my home and cell phones; I buy new glasses frames, striking dark

ones, chosen solely for their difference from my ordinary dull ones. I start cruising the business section of the local Barnes and Noble.

Besides, I have already learned from Kimberly the necessity of being “proactive” and also a “self-starter.” My résumé is too much of a work in progress to warrant posting on the major Internet job search sites like Monster and HotJobs, but there’s still no end of things to do on the web. I go to the event planners’ professional association web site and pilfer it for event-planning jargon to pad out my résumé. Way beyond just planning events, I expand into “providing onsite management” and “evaluating return on investment.”

Looking for advice and, better yet, company, I Google all possible combinations of *unemployed*, *white-collar*, *professional*, and *jobs*. These are not the best keywords, I discover. First, jobless white-collar people are not “unemployed”; they are “in transition” or perhaps engaged in a “job search.” Only the lowly—the blue- and pink-collar people—admit to actual “unemployment.” Second, avoid the word *job*, which, unless carefully modified, will lead to numerous sites in which it is prefaced by *hand* or *blow*.

The time I spend on the web has a dank and claustrophobic feel. After traversing a few links, I forget where I started and am lost among the pages full of advice, support groups, networking events and coaching opportunities geared to various salary levels. I join something called ExecuNet for a fee of \$150 and decide that’s what I am—an executive. I throw *executive* in among my keywords and start up the searches again, leading to still more support groups, networking events, and so forth. Is this a total waste of time, job-search-wise? I might as well be hacking through thick jungle undergrowth with a bread knife instead of a machete.

At my second session with Joanne, conducted by phone, Barbara Alexander begins to earn my respect. I had initially thought of her as a stay-at-home wife who didn’t have to work for the money—just enjoyed her little dabblings in PR and event planning, sort of as an extension of her busy social life. Her husband must have been pretty well-heeled, and I suspect that his contacts provided her with most of her clients. Divorce has confronted her with the need to earn money, an enterprise for which she is sorely unprepared. But now Joanne asks me what has distinguished my work from that of other PR and event-planning people. I search for an answer and come up with: “My thorough research on whatever topic or theme I’m working on . . . My goal is to be thoroughly conversant with the major issues and trends in the field, to the point where I can participate in substantive decision making, like picking a keynote speaker.”

“*Conversant!*” Joanne exclaims in a rare show of enthusiasm, “I love that word! We’ll use it in the résumé or maybe the cover letter.” So Barbara Alexander is not an airhead at all but a towering intellectual of the event-planning field.

Meanwhile I have homework from Kimberly. First I have to fill in the questionnaire she included in my “Client Discovery Packet,” asking me, among other things, to list five adjectives that describe me at my best and five that describe me at my worst. For the best I choose *energetic*, *focused*, *intelligent*, *compassionate*, and *creative*, while for my dark side I choose *anxious*, *compulsive*, *disorganized*, *distractible*, and *depressed*—all true at various times except for *distractible*, which was simply a waste of filling in space.

What are my three major fears? I offer “too old to find work” and “likely to end up in poverty,” but cannot think of a third. The only question that gives me pause is “list five things you are tolerating or putting up with in your life at present (examples: disorganized office, disrespectful relationships, poor communication, etc.).” That’s it: disorganized office. Stacks of paper mount and subside around in m

in waves; the floor moonlights as a filing space; empty cups and glasses crowd the desk, along with unpaid bills, unanswered letters, manuscripts I am supposed to review. Talk about a “distorted—passion,” as Morton would put it; to judge from my home office, I have the administrative talents of twelve-year-old boy. Kimberly had promised in our initial talk that I would come out of our coactive process not only with a job but with “a whole new view of myself.” With luck, the new view will be far less cluttered.

The other Kimberly assignment is to take yet another personality test, the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, which is marginally craftier than the WEPSS, in that I am not asked simply to choose the attributes that fit me, but am given somewhat more roundabout questions, such as “Do you usually go along better with (A) imaginative people, or (B) realistic people?” Once again, the only sensible approach is a random one. Do I usually show my feelings freely or keep my feelings to myself? Hmm depends on how socially acceptable those feelings might be. If it’s a desire to inflict grievous bodily harm on some person currently in my presence—well, no. When I go somewhere for the day, would I rather plan what I will do and when, or “just go”? Again, it’s somewhat different for a court appearance than for a trip to the mall. I race through the test with the mad determination of a monkey that’s been given a typewriter and assigned to generate Shakespeare’s oeuvre, hoping that some passably coherent individual emerges.

CAREER COACHES CAN perhaps be forgiven for using baseless personality tests to add a veneer of scientific respectability to the coaching process. But the tests enjoy wide credibility, not just among coaches but among corporate decision makers. In 1993, the Myers-Briggs test was administered to three million Americans; eighty-nine of the Fortune top 100 companies use it to help slot their white collar employees into the appropriate places in the hierarchy.⁴ On its web site, the Enneagram Institute lists, among the companies supposedly using the Enneagram test to sort out their employees Amoco, AT&T, Avon, Boeing, DuPont, eBay, General Mills, General Motors, Alitalia Airlines, KLM Airlines, Hewlett-Packard, Toyota, Procter & Gamble, International Weight Watchers, Reebok Health Clubs, Motorola, Prudential Insurance, and Sony. Amazon offers a score of books on the Enneagram, none of them apparently critical, including *The Enneagram in Love and Work*, *The Spiritual Dimension of the Enneagram*, and *The Enneagram for Managers*.

It is true that I encountered the Enneagram in the particularly wacky company of *The Wizard of Oz*. But the test I took was the real thing, which, a web search reveals, is variously said to be derived from Sufism, Buddhism, Jesuit philosophy, and Celtic lore—with a generous undergirding of numerology. The early twentieth-century Russian mystic G. I. Gurdjieff seems to have been a fount of inspiration, but the actual development of the Enneagram theory is usually credited to two men—Oscar Ichazo, a Bolivian-born mystic, and Claudio Naranjo, a psychiatrist who made his mark in the nineteen sixties by employing hallucinogenic drugs in psychotherapy. Whatever “ancient learning” the Enneagram test purports to represent, it is nothing more than a pastiche of wispy New Age yearnings for some mystical unity underlying the disorder of human experience.

Even the more superficially rational of these tests, the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, possesses not a shred of scientific respectability according to Annie Murphy Paul’s 2004 book, *The Cult of Personality*. It was devised, in the early forties, by a layperson—a homemaker in fact—who had become fascinated by her son-in-law’s practical, detailed-oriented personality, which was so different from her own, more intuitive, approach. Inspired by the psychoanalyst Carl Jung’s notion of “types”—which were by no means meant to be innate or immutable—Katharine Briggs devised a test to sort humanity into sixteen distinct types, all of them fortunately benign. (There were no psychopaths, of

the kind who might show up at work one day with an automatic weapon, in Briggs's universe.) To her eternal frustration, the test never won respect from the academic psychology profession, and not only because of her outsider status. Serious psychologists have never been convinced that people can be so readily sorted into "types."

Leaving aside the validity of "types," the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator has zero predictive value even in its own terms. In one study, undertaken by proponents of Myers-Briggs, only 47 percent of people tested fell into the same category on a second administration of the test. Another study found 39 to 76 percent of those tested assigned to a different "type" upon retesting weeks or years later. Some people's "types" have been found to vary according to the time of day. Paul concludes that "there is no evidence that [Briggs's] sixteen distinct types have any more validity than the twelve signs of the zodiac."⁵

So why is the corporate world, which we think of as so fixated on empirical, in fact, quantifiable, measures of achievement like the "bottom line," so attached to these meaningless personality tests? One attraction must be that the tests lend a superficial rationality to the matching of people with jobs. No one, after all, wants a sadistic personnel director or a morbidly shy publicist; and if you failed at one job, it is probably comforting to be told that it was simply not a good "fit" for your inner nature. As Paul writes:

The administration of personality tests is frequently presented as a gesture of corporate goodwill, a generous acknowledgement of employees' uniqueness. Under this banner of respect for individuality, organizations are able to shift responsibility for employee satisfaction onto that obligatory culprit, "fit." There's no bad worker and no bad workplace, only a bad fit between the two.⁶

Of course, if the function of the tests is really ideological—to promote the peg-in-hole theory of employment—they do not have to be in any way accurate as predictors of performance or satisfaction. They serve more as underpinnings of corporate etiquette, allowing employers to rationalize rejection or dismissal in terms of an inadequate "fit." We believe that there is a unique slot for each person, the tests announce—even though we may fail to find it in your particular case.

My job, though, is to find a "fit," however wobbly, in any institutional structure that will have me. And with this simple task in mind, the personality tests seem even more mysterious. If I am a public relations person by training and experience, what good will it do me to discover that my personality is better suited to a career as an embalmer? Presumably there are extroverted engineers and introverted realtors, who nevertheless manage to get the job done. The peculiar emphasis on "personality," as opposed to experience and skills, looms like a red flag, but I have no way of knowing yet what the warning's about.

MY LONG-THREATENED one-hour makeup session with Kimberly finally arrives, and the reason for this ghastly intrusion into my time is that I blew off a prior scheduled session out of sheer sullenness and inability to simulate the cheerfulness that a successful Kimberly interaction requires. We start with the results of the Myers-Briggs test. "You're an ENTJ," she announces. "I was so excited when I saw it!"

"Remember the two overlapping circles?" she quizzes me. I acknowledge that I do. One was the world, one was me.

"Well," she explains, "the personality is part of *you*"

"As opposed to the world?"

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