CHAPTER 1

Know Your Gig

THE IDEA HUNT BEGINS with a desire to learn about the world around you, but a good stride in that direction is to know a few things about yourself. Later on we will showcase the value of being interested, of being constantly on the lookout for ideas, of being a learning machine. But what is the energy that fires up your interest and curiosity, the power source for such a machine? What is the fuel that drives the Hunt?

Our answer is the *gig*. By this, we are not referring to what a musician does on a Saturday night or to a job picked up by a freelance graphic designer. Our notion of the gig is much broader. It's closer to one's personal brand or professional identity, even to the sense of vocation that many people seek to nurture. We're talking about your gig in life or, more specifically, in your professional life. We're talking about the Big Gig.

The Introduction offered a glimpse of one famously successful gig: Walt Disney's. His gig was to create entertainment for the whole family, whether through amusement parks like Disneyland or animated films like *Fantasia*. There are similar passions and purposes to be gleaned from every celebrated Idea Hunter's story. Henry Ford's gig was to create a car for everyone, and he had to refashion

the process of manufacturing to do it. Warren Buffett's distinction, apart from his piggy bank, is that he took a different tack on investing than his colleagues. He sought to understand the fundamentals of a company rather than try to predict the ups and downs of the stock market.

Those icons knew their gigs. And the salient point is that their gigs gave focus and direction to their learning and idea seeking. Because he was interested in family-friendly entertainment, Disney did not go looking for his best ideas in the seamy American amusement parks of his time. He traveled to Denmark instead, to observe the scene at Tivoli Gardens, an amusement park full of fresh flowers and happy-faced revelers of all ages. Buffett didn't pass his days staring at the ticker tape or conjuring up ways to game the market. He set his mind to learning whatever he could about a specific firm or industry. That served his goal of finding stocks that sold below the real worth of the company.

A gig is not defined by someone's line of work, much less by a job title. It's not even a formal specialization, although it does reflect a distinctive way of adding value to one's work. A product developer's gig is not product development; rather, it might be to encourage the free flow of ideas in a unit or organization, to help build a culture of conversation. A sales associate's gig is not sales; it might instead rest on a capacity for empathy, a talent for getting beneath the surface and understanding a customer's needs.

A schoolteacher's gig might be to serve as a teachers' leader—by heading up a committee, leading a school team, forming a discussion group, or chairing a department. She might take on these and other roles with an eye to becoming an administrator or a professional-development expert. As this latter example illustrates, gigs also have a future dimension—where you're heading. National Public Radio's Scott Simon has spoken of his father's advice: "Dress for the gig you want, not the one you have." The elder

Simon was a comedian, but his advice applies to almost everyone. When you're looking for ideas and new things to learn, think about your vision. Think about who you'd like to become, as a professional—and align your learning with that picture of yourself. The teacher, for example, might want to develop conversations with others who have made the transition from working with peers to leading them.

Knowing your gig is a major step forward on the idea trail. It's the big steering wheel of your interest and curiosity. Even if you already have a clear conception of your gig, it's important to occasionally refresh it, because circumstances change and new opportunities arise. But how does one discern or reassess a gig? In short, doing so requires self-reflection—grappling with questions about your passions and talents. And then it's necessary to connect your answers to the professional marketplace. Put simply: is there a customer for what you're offering?

Here we would like to borrow questions from two people prominent in different fields, drawing on different sources of wisdom. The first is an iconoclastic management guru; the second is a theologian.

The Discernment

In *The Brand You 50*, author and speaker Tom Peters recalls browsing an advice book about work and bumping into a sentence that jolted him: "When was the last time you asked, 'What do I want to be?'" Thinking it through, Peters devised four questions that could be asked in arriving at a self-definition. The first is the what-I-want-to-be question that made an instant impression on him. The others are: What do I want to stand for? Does my work matter? And, am I making a difference?

Other clusters of questions are posed by Peters in other contexts relating to one's products and projects. For example: "Who are you? What is your product? How is it special? How is it different from others' similar offerings? How can I demonstrate its trustworthiness? How can I demonstrate I'm 'with it'/contemporary?" Thoughtful answers to even just a few such questions will help bring your gig more clearly into focus.

Michael Himes, a Catholic priest and professor of theology at Boston College, has given considerable thought to how a student or anyone else discerns a vocation or calling in life. In a number of articles and presentations, he has outlined three basic questions people can reflect on, when they're making choices about a profession or even just a job or some other role. Those questions are:

1. Is this a source of joy?
2. Is this something that taps into your talents and gifts—engages all of your abilities—and uses them in the fullest way possible?
3. Is this role a genuine service to the people around you, to society at large?

Himes has an even pithier version of this self-examination:

1. Do you get a kick out of it?
2. Are you any good at it?
3. Does anyone want you to do it?

"Do I get a kick out of it?" has to be answered by you, the person asking the question. Himes says one way of answering is to think about the issues and concerns that you return to over and over. These are what "fascinate you . . . excite you . . . really

intrigue you . . . lure you on. They get you to ask more and more questions."

On the other hand, "Are you any good at it?" is a question for people around you to answer. In this connection, Himes recommends fostering a circle of friends who can be honest with you about your talents. Perhaps a simpler way of going about this would be to consider the people who have been important to you and your career—let's say teachers, bosses, colleagues, clients. What have you learned from them about yourself, about your skills and the areas in which you excel? What do you suppose they would say if someone were to ask them about your strengths and weaknesses? We would add that the discernment also has to be about potential. It's not simply a matter of what you're good at now, but what you might become good at—no, great at—in the future.

According to Himes, "Does anyone want you to do it?" must be answered by the people you are serving (or would like to serve). "We must hear from the people around us what they really need. What is it that they want us to do?" This is vocation talk. In workaday terms, it's all about the "customer," elastically defined to include employers, clients, team members, and others. Will they go for the package of skills, perspectives, and approaches that I'd like to sell? Am I offering something that will help make their lives a little easier, their products more valuable, their projects more successful? And will they recognize this?

Discerning your vocation is not exactly the same as understanding your gig. You may have chosen long ago to become a product developer (your vocation), before realizing that you'd like to be, or already are, the one who spearheads conversations about ideas for new products (your gig). Still, the three vocational questions are handy tools for discerning a gig. We would tweak them as follows:

1. What is it that constantly grabs my interest and sparks my curiosity?
2. What am I good at? And what do I want to be great at?
3. And where's the market for this?

Take a moment to reflect on these questions, and keep in mind that they're not really about reinventing yourself. They're about reflecting on what you're already doing, thinking, planning, desiring.

Part of the discernment is to think about the distinctive value you add to your work, the special skills and perspectives you bring to the task. If you're an accountant, what separates you from the one who works two floors above you? What makes you stand out? Or, how would you *like to* stand out? What's your vision of how to become the best accountant around? Peters has offered a straightforward assessment tool for examining these questions. Fill in the blanks: "I am known for [2–4 things]. By this time next year, I plan to be known for [1–2 more things]." This will get you pretty close to sizing up your added value as a professional, now and in the near future.

Another path of discernment is to craft a personal mission statement that gets to the core of what you value. Peters recommends something in writing that takes stock of your priorities: How exactly do you spend your time? What's the nature of your contributions at a meeting? Who exactly do you hang out with? A personal statement of this sort could provoke and clarify ideas about what Peters calls The Brand You—that is, what distinguishes you as a professional. It's important, though, to keep in mind that a gig should never be written in stone. Like a vocation, a gig is not static. It requires continued self-reflection and revision, because passions change, knowledge expands, and needs shift. As Himes often says in his talks to college students, "The only time your vocation is settled is when you are settled (six feet under that is!)." Ditto for the gig.

The Circle of Competence

Warren Buffett is well known for steering clear of high-tech stocks. He says he has no business in that arena—because he doesn't understand it. His wariness on that score is part of a principle that he has articulated together with his investment partner Charlie Munger. And that is the importance of keeping within your "circle of competence" (an application of Himes's second question, "Am I any good at it?"). Buffett knows not just his gig, but his circle of competence. That takes him a long way toward figuring out what he should be doing and where he should be searching for ideas.

It's easy to think that a phenomenally successful investor like Buffett must be taking some big risks. You could picture him swinging at almost every pitch, trying to hit balls hurled over his head or into the dirt. This is not, however, his stance as an investor. He works differently, and the baseball analogy is not an idle one. An ardent fan, Buffett often speaks of Ted Williams, the famed Red Sox slugger who revealed the secret of his success in his book *The Science of Hitting.* Nicknamed the "Splendid Splinter," his approach was to carve the strike zone into seventy-seven cells, each one the size of a baseball. He swung at the balls that landed in his best cells, and let the others whizz by, even if it meant being called out on strikes once in a while. As Buffett once remarked at a shareholders' meeting, Williams knew that "waiting for the fat pitch would mean a trip to the Hall of Fame. Swinging indiscriminately would mean a ticket to the minors."

Buffett and his firm Berkshire Hathaway have exerted the same discipline in their investment strategies. They don't lunge at opportunities outside their areas of proficiency. "If we have a strength," Buffett has explained, "it is in recognizing when we are operating well within our circle of competence and when we are approaching the perimeter." Munger adds: "Warren and I don't feel like we have

any great advantage in the high-tech sector. In fact, we feel like we're at a big disadvantage in trying to understand the nature of technical developments in software, computer chips, or what have you. So we tend to avoid that stuff, based on our personal inadequacies." Among other virtues, this demonstrates the value of humility—acknowledging what you don't know. It's also a powerful idea. "Everybody has a circle of competence. And it's going to be very hard to enlarge that circle," Munger advises in his Benjamin Franklin–style book *Poor Charlie's Almanack.* In this way Buffett and Munger are simply echoing Thomas Watson Sr., the storied founder of IBM: "I'm no genius. I'm smart in spots, and I stay around those spots."

Another outfit that understands its circle of competence is Google. A touchstone of the company's philosophy is that it's best to do one thing really, really well, as described in the company's "Our Philosophy" web page:

> We do search. With one of the world's largest research groups focused exclusively on solving search problems, we know what we do well, and how we could do it better. Through continued iteration on difficult problems, we've been able to solve complex issues and provide continuous improvements to a service that already makes finding information a fast and seamless experience for millions of people. Our dedication to improving search helps us apply what we've learned to new products, like Gmail and Google Maps. Our hope is to bring the power of search to previously unexplored areas, and to help people access and use even more of the ever-expanding information in their lives.

On the surface, this may sound like a straightforward statement of specialization, and to a degree it is. But the emphasis on "continuous improvements" and reaching into "unexplored areas" is not a call to simple, narrow specialization. The circle of compe-

tence is more than that. It's not just a way of saying, if you're a physician: "I'm a heart specialist." It's a way of considering your strengths and weaknesses as a heart specialist, and where you might be able to stand out, in that field. And, as the Google statement indicates, it's also about learning and applying the insights to new areas or subareas.

On this point, we are somewhat less skeptical than Munger and Buffett, who underscore the difficulty of enlarging the circle of competence. We believe the emphasis should be on *widening* the circle through constant learning and deep interest in matters related to your gig (or your next gig). Buffett himself has expanded his range of mastery by learning everything he needed to know about spheres of investment that were new to him, like the newspaper industry. Of course, he made sure to do the learning first, before the investing.

Gigs Matter

What Buffett and all effective Idea Hunters understand is that the gig is a general filter. It screens out some of the information and ideas that cascade your way, making it easier to repel the demons of information overload. It helps guide you to what you need to be learning and to the ideas you need to be getting. Buffett doesn't have to scatter his valuable learning time across the market, because he knows that certain sectors, such as high-tech, are not what he's good at. He could happily leave that to others.

The gig usually stays in the back of your mind, but it's always there. When fully assimilated, it's an ever-present preoccupation, a switch that goes on automatically, often unconsciously, no matter what you're doing. You could be reading, or at the movies, or talking to somebody. All of a sudden, time slows down, and you're in a zone where you're connecting what you're hearing to the few things

you're always switched-on about. Other times you might make the connections later on.

A person can have more than one gig. A professor could be known for a particular method of teaching as well as her distinct contributions to an academic research field, just as an Internet technology specialist can also be an aspiring entrepreneur. The schoolteacher who's a teacher of teachers is also, needless to say, a teacher of students; she should have a gig for that too.

There are also entire categories of gigs. For example, there are some people—inventors, like Edison—who focus entirely on creating new things. In pursuit of his gig, Edison prided himself on exhaustive experimentation, and even failure, along the road to discovery. (His gig was not mere invention, though he was plenty good at that; it was creating things that people really need and that are marketable.)

There are others, like Buffett, whose gigs fall into the category of improving things—in his case, the way people make decisions about investing. Still other gigs are marked by their breadth. On the one hand, Walt Disney was squarely focused on family-friendly entertainment. But this gig pointed him and his successors in a rich variety of directions, ranging from amusement parks to film animation to vacation cruises.

Finally, there is a foundational gig for practically everyone. Here again, we could apply one of Michael Himes's themes. He points out that people have multiple vocations (he is, for instance, a priest, a theologian, a teacher, a writer, a friend, an uncle, and so on). But he says one vocation embraces all the others—to be a human being. "All of my other vocations, all of the many ways in which I live my life, must contribute to that one all-embracing demand, that one constant vocation to be fully, totally, absolutely as human as I can possibly be," he writes. We feel that in today's economy, there is a universal gig that encompasses all the other gigs, and that is to be

an idea professional. This meta-gig is nothing less than a question of identity and self-definition.

The accountant is not really, at bottom, an accountant. She is an idea professional, or more precisely, someone who Hunts for ideas. And part of belonging to this burgeoning class of individuals is to understand that there are not one but two products of the work that people do. The first is the actual thing we make or the service we provide or the process we manage. The second product, no less essential, is what we learn along the way. It's the ideas we get about how to do a better job and strengthen our gig. This calls for a new attitude. And it is, in our view, part of everyone's professional calling. Everyone is an Idea Hunter.