

Remember: What You Do Is Not Who You Are

By Tim Herrera, *The New York Times*, February 6, 2021

One of the best pieces of career advice I've ever gotten was to think of jobs as verbs, rather than nouns. So, for example: I do journalism, rather than I'm a journalist.

5 Yes, it feels like a silly, arbitrary little word swap, but it is a mental shift that can help to disentangle who you are as a person from how you spend your days to make money for rent and groceries.

That balance is difficult to strike as the pandemic revealed. As the home became the office for millions of Americans, and working hours bled into personal hours. So it was more important than ever not to tie your entire identity — and, in particular, your life satisfaction — to the thing you do for money, experts said.

10 *'What do you want to be when you grow up?'* From that moment we're asked this question, early in many Americans' childhood, our identity becomes inseparably tied to the thing we do to make money. Whether we actually fulfill those wild dreams is beside the point; we're conditioned to tie our core identity to a profession.

15 As we grow into that mind-set, we embrace that a career is a singular force pushing our lives forward, and if we're lucky enough to be good at what we do, it can be difficult to have perspective, said Alison Green, the founder of the advice blog *Ask a Manager*.

"If you're conscientious and you like what you do, it's very easy to get your identity all tied up with your job," she said. "And not just the job itself, but the idea of yourself as someone who's really good at what you do. That's a very powerful thing."

20 She added: "There is this dark side to it that you don't really spot until it's no longer a force for good in your life."

25 Experts say it's important to protect yourself from letting problems in one area of your life affect the other areas. A bad week at work is a drag on your mental health, but if your work is only a part of your identity, and not defining it completely, the overall emotional impact of that bad week is less severe.

"The problem with having your identity tied up with your job is that it's not fully within your control," Ms. Green said. "If things start going badly at work, it can affect your mental health in ways that it wouldn't if you weren't so deeply invested. So it's giving work a lot of power over your happiness in ways that can end up hurting you."

30 She added that centering your life on a job may even make you act against your own self-interest and happiness, perhaps by working long hours or accepting behavior you normally wouldn't.

This doesn't mean you shouldn't be invested in your work or not care about your career and the people you work with. That investment can be an asset, and being passionate about one's work can help lead to better output. Rather, give that investment a ceiling.

35 "You're playing the long game here," Ms. Green said. "It's one thing to work into the evening for a few weeks or months, but it's not sustainable long term. You want to manage your career with an eye toward what you can keep up."