When Josh Sucher graduated from Bard College in 2007, he had no idea how to find a job. He had spent four years—and large amounts of his parents’ money—studying anthropology. He knew how to conduct ethnographic studies as an insider or outsider; he could tell you the most amazing things about witchcraft in different societies. His senior thesis had analyzed the “constructivist underpinnings” of a one-hundred-dollar laptop computer, which he described as “a machine with political implications hard-wired into it.” Within the context of Bard’s liberal arts campus, Sucher had done everything right. Judged by the harsher standards of America’s leading employers, he was as useless as an orchid in a snowstorm.

Similar frustrations gripped many of his classmates. Bard’s free-spirited culture didn’t seem to connect with the lucrative careers college graduates were supposed to find. Sucher’s father treated this predicament as a comic disaster, remarking at one point: “Why don’t you go down to the anthropology factory? I hear they’re hiring.” Even Bard’s graduation speakers couldn’t make the gloom go away. They offered the usual salutes to the life
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of the mind—and then winced at the perilous future each gradu­ate faced. Bard president Leon Botstein bemoaned the extent to which higher education nationwide was souring on the liberal arts. Commencement speaker Michael Bloomberg warned that finding a job “can be scary,” adding: “Some of you may take a little longer to find a job.”

All the same, Josh Sucher has prevailed—and he has done so without ever needing to stifle his personality, his interests, or his take on life.

Sucher’s story opens this book because it showcases a fundamental truth that’s in danger of being lost amid our national anxiety about the value of a college education. Curiosity, creativity, and empathy aren’t unruly traits that must be reined in to ensure success. Just the opposite. The human touch has never been more essential in the workplace than it is today. You don’t have to mask your true identity to get paid for your strengths. You don’t need to apologize for the supposedly impractical classes you took in college or the so-called soft skills you have acquired. The job market is quietly creating thousands of openings a week for people who can bring a humanist’s grace to our rapidly evolving high-tech future.

Imagine a spreadsheet with human strengths capping all the columns across the top of the sheet…and technical disciplines supporting all the rows at the side. Each intersection defines a new type of job. Curiosity + data science = market research. Empathy + gene sequencing = genetic counseling. Creativity + information networks = social-media manager. It’s a rich, won­derful grid. In the course of this book, we will explore all sorts of ways your liberal arts education and society’s needs can fit together.

The central insight is this: The more we automate the routine stuff, the more we create a constant low-level hum of digital con­nectivity, the more we get tangled up in the vastness and blind spots of big data, the more essential it is to bring human judgment into the junctions of our digital lives. It’s easy to get mesmerized by the digital tools that surround us: Snapchat and Facebook for socializing; TripAdvisor and Airbnb for travel planning; camera­toting drones for who knows what. It’s natural to lionize the soft­ware engineers who build these tools. But each technological breakthrough is just an empty framework without people to coax, confide, persuade, debate, teach, agree, rebel, and interact. Fundamentally, we’re social animals. We compete; we make friends; we crave respect and we punish our enemies. We behave in ways that baffle engineers and make perfect sense to humanists. That’s been true ever since someone in the Cave of Altamira twenty thousand years ago looked at a crude sketch of a bison and told her neighbor: “That’s clever! You should draw some more.”

The more our labs and engineers innovate, the more jobs we create for people who can make the human dimension work. Technology may be a job killer in warehouses or on the factory floor. There’s no denying robots excel at predictable chores, carrying them out faster, cheaper, and more reliably than we can. Yet in so many other aspects of life, the machines (and even software­based artificial intelligence) are clumsy intruders. They don’t know how to handle subtler situations, where feelings matter and the rules haven’t been written. We do.

If childhood habits foreshadow adulthood destinies, the start­ing point for Josh Sucher can be found in a family photo of him as a toddler standing on a chair, screwdriver in hand. He is trying to take apart a wall socket. The little boy looks so earnest—and so confident—that you want him to succeed, even if your prudent self is about to scream: Get off that chair now! Keep that image in mind. I’ve spent a lot of time trying to figure out why adventurers
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like Sucher keep gliding into career opportunities that other people don’t see. Part of his good fortune (and yours too!) can be traced to the merits of keeping a dash of youthful wonder in your life.

As Josh Sucher grew up, curiosity kept tugging him in unpredictable ways, including an ill-advised attempt to bicycle to school — as a seventh-grader — by zipping onto the expressway. When it came time to choose a college, he ignored the vocational pathways his more prudent classmates preferred. Instead, he picked Bard, a famously iconoclastic school a hundred and ten miles north of New York City. Its alumni include the founders of the rock band Steely Dan and dozens of well-known painters, artists, actors, and composers. Its writing faculty over the years has featured the likes of Toni Morrison, Saul Bellow, Chinua Achebe, and Ralph Ellison. At Bard, there is no business school.

For Sucher, Bard became a nonstop source of enchantment. The first week of freshman year, he found himself in a cultural anthropology class where the instructor pulled out a nail clipper, snipped off a few scraps of her own keratin — and passed them around for student examination. Her point: What looks clean and nice on the tips of our fingers suddenly becomes disgusting when it’s removed. Terms such as dirt and filth aren’t absolutes at all; they are hugely dependent on context and culture. For an excited freshman at a seminar table, this was a thunderbolt of truth. The professor’s message “completely reframed the way I view the universe,” Sucher later told me.

After four years at Bard, Sucher knew how to create a short play from scratch in a week. He knew how to stage theater in the most improbable locations, ranging from campus mailrooms to abandoned barns. He had amassed a splendidly impractical collection of skills without any obvious way of turning them into a respectable job. Stalling for time, he decided to try law school. That turned out to be a dead end; law was his father’s calling, not his.

To help pay bills during law school, Sucher set up Block Factory, a side business providing tech support for small companies using Mac computers. He became a man with a tool kit, advertising on Craigslist and getting paid for installing video projectors, Internet cables, and other gear. His “office” consisted of a $450-a-month rented desk in a co-working facility near Brooklyn’s Gowanus Canal. His home: a bed in the attic of his grandmother’s house. So be it. “I knew my way around a computer, and I liked taking things apart,” Sucher later explained.

If you had met Sucher then, you might have dismissed him as an aimless soul. In reality, he was sharpening a vital skill that Bard had taught him: how to listen. His new clients — particularly a cluster of Manhattan art galleries — needed more than a better A/V connection. They wanted a friendly listener who could soothe their spirits and deliver tech with empathy. “Most of my customers were anxious,” Sucher told me. “Something wasn’t working and they’d start berating themselves. They’d say: ‘You’re going to think I’m an idiot. I feel like a failure.’ There were a lot of talking-them-off-the-ledge moments. I’d say: ‘It’s not you; it’s the technology. This thing is terribly designed.’ I’d get things fixed and then we’d talk shop.”

After a couple years, however, Sucher yearned for a different kind of job, one that let him address tech’s failings in a broader way. “I started burning out,” Sucher told me. “I was becoming dissatisfied by devising clever workarounds for minor IT problems over and over again.” His new goal: teaming up with like-minded people to create user-friendly tech built properly from the outset.
In his free time, Sucher started hanging out with digital designers and usability experts. Without ever sending out a résumé, Sucher was networking his way toward his next job. He popped into a Manhattan party to celebrate the launch of a book about market research and user interviews—and found himself rubbing shoulders with noisy, spirited people who appreciated great design. Inspired by the encounter, he signed up for a program in Interaction Design at Manhattan's School of Visual Arts. At SVA, Sucher paired his long-standing empathy and curiosity with new skills relating to design, market research, and a smidgen of computer coding. “It was a magical moment for me,” Sucher said. “I had found my tribe. At one point, there were tears in my eyes.”

It didn’t take him long to realize that technology’s latest zigs and zags actually made his college training more valuable. Fast-growing new companies needed generalists who knew a little bit about tech—and a lot about human nature.

Three different paths led Sucher to Etsy, a Brooklyn-based company running a billion-dollar online marketplace for artisans selling everything from greeting cards to jewelry. Several of his SVA friends and instructors worked there. At a conference, he had heard Etsy’s chief executive, Chad Dickerson, share the company’s story. And he took a liking to the way Etsy’s marketplace supported small businesses trying to make it in the arts. When he learned the company had an opening, he applied.

Not only was Etsy hiring, it also radiated a fondness for people with eclectic backgrounds. Dickerson himself had been an English major at Duke. Many of Etsy’s software engineers and data analysts had spent their college years in fields such as literary history, Japanese studies, and psychology. This was a company where liberal arts majors needn’t hide their pasts. They could banter about Jenny Holzer’s conceptual artwork and turn theory into praxis. To Sucher, Etsy sounded like home.

Today, Sucher conducts a digital-age version of ethnography and field research for Etsy. By using GoToMeeting and Google Hangouts, he connects with artistic creators and buyers around the world, finding out how they use Etsy and what would make it work better for them. He’s the patient listener, drawing out details of the ways artists set up their studios or the reasons why they feel compelled to create. His curiosity and warmhearted manner help him gain insights into Etsy customers that administering standard questionnaires wouldn’t reveal. “Each person is his or her own story,” Sucher explained to me. “There are a million of them, and they never grow old.”

Think of him as an anthropologist in action, mindful of buyers’ preferences that can be as stark and hard to explain as the way we think about fingernails. Colleagues value his discoveries, which help guide new services and features. “I put myself in the shoes of our buyers and sellers,” Sucher told me. “I’m constantly opening my mind to the way they experience technology.” We can argue forever about the reasons why Sucher’s unplanned journey worked out so well. What’s clear is that the curiosity, creativity, and empathy you develop in college help you make your own luck. Rapid, disruptive change doesn’t ruin your prospects; it can actually play to your advantage.

In 2006, economists David Autor, Lawrence Katz, and Melissa Kearney published a landmark study looking at the way technology was changing people’s incomes, destinies, and ability to hold jobs. The scholars (based at MIT, Harvard, and the National Bureau of Economic Research, respectively) combed through a
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quarter century of data from the U.S. Census Bureau, the Labor Department, and other government agencies, decoding the secrets held in every American pay stub since 1980. What Autor, Katz, and Kearney uncovered has influenced public discussion of technology's allure and perils ever since.

While new technology is barely touching low-paid manual labor such as busing dishes, it is hammering millions of predictable, task-based jobs that traditionally provide tickets into the middle class. Factory workers have known this for decades, as machines keep displacing assembly lines full of human welders and fitters, but Autor, Katz, and Kearney demonstrated the degree to which tech's Grim Reaper has been targeting stores, offices, banks, and other bastions of white-collar work too. Payroll clerks keep being replaced by software. The same holds true for proofreaders, bank tellers, executive secretaries, and switchboard operators. McKinsey researchers estimate that 45 percent of workplace tasks in modern society are at risk of being automated. Or, as venture capitalist Marc Andreessen observed, “Software is eating the world.”

When the U.S. economy careened into the troubles of 2008 to 2010, 8.8 million Americans were thrown out of work. Eventually the economy got better, but many of those jobs didn't come back. Autor, Katz, and Kearney had nailed it: technological progress was squeezing routine-centered jobs out of existence. Even MIT Technology Review—a magazine whose very name spoke to a fondness for cutting-edge engineering—raised a ruckus in 2013 with a cover story entitled “How Technology Is Destroying Jobs.” In the piece, MIT management professor Andrew McAfee nervously ruminated on a future full of self-driving cars and warehouse robots. “When all these science-fiction technologies are deployed,” he asked, “what will we need all the people for?”

The Explorers

As public anxiety grew, an idea took hold that the tech sector itself might provide the answer. If we could just train enough software engineers, the argument went, a new generation could find gainful work. Hundreds of coding academies sprang up in cities ranging from San Francisco to Detroit. During his presidency, Barack Obama repeatedly urged teenagers in all walks of life to load up with science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) courses so they could become programming wizards too. Movies like The Social Network glamorized late-night coding binges. Even our language reshaped itself, like a plant twisting toward sunlight, with computing-related terms such as open source, backward-compatible, hackathon, and hackerspace writing themselves into the dictionary.

Here's the painful twist: The software sector makes no attempt to shield its own workers from automation; instead, it constantly squeezes out its own older jobs almost as fast as it creates new ones. Much of what programmers did by hand a few years ago has been turned into automated tool kits, libraries, or subroutines. Of the 10.1 million net new jobs the United States added from May 2012 to May 2016, only 5 percent, or 541,000, are in the computing sector. Being able to write business software, run a computer network, or create a smartphone app has turned out to be the answer for less than one-tenth of job hunters. For everyone else, success has been happening elsewhere.

What tech enthusiasts overlooked were the broader consequences of digital advances that kept rippling through the rest of the economy. Once or twice a century, a wave of innovation changes not just an industry, but an entire way of life. We saw this in the first half of the twentieth century, when the rise of the automobile industry inspired far more than a hiring spree at Henry Ford's factories. From the 1920s to the 1950s, millions of
newly defined jobs sprang up across the country, brought into existence by what a motorized America now needed or desired. Towns everywhere reshaped themselves to make room for auto mechanics, road-construction crews, driving academies, car dealerships, car washes, motor-insurance agents, traffic-safety officers, parking-lot attendants, mapmakers, and personal-injury lawyers.

It’s happening again.

Take a close look at job creation since May 2012, and you will see that the fastest-growing fields often turn out to be ones indirectly catching the warmth of the tech revolution. Thanks to the rapid rise of cheap online surveys and big-data analytics, for example, America is now graced with more than 550,000 market researchers and marketing specialists. That’s a 30 percent leap from the level in 2012. It didn’t take many software engineers to provide us with instant, low-cost polling services such as Qualtrics, SurveyMonkey, Clicktools, and FluidSurveys. The big impact lies in the ways these ubiquitous tools have been put to use. We poll ourselves constantly now. You probably clicked your way through at least a dozen such surveys in the past year, whether you wanted to or not. Companies need data on everything from airline service to your puppy’s latest visit to the vet. In the process, market research has been transformed from an obscure specialty into a field more densely populated than the city of Cleveland.

Remember the figure of 541,000 jobs added in the computing sector from May 2012 through May 2016? Look at what happens if we tally job growth during the same period in the following thirteen areas, all of which are tech-influenced but hardly tech-centered: compliance officers, entertainment producers and directors, event planners, fund-raisers, genetic counselors, graphic designers, human-resources specialists, management analysts, market research analysts, marketing specialists, school administrators, technical writers, and training specialists. We’re at 626,000 net new jobs, with many of these fields creating work at double or even quadruple the pace of the overall U.S. economy.

What’s more, we’re just getting started. Add in big categories such as general management, finance, legal work, sales, and teaching, and we’re looking at a further 1.7 million net new jobs, or a grand total of more than 2.3 million over the past five years. To put this giant sum in context: it’s more than triple the new-job contribution from the computing sector during that period. Or, if you prefer, it’s equivalent to the entire population of Pittsburgh, Miami, New Orleans, Atlanta, and Seattle combined.

Surprised? That’s totally understandable. Most of these new jobs have tiptoed into the U.S. economy with no fanfare whatsoever. They don’t fit into the conventional story lines of media coverage or the major political parties’ slogan wars. We aren’t talking about The Wolf of Wall Street or single parents working the night shift at minimum wage for soulless multinational corporations. This resurgence of meaningful work is happening in the forgotten middle. It involves an eclectic mix of high-skill but low-profile areas that just happen to be hungry for talent.

If you’re looking for entry-level jobs straight out of college, chapter 4 highlights a multitude of opportunities where your bachelor’s degree can be put to work right away. If you’re taking the longer view, with a focus on turning your liberal arts background into a fast-track career, chapter 7 shows you how people with degrees in the humanities and social sciences have risen to the top in fields as diverse as finance, government, nonprofits, and the entrepreneurial economy.

In all these sectors, tech makes us nimbler and quicker-witted. By spending less time on routine chores, we become more productive,
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which makes us more desirable. Our opportunities expand. Society keeps creating more room for people who do what we do. Put Google’s search engine at your fingertips, and your productivity soars in any field calling for instant access to fresh information (examples range from medical research to sports announcing). Embark on a fund-raising campaign, and software tools like the Raiser’s Edge become booster packs for your brain. The list is endless. LinkedIn has become the professional equivalent of steroids for recruiters; LexisNexis does the same for lawyers; AutoCAD for industrial designers; Final Cut for filmmakers; Houzz for architects; and so on.

Think of Josh Sucher’s situation. He couldn’t have found work at Etsy by proffering the old-fashioned ethnographer’s approach of traveling around the United States with a notepad and a microphone, collecting one or two user stories a day. Such a method would have been unbearably slow and expensive for Etsy to endure. With GoToMeeting and Google Hangouts, everything changes. Suddenly it becomes easy to carry out virtual visits to artists’ studios anywhere in the world, without the burdens of traditional travel. Sucher can arrive at Etsy’s Brooklyn headquarters at 9:30 a.m. and begin a digitized chat with an artists’ collective in Toronto a few minutes later. Customers in Arizona become just as accessible. For that matter, the whole world is within reach. Colleagues at Etsy headquarters can watch his conversations and suggest additional questions to ask. Technology might be eradicating other jobs, but it is simultaneously creating new openings that couldn’t have existed twenty years earlier.

Most of these opportunities call for a modicum of technical literacy, but nothing that can’t be picked up in a few months of concentrated effort. (You don’t need a computer science degree.) Average salaries range from $43,000 to $90,000 a year—the sort of pay that commands college graduates’ attention. Most important, these jobs are in the heart of the U.S. economy. They arise in big sectors such as management, teaching, sales, and education, which together employ nearly half of the 140 million Americans at work. By contrast, computer-related fields employ less than 3 percent of the workforce. Starting pay for the best software engineers can be stunningly high, but that’s true for athletes and pop stars too. For the vast majority of Americans who will win new jobs in the years to come, programming won’t be the answer.

What do we call this exciting new category of jobs? Many center on an ability to read the room—and get different people on the same page. Let’s dub this “the rapport sector.” Other opportunities call for wise decisions amid the ambiguity and murky information that machines can’t stand. Such settings make the most of our ability to pick up signals machines never see or balance priorities in ways equations can’t describe. Now we’re talking about “the ingenuity economy.” We might even want additional labels acknowledging the value of old-fashioned communication retooled for a digital age. People have been storytellers since long before the days of Aesop or the Ramayana. Even if modern cultures have traded in parchment for Pinterest and Prezi, the demand for people who can inform, entertain, or inspire is endless.

What unifies all these jobs is something more fundamental: an explorer’s spirit. America’s most interesting jobs are going to be ones that haven’t been done before. The opportunities are bigger; the bureaucracy smaller. Find (or invent!) one of those jobs, and you control your own destiny. Your best ideas will take hold faster; your mistakes will disappear from sight more quickly. Such opportunities exist not just at start-ups, but in thousands of big companies too. Old work practices are fading away. New opportunities are arising, and fresh perspectives are needed. Look at the
way advertising, public relations, and marketing have been upended by social media to see how vast and rapid this transformation can be. Everyone from Walmart to Wally’s Bait and Tackle now needs an influx of social-media talent in order to connect with a new generation of customers.

Be like Josh. Come at your career with a pioneering spirit, and you gain the confidence of steadily building up your strengths. Just as important, when unexpected change happens, you have the experience and the temperament to make the most of whatever comes next. As the philosophical writer Eric Hoffer once observed, “In times of drastic change, it is the learners who inherit the future. The learned usually find themselves beautifully equipped to deal with a world that no longer exists.”

Job hunting has changed a lot since the 1970s and even since the 1990s. Predictable career paths are rarer; the opportunities to improvise are greater. Irving Trust and Sperry Rand don’t come to campus anymore looking for raw talent that can be slotted into multiyear executive-training programs. In fact, those particular companies don’t even exist today. They have disappeared in a wave of corporate mergers and restructurings. Everything changes faster now—and so be it. In the creative chaos of everyday life, resourceful people still reign supreme. To borrow a phrase from MIT’s David Autor, when success centers upon “problem-solving, intuition and persuasion,” it’s the explorers’ turn to win.

Of all the classes I took in college, the most valuable one had nothing to do with the career I eventually found: writing business books and crafting cover stories for publications such as the Wall Street Journal and Forbes. Instead, this course transported me to nineteenth-century Russia and the life’s work of a brilliant, tormented soul. The subject: someone who spent seven years in Siberia’s czarist prisons, who repeatedly skated on the edge of bankruptcy because of his gambling problems, and who, even so, managed to write two of the world’s most renowned novels along with at least a dozen other books.

You’ve probably deduced that this was a Russian literature class focused entirely on Fyodor Dostoevsky. I signed up as a naive freshman at Stanford, having been blown away by Crime and Punishment in high school. Awed by my first taste of Dostoevsky, I wanted to see what else the man had written. Our professor did not disappoint. On the first day of class, the professor, William Mills Todd III, explained that we would spend the next ten weeks reading nearly everything of scale that Dostoevsky ever wrote. Not just The Brothers Karamazov (944 pages) and Crime and Punishment (another 560), but also Poor Folk, Notes from the Underground, House of the Dead, and The Possessed, as well as excerpts of other Russian works from the same period. All told, we would be assigned nearly three thousand pages of Dostoevsky’s passionate (and sometimes chaotic) text. A six- to eight-page midterm paper would be a small part of our grade. The main event would be much tougher: an extended final paper that seized on some aspect of Dostoevsky’s work and analyzed it across all of his fiction. I was stunned. How could I get everything read? How could I make sense of it all? I felt like a traveler in the opening scene of a survival movie, stuck in some remote forest after a bus crash, not sure what to do next. Was this what college was supposed to be?

At first, I relied on ordinary study habits, mixing dorm-room chatter with intermittent efforts to turn pages in the late afternoon. I fell behind. Too many pages; too many Ilyushas and Alyoshas that I couldn’t keep straight. I did settle on a racy topic for my final paper: “Intemperance and Debauchery in Dostoevsky’s Fiction.” That was fine; it allowed me to savor many, many
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scenes involving drinking and reckless sexual choices. The more I perused, though, the blurrier it all became. I was going to fail.

In desperation, near the end of the term I cobbled together a radically new approach. Now I read late at night, hunched over a desk, with no distractions. I skimmed through long passages in which everyone was sober and fully dressed, making time to note each new moral transgression as it happened. Instead of gently dabbing key passages with a yellow Hi-Liter, I began attacking the text with a ballpoint pen. Soon Dostoevsky's work was splattered with an impudent teenager's commentary. Half my comments were inane, but it didn't matter. Later on I could refine the best insights and shed the rest. At least I would make it to the finish line.

Decades later, those unruly habits are still with me. In fact, they define my biggest projects and my most productive moments.

Learning how to wrestle with big, half-formed ideas—and how to keep fighting in the face of fatigue—was the best lesson of all. I don't mean to malign the standard preprofessional courses that college offers. Basic journalism classes taught me how to turn someone's speech into a news story; economics and accounting courses schooled me in how to read a balance sheet and think through questions of supply and demand. Those career-minded classes not only made me employable; they ensured that I would sail through those awkward probation periods when employers wonder: Can this newbie actually do anything? Yet a decade out, when I began to dream of writing big, ambitious feature stories or full-length nonfiction books, Journalism 101 wasn't going to get me there. The habits learned in the Dostoevsky course did.

Essentially, our professor had turned us loose on a big project with inadequate preparation—and then left us alone. We had ten weeks to stare failure in the face and come up with our own survival strategies. How would we stay afloat when we were being overwhelmed with too much information? How would we stay organized? How would we take all this material and shape it into something that was coherent, believable, and surprising? He wasn't going to spoon-feed us the answers. We had to find the solutions, which meant inching ahead on our own, week after week, without any outside assurance that we were on the right track.

Knowing how to prevail in such murky moments is the hallmark of a liberal arts education, and you can benefit from it even if you don't attend an ultra-selective school such as Harvard, Stanford, or Amherst. Your grades don't matter as much as your willingness to stretch your ideas and aspirations. In the chapters that follow, you will meet graduates of Mississippi College, the University of Nevada, and San Francisco State who parlayed their liberal arts beginnings into winning careers. Regardless of whether you're studying philosophy, English, sociology, or any of a dozen other disciplines, you're being introduced to a wider way of engaging with the world. Payoffs arise later in all sorts of jobs. As the nineteenth-century British educator William Cory put it, the benefits of such an education consist of "the habit of attention... the art of expression... the art of assuming, at a moment's notice, a new intellectual position... the art of entering quickly into another person's thoughts"—and even the willingness to accept that you might be wrong.

Aren't life's biggest challenges always that way?

In the movie (and novel) The Martian, there's a scene where astronaut Mark Watney discovers that he has been left alone on Mars by his crewmates with at least a four-year wait until any space probe might return. He's not dead yet. He has three hundred days of food, as well as an erratic but diverse assortment of
supplies and tools. At that point in the film, Watney starts to envision a way out, declaring: “I'm gonna have to science the shit out of this.” The movie is a beautiful tribute to the power of science and engineering if you're ever stuck on another planet needing food, shelter, and oxygen.

Inspired by his example, I'm going to do everything possible in this book to help you “humanities the hell” out of similar situations on Earth—when it's your mind and soul that need sustenance.

It's hard to say exactly how or why the pioneering spirit forms in people. Psychologists' research suggests that personality is very fluid in childhood, begins to take shape much more clearly in the high-school years, and is largely settled by early adulthood. How much is determined by genetics, parenting, educational exposures, socioeconomic standing, and peer interactions isn't fully understood. Perhaps it never will be. Even so, the relationship between personality and success is one of the most keenly studied subjects in the social sciences.

In recent years, society has embraced grit as the greatest virtue of them all. Traits such as tenacity and conscientiousness have been admired for decades, and a wealth of academic research now demonstrates how broadly these strengths pay off. The full linkages are elegantly explained in *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance*, a bestselling book by University of Pennsylvania psychology professor Angela Duckworth. But even the best ideas can be taken too far, especially when careful scientific research is turned into click-bait headlines. That's literally true in the wilderness, where your odds of success improve if you bring sufficient food and water as well as some form of navigation. And it's metaphorically true as you travel from college to career. In the chapters that follow, I'll talk about the extra elements of a college experience that can help you become fully career-ready while still making the most of your liberal arts strengths. Touch points will cover everything from why you should get to know your professors and the school's recent alumni to the importance of picking the right summer jobs and the right electives. (Yes, curiosity, creativity, and empathy will pay off once you start working, but a few practical skills will help you land that first job.) A generation ago, when tuition costs were lower and almost any undergraduate diploma was good enough to impress employers, college officials could joke that a liberal arts education “trains you for nothing but prepares you for everything.” Today, you want to be brilliantly prepared and properly trained too.

You're probably wondering whether the explorer's track favors students from affluent, well-connected families, people who can
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afford to take risks that others dare not try. We haven’t achieved perfect equality of opportunity yet, but a lot of people are working hard to knock down barriers. In the chapters that follow, you will see how students in many traditionally underrepresented groups—first-generation, Latino, African American, Pell Grant recipients, and so on—have created compelling careers from a liberal arts beginning. Technology is helping in a big way, as it’s becoming easier than ever to strike up online conversations with potential allies, no matter what your own background might be. (See chapter 9 for an extreme example of what a single Skype contact can accomplish.) Life’s imbalances related to money won’t ever go away, but a handful of colleges with a conscience are helping lower-income students try promising career options without going broke. Such pilot programs are overdue; they should be expanded as rapidly as possible.

In part 1 of the book (“Your Strengths”), you will see why supposedly impractical classes can turn into superb launching pads for ambitious students’ careers. Part 2 (“Your Opportunities”) will explore four powerful new career strategies that have helped explorers with “tainted” degrees end up in terrific jobs. You will see why IBM counts on a sociology major to explain some of its most complex technology to customers, why a philosophy major has created one of Silicon Valley’s most successful start-ups, and why a leading ad agency hires English majors, not data scientists, when it wants to tell stories with numbers.

In part 3 (“Your Allies”), we will look at broader changes that could help our country and our companies make fuller use of this pioneering spirit. You will learn how campus career offices and recent alumni can make the job hunt less frustrating. You will be introduced to several dozen major companies that “get it” in a big way when it comes to the merits of hiring liberal arts graduates.

Some are in tech-influenced fields; others are in traditional strongholds of humanities and social science majors, such as government, education, and media. Part 4 (“Your Tool Kit”) will provide tactical advice on how to tell your story and how to get paid properly.

In the summer of 2015, I wrote a Forbes cover story headlined “That ‘Useless’ Liberal Arts Degree Has Become Tech’s Hottest Ticket.” I didn’t realize until near the very end of my reporting and writing that this project was really an ideological manifesto cloaked in the safer garb of a carefully reported magazine feature. We as a country were in danger of isolating and marginalizing some of our most valuable talent. We needed freethinking pioneers more than ever, yet in many sectors, we were mocking the very people that we should have been celebrating.

Taunting liberal arts majors had become an ugly sport. “If you’re planning to major in English, see if you can’t get a job at Starbucks instead,” nationally prominent columnist Megan McArdle wrote in 2012. It was philosophy majors’ turn to be rebuked a few years later, when Florida senator Marco Rubio declared in a presidential debate: “We need more welders and less philosophers.” Former Florida governor Jeb Bush suggested in a 2015 speech that universities warn new students: “Hey, that psych major deal, that philosophy major thing, that’s great, it’s important to have liberal arts…but realize, you’re going to be working at Chick-fil-A.” Individually, such jibes can be shrugged off. In aggregate, they sting.

Ironically, these critics’ own careers disprove their pessimistic views; all three hold liberal arts degrees themselves. McArdle studied English literature at Dartmouth; Rubio majored in political science at the University of Florida; Bush specialized in Latin American studies at the University of Texas. Their own lives
reveal the power of this academic path in widening your horizons and preparing you for leadership. The virtues of independent thinking, curiosity, and bold, clear communication may be incubated in college campuses—but they run deep throughout America's heritage. When Gutzon Borglum was hired to carve presidents' faces into Mount Rushmore, three of his four heroes (Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, and Theodore Roosevelt) were the epitome of free spirits. They remade themselves multiple times; they chased after the new; they did everything possible to help meandering earn its good name.

And then the nation lost it.

Somewhere in the late 1980s or early 1990s, we became a more cautious country. The culture of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* and Bobby Troup's "(Get Your Kicks on) Route 66" gave way to a nation of homebodies. People's willingness to relocate to a new state fell by half from 1980 to 2015. Open lawns gave way to gated communities. Parents turned nervous and protective. College tuition rose to the point that few administrators dared talk anymore about developing students "trained for nothing," regardless of how well these jaunty originals might succeed over the long term. Instead, campus leaders vied to make the undergraduate business and engineering programs as robust as possible. At many campuses, marketing, accounting, management, and finance became more popular majors than English and history. Families lost patience with the long-term benefits of college education, regardless of academic focus. Instead, everyone fixated on vocational majors associated with the highest starting salaries. Finally, liberal arts departments sometimes became their own worst enemies, retreating into a narrow form of scholasticism that made getting a job seem like selling out.

Yet our country's original curiosity and desire to explore is inextinguishable. Within my own family, I think about my father-in-law, Jack Corcoran. Shortly after World War II, he came home from Japan with a military discharge and a chance to go to college on the G.I. Bill. Instead of working in the Connecticut factory towns that had employed his relatives for decades, he decided to try his luck at Wesleyan University. He studied biology and English, slicing his way through the tormented novels of Romain Gary. If his girlfriends didn't care for such books, he shrugged and looked for new companions.

By the time I met Jack, he had been working in military engineering for more than twenty years, but his job alone never fully defined him. Throughout his life, he has continued to seek out challenges that stretch his curiosity. One year he read up on neural networks, fascinated with computers' ability to mimic the human brain. A few years later, he tried his hand at short stories with a science-fiction twist under the pseudonym Virtual Jack. Video editing... documentaries... the projects just kept coming. College infused him with the explorer's mind-set, and that indomitable spirit never left him.

We all need to find it again.