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### *A Design for Life* An hour with Alain de Botton

BY SCOTT WILSON

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# A Design for Life

Author and philosopher **Alain de Botton** discusses, among other things, the promise of enlightened capitalism and how to survive the pleasures and sorrows of work in the modern world.

BY SCOTT WILSON

You'd be forgiven for thinking that talking with Alain de Botton, whom *The Guardian* has called Britain's "most popular philosopher," could be somewhat intimidating for those with no more than a layman's grasp of Seneca, Nietzsche, and the joys of the unreconstructed Schopenhauer. But ten minutes into our discussion I'm struck by just how friendly, polite, and dare I say it, *unassuming*, one of the UK's foremost polymath thinkers comes across in an interview. It's like chatting with your Aunty Ethel on the state of her rose garden during another wet English summer—albeit an aunty armed with a Cambridge double first and a litany of distinguished intellectual contributions.

The Swiss born, bestselling author of books such as *How Proust Can Change Your Life* (which John Updike declared “dazzling” in his *New Yorker* review), *The Pleasures and Sorrows of Work*, and *Status Anxiety* is also a recognized authority on architecture and an increasingly prominent voice on well-being. I was made aware of the breadth and depth of his intellectual reach when preparing to research his work for this article. Wandering into my local bookstore I was enthusiastically led around every nook and cranny by an assistant who pulled his books from shelves in fiction, self-help, travel, philosophy, architecture, art, and design. Sixty minutes later I left with a lot of reading to do. I wondered if he ever feels confused about what he does.

“Well I recognize that I’ve got an odd job. Basically, I’m in the business of selling ideas. And that sounds like an odd and intangible thing because one might immediately go, well, ideas for what? After all, a company like Deloitte sells ideas as well. But they have a very clear application. Their ideas are designed to make businesses go better. I would say that I’m in the business of selling ideas that can make people’s inner psychology, what you could call their emotional life, go better. The way I do this is to look at a number of areas of psychological life, ranging from personal emotions, to working life, to relationships with the community, and other such problematic areas of life. I’m sifting and looking around for good ideas or what could more grandly or pretentiously be called wisdom, which sounds like an odd concept. But I think wisdom can be a useful word because it sort of suggests a bit of knowledge which is not only true, but is useful.”

Glancing at the pile of books next to me, I suggest such an eclectic canon of work must require a supercharged approach to creativity. Does wielding such an obviously wide, diverse lens through which to observe, think, and write demand some sort of a process to getting stuff done?

“Yes. Broadly speaking, my discipline base is the humanities. So I feed off history, psychology, philosophy, sociology. I’m not a scientist; I’m not an economist. I look at a number of areas related to, let’s say, emotional satisfaction or well-being, which encompasses lots of different areas. So it can go as widely as architecture because architecture and the spaces we inhabit are part of what contribute to well-being. Overall I think it’s about getting to grips with a topic and trying to find out what belongs to that topic. Really what I’m trying to do is to work out what ideas belong where. It’s a chance to structure an order to a topic. So, if I’m writing about architecture, I want to try and gather all my thoughts that are around space and aesthetics and the psychology of location. I want to try and get all those ideas in there. And so the working process starts off relatively free form and fluid and I’m just trying to get to the main idea. The best analogy is again with architecture. You start with a sketch. You then build it up into detailed plans. You then go into the

actual construction of the thing. You put down the main bones and supporting pillars, and then at the very end, you're tidying and decorating the little details, the minor things. So it's very similar to putting up a building except you're putting up chapter three rather than a floor."

The son of a famously successful Swiss banker, de Botton grew up in Zurich but was educated at those twin citadels of the British elite, Harrow and Cambridge. Now that he has been firmly established in London for a number of years, I wonder if all his time in the UK has given him a particularly British slant on life?

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"And with London nowadays, it's a working city; there are very few artists left. It's a very expensive city in which to live ... So it's not a kind of bohemian life, it's not groups of people sitting around in silk dressing gowns, you know, composing Latin sonnets."

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"Well I operate from the UK, but I don't see myself as particularly British, no... But there are things that I very much appreciate about the UK. It's a relentlessly skeptical society when it comes to intellectuals, when it comes to people who sort of think about stuff. It's a very empirical society that worships down-to-earth common sense. And in a way that's a tougher environment in which to make it, as somebody with ideas. You come up against a lot of irony and sarcasm around anyone who's trying to think about anything with any degree of solemnity, as I am sometimes. But that's kind of a good discipline as I think the dangers of a rather over-indulgent culture are obvious to see when you look at France or Germany, whose intellectuals can really only talk to each other. They are very hermetically sealed, partly because they're quite pampered, whereas the UK. does not pamper anyone who thinks for a living. In fact, it mocks them and teases them constantly! I think that keeps us sharp, keeps us on our toes. And with London nowadays, it's a working city; there are very few artists left. It's a very expensive city in which to live. Most people living there are professionals of one kind or another. That lends a particular kind of tenor. The people I meet and see day to day are politicians and business people and doctors and marketeers, all sorts of types. So it's not a kind of bohemian life, it's not groups of people sitting around in silk dressing gowns, you know, composing Latin sonnets."

Outside of London, de Botton's increasingly high profile in the US business community can be traced back to participation at a number of TED conferences and their use of social media as a potent channel for disseminating the talks.

In particular, his 2009 talk *A Kinder, Gentler Philosophy of Success* earned him widespread recognition throughout the TED community. Has this inspired him to embrace technology as a means of developing new ideas and getting them out to an expanding audience?

"I think in a weird way the TED talk I gave in Oxford in 2009 in many ways did change my life and I didn't know it at the time. The reason being, as you hint, businesses look at TED talks, and that particular talk opened doors to an incredible array of businesses that I've been in contact with since 2009. I find myself often invited to come and talk to them, to think with them, to write stuff for them. It's become an increasingly important part of what I do every year, which involves many different kinds of projects. But it tends to come from the same place, from this one talk.

"And with technology, it's crept up on me like on so many people. I realize that the old model, which is that some wise and old, powerful publisher would publish a book and you could stand back and that was it, was never really quite true anyway. I was always very aware that publishers are quite old-school and they don't really understand their readers and they're not really on the case in terms of building audiences for writers. I always knew that you kind of have to do it yourself. And social media gave me, like so many other people, a real, very easy, cheap chance to do that. You set up a Twitter account at no cost and I can get a message out to my constituency, bypassing the two traditional gatekeepers, which are publishers and the mainstream media. I'm finding that the book doesn't even need to be reviewed because the news is already out through social media. That's an extraordinary and, for me, very comforting position, because this used to be a real bottleneck. So that's a huge kind of freedom. And the cost of doing so is more or less nil."

But with printed media seemingly on course to follow audio and visual media down the democratized path of streaming content and relegating the physical format to niche categories in the process, isn't technology more than ever a double-edged sword in the world of the writer. Because does anyone actually read books anymore?

"I think books have got good things going for them. They don't require huge advertising. They can't be easily divided. They are a unitary thing. You know, you can't say, I'm just going to take chapter two. It makes no sense, unless you've read chapter one! Unlike a newspaper or a CD, you can't rip the bit out, it just makes no sense. It has to be sold as a unitary package. It's never needed much advertising, and customers have got used to the cost of it. So it's insulated from some of the pressures. The publishers will bleed, but the underlying statistics on book sales and e-books is, you know, fairly stable. The thing that's collapsing is of course bookstores. They really will collapse. And there still isn't a proper mechanism for news about new

books and new authors to emerge in a systematic way. So the process of discovery is floundering, and it means that some of the big names are getting more sales than ever. So for every Malcolm Gladwell, there are lots of people with actually just as good if not better ideas who are getting a little bit drowned out. But, you know, humans are resourceful creatures, and the bushfires will keep signaling that there's stuff out there. So I'm confident it will get through."

De Botton's recent work has been suitably wide and varied to provide plenty of useful content. *The Pleasures and Sorrows of Work*, for instance, saw him dabble in ethnography in a way that recalls sociologist Donald Francis Roy's classic studies of industrial blue collar America of the '40s and '50s. Spending two years researching a variety of professions, jobs, and the people who work in them allowed de Botton to explore whether we can ever truly be satisfied with work and navigate what he calls the fallacy of meritocracy in the workplace. So, is it possible to actually enjoy work and lead a more meaningful life in the process?

"I think the question is similar, or I always think of an analogy, with *love*. You know, when people ask is it possible to have a relationship that's satisfying? Well I think we have to start with the theory. And at the level of theory, yes, of course it is possible. Is it hard? Yes. It's unbelievably hard. And part of the reason why it's hard is because human beings have so much imagination. By imagination I mean a capacity to imagine affections and developments from pretty good situations. So we're ambitious. We're all the time thinking, this is quite nice, *but could it be better?* And we think that in love and we think that in work.

"So, when you're starting off in your job, you think, wow, it'd be amazing just to have a job! That alone would be great. You know, I could buy a suit and I'd go to work every day and be smart, and that'd be really cool! And then after a few years, you think, well, that's not quite enough. What about getting further up the ladder? And then, when I'm further up the ladder, what about having my own business? And then you have your own business and think, yes, but what about having more money? And then one thinks, I've got some money, but why am I not Bill Gates? And so on and on. There's a constant rise of expectations. We've all got so many different things in us, so many different potentials in us, but the modern world responds and rewards specialization, people who know how to zero in on a particular thing. The ideal sweet spot is that you're very interested in a specialized bit of the world that society needs but where there are few other competitors, and you can draw a good salary. But that happens for very few of us.

"Indeed for many of us, we might not ever know what we actually want to do. We've got intimations of it on a Sunday evening but can't really bring it into the kind of focus that you need to sort of get the job on a Monday morning. And of course we can't necessarily pursue as many different careers as our imaginations would

like. You know, we'd like to be chefs and a hotelier and a technology specialist and a pilot, and it sounds pretty fun to be a carpenter too, and what about being a photographer? That'd be quite cool, etcetera, etcetera. But most of us at the age of 16 or 17, we start making some choices and by the time you're 21 or 22, those choices are hardening. You've actually already reduced the kind of options for yourself. By the time you've got a family and you're settled in a particular job, it takes unbelievable courage and effort and will to change your career. So, there are a lot of people out there who may be drawing quite a good salary but are just not necessarily deeply satisfied by their work. And it's very painful—very painful."

So with people endlessly chasing rainbows in their careers, is it actually possible to get relief from the pressures to succeed in work?

"We live in a world partly driven by the ideology of the United States that is very forward-looking, very optimistic, very much placing the emphasis on individual achievement and the possibilities that are open to everyone so long as they work hard, which is a beautiful philosophy of life but also a very punishing one. It places huge responsibility on the individual to perform and leads to deep shame if there is failure. And with failure—well, we worship success but we also implicitly punish failure, very harshly, psychologically speaking.

"For example, the psychological consequences of unemployment or professional mediocrity are very severe. And I think that the answer to this is really some kind of collective consolation and recognition of the difficulty of the task, and that it's not any one person's fault. At the end of the day, we live under this philosophy of success which is going to leave most people feeling that they've underperformed. Only a very narrow elite will feel that they've done what that society wanted them to do. So I think it's important to recognize the psychological pressures rather than meet them only in the middle of the night as frightening characters that are chasing just us and instead to see them as actually written into the contract of modern society. To recognize that you may be suffering it personally, but realize it is a social and historical phenomenon."

Fear of failure and the debilitating pressures to succeed at everything are recurring themes in de Botton's work and underpin many of his ideas on navigating the path to a more meaningful life. His bestselling book *Status Anxiety* was a pointed take on just such a topic. Reading it reminds me of the famous Gore Vidal line: *Every time a friend succeeds a small part of me dies.*

"That book started off really from an awareness that the number one fear that many people in developed societies have is the fear of being a professional failure. This is really something that haunts modern men and women. I wanted to try and trace that idea. I wanted to start saying, look, it happens in your head but it has a history, it has a philosophy. And it's really important to get to grips with it. Human

beings have not always thought this. For most of human history, people have been terrified of starving, they've been terrified of, you know, being killed or falling on the wrong side of court politics or whatever it happened to be—but they haven't had this feeling that they should create themselves *afresh*, where every person is this kind of self-created being who has to be very special and do something extraordinary. This is very modern. And I wanted to look at the history of this happening so I looked at the history of America where that story is very central and then spreads across the world.

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“... I also explored the kind of nasty sting in the tail that you can get in a society which wants equality of opportunity for everybody but isn't going to have an *equality of outcome* for everybody.”

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“I studied concepts such as the concept of equality—equality of opportunity, which is so fundamental to the way we look at the world now, that we want equal opportunities for everyone. But I also explored the kind of nasty sting in the tail that you can get in a society which wants equality of opportunity for everybody but isn't going to have an *equality of outcome* for everybody. So with that you're going to get what we call a lot of “losers,” which gives rise to problems with what some call self-esteem. It creates a lot of psychological disturbance. So I wanted to explore and understand how people have traditionally coped with this kind of thing. I looked at the role of religion in appeasing some of those doubts, the concept of an afterlife where some of the pressures of this life are taken care of. Then what happens when religion declines, looking at things like nature, the role of art. So, just really looking at the strange psychological position we find ourselves in today. And it's a book that remains very alive in a way. It's a book people keep coming back to. It's one that resonates strongly in different parts of the world such as China and South Korea, where I think people feel this very intensely, where they're just trying to grapple with it every day.”

What lessons can one take away from your books that help deal with these pressures?

“Well, take the philosophy of stoicism, which developed in the Roman Empire during some very turbulent times. Stoicism doesn't give us the comfort of thinking that life can be made perfect. What it tries to do is to steel us for the challenges and make us feel in a sense heroic about the difficulties. And I know that may not sound like an ideal and cheerful solution, but I think there are many problems in life,



particularly around relationships and work, to which the best response is essentially a kind of stoic response. Accepting and bowing down to certain necessities, understanding where they come from and using understanding to kind of blunt the force of bitterness or anger and essentially not seeing it as a personal plot against you but as something which is endemic and structural to being alive. There are very, very few people who get through this life thinking that they've done justice to their talents and have answered their romantic longings. This is just a privilege that's open to very few. And yet the world leads us to expect that this is for the many."

Some of de Botton's recent thinking on what he calls *enlightened capitalism* also hints at a need for business to embrace human needs more so than in the past in order to become more effective in a world where disruptive technological change is the norm. Are you suggesting a reworking of the classic Maslow's *Hierarchy of Needs* for the 21st century?

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"I think capitalism, as I see it, is a concept that to date has been very useful and very good at delivering answers to many human needs that have plagued human beings for most of their history. You know, we are now very good at delivering food, construction material, certain kinds of information, transport, logistics, legal knowledge, financial knowledge, medical knowledge and assistance. These things are going pretty well in many advanced economies, although obviously disastrously in other nations. But in the kind of economies where the people reading this will be, these things are going quite well.

"But of course, critics of capitalism say it's hollow, it's meaningless, it's soulless. It's all about more running shoes and pizzas! It's not about the stuff that matters. Now I think this is interesting and the true capitalist has to take that onboard. And yes, if you think of the famous pyramid of needs from Maslow, capitalism has been making its profit and centering its energies around the bottom bit of the pyramid. I think the challenge for the future is how can money and labor be made and employed towards the top of the pyramid. And if you'll remember, the top of the pyramid is things like the need for connection, the need for community, the need for understanding.

"Take something like psychotherapy, which I'm interested in. It's striking that psychotherapy, despite being the most important intellectual achievement in the psychological sphere of the 20th century, still struggles to have a broader monetary impact. The net value of psychotherapeutic services in, say, the American economy is probably way, way, way below landscape gardening or certain kinds of dental hygiene. It's very low down on the scale. It's economically puny. And yet, all sorts of claims are made on it, you know, this is supposed to help us to live wonderful lives and all the rest of it. So it all comes back to what I was saying earlier, that there is a divorce between financial logistical organization and good ideas.

"For example, take the mobile phone and communications. We've made unbelievable progress at learning how to get in touch with one another. But the *real* challenge is not just how to find someone in space and send them a text message, it's how to get through to them in the really difficult areas of life. Communication between colleagues, between friends, between family members remains very challenging, despite the iPhone! So I think technology is still at the dawn of cracking some of the harder issues, and businesses are still not necessarily capitalizing on those more thorny psychological needs that lie outside of business as we currently understand it."

You're also a well-known atheist, but in your book *Religion for Atheists* you propose that secular societies should look to religions for more insights into how to build a sense of community, make our relationships last, overcome feelings of envy and inadequacy, and much more. What exactly is it about religion that informs your thinking in the realm of enlightened capitalism?

"Well the question that interests me as an atheist is: What do human beings get from religion? And what kind of needs does it answer to? So when people celebrate religious rituals to do with human development, I look at it from a psychological perspective as a kind of mechanism that's trying to make people suffer less and trying to answer to their needs. And so that excites me because I think there are lots of good ideas here that we haven't really looked at properly as atheists, that the secular world has been too hasty in rejecting. So again it comes back to this idea of enlightened capitalism. You know, religions are massive organizations transmitting ideas. What's Buddhism transmitting? Well, Buddhism is basically transmitting ideas about calm. Now that's kind of a weird thing, right? It's like it's the size of General Motors and it's selling you calm. But that's a really interesting idea that gets me going. And I thought, okay, well I'm not interested in Buddhism per se, but the idea of an organization that will systematically say, we're going to take calm seriously, we're going to try and do everything to make people who interact with us calm. That's a fascinating challenge."

From stoicism to enlightened capitalism, we've covered a lot ground. What else

occupies de Botton's time these days? It seems much of it is taken up with running The School of Life, which he founded in central London a few years back. Housed in a former shop that



sells books and has a space for seminars and teaching, it is, he says, "a kind of one-stop shop where you should be able to pick up stuff about emotional intelligence and emotional well-being. We do a lot of activities around that core mission. We offer classes and seminars. We consult with businesses. We make some films. We generate content. And it's all based around trying to raise emotional well-being and intelligence in the community." Next year will see the business move toward a licensing model with branches opening in Melbourne, Seoul, Amsterdam and Paris. Does this hint at a yearning to become more entrepreneurial and explore the business world in more depth?

"I spend a lot of time wondering about the impact of what I do. And one of the things that I think separates me from other writers is that I've always had a much more practical outlook on life. And for better or for worse, I'm actually interested in changing how things happen. And this means that, especially in recent years, I've spent a lot of time involved with things that are not typical writerly pursuits."

"For instance, I've set up a couple of businesses that are in fields quite different from writing, although they're connected. One organization I set up is called Living Architecture, which grew out of a book I wrote on architecture. And the question really, what's wrong with the British that they're so uncomfortable with modern architecture? Not just the British but, you know, what's gone wrong with the modern world that good contemporary architecture is still quite an anomaly."

"And then a lot of my work has been focused on changing the atmosphere around culture and how people respond to philosophy, literature, etcetera, and to their own emotions. And that led to the creation of The School of Life where we have a rolling procession of lectures, speakers, classes, and all sorts of things. What I've been thinking about now is how can the good ideas in this world ally themselves with power, which nowadays is around business." **DR**

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