

How to Drop Out

**People who work get bored when they don't work. People who don't work
never get bored.**

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People who work get bored when they don't work.
People who don't work never get bored.
— graffiti, Paris, May 1968

Updates

Disclaimer (last updated October 2014)

The original 2004 How to Drop Out is easily the most popular thing I've written, and thousands of people have found my site by putting "how to drop out of society" into Google, but I wonder if it was worth it. The message I was aiming for was something like "If you have the mental focus and self-discipline to be successful in the dominant society, but you don't like it, here's how you can change your value system to reduce your need for money and status, and gain some benefits of industrial civilization without being in a position of forced obedience." Or: "Society is your enemy, it attacks you by making you need money, and if you are better than the average person at sacrificing comfort for long-term goals, you can work toward a position where you need relatively little money and have more free time."

Instead, through great carelessness, I allowed people to think my message was something like "If you can't even get good grades or hold down a job, don't worry, there is a gateway to a magical wonderland in the nearest dumpster." Or: "If you have a weak sense of who you are and you need an inspiring story to give your life meaning, how about being a heroic puritan like me, whose goal is to avoid guilt through an impossible lifestyle that has no connection to a society that is viewed as a cartoonish monolithic evil."

Over the years a lot of readers have been disappointed that I'm not that guy, and at least a few have quit classes and jobs that they should have stayed with. Even I sometimes lost focus on what I really needed. I dabbled in homesteading and discovered that it requires too much work and way too much driving, while the excitement of living in the woods fades quickly. Looking back on the popular myth that first attracted me to primitive living, what I wanted out there was something that is easier to find in the city (but still difficult): close to zero obligations, and giant blocks of time with nothing I'm supposed to be doing. I'm still working on that.

October 2008 Update

"How To Drop Out" has been my most popular piece of writing for more than four years. In that time I've bought some land, which you can read about on my landblog, and I've shifted my main residence to Spokane, where it's harder to find good food in dumpsters, so my expenses are higher. Also, I've decided I need to be even more aggressive in dispelling the very powerful myths that are tied to the idea of dropping out of society. So here's a new short version of the essay, hitting the main points, adding a few new points, and really hammering the points that people keep missing. The original essay is below it.

1. Do not drop out. Instead, try to stop yourself from committing suicide until you can find a job that is so non-hellish that it does not make you suicidal, and then stay at that job, or an even better one if you can find it, for several decades. Grab what fun you can on the weekends, save up money, enjoy your retirement, and you will have lived a pretty good life.

Seriously, it's good to live differently, to take uncommon paths, to minimize your dependence on a society gone astray. But if I were to say, "Woo-hoo! Dropping out is so cool! Quit your job now and hop a freight train to Bolivia, and you will be ALIVE while everyone else is DEAD," then that might be worse than saying nothing. Motivational writing is a drug. If you require a motivational writer or speaker to live differently, then as soon as that external energy shot wears off, you will fizzle and burn out. But if everyone is trying to discourage you from doing something, and you do it anyway, *then* you have the internal motivation to persist and succeed. So: dropping out is not fun — better not do it.

2. **"Drop out" is a bad metaphor**, because it implies you are either in or out. In reality, *no one has ever been in or out* — everyone is somewhere in between. The most pathetic office drone still has forbidden dreams, and the most extreme mountain man still has commerce with society. Your mission is to find a niche, somewhere in this range, where you're not held over a barrel by a system that gives you no participation in power.

3. **It's not about being pure**. It's not about keeping your hands clean or avoiding guilt. Imagine birds living in a forest. Humans come and cut the forest down and build barns and plant crops. If some birds are able to live in the barns, or eat the crops, they don't say, "I'm not going to live in the barn — that's cheating," or "I'm not going to eat the crops, because then I'm just part of the system." Of all the species on Earth, only humans are that stupid.

Now, that doesn't mean you should accept all gifts. Sometimes the "crops" are poisoned or the "barns" are traps. By all means, when you are offered benefits, use your full intelligence to see what strings are attached. And if you reject something, reject it because you see that it will do you more harm than good, not because you have some silly obsession with purity. Here's a test: when Thoreau was living at Walden Pond, he would often go into town for dinners with his family. If you see anything wrong with that, read this section again, or read this piece about the myth of self-sufficiency.

4. **"Out" is relative and not absolute**. It is a path and not a destination. And you walk the path not by disconnecting from the rest of the world, but by engaging it in an intelligent and creative way, instead of in one of the disempowering ways that are made to look like the only ways. The myth of the pure and total outsider is one of those disempowering ways. It's a trick designed to make you set an impossible goal, get discouraged, and give up.

5. **Do not try to find a job doing what you love**. This is my most radical advice. There are some people in the world who have jobs they love so much that they would do them for free. If you become one of these people, you will probably get there not through planning but through luck, by doing what you love for free until somehow the money starts coming in. But if you make an effort to combine your income and your love, you are likely to end up compromising both, making a poverty income by doing something you don't quite love, or no longer love. For example, if you decide to become a chef because you love cooking, it will probably make you hate cooking, because cooking will become linked in your mind to all the bullshit around the job.

What I recommend instead is to separate your money from your love. Get the most low-stress source of income that you can find, and then do exactly what you love for free. It might eventually make you money or it might not. "Do what you love and the money will follow" is mostly false. The real rule is: "If you're doing what you love, you won't care if you never make any money from it — but you still need money."

6. **When you begin to get free, you will get depressed**. It works like this: When you were three years old, if your parents weren't too bad, you knew how to play spontaneously.

Then you had to go to school, where everything you did was required. The worst thing is that even the fun activities, like singing songs and playing games, were commanded under threat of punishment. So even play got tied up in your mind with a control structure, and severed from the life inside you. If you were “rebellious”, you preserved the life inside you by connecting it to forbidden activities, which are usually forbidden for good reasons, and when your rebellion ended in suffering and failure, you figured the life inside you was not to be trusted. If you were “obedient”, you simply crushed the life inside you almost to death.

Freedom means you’re not punished for saying no. The most fundamental freedom is the freedom to do nothing. But when you get this freedom, after many years of activities that were forced, nothing is all you want to do. You might start projects that seem like the kind of thing you’re supposed to love doing, music or writing or art, and not finish because nobody is forcing you to finish and it’s not really what you want to do. It could take months, if you’re lucky, or more likely years, before you can build up the life inside you to an intensity where it can drive projects that you actually enjoy and finish, and then it will take more time before you build up enough skill that other people recognize your actions as valuable.

7. Hard work is satanic. Primitive humans have moments of extreme exertion, but they don’t go through life in a hurry, they don’t push themselves, and even when they live on the edge of hunger, they don’t stress about it. Even medieval serfs worked fewer hours, and at a slower pace, than modern industrialized workers. Ivan Illich has written that at the dawn of the industrial age, they would put a man in a pit that gradually filled with water, and give him a pump, and he would have to pump constantly all day to not drown. Humans are so naturally resistant to hard work that it took something like that to train people for industrial jobs. Now they do it with the schooling system, and with the religious doctrine that hard work is morally virtuous.

The opposite of hard work is quality work. Quality work may be done quickly, but it is never pushed. It arranges itself around the goal of doing something as well as it can be done, and it finds its own pace.

Another opposite of hard work is playful work. Like quality work it may be done quickly but is never pushed. But playful work is indifferent to quality, or even to success. When you’re doing playful work, you don’t care if it ends in total failure, because you’re having such a good time that you would look forward to doing the whole job again.

8. There are no easy rules. This is a tangential point. If you’re interested in dropping out of society, you are also likely to reject society’s rules, and try to replace them with counterculture rules or rules of your own invention. Humans are map-making animals, and we’re always trying to make a map so good that we no longer have to look at the land. This is a mistake, and if you reject the dominant map, it’s best to learn to not use any map at all. There is one rule that’s very simple, but not easy: observe reality and adjust.

9. Don’t rush it. Getting free is not like walking through a magic doorway — it’s like growing a fruit tree.

How to Drop Out (original 2004 essay)

I didn’t even start dropping out until my mid-20’s. Unlike many outsiders and “radicals,” I never had to go through a stage where I realized that our whole society is insane — I’ve known that as

long as I can remember. But even being already mentally outside the system, I found it extremely challenging to get out physically. In fourth grade I wanted to blow up the school, but I didn't know how, and even if I had done it, it would not have meant an endless summer vacation. In high school, inspired by Bill Kaysing's *The Robin Hood Handbook*, I wanted to go live off the land in the Idaho wilderness, but actually doing it seemed as remote and difficult as going to the moon. (Kaysing later wrote the book *We Never Went to the Moon*.) So I continued to bide my time and obey the letter of the law, like the guy in the Kafka parable ([link](#)). In college, when Artis the Spoonman performed on campus and told us all to drop out, I thought that was ridiculous — how would I survive without a college degree?

A few years later, with my two college degrees, after jobs operating envelope-stuffing machinery and answering phones in a warehouse, I was finally nudged toward dropping out by the Bush I recession and my own nature — that I'm extremely frugal, love unstructured time, and would sooner eat garbage than feign enthusiasm. More than ten years later I'm a specialist at eating garbage — as I draft this I'm eating a meal I made with organic eggs from a dumpster, and later I'll make a pie of dumpstered apples. I live on under \$2000 a year, I have no permanent residence, and moving to the Idaho wilderness now seems like a reachable goal — but no longer the best idea.

Getting free of the system is more complex than we've been led to believe. Here as in so many places, our thinking has been warped by all-or-nothingism, by the Hollywood myth of the sudden overwhelming victory: Quit your corporate job this minute, sell all your possessions, and hop a freight train to a straw bale house in the mountains where you'll grow all your own food and run with the wolves! In reality, between the extremes there's a whole dropout universe, and no need to hurry.

In my case, as I understood what I had to go through to make money, I stopped spending it. I learned to make my meals from scratch, and then from cheaper scratch, making my own sourdough bread and tortillas. I stopped buying music and books (exceptions in exceptional cases) and got in the habit of using the library. When I crashed my car, I kept the insurance money and walked, and then got an old road bike. I took a road trip by hitchhiking, but it was too physically taxing and I got sick. Like many novice radicals, I got puritanical and pushed myself too hard, and finally eased off. I temporarily owned another car and lived in it for a couple months of a long road trip. In the Clinton economic bubble, I got a job that was much easier and better paying than my previous jobs, and built up savings that I'm still living on.

The main thing I was doing during those years was de-institutionalizing myself, learning to navigate the hours of the day and the thoughts in my head with no teacher or boss telling me what to do. I had to learn to relax without getting lethargic, to never put off washing the dishes, to balance the needs of the present and the future, to have spontaneous fun but avoid addiction, to be intuitive, to notice other people, to make big and small decisions. I went through mild depression and severe fatigue and embarrassing obsessions and strange diets and simplistic new age thinking. It's a long and ugly road, and most of us have to walk it, or something like it, to begin to be free.

A friend says, "This world makes it easy to toe the line, and easy to totally fuck up, and really hard to not do either one." But this hard skill, not quitting your job or moving to the woods or reducing consumption or doing art all day, is the essence of dropping out. When people rush it, and try to take shortcuts, they slide into addiction or debt or depression or shattered utopian communities, and then go back to toeing the line.

The path is different for everyone. Maybe you're already intuitive and decisive and know how to have fun, but you don't know how to manage money or stay grounded. Maybe you're using wealth or position or charm to keep from having to relate to people as equals, or you're keeping constantly busy to avoid facing something lurking in the stillness. Whatever weaknesses keep you dependent on the system, you have to take care of them before you break away from the system, just as you have to learn to swim before you escape a ship. How? By going out and back, a little farther each time, with persistence and patience, until you reach the skill and distance that feels right.

At the moment there's no reason to drop out "all the way" except puritanism. I hate civilization as much as anyone, but in these last few years before it crashes, we should appreciate and use what it offers. Sylvan Hart (his given name!), the 20th century mountain man who even smelted his own metal, still traded with civilization, and once carried a sheet of glass 50 miles through the woods so he could have a good window. (See Harold Peterson, *The Last of the Mountain Men*)

Some of the happiest people I know have dropped out only a short distance. They still live in the city and have jobs and pay rent, but they've done something more mentally difficult — and mentally liberating — than moving to some isolated farm. They have become permanently content with low-status, modest-paying jobs that they don't have to think about at home or even half the time when they're at work. Yes, these jobs are getting scarce, but they're still a thousand times more plentiful than the kind of job that miserable people cannot give up longing for — where you make a living doing something so personally meaningful that you would do it for free.

"Do what you love and the money will follow" is an irresponsible lie, a denial of the deep opposition between money and love. The real rule is: "If you're doing what you love, you won't care if you never make a cent from it, because that's what love means — but you still need money!" So what I recommend, as the second element of dropping out, is coldly severing your love from your income. One part of your life is to make only as much money as you need, at a job that you can come home from feeling energized and not drained. And then the important part of your life is to do just exactly what you love, with zero pressure to make money. And if you're lucky, you'll eventually make money anyway.

But how much money do you "need"? And what if the only jobs available are low-paying and so exhausting that you come home and collapse into bed? These questions lead to my own level of dropping out, which is to reduce expenses to the point that you shift your whole identity from the high-budget to the low-budget universe.

In a temperate climate, you have only five physical needs: food, water, clothing, shelter, and fuel. (If you're a raw-foodist and don't mind the cold, you don't even need fuel!) Everything else that costs money is a luxury or a manufactured need. Manufactured needs have fancy names: entertainment, transportation, education, employment, housing, "health care." In every case these are creations of, and enablers of, an alienating and dominating system, a world of lost wholeness.

If you love your normal activities, you don't need to tack on "entertainment." If you aren't forced to travel many miles a day, you don't need "transportation." If you are permitted to learn on your own, you don't need "education." If you can meet all your physical needs through the direct action of yourself and your friends, you don't need to go do someone else's work all day. If you're permitted to merely occupy physical space and build something to keep the wind and rain out, you don't need to pay someone to "provide" it. Expensive health care is especially insid-

ious: not only is our toxic and stressful society the primary cause of sickness, but the enormous expenses that have been added in the last hundred years are mostly profit-making scams that cause and prolong sickness far more than they heal it.

This is the low-budget universe: I ride around the city on an old cheap road bike, in street clothes, often hauling food I've just pulled out of a dumpster. Sometimes I'll be on a trail where I'll invariably be passed by people on thousand dollar bikes in racing outfits. Why are they riding around if they're not carrying anything? And why are they in such a hurry?

I used to be envious of those suckers: I *have* to ride my bike to survive and they're so rich they do it for fun. But what is this "fun"? I get everything — exercise, getting from place to place, meaningfulness, the feeling of autonomy, and doing what's necessary to survive — all with the same activity: riding my bike. They should be envious of me: my life is elegant and theirs is disjointed and self-defeating, making money which they have to turn around and spend on unhealthful restaurant food because they don't have time to cook, on cars because they have too many obligations to get around by bicycle, and then on bicycles or health club memberships to make up for sitting in their jobs and cars all day, and even then on medical "insurance" (a protection racket which for most people costs more than uninsured care — or there would be no profit in it) for when their fragmented poisonous life makes them sick.

How do you get out of this? One step at a time! Move or change jobs so you don't need a car, and then sell the damn thing. Get a bicycle and learn to fix it yourself — it's not even 1% as difficult and expensive as fixing a car. Reduce your possessions and you'll find that the fewer you have, the more you appreciate each one. Get your clothing at thrift stores on sale days — I spend less than \$20 a year on clothes. Give up sweetened drinks — filtered water is less than 50 cents a gallon and much better for you. If you have an expensive addiction, pull yourself out of it or at least trade it for a cheap one.

Probably the most valuable skill you can learn is cooking. For a fraction of the cost of white-sugar-white-starch-hydrogenated-oil restaurant meals, you can make your own meals out of high quality healthful ingredients, and if you're a good cook, they'll taste good. I eat better than anyone I know on \$100 a month: butter, nuts, dates, whole wheat flour, brown rice, olive oil, all organic, and bee pollen for extra vitamins. From natural food store dumpsters I get better bread, produce, meat, and eggs than Safeway even sells, but if this is impossible in your city, or you'd just prefer not to, you can still eat beautifully on \$200.

The foundation of all this is to cultivate intense awareness of money. It doesn't grow on trees but you have millions of years of biological memory of a world where what you want *does* grow on trees, so you need to constantly remind yourself that whatever you're thinking of buying will cost you an hour, ten hours, 100 hours of dreary humiliating labor. Your expenses are your chains. Reducing them is not about punishing yourself or avoiding guilt — it's about getting free.

If you continue to reduce expenses, eventually you'll come to the proverbial elephant in the parlor, the single giant expense that consumes 50–80% of a frugal person's money, enough to buy a small extravagant luxury every day. Of course, it's rent, or for you advanced slaves, mortgage. The only reason you can't just go find a vacant space and live there, the only reason another entity can be said to "own" it and require a huge monthly payment from whoever lives there, is to maintain a society of domination, to continually and massively redistribute influence (symbolized by money) from the powerless to the powerful, so the powerless are reduced to groveling for the alleged privilege of wage labor, doing what the powerful tell them in exchange for tokens which they turn around and pass back toward the powerful every month and think it's natural. Rent

is theft and slavery, and mortgage is just as bad, based not only on the myth of “owning” space but also on the contrived custom of “interest,” simply a command to give money (influence) to whoever has it and take it from whoever lacks it.

Fortunately there are still a lot of ways to dodge rent/mortgage other than refusing to pay or leave and being killed by the police. For surprisingly little money you can buy remote or depleted land and build a house on it. (see *Mortgage Free!* by Rob Roy, and also *Finding and Buying Your Place in the Country* by Les Scher) If you don’t mind starting over with strangers, you can join an existing dropout community. (See the Communities Directory.) You can live in a van, camp in the woods, or look for a caretaker or apartment manager job. If you’re charming, you can find a partner or spouse who will “support” you by permitting you to sleep and cook someplace without asking for money. And if you’re bold or desperate, most cities have abandoned houses or buildings where you can squat. Mainly all you need are neighbors oblivious to your coming and going, a two-burner propane camp stove, some water jugs and candles, and a system for disposing of your bodily waste. If the “owners” come, they’ll probably just ask you to leave, and in some places there are still archaic laws from compassionate times, making it legally difficult for them to evict you.

I squatted a shed for two weeks in December 2002 and if necessary I’ll do it again. Also I have enough money saved to buy cheap land — the project is just too big for me to do alone. Also I’m slowly learning wilderness survival — which is iffy since wilderness itself is not surviving. But I spend most of my time surfing housesits and staying with friends and family.

To drop out is to become who you are. Do not feel guilty about using strengths and advantages that others do not have. That guilt is a holdover from the world of selfish competition, where your “success” means the failure or deprivation of someone else. In the dropout universe, your freedom feeds the freedom of others — it’s as if we’ve all been tied up, and the most agile and loosely tied people get out first, and then help the rest.

But what if they don’t? What about people who are outside the system but still hyper-selfish? These people are not what I call “dropouts” but what I call “idiots.” The view of this world as a war of all against all, where your purpose in life is to accumulate “wealth,” zero-sum advantages and scarce resources for an exclusive “self,” is the view of the elite. The only reason to think that way is if you are one of the handful of people in a position to win. For everyone else, the value system that makes sense is that you are here to help, to serve the greatest good that you can perceive. Yet in America, rich and poor alike are raised with robber baron consciousness, to turn us against each other, to keep us exploiting those below us instead of resisting our own exploiters, to keep all the arrows going the right way in the life-depleting machine.

The frugality that I’m talking about is the *opposite* of ungenerosity, because it frees us from a scarcity-based system in which we cannot afford to be generous. For all our lives we’ve been trained as prostitutes, demanding money in exchange for services that we should be giving free to those we love, because others demand the same of us. In this context, the dropout is a hero and a virus: if you no longer need money, you can give others what they need without asking for money, and then they no longer need money, and so on. In practice it’s still sketchy because there are so few of us, but the more of us there are, and the more skills and goods and openings we offer, the better our gift economy will work. And if we do it right, they won’t be able to just massacre us or put us in camps, as they’ve always done before, because we will have too many friends and relations in the dominant system.

For strategy I look not to political movements like revolts or strikes or radical parties, but to cultural movements like gay liberation or feminism or pagan spirituality. First define a clearly understood identity, then proudly claim that identity, then build public acceptance through entertainment and by each of us earning the support of friends and family outside the movement. I'm envious of gay people — I've spent years mastering written language just to halfway explain myself, and all they have to say is "I'm gay."

If we had a word, what would it be? In a recent family bulk Christmas mailing, I was "living the bohemian lifestyle," but I don't go to poetry readings or hang out in coffee shops. "Anarchist" smacks of ideology, of people who bicker endlessly about abstract theory, although maybe we could adopt an insulting term used by theory anarchists, and call ourselves "lifestyle anarchists." "Voluntary simplicity" is too tame and politically correct, suggesting aging yuppies trying to save the world by reducing households to one car — plus the life I advocate is not at all simple, just unstressful. I'm too politically ambitious and forward-looking to be a hobo or a tramp. In Eastern tradition I could be respected as some kind of monk or holy man, but I don't want to get "enlightened" — I want to make the whole world wild and free.

The word I've been using, "dropout," is a good start but it has the same deep flaw as "primitive": it places our dominating, parasitic, and temporary civilization in the fixed center. We've got it inside out. On the physical plane, nature is the center that holds, and "mainstream" society is the falling apart, the irresponsible life-wasting deviance. What I'm trying to do — and what we're all going to have to do in the next few decades if we survive at all — is drop back in.

translations of How To Drop Out

Slovak by Margareta Sliwka
French by Eddie Vigor
Russian
Ukrainian
Belorussian

other external links

Audio of me reading "How to Drop Out" (thanks Avi)
Early Retirement Extreme
Chris Davis's Idle Theory
Moneyless World, a blog by a guy who has been living without money since 2000
A page about master dropout Jeffrey Sawyer

Related internal links

Criticism and Response
Books about dropping out
Dumpster Diving FAQ

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)
Anti-Copyright



Ran Prieur
How to Drop Out
People who work get bored when they don't work. People who don't work never get bored.
April 2, 2004

<http://ranprieur.com/essays/dropout.html>

usa.anarchistlibraries.net