



**ALAIN DE BOTTON**

**in conversation with Paul Holdengräber**

*The Pleasures and Sorrows of Work*

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**Celeste Bartos Forum**

**LIVE from the New York Public Library**

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**KIM IRWIN:** Good evening. Hi. I'm Kim Irwin and I'm Manager of LIVE Public Programs, and welcome to the New York Public Library. And tonight is going to be a lot of work. As my great-uncle Harry used to say, "Work is fascinating. I could stare at it for hours." (**laughter**) And it will be quite a workweek for LIVE, too. Beginning tomorrow, we are participating in the Muslim Voices Arts and Ideas. I don't know if you know about this wonderful festival that's happening throughout the city. It's a cultural

expression of the Muslim world and it's presented by the Asia Society, BAM, and NYU Center for Dialogues. And we're working with the European Union National Institutes for Culture, or EUNIC, to bring you five events on Islam in Europe, which will explore multiple perspectives for viewing relations between European society and their Muslim communities. And joining us will be Her Majesty Queen Noor, Benjamin Barber, David Brancaccio, and many others. And with President Obama's address to the Middle East, not even a week ago, the next three days of conversations will be extremely enlightening for those of us who know little about Islam. So please join us for all or part of this very timely series.

And I know you love LIVE, and you love the New York Public Library, so please consider becoming a Friend of the Library for as little as forty dollars. You can join and get ten dollars off of every LIVE ticket and if you join tonight, you get free tickets to LIVE, so it's all a very good deal. And many thanks to our bookseller, 192 Books. There will be a book signing after the program tonight. And tonight we have, once again, *The Pleasures and Sorrows of Work*, a conversation between Paul Holdengräber, Director of LIVE, and Alain de Botton, author of *How Proust Can Change Your Life* and *The Art of Travel*.

But first we want to show you the work of Flash Rosenberg, our artist in residence for LIVE, and some of you know her work. Flash creates animated drawings of LIVE conversations, and unfortunately she couldn't be here tonight. So how did she become an artist in residence of LIVE? Well, I'm going to read you Flash's own words. "I was you,

in the audience, struck by how LIVE programs are more than lectures. Something active happens. Maybe not visibly, but people are sitting out there, people sitting up here. Looks like a lecture. But there seemed to be a new energy for what could happen. Conversations were happening. Not just onstage but between strangers sitting next to each other and within each person. One night, on a whim, I brought a pad of drawing paper to the conversation between Adam Gopnik and Paul Holdengräber. They were talking about raising children in New York. I drew how I heard the talk. I wanted to capture the ideas, how ideas looked. That meant combining text with doodling. I write words until the alphabet is insufficient. Then the lines start to meander, causing drawing. Then when the drawing gets too abstract, back to the words. You will now see conversations portraits of António Lobo Antunes, who we had last fall, and Mark Twain, who appeared in April.

**(Flash Rosenberg video plays)**

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** A big round of applause for Flash Rosenberg. **(applause)** As you could tell, we put our artist in residence to work immediately, and she portrays these conversations as they happen in real time. Now in real time I'm going to interview, have a conversation, instigate a conversation hopefully elicit all kinds of unknown comments to himself from Alain de Botton. So a big round of applause to Alain de Botton. **(applause)** *The Pleasures and Sorrows of Work*. I must say in an era such as ours now, to fill the auditorium tonight was not difficult for two reasons. One, it was Alain de Botton, and the other reason was the timeliness of your subject. I'm wondering when did you start working on the sorrows and pleasures of work?

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** Well, I began the book during what we call the boom times. Of course, the boom times, were they that great for you? For most of us, they weren't boom, but, anyway, what we now refer to as the boom times. But the book had another title. It was a title from Walt Whitman, a section of *Leaves of Grass* called "A Song for Occupations," and that was the working title until one night my publisher in the UK, Penguin, had been increasingly unhappy, and they'd gone from a very English, "We quite like it," which basically means, "it's awful." **(laughter)** And the pressure had been steadily increasing and then, I kid you not, at about just before midnight one night, the senior head of the Penguin division which I publish called me up, and he sounded very nervous, "Is something wrong? Are you drunk? What's happening?" **(laughter)** And he said, "It's your title. If we publish under this title, I have to resign," **(laughter)** and I said, "Come on."

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** And was it because Walt Whitman is American?

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** He said to me, "It's going to sound like a very high-minded book about the Israeli-Palestinian situation."

**(laughter)**

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** But, I mean, you couldn't have defined your book better.

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** So we had to change it. And originally it was called *The Pleasures of Work*, and I felt very, very depressed about it and I thought, “This just isn’t the pleasures of work only,” and then the word “sorrow” popped into my mind, as it often does, and I thought, “Right, this is a nice word. It’s slightly old-fashioned. It’s not hysteria, it’s not depression, it’s sorrow.” Which I think is often the attitude with which we do greet unhappiness in work. We don’t scream so much as feel a sort of heaviness, which is for me captured by that word “sorrow.” So that’s the slight, small origins of the word, but it was narrowly going to be called *A Song for Occupations*.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Is there a significance to the order in which the title finds itself—pleasure and sorrows?

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** I’d like there to be. My U.S. editor, Dan, who I think is in the audience, I’m not sure, said originally, said, as Lehman Brothers collapsed, shortly after Lehman Brothers collapsed, said, “Listen, I’ve had a thought. Could we call it *The Sorrows and Pleasures of Work*? Would you mind?”

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** What did your English publisher say at that moment?

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** At that moment, he felt he’d had a victory and could recede but then I said to Dan, “I think we’re going to stay with the title,” and he accepted it with his usual grace.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Do you think in your mind Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther* came to bear at all?

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** Yes, it is always. I like having these little allusions. Yes, I think the word "sorrow" is a good one. It suggests something that's slightly dated, that's nonmedical.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** People who read that book—upon reading it many young men and women, particularly men, committed suicide.

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** This is not an intended side effect of the book, **(laughter)** I hope. I mean, it started off. In many ways, it's a celebration of the workplace. There's a lot of, you know, that genre of the misery memoir in psychological life. Well, there's sometimes the equivalent of that in the workplace, as though if you're a writer, an artist, and you write about the workplace, it must always be a story of exploitation. And though of course there's exploitation, that is only a part of the story, and it seemed important to reflect both. And it seemed important to be excited by aspects of the working world. I remember—I was just reading the *New York Times* this weekend, and Obama was being interviewed, and he said something like—the discussion was about manufacturing, and he said, "You know, during the campaign we used to go a lot of huge factories where they'd make things like turbines." And he went, I quote him, and he said, "and, gee, that was always cool." And, in a way, that's not the most eloquent sentence from an otherwise very eloquent president, but I know exactly what he means. There is something about

seeing the larger bits of the world economy as they emerge in turbines, or indeed in electricity transmission towers or whatever that excites on the whole only children or adults who are willing enough and not frightened enough to let go and actually celebrate this aspect. The reason why we normally hold back is we think it's silly. You know the fashionable question in town is always what's on at the Met, not what's coming in to the docks, not what's on down at the docks or, you know, "what kind of cargo we've got coming into LaGuardia?" These are not fashionable questions. The way in which the economy feeds a city, houses a city, this is not something that we accept as a culture.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** And this got you very excited. You got, when one reads your most recent book, *The Pleasures and Sorrows of Work*, you got very excited going to see what came into the port.

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** Yes, I mean, I remember, one day I went to Tilbury Docks, which is just at the mouth of the River Thames, I mean, where the Thames meets the North Sea, and though there's this assumption that no shipping comes into London, it's in fact a relatively busy port, and so every day of the week, night and day, you've got these huge cargo tankers bringing in all sorts of things. And you learn stuff about, you know, the economy. I remember looking at this enormous sort of bulbous-shaped ship and asking what was in it and it was carbon dioxide used to make lemonade, children's lemonade. An enormous tanker that had come from Rotterdam with the gas for the lemonade. This kind of stuff absolutely fascinates me.

And there was no one watching all of this going on except for one group, and they were the proverbial ship spotters. Thick rubber-soled shoes, anoraks, all men, bearded, some of them with hot drinks to keep them from the weather. And I loved what they were looking at. I didn't really like what they were doing with their curiosity because at the end of the day they were only interested in length and the size of turbine, the turbine shaft.

**(laughter)** That's all they cared about. **(laughter)** They reminded me of a lover who's fallen in love, but all they can think of doing with their beloved is sort of measuring her shoulder blade. So I like the object—

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** All kinds of images come to mind.

**(laughter)**

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** Indeed. So I liked the object of their curiosity but not necessarily what they were doing with it. But they were a starting point.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** And what were they saying? What did you overhear them talking about?

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** They were saying such things as “that's just come in from Nigeria,” or “that's the one carrying the Ford axles.” They had a very good grasp of the economy. Normally when we're trying to understand the economy, we read the *Wall Street Journal*, we turn on MSNBC, et cetera. We have an essentially economic

understanding of the economy. These guys seemed to be aiming for a more, if you like, aesthetic understanding of the economy. What interested them was the size, the strength, the formal beauty. They wouldn't have put it that way, but I think that's what was exciting them. And, of course, they have colleagues in other areas—in aviation, in trains, and in other such things. And they're routinely ridiculed, and to some extent their interest does have a pathological element sometimes. But it also has other elements.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** In a way, they are specialists.

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** Not themselves. They're excited by the specialism of the modern world. They're interested in the cooperation. They're also interested in how stuff got here.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Let's look at a couple of images if we could.

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** That's a power station just opposite Tilbury Docks. And that's doing a lot of the electricity generation for South London.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Let's look at the second image.

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** Faint. There's a little bird. Can you see the bird? I was very proud of the bird on the mudflaps.

**(laughter)**

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Where's the bird?

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** Just down there. Someone who knows more about birds would be able to tell me what that is. I've forgotten. I used to know.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** A birdwatcher.

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** A birdwatcher, indeed.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** There you have it.

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** There must be someone who will tell us. So—and then some oil being refined. A giant BP oil refinery, again, just on the estuary of the Thames. And here they are, here are a couple of ship spotters. Giant Hapag-Lloyd cargo boxes there behind them. And, yup, that's how they spend their weekends.

This is the—Sainsbury's is the number-two supermarket in the UK. It controls an extraordinary percentage of all the food distribution, and they have a giant warehouse. The word "cathedral" is much overused, but they have something that is at least the size of two cathedrals outside the main ring road of London, and I spent some time there and it's a fascinating place for the amount of—the speed with which things are going in and

coming out. You know, two hundred years ago, we used to know where stuff came from. One of the distinctive features of the modern world is we don't know where anything comes from. You know, the joke is that children think that tomatoes grow in supermarkets, et cetera, we just don't know. We've disconnected ourselves from production, which leads to alienation, feelings of deadness, feelings of guilt, because we always think, "Well, I can't see where this has come from, so what possible unbelievable exploitation might have occurred?" So what I was trying to do was to stitch back some of the connections between ourselves as consumers and the processes of production. I think it's one of the possible roles of art in the age of advanced logistics, is just to go back on some journeys.

And when I was there, you can't see it, but at the top left there's an enormous section which is devoted to exotic fish, which is basically any fish caught outside of UK territorial waters, and I remember being in a place that's was about the size of this room full of tuna fish and the forklift truck driver who I was shadowing, I said to him, "You know, where are these headed?" And he said, "Well, everything here is going to be gone within eleven hours and it was in the sea twenty-two hours ago," and so the whole process—

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Time is of the essence.

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** Time is absolutely of the essence and it was then that was born a very crazy project, which I took to its ultimate conclusion, which was to try and

photograph every single person who had come into contact with the tuna, from the guy who clubbed the tuna fish to death to the person who ate the tuna, who was a boy in Bristol. Here he is, many months later.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** I just thought I would be right there with you.

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** Very good. He's called Sam and we followed the particular shipment, we found his mother, and we surprised her in the supermarket and explained who we were. She was very surprised, she called her husband. We said, "can we come home with you and watch your tuna?" **(laughter)** And it was a slightly crazy project, but I wanted it from beginning to end.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** So explain to us a little bit this fascination with this archaeology, because you're really interested in showing where things come and in the end where they end up in our mouth and how this project in a way is cowritten, or coauthored, it's authored by you and by Richard Baker, the photographer who was kind enough to loan us these images.

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** I think in a time when you think that things are slipping away, and I think artists are often people who think that things are slipping away, or rather who are most distressed by that sense of slippage, there's a desire to hold on to it, and one of the things we do when we want to hold on to it is we make art out of it—we write it, we want to photograph it, we want to arrest it, we want to freeze-frame the process. It's a

process of control. Control has a bad name: “Control freak,” et cetera, but I think there’s perhaps a nobler attempt to try and control which is to simply become more aware of the life we’re living and of the things we’re implicated in and, you know, in a small, almost metaphoric, way what was going on there with the tuna journey was an attempt—you know, it could have been so many things, it could have been the iron ore in the western Australian desert and its eventual fate in a car factory in Mexico. It could have been so many things, and it doesn’t really matter what so much just that we bear in mind all of this at all times, so in many ways the book was about raising consciousness, that age-old thing that artists try and do, trying to jolt us out of habit, out of settled modes of thought, and get us to find the world more interesting than we often believe that it is.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** But this warehouse we saw before, in the image before, is also a way of stocking goods at a very reasonable cost. So Amazon, let’s say, stocks the books of the world, we do that and by doing that we have all the small bookstores run out of business. So do we really know where things come in a better way than before by having these huge warehouses or by having someone such as you tell us where they come from, when in the end they all end in one big warehouse?

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** Yeah, I mean, I think there’s a real tension between how we would—the scale we would like to have in our lives and the scale we actually like to have. Most people in the U.S. work in organizations of over five hundred people. That’s pretty large, over five hundred people. When you’re in an organization with over five hundred people, you’re going to probably be very far from the source of the meaning of

your job. Now, what is the meaning of a job? I think jobs acquire meaning when you feel in some way you're able to change somebody's life for the better. You are—I don't know—

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Can you say that again? I think this is really important for people to hear.

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** Take a step back. Often when people are unhappy in their jobs, they say, “You know, the salary's okay, you know, my colleagues are okay, but what's the meaning of it?” So that word “meaning” seemed to me very central and I sort of circled around it in the book, and I think that a job acquires meaning when we feel that in some ways we have been able, as I say, either to reduce the suffering of another human being or to increase in some way their pleasure. Now, there are obvious ways of doing this—you know, you could be an opera singer or a brain surgeon. Those are dramatic examples. But, really, there are much more ordinary examples. You know, reuniting somebody with their lost luggage, removing the squeak to a door. These are all ways in which you can get a sense that you're in some ways leaving the world a slightly better place at the end of the day.

Now, the problem with the modern economy is that very many jobs do leave the world slightly better. The problem is you don't feel it. I went to hang out in a giant biscuit manufacturer—a giant biscuit manufacturer—or cookie manufacturer you would say here—called United Biscuits—they're the number one biscuit manufacturer in the UK,

and they're the number two in the bagged-nut market. That includes all those—any salted bagged thing. They also make Pringles. And in fact the owner helped to fund this hall—the owner of United Biscuits—to fund or renovate this hall—I think I'm right in saying.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** The New York Public Library.

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** Mr. Schwartzman.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** The library actually is called after his name now.

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** Indeed. The profit, the profit in part—actually we can come back to that—

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** We should.

**(laughter)**

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** The profit in part came from United Biscuits, which is a very profitable concern. They make also things like Jaffa Cakes, which I don't think you have, and et cetera, and I went to follow a particular kind of biscuit they were making called the Moment. **(laughter)** They were launching a biscuit called the Moment. It was a five-million-pound development program. And it took three years to do and I sort of came in on various stages. And I don't think any of you will have eaten a Moment, **(laughter)** and

the reason I say that with confidence is that all biscuits have a target audience and Moments are for women, between the ages of twenty-six to thirty-six, living on low incomes in the North of England, **(laughter)** which I don't think sums up anybody here.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** It's quite—it's a bit unlikely.

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** It's unlikely. It's unlikely.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Though some of those women may have found themselves coming to the New York Public Library.

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** We hope so, and I know that you have an outreach program.

**(laughter)**

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** We do, as you can tell.

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** So, the point is, you know, when you're wheeling your trolley down the aisles of the supermarket the biscuit you're coming way before you knew what you wanted. **(laughter)** Everybody has a biscuit for them and you can learn an awful lot.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** It's kind of the sex appeal of the inanimate.

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** Yes, and you can learn an awful lot about somebody by just going, “Hey, what’s your favorite biscuit?” **(laughter)** I’ll tell you later if you’re interested. **(laughter)** The interesting thing of course is that there are fifteen thousand employees at United Biscuits and I hung out a lot with the employees in a sort of eight thousand band who were working in accounts in the main office in Hays, and they’re processing reinsurance forms for the pallets that carry the biscuits, so you’re really quite far from the pleasure of eating a biscuit here, you’re really pretty far, and a lot of them were bored out of their minds and they hated their jobs.

And many of them—one of them in particular and I remember chatting to her. Her dream was to start a cake shop. And she wanted to start a cake shop and make cakes for people. And many of us have cake baking fantasies, I think I’m not alone in saying, **(laughter)** and the reason for that is the fantasy of baking the cake is you’re doing something good for somebody and you can see what you’re doing. You bake the cake in the morning and by evening you see the person who’s eaten it, et cetera, et cetera, i.e., it has none of the problems of Bigness with a capital B. You’re able to connect with the person. And the problem with so many large organizations is it’s not that what they’re doing is meaningless, it’s the—there’s a sensation of meaninglessness within the organization.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** So the unhappiness could be ameliorated, one might say, made—people could be made to feel better in these organizations if they felt that they were part of an organic whole.

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** Yes, often, yes, I mean often what the bosses of such organizations do is to try and remind employee number eight thousand of what the whole team is doing so that there is some connection with what is going on. I try to suggest that that would be one way of looking at the usefulness of having me hanging out at United Biscuits, but they were not impressed by that particular function. Although, I mean, I say this flippantly, but I do wonder—I think that the idea of having a writer in residence embedded in businesses is not such a bad one, because so many businesses don't know how to look at themselves, and they don't know how to project an image of what they do back to their employees, so it's not such a bad idea. You know, I think—

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Do you think if this particular biscuit company which we are very indebted to here at the Library, (**laughter**) as you suggested quite correctly. If the employees of that particular biscuit company knew that the biscuit—owner of that particular biscuit company was doing something very good—namely some philanthropy, namely something that could, in effect, change the well-being of an organization without which it might be doing less well? Do you think the employees would feel different—

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** Let's start with his name. If they even knew his name, that might be a good start. They don't even know his name. They don't know who their company is owned by. They have absolutely no idea of the wider context in which their activity is taking place. A lot of this is, you know, related to efficiency. There is a battle between efficiency and, as it were, connection—connectedness to things. There's a famous Italian economist, Vilfredo Pareto, at the end of the nineteenth century, who comes up with an

equation and the equation basically says that the more specialized your economy, the richer you will be. In other words, the more your workforce is involved in tiny, tiny things, the better it is for your country and your economy.

Now, if you go to United Biscuits and you say to people, “What do you do?” on the whole, you don’t understand the answer. They’ll say things like, “I’m a packaging technologist,” or “I’m a data-systems analyst.” You just—it requires a few more questions or even ten more questions before you begin to understand what they’re doing. And that’s typical of the modern world. You know, you go to most parties, and you say, “Hey, what do you do?” Very few people say, “I’m a farmer,” or “I’m a bricklayer.” You know, that’s children’s books. In children’s books, people do simple jobs. They’re not simple—they’re simple, but they’re easily identifiable, they carry you from beginning to end. That’s why they’re so appealing to children. They—children can understand what’s going on. And you get into the adult world, you get this terrible division. From an economic point of view, that’s the way it should be. It makes no sense if train drivers come home in the evening and start making yogurt. Or if brain surgeons think, “Hey, it’s a good idea to make children’s clothes.” You know, that’s not efficiency. An efficient economy is one of specialists. But there is this human toll to specialization, and the toll is of disconnection, alienation, and a sense of deadness, if you like.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** What do you do?

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** What do I do? (**laughter**) That's a very good question that I wrestle with and answer with—you know, according to the audience. I'm a writer.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Let's see what you answer.

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** I'm a writer. Now, when I started writing the book, I believed that writers were very odd creatures, very different from the rest of society, but more and more, the more I studied other occupations, the more I realized that writing slots into all jobs, really, it slots into a continuum. Really, what you're trying to do is to identify a need and service it. You know, as the biscuit manufacturer is doing. The exact need that a book is serving is firstly something of a mystery. The professors of literature don't quite like to talk about this. The idea of "what is the purpose of a book?" "What is the enjoyment of a book, or the point of a book?" This does not loom large in curriculums. Largely because the question is seen as potentially naïve or have a kind of simplicity which is verging on the dumb. But it's such things as you want people to recognize themselves in other people's experiences. You want to be able to put people in a context so by reading a book the wider context in which they exist will become clear to them. You want a sense of communion. One of the big reasons why we read is 'cause we're lonely. Not that we have no one to talk to but that those we do talk to are not talking about the secret, private, important things. That the common dialogue is not picking up on the important things. These are some of the reasons we consume, we buy, we drink books and we do so as I say for reasons that are analogous to the reason why we might pick up a biscuit.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** What kind of a writer are you?

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** At first I thought you were going to ask me what kind of biscuit do you like, **(laughter)** but that was just—flitted into my head.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Let's start with that. What kind of biscuit do you like?

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** No, I won't tell you.

**(laughter)**

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** What kind of biscuit do I like?

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** Fig rolls. Yeah. What kind of a writer am I? I'm very uncomfortable. I'm very uncomfortable to position, and I keep coming across sort of well-meaning literary editors and publishers going, "Oh, you know, we like your stuff, but we just don't know where to put you?"

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Does that comfort you in a sense?

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** No, I've had enough of heroic loneliness. **(laughter)** I'd like to be placed somewhere. I see myself basically as an essayist. There are a few essayists.

There are a few, you know, I just met for the first time a wonderful essayist, Adam Gopnik, who I think is here in the audience. Now, what is an essayist? An essayist, I think, is somebody who believes in approaching a variety of topics and discussing them in such a way that their own personality and interest is in tension with the material, that they do not simply disappear behind a mask, as academic writing or technical writing or scientific writing urges you to do. The author remains a presence, not for reasons of vanity but because by remaining present in the text, there are things you can do. You can, in a way, leave your reader with more orientation.

If I say, “I went somewhere and I felt this,” it’s much easier for the reader to make up their mind what they feel than if I say, “The play was bad.” If I say “The play was bad,” and there’s no name on the byline, then one thinks that’s the word of God. If somebody says, “I went to the theater and I was a little bit bored halfway through,” the reader has a bit more room, so I always want to write, as it were, in this slightly more kind of personal way. I have heroes, people that inspire me, like all writers do. Texts that have very much inspired me in the past. Nicholson Baker’s *U and I*, a wonderful essay, Julian Barnes’s *Flaubert’s Parrot*, Cyril Connolly’s *The Unquiet Grave*, Montaigne’s essays, Emerson’s essays, Virginia Woolf’s essays.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** And the essay as a form, which happens also to be my favorite form, is really an attempt, it’s an assay, you’re trying, you’re measuring, you’re weighing, and therefore you’re also prone to the possibility of failure.

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** Yes, I mean, that's with any style of writing, any kind of writing. But absolutely. There's something a little bit tentative and you sometimes try things out in a very authoritative way but with slight tongue in cheek, so I've sometimes written sentences that critics have said, "Well, I don't feel that," or "I'm not sure about that," you know. There's that French aphoristic tradition. You know, La Rochefoucauld's aphorisms, you know, he comes out with things like "There are some people who would never have fallen in love if they hadn't heard there was such a thing." Sort of classic aphorism. Now, a sociologist greeting that statement would go, "well, let's run some tests on this thing. **(laughter)** Let's do a poll here," et cetera. I guess I'm at the opposite end of that. I'd rather throw out a sentence like that and see what happens.

You know, I wrote a book about architecture, and in it I ventured the idea that in order to appreciate beauty you had to have been quite sad in your life. And that happy people have a harder time appreciating beauty. Now, I slightly threw that out. I mean, there was some argument there, but I deliberately did not try and back it up with endless arguments so you're talking about failure, it's also about not trying to hold up your arguments with endless supports. It's about saying, "I'm going to take a risk, and if you don't agree—if you agree, we're going to fall in love quickly. If you agree, it's going to be a magical moment and it's going to be a nice moment of recognition." But if you don't agree, I'm not going to try to have nine footnotes to persuade you, 'cause I don't think that's the way it works, so in that sense it's riskier.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** What is the risk of this book, do you think?

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** Well, this book was in a way a departure. I went out into the road. I tried to do what I pretentiously call a kind of philosophical journalism. Now what on earth is that? I wanted to work with a different material. In different books, I've worked with different material. I've worked with material primarily from libraries. Other people's books: Proust's books or the books of philosophers. I've worked with historical material. I've worked with bits of my own life, bits of my own personal love life. And this time I wanted to work with the material that the *Wall Street Journal* covers in its own particular language, but I wanted to describe it in a completely different way. So it was a change in material. I wanted to write about oil tankers and offices and call centers in the middle of the night and freight trains running through the desert. That's what I wanted to do, which is sort of risky.

And I also wanted to give the whole thing a documentary feel. I came across Robert Frank's *The Americans*, the most beautiful book of photography, and I thought it's lovely, the ambition to try and capture something with photographs and so I thought from the first I'd design the book as a kind of photo-essay, and came together with a wonderful guy called Richard Baker, who took all the images, so it's an original photo-essay mixed in with an original sort of travelogue. And what I wanted to try and do was not to push the argument too far. When I was writing the book, a lot of people said to me, and it always annoyed me, they said, "Ah, so you're writing about the work/life balance and how fathers should be looking at the workplace and how management works today." They had ideas that if, given what I'd written in the past, really what I was going to do

was to write a set of conclusions about what the world of work does. The biggest risk I took with this book was not to tighten it too much. There's a lot of ideas in it, but they're not rammed home, they're left to float, and I deliberately did that because I didn't want to sort of tighten all the screws too much. I wanted to let the—I wanted to use it as a kind of mirror for individuals to pick up and look at their own working lives with its help. And I did not want to write a treatise on work as it is today, something that kind of feels extremely relevant right now and might be totally dated in six months. As I say, I was trying for a slightly more loose-fitting kind of medium.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Let's talk a little bit about taxonomy nevertheless. Both in terms of your choice of different professions which end up being the ten different chapters of your book but also the difference you see between work and labor, between work and toil. Because, in some way, though this book is a departure, in a way, it seems to me to come back to some of the organized web of obsessions you seem to have. *The Art of Travel*, for instance, the word "travel" itself comes from "travail," from kind of working. In America in particular we seem to be so good at this. When we go and exercise we say we're working out. When we go to a restaurant, people come and ask us in the middle of a meal if we're still working on it. **(laughter)** Which has always amazed me.

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** And the right answer is, "no, I'm done."

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** No, I'm enjoying the food. **(laughter)** No, really can you translate—imagine going to a French restaurant and somebody saying to you, “Est ce que vous travaillez encore ? Sono Laborando ?” No! It doesn't work. So we have this obsession with everything. We travel as you know while with a camera so that we can bring back the goods. It always reminds me of that wonderful line of Susan Sontag who said, “Just wait until now becomes then, you'll see how happy we were.” **(laughter)** We always seem to come back with some goods. So I'm wondering, you know, how, were these various professions, a biscuit manufacturer and others, randomly chosen? Was there a—I know there was a loose kind of connection. Were they chosen with a real purpose? And then how would you make a distinction between working and labor, for instance?

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** Well, I'm always attracted to order in my books and in my table of contents. And very often a book begins with a table of contents. And I knew early on that I wanted a table of contents that would simply be a list of professions. In this I was partly—I was inspired by the wonderful children's writer Richard Scarry and his book *What Do People Do All Day?*

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** And *Busy People* is another one.

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** This particular book *What Do People Do All Day?* Before it was called *A Song for Occupations*, it was called *What Do People Do All Day?* **(laughter)** A working title. It's gone through many iterations. And that tells you the orientation of the book. *What Do People Do All Day?* is a great book, it just goes through a whole list of

professions. Everything from you know woodcutting, paper manufacture, coal mining, et cetera. And it's a wonderful book precisely for its kind of almost big and dumb categories. I like big and dumb categories. I like simplicity, utter simplicity, when it comes to the organization of material. There can be complexity, but that comes in later. The architecture's got to be totally simple. I'm a classicist in that sense. You've got to know—you walk in—you know, I like a hall, you walk in you, you know where all the rooms are, it's immediately obvious, good diagram, good plan. So I wanted a book to have that.

And I also wanted to pick a range of jobs that we don't get to hear much about. You know, if you look at most novels, people never have jobs. You know, they—at most they're lawyers or maybe they're doctors, but they on the whole, writers do not understand labor, normally because they've only done a few years of Starbucks **(laughter)** and then the agents called. Writing is not a professional business. Now, of course, it is work, but it's only one kind of work. So the day when you could, you know, be at the Admiralty in the morning and finishing off the sonnet in the afternoon is finished. You can't do that, unfortunately. And that's led to a very—a kind of narrow vision of literature where, as I say, often, jobs are clichéd. So that was anyway, what I wanted to do, because I wanted to fight against that. Of course, if you look at TV, there are jobs in TV, particularly lawyers, doctors, nurses, and criminals, so if you're interested in any of those fields of endeavor, **(laughter)** there's a lot of information out there. But I've never seen a TV drama about people in logistics **(laughter)** or, you know, people in, I don't know, power transmission.

So I wanted to pick jobs that were deliberately different, but also sat on themes, issues I wanted to discuss. So why did I go for biscuit manufacturer. I wanted to look—it's a quintessential part of the modern world that there are many organizations that become enormously rich making very, very small things. Things that are right down at the bottom of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. And that is something we should all reflect on. You know, why is it that sometimes the largest profits can be accrued from making things which are of only marginal benefits? You know, there are no billionaire marriage therapists, I don't think. You know, marriage therapy is a very important thing.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** One would think one could become, I mean, given the rate of divorce.

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** Given the rate of divorce, et cetera.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** One would imagine.

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** But you can't. The billionaires are making, you know, biscuits, and soap and little widgets, et cetera, so that bears thinking about. And that's got to do with industrialization and, you know, management systems, et cetera. So I wanted to look at that. Now it could have been something else. I first wrote to Kraft, Kraft, you know, the cheese people, but they didn't allow me in. So I wrote to a number of—so a lot of it was just who was I going to be allowed to see.

To come round to the issue of labor and work. I mean, broadly speaking, I think there are two visions of work out in the world. What you could characterize as a working-class view of work and a middle-class view of work. The working-class view of work sees work primarily as a source of income. It's just a way to get money. You work for money, and your real life goes on on the weekends and with your family and work is, as it were, just to get by, to get money. The middle-class view sees work as the meaning of life, and that's why you should work all weekend and not particularly complain and take only a few days of vacation and your colleagues are your friends—that's where your real life is centered. And those are two—I mean, there's a history to this. The eighteenth century—the great thing about speaking at a place like this rather than a university is you can come out with sentences like “in 1750, things started to change.” But they really did, you know.

**(laughter)**

For most of human history, for most of human history, work was seen as a punishment as something you did just to survive, then in about 1750 you get this shift, you get bourgeois thinkers, people like Diderot, Benjamin Franklin, who start to articulate a new vision of work, and start to argue that work is not just a penance or a punishment, it's a liberation. It's a way of fulfilling your destiny as a human being. Interestingly, at the very same time, the same sort of thing goes on with love. At the very same time, people started to decide that you could marry somebody because you loved them. Extraordinary idea. For most of human history, you married people to hand on the family plow or the pot or the chair, whatever your most important possession was, but you know, it wasn't a romantic

union. So, suddenly, there was this shift. Suddenly, you could marry for love, and you could work and you could do it for pleasure.

And two things go out of the window, two things that the aristocracy had always been very interested in: the hobby and the mistress. **(laughter)** So suddenly having a mistress, no longer so great. And having a hobby, “what are you doing with a hobby?” You know, make your life your hobby, don’t have this thing on the side. So we are the heirs of these two incredibly demanding ideas, that you can work for happiness and that you can get married and have within marriage all the pleasures of the romantic. And these two beautiful ideas probably let down 50 to 80 percent of us at some point in our life. **(laughter)** I’m not speaking autobiographically necessarily.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Of course not.

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** But they, you know, they let us down and yet we cling to them, and that’s the modern world. That’s the modern world.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** As you put very succinctly in the book, the eighteenth century, and, around the time of the *Encyclopédie* of Diderot and [d’Alembert](#), put Aristotle on his head, but in the olden days, before the 1750s, if we can speak in that way, there was a clear distinction made between leisure and work. What happened to leisure? Our free time. How we speak about our free time as opposed to our imposed time in some way by the organizations, various organizations we work for.

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** Well, leisure has become stupid. Leisure has become about rest, leisure has become about a period of empty time, which is really a distraction or a period of recuperation before you get back to work, which is where things really belong, which is why people get so bored on holiday. And, you know, the great thing about the hobby in its heyday was that it was seen—it was acceptable to have a hobby, because it was accepted that no occupation could possibly capture the complexity of any human being, so you could never be the person it says you are on your business card. All of us are much more complicated than that person on the business card. And the hobby is trying to make room for that, it's trying to say—

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** And yet we want to identify so much with our business card.

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** And also the business cards of others.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** We have this Japanese moment, as it were, where we give out our card and get a card and look it very intently, (**laughter**) and what this is to some extent comical but to some extent also pathetic, because what we're saying there is “I am this person,” and “should I not have a business card anymore,” which brings me to the other side of labor, which is unemployment, “should I not anymore have a business card, I have become nobody.”

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** “I have become nobody,” which is why Durkheim writes a lot about suicide in individualistic, career-driven societies.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** We’re back to suicide.

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** Where there is literally no point in living. But that’s absolutely right—this overidentification of the person. You know, it’s hard to get by in conversation without somebody saying to you, “What do you do?” And the reason why people are asking that is not just they want to know—you know, they want to find out what you’re earning or what your status is—they really want to know who you are. You can’t understand who a person is without reference to their job in the modern world. Which is why so many—I mean, this is the problem of anyone who for whatever reason is outside of the economy, i.e., is not earning money for whatever reason. Because you’re too old, or you’ve retired, or because you’re looking after children, or because you’re a child, or whatever, you’re outside of the economy, at which point you have to always say, “I’m not working,” which is really a way of saying, “I don’t exist,” and this is incredibly hard.

You know, politicians on all sides of the political spectrum always speak about the perfect society being a “meritocracy.” If you listen to Obama, you listen to anybody. “Meritocracy.” “What we need to build is a meritocracy.” Now, what is a meritocracy? A meritocracy is a society where people end up where they merit to be, where they deserve to be. So if you work hard, if you’re a hardworking person, and you’re full of energy, you deserve to not be held back, you deserve to get to the top. The dark side of meritocracy is

that if you get to the bottom, well, you probably deserve to be there, too. So it's a very cruel idea, but also it's an insane idea. While one can welcome certain measures, meritocratic measures, to actually believe that a meritocracy is ever possible is very, very dangerous. It's ultimately very judgmental.

I mean, let's turn to Christianity. I'm a completely secular Jew, but let's think about Christianity. Saint Augustine says that it is a sin to judge anybody by his post, now really what he—post—job, by his job, really, and the only person who can judge anybody is God and he does this on the Day of Judgment with trumpets and the angels and the smoke, et cetera, a mad idea from the secular point of view, but something very important going on there, which is don't judge anybody by their business card, hold off on the judgment of the business card. That business card is giving you only a very, very loose bit of data about the person in front of you. And this is something we routinely forget and the more a society connects its values to work, the more it's likely to forget that there is anything about a human being that is not captured through the prism of work.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** In thinking about tonight, I was reminded of this poem by William Carlos Williams in *Paterson*, part of the poem where he says, "I asked him 'what do you do?' He smiled patiently, the typical American question. In Europe they would ask you, 'what are you doing?' or 'what are you doing now?'" Do you find that distinction still to be valid?

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** I've never noticed it, no. I find that nowadays there's an interesting new development that no one dares to ask if you go into a room, what do you do, because somebody in the room is probably unemployed, and it creates a kind of embarrassment, so that's what I've found at least in the UK, a sort of new embarrassment about unemployment.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** You were mentioning a bit earlier that you wanted to do a chapter about Kraft, but you were not granted permission to go into the factory of Kraft. How difficult was it for you then to be granted permission as a—as it were, as a writer in residence at certain companies. Was it tough to become the person who was inspecting what they were doing?

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** Yeah, I mean, we were talking about why does the world of work not often appear in literature? One of the reasons is it's difficult and writers are by nature timid, cautious creatures, who don't like to step outside of their comfort zones, or rather their comfort zone is pretty dangerous, anyway, so to get into most corporations and to go and see what they're up to is incredibly hard. I mean, most—I wrote ten chapters and I'd written at least a hundred letters to get into the companies, and most of the time they said no.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Okay, so what did the letters say?

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** At the beginning they were rather naïve, and they said, “I deeply admire your company making cheese and I’ve long been interested in cheese.”

**(laughter)**

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** And they read through that immediately.

**(laughter)**

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** Or, you know, “it’s been a long time that hydraulics has been part of my life **(laughter)** and I would like to get a deeper acquaintance with it,” and many of these letters went unanswered. Even the follow-up calls went unanswered. And in the end I had to lie, and I would say things like, “I’m a journalist at the *Times*, and we’re running a massive feature story, massive, with color pictures, **(laughter)** next week, and we would like to come to do a big, big story about something tangentially related.” You know, let’s—I would never say tuna. You can’t mention fish, because there’s utter paranoia because they’re destroying the planet or might be. So I’d say something like, in that case, I was going to talk to them about the pallet system that they use, sort of a business journalist, and I wanted to talk about the new pallets that the industries are using. “Great, come and see the pallet system.” So I did that. And then of course there would be horrible moments afterwards, when they’d be calling up going, “We’ve been looking at the *Times*, the article’s not in. **(laughter)** Do you think it will be next week?” And I’d go, “Yeah, I’m very, very hopeful.” Fortunately, the recession in

newspapers came along, and it has been a wonderful way of saying, “The whole floor has gone. **(laughter)** The editor, the subeditor, everyone’s gone, it’s a miracle I’m here, **(laughter)** but I’m holding on.”

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** “And how are your pallets doing these days?” Did you find that doing this you at moments were just becoming a voyeur?

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** There’s always that thing of “are you a voyeur or are you properly embedded?” You know, what is the nature. I mean, war correspondents have this, what are you—

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** But let’s talk about tuna.

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** Tuna, yeah. Well, I would have liked to have been more of a voyeur. I mean, to follow the tuna, I had to spend ten days on an Indian Ocean—I’m normally someone who likes a comfortable bed, I like my creature comforts, and I had to spend ten days on a little wooden boat that was about the size of two of these stages and looking for tuna and every day the captain would get on the roof and look for tuna, and there wasn’t any tuna, and the sea was completely still and, at moments then, the BlackBerry did work, strangely, in the middle of the Indian Ocean, **(laughter)** there was enough signal so I would send—there’s a picture of me in the—and times got a bit desperate. And, I mean, I was very uncomfortable for two years. I was the guy in the corner in the white jacket with a hairnet. What was he doing? **(laughter)** Who knows?

Was he part of the staff? Sometimes people would come and say, “Would you mix that bowl?” And I’d go, “Sure,” (**laughter**) so no one quite knew who I was and it was very embarrassing, but thrilling too. You know, after you’ve done ten years in the library, you’re ready for some excitement, and it was certainly an exciting journey.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** You were mentioning some of the writers who had mattered to you. Walt Whitman features very large in this book. Why him? And also talk a little bit, if you could, about your relationship with someone else who’s been certainly a great hero of mine, Studs Terkel, who wrote an extraordinary book on work, where I think he did not pretend to be someone else but rather asked people, really, what they were doing.

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** Well, Walt Whitman was celebrating without being blind to its horrors, industrialization and industrializing America. He was amazed by size, by distance, by speed, and also by interconnections. If you read many of his lines, they’re often literally building connections between things. Something, you know, in a prairie and something in the mountains. Something that’s moving and something that’s still, something that’s in a city and something that’s on a quiet homestead. All these connections, trying to give you what we would call a global vision, you know, a sense of being above the world, you know, the poet as seer, as eagle above the landscape, and that’s a very beguiling image, a very interesting image. Before getting on to who was the second person you—

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Studs Terkel.

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** Studs Terkel. I wanted to mention Norman Mailer, who was another big influence, particularly his book which is sadly out of print called *Of a Fire on the Moon*, which was a book which *Esquire* commissioned him to do about the American moon landings, 1969 moon landings. And it's a wonderful book, because it's in a way about the moon landings, but it's also about race, it's about gender in America, it's about his divorce and his alcoholism and his sadness in motel rooms, and also about the fascism of NASA in all its different ways, a very beautiful interesting analysis of what fascism is and its many—all of this in something that's objectively about a rocket taking off. And I thought “This is fascinating, this is amazing,” more than his other books, as I say, the book is out of print, but it seemed to me to be absolutely fascinating, how this man was writing about technology, something that he didn't really care about, instinctively, but he was finding so much in it.

Studs Terkel—very interesting, too, this idea of the writer as anthropologist, giving people a voice. The sheer interest of recording. We so often think that we have to do something amazing as writers. And sometimes the only amazing thing we have to do is to show up in a halfway interesting place with a tape recorder and just go for it. And something interesting is going to happen. And I think that's really for me the lesson of Studs Terkel.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** And listen.

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** And listen. Exactly.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** What did you learn from the career counselor?

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** The career counselor. One of the chapters is on career counseling. And career counseling is, in a way, the most important job in the world because it's the job that tells you what job you should do, so it's a magical, beautiful, mad idea, that there should be a job out there that will help you to know what your job should be, and so I went to study this career counselor. I went to study his working methods. He was very interesting. He talked a lot about "a calling." And he was a very anti- a calling. What is a calling? A calling is a Christian word, a medieval word, that suggests that all of us have a calling and that, at some point, God will single us out and say, you know, "You come with me. Work in this bit or do this or whatever." And is his view, in the career counselor's view, we have a modern, we have a modern vision of that that there is still something out there that's doing this. So we're expecting a finger—especially if we've recently graduated—a finger's going to look down and say, you know, "I want you to work in consulting," (laughter) or "it's architecture for you," or "it's the army for you." Of course the real problem is it doesn't happen. It happens in about 2 percent of cases. Most of us lie on our beds thinking, "What on earth are I going to do?" And then we rush to a decision.

And the career counseling is all about slowing down the process. The first thing this career counselor does when you go and see him is he gives you a sheet of paper and it's headed "Things I like," and he gives you ten minutes and you're just supposed to write down things you like. And everyone goes, "What? What do you mean things I like?" And the guy just says, "Anything you like. What do you like? What do you like? Tell me something you like," and just leaves the person alone. So you know "I like drinking milk, I like my grandmother, I like the evening sky," whatever. And this then becomes the basis of a longer conversation about trying to recover spontaneous roots of interest. Because the theory is that most of our interests, our native interests, get squashed. If you look at children, children under five, six, they're never bored, they know how to play. They never ask themselves "what do I want to do?" "Would it be interesting to play with Lego or maybe I should make something"—(laughter) they just go for it. They have spontaneous passions. They don't need career counselors.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** The parents, though, impose on the children, particularly in the American context, maybe in England as well, the notion that we must have play dates, we must create occupation for them.

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** And so, then, by nine or ten or eleven, children are either bored or they're thinking "should I play with Lego, is the income going to be sufficient if I become an architect, is that the right—?" So i.e., they're starting to calculate reasons of status and money. And so the attempt of the career counselor is to go back to the spontaneous kind of roots and, you know, fascinating things and in many ways it works.

It works best when it's closest to therapy, and it works worst when it's closest to psychometric testing. Very many organizations when they fire people, they give them a career test to find out what job they want to do, and of course the job they probably really wanted to do was the job they've lost, but they, nevertheless, that's the thing that they're sent off to do. But there are also mad sides of career counseling. Sides I don't agree with. It sometimes reminds me of creative writing teaching. I've done some creative writing teaching, and the myth under which creative writing teaching occurs is that everybody can be a great writer, and it's not true. And it's the same with—

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** So you try to discourage students from becoming writers?

(laughter)

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** No.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** But it might be a good service, quite seriously told, is that you might tell students, you know, “it's very nice of you to want to take a creative writing class, but in fact you have absolutely nothing creative about you.”

(laughter)

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** If only you had been on hand to give me courage with that. It was on the tip of my tongue sometimes, but I think there's something similar going on in

the career-counseling world. Which is, again, maybe not everybody has a brilliant destiny. The other thing about career counseling is that it's totally apolitical, it suggests that the only reason why people haven't found the perfect job is 'cause there's something inside them, some kind of psychological knot, that has prevented them. Rather than, for example, the world economy having fallen off a cliff or whatever it is. (laughter) There's no acknowledgment at all of the wider, you know. It's the antidote to Marxism. You could never find a Marxist career counselor. (laughter) It's two opposite ends of the scale.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** What did you learn in going through the career counseling? Were you trying to, as it were, pretend that you needed it and find out what Alain de Botton's calling was?

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** Well, I didn't only pretend, I actually went through all the tests and was given a document. It pointed out that I can't do maths, which I knew, and that I'd be very badly suited to any numerical job. It said that I'd best be suited towards a job in the hospitality or sales industry at a middle level, which wouldn't require too much stress, and I showed this to my mother. And she said, "Oh, they're absolutely right. You're a very good salesman," she said, "this is good for you." And, you know, maybe that's true, so I did put myself through this computerized system.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** But in this economy, in all seriousness, people are losing their jobs left and right, people are despairing of finding other jobs, people are—by losing their jobs, they're also losing the meaning that their jobs gave them, because jobs in some

way, as you were saying, I think correctly, somewhere in the middle of the eighteenth century became synonymous with who we are. In this economy where people are becoming more and more unemployed, maybe more and more desperate, what are the measures that they can take now to re-create a sense of self, a sense where happiness figures in somewhat? I know, at the same time, you believe that unhappiness is constitutional to our being.

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** Firstly, I mean, I've been going round offices all day, different people's offices.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Today.

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** Today. And I was amazed in a way that I haven't seen yet in the UK, though it's coming, you'd walk past a floor and you'd go "what's happened on this floor," and they go, "everyone's been laid off," a whole floor where the whole—everyone's gone and this really has a profound effect. I mean, it is, you feel the waste of life. You know, we talk a lot about waste—

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Ruskin talks about that beautifully.

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** "No wealth but life." The waste of resources, the waste of everything, but the greatest waste of course is the waste of life, unproductive human beings, people who are unable to give anything of themselves anymore in a certain

context. So it's absolutely heartbreaking, and almost I'd use the word "disgusting."

There's something disgusting about that kind of destruction. It's like seeing a waste. It's like seeing a meal that someone's thrown on the floor and not eaten. It's like seeing a book that someone is burning without reading. For me, it's at that level of kind of horror.

What can people do? I think at some level we have to get tragic. What I mean by tragic is we have to accept the tragic dimension of life, which is not something that our society is ready to accept. We live in a perfectionist world, where we believe that if—with a little bit more effort, everything can be right. The founding ideology of the United States and through the United States has spread across, certainly across the UK and other developed economies. This idea that we are in charge. We have science and we have reason and these are two immensely powerful tools that will solve all our problems, and so we don't need to shudder at night under the huge skies and be frightened or be humble, because we're in control.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** So there's a positive side to this downfall now.

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** Well, in a way, it's about reminding us of our limitations, and if we can accept those limitations with grace, with a genuine humility, rather than anger, because there's a lot of anger as well, and anger is an emotion that you feel when you feel that there's always someone responsible—"somebody has done this to me." Once you start to accept that there's something about this that is more broadly human, it ceases to be about anger, and it more becomes that word "sorrow," it becomes something more

spread out. You know, if you're looking at using that word "tragedy," if you're looking at *Hamlet*, by the end of *Hamlet*, you're not angry against anyone, are you? I think it would be unusual to reach the end of *Hamlet*, and go, "I'm furious with everybody. They've really messed this up. We should clean this up and get better health and safety and this kind of thing." You don't. You feel how weak and pathetic and noble and amazing and terrible the fallen human creature is, or some such feeling.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** The predicament of humankind.

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** That's right.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** I have felt, recently, upon rereading you, that in a way your work is a footnote to a phenomenal essay that Sigmund Freud wrote in 1931 called "Civilization and Its Discontents," and I want to read you a short paragraph and have you comment on it, because, in some way, I think that this most recent book but also *The Architecture of Happiness* and also *The Art of Travel*, with all the anticipation we put into travel, which leads us quite naturally to being disappointed by what we see. We might as well stay in one of your favorite places, namely in bed. (laughter) Many of your chapters actually begin with you in bed wondering what you will do next.

Here, in "Civilization and Its Discontents," on the most recent edition on page 23 for those of you who would like to read it afterwards, it goes like this: "One feels inclined to say that the intention that man should be 'happy' is not included in the plan of creation.

What we call happiness in the strictest sense comes from preferably sudden satisfaction of needs which have been dammed up to a high degree and it is from its nature only possible as an episodic phenomenon. When any situation that is desired by the pleasure principle is prolonged, it only produces a feeling of mild contentment.” And here comes the lines that particularly made me think of your own work: “We are so made that we can derive intense enjoyment only from a contrast and very little from a state of things.” And then one of Freud’s *fantastic*, I mean, just *outstanding* footnotes, he says, “Goethe indeed warns us that nothing is harder to bear than a succession of fair days,” to which Freud responds with one line to that footnote, in the footnote, “But this,” Freud says, “may be an exaggeration.”

**(laughter)**

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** Very good. Yes, I mean, Freud stands in a long line. You could put Pascal there, you could put Saint Augustine, i.e., Christian, Catholic pessimism, and you could put the Buddha.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** And for each one we would have wonderful quotations. For Pascal, “the whole misery of man comes from his inability to remain alone and happy in a room.”

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** I mean, the interesting thing is, what does it do to people to read this sort of stuff? And without asking for a show of hands, the conclusion is it makes you happy.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Because?

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** Because it is a relief from the terrible feeling of loneliness we have that we're very lonely with the feeling that we're not enjoying it, that we're finding it all a bit hard, that it's not quite what it's cracked up to be, that we've gone wrong somehow. We're the only person on the holiday who's not having fun. We're the only person who's only having about fifteen minutes of pleasure, though it's our wedding day.

(laughter)

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** That's when it's good.

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** That's when it's good, exactly. (laughter) We're the only person who's had a child and is sort of thinking, hmmm. (laughter) Et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. We're very, very lonely with these unacceptable, negative feelings. But, of course, these are universal. In other words, we live in a culture of optimism and we are creatures who are very, very sad about all sorts of things. The wonderful thing about reading people like Freud or Schopenhauer, et cetera, is they do exaggerate a bit. And it's a wonderful thing that you get when you exaggerate. I mean, if somebody—if you're

feeling a little bit down in the dumps, the worst thing, the worst thing you can do is hang out with a cheerful person. (laughter) I mean cheerful people—the people commonly described as “a cheerful soul.” I mean, they may have qualities.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** They’re nearly as bad as people who tell you that a joke is going to be funny.

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** A joke is going to be funny, or summertime is coming, et cetera. One has to keep a wide—if one’s of a depressive temperament, you have to keep a wide berth.

(laughter)

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** It’s a sense of hygiene, nearly. One needs to keep away.

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** The most cheerful people are those who say, “I know, I know. It’s awful, and it’s going to get worse, (laughter) until the worst of all happens.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** It reminds me a little bit of going to see a doctor and if you are sick and if the doctor tells you you’re fine there’s really no hope.

(laughter)

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** That's right, that's right. So I'm very drawn to this kind of pessimism, which I find cheering, it's why Leonard Cohen is you know nice to read and, you know, you come out of a Leonard Cohen song because "it's not that bad," (laughter) and there's an uplift as you sense that. Similarly with Freud and others. But coming back to why people read, as I say, one of the reasons why people read is for confirmation of their darkest thoughts. And there's always dark thoughts. I mean, we are creatures headed for death, and so all of us have within us an awareness of something very, very bad on the horizon. And most of the time we manage to keep it at bay, and we're going to do other things, et cetera, et cetera, but all of us, often in the middle of the night, have that awareness, and it's to that side of us, the side of us that's going to be facing the very worst, that passages like Freud and passages of my book et cetera are written in the spirit of and for.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Let's look at a few more images and have you comment on them if you can see them.

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** That is part of a logistics center just near Stratford-upon-Avon, Europe's largest logistics center and it's got an arrow pointing towards the main interchange hub where lorries come and exchange their cargo. There it is, it's heading towards that. There's a kind of soulless, immaculate beauty, I think.

This is the desk of the chairman of, well, I'm going to say it now, legally, I'm not allowed to say it, but I feel that I'm going to live dangerously. This is the head of Ernst &

Young in Europe. That's his desk. He's got a desk like anybody else's. He was offered, when the building was built, he was offered his own desk, with his own cubicle, his own office, with a door that shut and et cetera. And he said, "no, I want to be right in the middle of everybody else." And he doesn't have a secretary to himself, like everybody else he shares a secretary. And the only person, he's got a quote from Theodore Roosevelt about the heroism of failure and not wanting to lead a small and meek life, but wanting to embrace—do you know the one I mean? A heroic quote, anyway, that he liked and put between sheets of plastic and pinned to the thing and that's his desk. And I was interested I guess in looking at his life in the way in which—because we live in modern, democratic societies—power has not been erased, but you have to try and avoid references to power. So everybody calls him Jim and he doesn't look different in any way, he doesn't have a secretary, chauffeur, private jet, et cetera, none of that. But of course he's not ordinary at all. His salary's something like a hundred and thirty times more than anybody else's.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** But he wanted to be in that cubicle.

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** Well, he knows that his ability to have a salary that's a hundred and thirty times larger than anybody else is directly dependent on him seeming very normal. The moment he seems like somebody on a pedestal with a salary much higher than everybody else, no one's going to listen to him, he's not one of the gang. And it's in the nature of modern organizations that everybody needs to feel part of the gang. People are not going to work for a potentate. They are only going to work for somebody who

seems a bit like them, which is the curious nature of power and hierarchy in the modern world. So I was just thinking about that and thought it was a good idea to snap his desk, or Richard took his desk in an idle moment.

This is the entrance to the accountancy firm, people clocking in. Terrific, unbelievable hours that people put in to the accountancy firm. When I—as a writer, I spend most of time feeling extremely guilty in relation to what I perceive to be the productivity of people in offices, and one of the great sources of relief for me, spending time in this accountancy firm, was to realize just how much time people waste. It was wonderful, time being wasted all the time. You know, if this office were like a bucket, it was like a bucket with holes in it. Water was coming out everywhere. It was amazing if by the end of the tax year there was anything left in that bucket at all.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** I'm always amazed by that in organizations where people are constantly going to meetings.

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** Meetings, absolutely.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** I always wonder, you know, management, the management that knows how to calculate, have they ever sat down and calculated how much it costs to go to meetings? I mean, when all my colleagues here at the Library, whenever I meet them, they're off to a meeting.

(laughter)

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** Right. For a brief time, I was given a job in an arts organization, and part of my job was to do meetings, and the meetings that I'd attended tended to last two and a half hours, and I realized that one could do literally the whole thing in twenty minutes, and there was a terrific sense of disappointment when we reached the end of the twenty minutes, and I said, "Well, that's it, guys, we can all go home." They were flummoxed and they couldn't believe it. So, you know, the ritual of the office, it's the chat, it's you know, it's the social life that is as much part of the doing as the money.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Have you been watching these films of *The Office*?

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** Sure, all of that. This is the end of the day. I make the point that office civilization is really dependent on two narcotics: coffee and wine. (laughter) Coffee to bring you up, wine obviously to bring you down. (laughter) After a day at the office, it's like playing a video game all day, you know, you're completely jumpy, and suddenly the plug's been pulled out. What are you going to do? And it leads to that sort of nervous excitement which in my experience, one can only be settled by copious amounts of alcohol, (laughter) so I don't, you know, I drink much less than many people and I realize why, it's because I'm not doing a video game job that I have to bring myself down. You know, I'm not so overstimulated that I need that.

Here's a guy headed home. And that is—that's a very interesting picture in a way. This is the point where half of London's electricity is joining the London network. Half of London's electricity is generated at a nuclear power station in Kent called Dungeness Power Station, and it travels quite anonymously across the landscape, and it ends up in Dalston, a part of East London, and this is the moment when, after lots of looping around, it actually prepares to enter the earth. And I think that some poets should celebrate this place. I mean, it's unbelievable. I mean, this is where your electricity is, you know, is coming from but we don't know it. It's completely un-signposted. And I must say I felt a real thrill when I discovered—this was not easy to discover. I had to talk to transmission engineers, et cetera, et cetera, no one would tell you, you had to get secret maps of how the London thing and then eventually I found this bastard and thought, "right, this is great, I've got it," and I felt somehow I understood the world a little bit better and I was very pleased with that.

This is the Paris Air Show. Happens, it's a biannual event, and it's the place to go if you want to put down a down payment on an A-380 or if you want to buy a Boeing Dreamliner. This is the guy sitting on a stand that they produce seats and also cabin curtains, things that divide the curtains. There are three or four suppliers. I wanted to—well, I went to the Paris Air Show. It was the cutting edge of modernity in a way, but I remember spending time with some suppliers, and, by the end of the Paris Air Show, the recession was looming and the mood started to get a bit gloomy, and I was in this Novotel and they had this party for some of the suppliers, and we all got a bit drunk, and at the end, one of the suppliers from Wyoming who was on this stand started singing this

rather loud, raucous song and he started singing, “We’ll all be in the aeroplane graveyard soon,” and I’m actually not sure what he was saying, and he was getting so loud we eventually had to put him to bed because he was threatening to bring out the police. And, anyway, the next morning I said, What is this about the aeroplane graveyard? And he said, Oh, it’s a place in Mojave, in the Mojave Desert, and it’s a place where aeroplanes go to die,” and it’s an amazing place, because airliners die within twenty, twenty-five years, they’re finished, and they get taken apart, and they get filleted for spare parts, and they end up outside the town of Mojave in this place which looks half like the ruins of Rome and half like something out of *Mad Max*. It’s this curious mixture of extreme modernity and extreme kind of datedness, and it reminds us of something about the world of modern work, which is not very many things last.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** The transience.

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** The transience. Although, obviously, we are transient beings, and one of the things we have to cope with personally is that we as working entities are going to end soon, but not just that—the whole industry in which we work. I don’t know anybody in any industry that is not facing some major thing on the horizon that might potentially completely destroy how it’s operating. I keep speaking to people going, “well, at the moment I’m this, but who knows where I’ll be next year?” The whole thing might completely change.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** You finish your book—the last two pages, you speak, indeed, about death. You say “death is hard to keep in mind when there is work to be done. It seems not so much taboo as unlikely. Work does not by its nature permit us to do anything other than take it too seriously.” I’m wondering also to what extent this book was both written in the spirit of seriousness but also as something that you want to be liked.

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** Well, I think that one of the things that we can welcome work for is for its capacity to distract us. And sometimes—I mean, the word “distraction” has a very bad image, particularly, you know, among philosophers. The idea of being distracted. The whole idea is you should, you know, retire, maybe to a tower, to contemplate the great questions of life, the brevity of life, the insincerity of human relations, that’s the sort of thing that philosophers should be taken up with.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Should we not?

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** Having done a lot of that myself, I’m starting to get a little bit wary of it. And I think that one of the things that we can welcome work for is for its capacity to keep us distracted, for its capacity sometimes to put those large and maybe unanswerable questions at bay and keep us focused on what’s on the agenda for tomorrow. You know, what is it, what are we doing between the coffee break and the arrival of the presentation or whatever it is. That somehow the great thing about work is that it keeps us focused on relatively achievable, small-scale goals.

There are the aeroplanes in Mojave.

So, yeah, keeping distracted. Also, escapism. You know, a lot of people knock work. And they say, “Oh, so-and-so is just escaping into their work.” Thank God sometimes we do have work to escape into. And I think work at its best allows us to create things. Whether that is, you know, a book, or a boat, or an organization, or a system, or an invention of some sort that is slightly better, slightly more coherent, beautiful, noble, interesting, than we manage to be day to day, as we are in our pajamas, as we are wandering around, as we are with our loved ones, et cetera. There is—you know, we come together in our work, we bring the best of us and we concentrate it and, as it were, at its best that is a tremendous relief.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** And had we not work we would focus too much on the misery of life?

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** Yes, I mean, absolutely. You know, depressive lucidity quickly teaches us that yes, things are pretty vain, and that there’s not much meaning to anything, but look at us, no human being is more than about four questions away from utter meaninglessness. For example, take your life, take my life. Why are we here?

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** I have two more questions.

(laughter)

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** I'll put you through this exercise. I'll put you through this exercise. Why are we here? We're here to entertain people. Why does that matter? Well, I don't know, we're going to be dead, they're going to be dead.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Sounding good.

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** They'll forget this, you know, within a day or so, you know, et cetera, et cetera. Even if you're a brain surgeon, "why am I stitching up this person's brain? So that they can have a next accident before the inevitable comes," et cetera, et cetera. So very few jobs are immune from being criticized as ultimately meaningless, but I think that part of being healthy is being slightly deluded about this, being able to keep at bay some of those utterly kind of trenchant and accurate but ultimately depressive questions and being able to keep on chatting, as we will, for a few more minutes, and keep on stitching up the brain, and all those things which, you know, viewed from the outer rings of Saturn, has very little meaning.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Very quickly now, since I'm just three questions away from utter meaninglessness, I was very surprised by my seven-year-old boy, who composed a poem which goes like this: "Sometimes I'm angry, sometimes I'm mad, but when I do my work, I'm glad."

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** Sweet.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Sweet, but in a way—

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** Very good. He's got it, he's captured it.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** But maybe he's captured what he should keep at bay, in some sense. In some sense, I'm concerned particularly in the context, in the American context, where we're preparing our children much too early already for, you know, for going to schools, for the next chapter, for what's coming up afterwards instead of in some way being deluded at this particular moment.

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** Yes, the educational system is almost—I agree, it's a huge thing, but I mean, I think—It makes me think about gardening. One of the quintessential jobs is gardening. It's almost like a sort of meta-job, gardening, because what is gardening? Gardening is you find a piece of rude and unkempt nature and you manage—in a limited space, because the garden is always a limited space—there's always a space beyond the garden—in that limited space to train it, to educate it, to make something more beautiful than nature could make, and, in a way, all jobs, when they're going well, are a bit like gardening.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** And is your interest then in jobs that are in some way inspired by manipulation, by the hand, by craftsmanship?

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** Well, I think all jobs—There's some confusion about craftsmanship, which naively associates the idea of craft simply with woodwork or working with your hand or working with tools. I think that there can be a craft element to music, there can be a craft element to writing computer code. I think we need to use—let that word craft sail over many, many more occupations. It's not just about woodworking, I think. Craft is anything where we're able—

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** What is a craft when you have a desk job?

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** Well, a craft at a desk job can be any occupation where you feel like you're taking something from raw ingredients, you're carrying it on a journey, you're ending up with something whose meaning and whose beauty you can understand and feel in control of. That could be the end-of-year accounts. There is a—I've spent time with the accountants. There is something very fascinating and dare I say beautiful about the job of accountancy, which is trying to cohere all the movements within a company onto a piece of paper. It's a snapshot of what has happened inside a company in an attempt to order something, and there is craft there as there is craft in woodworking or in gardening.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** In the *Big Oxford Book of Work*, about about six hundred pages long, it finishes with this wonderful line of an Oxford don on being asked how he was enjoying his retirement—reminding me a little bit in some sense of the contrary, my

own father, aged ninety-one, when people ask him when he will retire, he says he's too old to retire. But this don in particular said, "It's not too bad, but I rather miss the vacations."

(laughter)

**ALAIN DE BOTTON:** Wonderful.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Alain de Botton. Thank you very much!

(applause)