

Chapter 3

“Frankly my dear, I don't give a damn.”

Ok, so the title of this chapter is a reference to a very old film (ask your Nan) and while Rhett Butler might not have given a damn, how often have we heard the phrase, “I don't care what you/he/she/they think”, spoken by someone who very much cared about what you/he/she/they thought?

The truth is of course, that most of us care way too much about what other people might think of us. But why do we do it?

Alain de Botton (English philosopher, 1969 - still breathing) has coined the phrase ‘Status Anxiety’, something which he has written and talked about quite extensively.

In short, Status Anxiety is the anxiety we bring upon ourselves because we give too many damns about what other people might think about us, or just as importantly, we give too many damns about what ‘we think’ other people might think about us (because the two are rarely the same) and if that isn't enough we amplify that anxiety by putting time, money and effort into trying to make other people think what we would like them to think about us. Does all that make sense?

But let's delve into it a little further so we can expose this particular anxiety for being what it truly is; a pointless waste of time and effort and something that makes you miserable and obstructs you from being who you are or what you want to be.

Alain de Botton started one of his many speeches on Status Anxiety by quoting George Orwell who once wrote,

“*After the age of 20, no one cares if you are nice.*”

George Orwell, author of 'Animal Farm' and '1984'. He actually wrote a lot more other stuff and in my humble opinion, if his 'Notes on Nationalism' and 'Why I Write' were made compulsory reading in all schools, I think we would be living in a much kinder, fairer and just society than the one we now find ourselves in. But I digress.

So what was Orwell getting at? Well, when you are at school or go off to college or university and meet new people, you will be asked (and you will ask of them)...

- What music do you like?
- What celebrities do you like?
- What box sets have you watched?
- What's your favourite reality TV programme?
- Do you have any siblings/pets?
- Blah-de-blah-de-blah.

There is absolutely nothing wrong with this. It's all perfectly normal, very useful ice breaking banter when getting to know someone. However, when you leave education behind and you meet someone new, be it at a party or a formal event, the ice breaking banter will be replaced by a single question. And it will always be the same question. And after answering that question, the person who answered the question will pose the very same question to the person who just asked it. I hope all that makes sense. So, what is that question?

Well, that question is.. drum roll ...

"What do you do?"

Yep, that's it, just four little words. And it's a question that on its own doesn't really make sense as there is no context added to it. In answering, "What do you do", we could say, I live, I breath, I run, I walk, I talk, I buy, I cry, I look, I cook ... and we could go on and on answering that question telling the questioner what "We do" long after the party is over, but we don't, because we know what it means, it means, "What do you do for a living?". It is such an often asked question it is of no surprise that it has been reduced to four words, my only surprise is that it hasn't been reduced further to "WDYD?"

What the other does for a living is, initially at least, the only thing that needs to be known about each other, because from the answers given, both will instantly assign the other a host of pre-conceived ideas based purely on the reply that each one gets; with the most important of them being, do they earn more than you or do you earn more than them? Because based on that, you can decide who sits on a rung further up the 'Ladder of Success' than the other. Will you get a slight kick out of realising you sit further up that ladder than them, or will you feel slightly kicked that they sit further up it than you?

So, as Orwell said, "*After the age of 20, no one cares if you are nice.*" All, they are interested in is 'what you do', or more importantly how much you earn.

So, what's all that about?

Well it is sad to admit, but society (albeit it a modern 'Western' society) holds the collective belief that if you earn a lot of money then you must be successful in life. 'Wealth' and 'Success' have become synonymous. We are also conditioned to believe that success comes from years of hard work, skill and good judgement and consequently not only does success make you wealthy (or is it wealth makes you successful?) but it comes wrapped in dignity and respect.

But if that is true, so it must also be true that those on low salaries are deemed less successful in life or even failures. And consequently, their failures must come from years of laziness, lack of skill and poor judgement. And needless to say, dignity and respect are not to be found.

It is true that if you work hard you are more likely to proceed further than if you didn't work hard, but 'success' isn't guaranteed by hard work, skill or good judgement. And it has to be remembered that not everyone gets to where they deserve to be and not everyone deserves to be where they get to be.

For every hard working, skilful individual that has fallen on hard times there is someone living the 'life of Riley' who hasn't done an honest hard days' work in their lives. They have got to where they have either through immoral means, exploiting others or because of who they know or who they are related to. Did they earn their dignity and respect?

We judge how successful people are by how much they earn, where they live, what car they drive and what they wear. And it is all nonsense, complete nonsense, but there you have it. Turn up at an expensive hotel in a car worth a million pounds (can cars really be worth that much?) and you will be met by doormen who will open your car door for you, carry your bags and offer to park your car. Turn up in a clapped out old mini with the exhaust pipe tied on with string and the same doormen will probably ask you to drive on.

Consequently (according to Alain de Botton) we invest emotional meaning to material goods, but it is not the items themselves that we are necessarily interested in, it is the reaction we get from others when they see our collection of shiny baubles that we crave. It is that degree of respect and honour and yes .. that motivates us. As I mentioned earlier in chapter , such people are akin to drug takers wanting bigger and bigger highs. The person who surrounds themselves with 'look at me baubles' is never content, they

will strive to get bigger and more expensive and more shiny baubles to show to the world just how successful and deserving they are.

But, we as a nation look up to celebrities with their perfect lives and their perfect hair and their perfect teeth. But we don't see the unhappier sides of their lives, their constant battle to stay current, to stay in the limelight, to stay a celebrity.

Schopenhauer (German philosopher)

Misanthropy is the general hatred, dislike, distrust or contempt of the human species or human nature. A misanthrope or misanthropist is someone who holds such views or feelings.

Greek *misos*, "hatred" and *anthrōpos*, "man, human"

The World as Will and Representation

"We will gradually become indifferent to what goes on in the minds of other people when we acquire a knowledge of the superficial nature of their thoughts, the narrowness of their views and of the number of their errors. Whoever attaches a lot of value to the opinions of others pays them too much honor."