



**DISCOVERING YOUR LIFE'S WORK:
EMBRACING ASPIRATION IN UNCERTAIN TIMES**
Jodi Kantor

In early 2025, students at Columbia, my alma mater, asked me to deliver their undergraduate commencement speech.

The school had an air of doom. The quadrangle, where students from around the world had long converged to share ideas and ambitions, had become the site of screaming matches over Israel and Gaza. Protestors had destroyed property and trapped janitors. Police had stormed in. The campus gates, usually thrown open to the flow of the city, were locked. University presidents came and went.

I said yes to the speech. Things got worse. The president of the United States aimed his might at Morningside Heights. His administration ripped away a fortune in federal funding and jailed a student for political speech. Before sitting down to write, I reached out to students to ask how they were navigating their sad, strange senior spring.

They didn't want to talk about Israel and Gaza. Or President Trump. Or even the university administration many of them had grown to distrust. Instead, all of them—regardless of demographics or political views—were united in worry over one question.

How, in this environment, were they supposed to find and start their life's work?

Their education had been knocked around by one crisis after another. Nearly every field felt like a bad bet, they told me. Their generation had rushed toward the promise of STEM. Now basic assumptions about science, medicine, and progress were in question, and labs were being dismantled. Students who had secured research jobs were watching those offers evaporate. Tech companies once regarded as employers of the future now looked like threats to the social fabric. The long-standing dream factory of Hollywood was faltering too.

AI was coming, heightening their panic. Computer science training no longer looked like the surest path around. New technology threatened to obliterate entry-level jobs. Some work that once would have taken a paralegal or junior analyst a week now took a few keystrokes.

This period of their lives was supposed to be about dreaming and reaching, but the Columbia graduates felt exhausted and powerless. Just as they needed to seek out bosses and mentors, their faith in authority was weak.

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“You go to Columbia, you think you’re on a path up and out,” a senior named Xxaria Makely told me.

Xxaria came from an economically distressed town in upstate New York. After years of waiting tables, her mother had trained as a medical technician, commuting two hours each way to earn her degree. Now Xxaria was about to graduate from the city’s premier university with a 4.0 GPA and a fierce desire to become a clinical psychologist. Even among talented classmates, she stood out for her perceptiveness and sensitivity, which she had deployed to keep other students stable throughout the campus’s crises.

But a few months before graduation, the Columbia psych lab where Xxaria had lined up a work-study job said they would not be able to pay her due to the budget cuts and a hiring freeze. She pushed onward, working at the lab without pay to gain experience. At night, she bartended to make up the difference. She wanted to stay in the city after graduation and continue to do research, the entry ticket to ferociously competitive psych PhD programs. But looking for a job was like launching paper airplanes at a brick wall. She had sent out dozens of résumés and gotten zero response.

That spring, as graduates entered the job market, many of them were met by... no one. For anyone who has not applied for a job lately, an update: The process has turned digital and sterile. Many employers rely on AI programs to conduct initial interviews—posing questions; recording video answers; then insta-scoring the results and shooting recommendations to the company. Sometimes there is no human being for the applicant to talk with until the final rounds. No chat that might help seed a relationship. No office visit from which an applicant can glean impressions. No exchange from which a young person might take something even if they don’t get the job.

Xxaria figured she had to give up and return home. “Maybe the idea that Columbia will change your life is wrong,” she said. “Maybe I just have to accept that I’m going right back to the world I came from.”

Talking with her, the promise of education—and of the workplace—felt so fragile.

Success, fulfillment, finding one’s life’s work—none of it has ever been easy. We all know that, and that’s why many of us devoted ourselves to scaling the double peaks of Mount College: getting in and covering the costs. This quest has ordered our hours and consumed our savings.

I pursued it when I was younger, then did it again as a parent. Did we do this for status, to wear the right sweatshirts? Maybe a little. But college felt like hope. Opportunity. A reflection of some of the best parts of being American: self-determination, not being confined to the class you’re born into. Even when the country and the world shook—9/11, Katrina, the pandemic—we were anchored by a collective agreement: Education plus hard work equals something good.

The possibility that the equation is faltering is terrifying.

The anxiety about this is generational, transcending demographic and economic lines. At Texas Woman’s University, a public school headquartered near Dallas with a century-plus record of lifting low-income students into good jobs, professors told me that the climb has become much harder and steeper across their years of teaching. Tuition and housing have become so expensive that many students have been holding full-time jobs while attending full-time classes, squeezing out any possibility of internships.

At Stanford, storied generator of wealth and success, a student showed me a text chain with friends jokingly instructing one another to spell “job” as “j*b” because the actual word provokes so much anxiety.

The Palo Alto and Texas students feared that even a solid job might fail to provide enough rent money or a path to buying a home; that fulfilling jobs are for rich kids who can afford to take risks or earn less.

Sometimes even stability felt out of reach. “When you enter the workforce, you’re inherently disposable,” Annalise Soto Serrano, a junior at the Texas school, told me. “You’re not protected. So you’re trying to achieve a job not based on passion, just based on survival.”

As they face all of this, many young people are getting questionable advice or little guidance at all. For all of Columbia’s might, and even though the university has produced plenty of psychology researchers, not a single person there was helping Xxaria find a job. She sent off messages to alumni through a career services portal and got almost nothing by way of reply. Her professors seemed overwhelmed by the collapse in funding and offered few leads.

Around that time, a sincere young man, a friend of my then-nineteen-year-old daughter, sat in my kitchen and offered a long stream of perfect career nonsense to my husband and me. Here’s what he had divined so far in college: Only a job in consulting would pay him enough to live in New York City. And because he would inevitably spend the first decade of his career doing “shitwork,” as he put it, the field did not matter. If he had to do that scut work, it should at least be lucrative, he said. After a few years as a consultant, he reasoned, he could easily switch to politics or entertainment, his true passions. He aimed to decide his path by sophomore year, when recruiters would show up on campus.

His parents were spending their savings on college tuition only for him to learn so many dubious ideas about work, happiness, and success.

None of this grimness surprised me. For years I had watched these forces gathering and had published articles about the technological takeover transforming the workplace. Back when Starbucks was still considered the best hourly employer, I reported that the company was devising the schedules of its baristas by algorithm, stripping them of predictability and sending their personal lives into disarray. With a computer dictating their hours, often just a day or two in advance, arranging childcare or making a medical appointment became an ordeal. A decade ago, a colleague and I chronicled the harsh tactics Amazon was using to get the most out of its white-collar workforce. Their practices were a memo from the future.

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A few years later, colleagues and I revealed that Amazon warehouses had a staggering 150 percent annual turnover rate, cycling through human beings not by mistake but as part of a grand plan. Loyalty, experience—none of it mattered. And Amazon's colossal success left many of those workers behind instead of propelling them forward.

As the pandemic ebbed, I wrote about companies that deployed productivity tracking to push workers to do the maximum. Hospice chaplains had to earn "productivity points" as they cared for the dying. Psychologists were penalized by keyboard monitoring programs for "idle time" even as they sat and talked with patients.

I also exposed one of the worst bosses of all time. In 2017, my colleague Megan Twohey and I revealed that Harvey Weinstein, the producer who at one point had been thanked more than God at the Academy Awards, a lion of the liberal establishment, had covered up decades of allegations of sexual abuse. Work was the key to his predation. Weinstein had pressured young women into sex by wielding his power as a producer, promising them jobs, parts, Oscar campaigns. In his hands, career aspirations were vulnerabilities. Some of his targets were in their very first day on the job.

As I wrote, I watched our collective dreams about the workplace decay. Television comedies portraying colleagues as alternative family units gave way to dystopian meditations on employment. I visited campuses to speak about the Weinstein investigation, journalism, and finding meaningful work. Year after year, a feeling of discouragement was rising. The notion of work as a source of fulfillment or progress began to sound naive to many young people. A labor activist captured rising sentiment with a book called *Work Won't Love You Back* ("A deeply reported examination of why 'doing what you love' is a recipe for exploitation").

Still, when Xxaria told me she was headed back home, that she was giving up on the promise that Columbia would propel her forward, something in me shifted.

I could not accept that kind of downgrade or defeat. For the entire generation, for the Columbia class, for my own daughters—and for Xxaria. When she was eleven years old, Xxaria's beloved older brother Keith died of an overdose. That was why she was so driven to pursue psychology research, why she continued to work in a lab that could not pay her. She was on a quest to understand how addiction treatment could become more effective and to forge new forms of help. The idea that a young person with that kind of purpose could not move forward was intolerable.

Since then, I have not been able to stop pursuing answers to the question the Columbia students posed. In a degraded environment, how can they establish themselves as the authors of their own lives and fill their days with vitality and meaning? How can *you*?

I am not a professional career counselor. Nor a labor economist. I'm an investigative reporter, a specialist in secrets, currently focused on the locked box of the United States Supreme Court. I don't write advice books, and found myself surprised to be rising every day at dawn, before my own workday begins, to generate the pages for my book *How to Start*.

Consider the book a letter from an older ally who has seen a great deal, through reporting on the workplace and also making my own way. Journalists are observers, but now I'm stepping out from behind my articles to try to help you more directly. In those early-morning hours at my laptop, I have been drafting the beginnings of an escape plan from what others may tell you is inevitable.

They are wrong. The robot interviews, dystopian management schemes, and intimidating housing prices are all real, of course. But they do not come even close to representing the entire truth. The culture is swinging too far toward cynicism and fear. I have documented some of the worst of the workplace, and still I am telling you: Do not give up on it.

Work is how we spend many of our minutes and hours. Perhaps you've met people who live happy, fulfilled lives despite being miserable at work. I have not.

I want you to have every good thing that work can bring: satisfaction, fellowship, pay. Work is one of the legs that keeps the table of life standing up. Family, friendship, marriage, faith, rewarding work—take as many of these as you can get, because they operate in tandem. Relationships falter. People get sick. Jobs come and go. The combination keeps us upright, especially when one of the legs goes wobbly.

But our stake in work is also collective. Despite everything, work is our engine of progress. Cancer therapies, new commercial aircraft, winning political campaigns, and every television show you've ever enjoyed were all made by groups of former strangers who labored together in shared discovery, discipline, and purpose. To declare defeat on work is to surrender possibility itself—for yourself, for everyone.

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Do not give up before you even start. Frustration and disappointment are certain. Failure is possible. But if you abdicate the search for satisfaction now, you will put it further out of reach. Resist the urge to arm yourself with uninformed cynicism masking as oh-so-wise pragmatism that's really just good old fear of rejection. We do not yet know what the world will offer you.

Here's the funny thing about those articles I wrote: Even as they chronicled the darkness of the employment world, they also demonstrated the potential of the workplace—my own. Everyone knows the newspaper business is largely falling apart. Not a day of my career has passed when my field hasn't been in existential and financial crisis. For much of that time, the fate of the *New York Times* was uncertain. But after we documented Amazon's brutal internal culture, the company introduced paternity leave for the first time. The Weinstein revelations led to a worldwide reckoning. In the years those articles were published, the *Times* built an audience that now amounts to twelve million subscribers and counting.

I went into a field that everyone told me was a disaster and experienced potency, impact, camaraderie, uplift, and even a measure of business success.

I cannot spare you from struggle. My mission in *How to Start* is to help you wrestle in the most fruitful way, making discoveries that will sustain and reward you for a lifetime. Just because this quest is difficult doesn't mean it can't involve joy and daring. Even in this environment, there is a lot you can do to stop feeling tossed around and to claim agency over your own life. There are even ways to harness the awfulness of this moment, to use it for forward propulsion.

This life stage has never been easy. This era is making it harder. We need to bring you all the help we can. None of us can say what the workplace will look like in ten or twenty years, so we are going to work with durable, time-tested material that can withstand whatever comes next. **In particular, I want you to focus on two forces that power the best careers: craft and need. Each is important, but the real magic happens when we combine them. Together they can lead you to create something beautiful that will serve you and others.** 📖



Info



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jodi Kantor is a *New York Times* investigative reporter who has revealed hidden truths about power, technology, gender, law, and employment. In 2017, she and Megan Twohey exposed Harvey Weinstein’s treatment of women, setting off the worldwide #Metoo reckoning. They were awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Public Service and co-authored *She Said*, a book taking readers inside their investigation, also made into a film. Recently, she has been working to illuminate one of our most secretive and critical institutions, the Supreme Court. Kantor lives in Brooklyn, NY, with her husband Ron Lieber and their two children. She began her journalism career by dropping out of law school, and she speaks at campuses across the country about finding work of meaning.

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