You Are Here

Christopher Kai Tanaka

Abstract

This text is for the youth struggling to carve out an existence at minimum wage, or those with non-traditional jobs as pseudo parents. I have been there and I will take you there. We will journey through summer camps, garbage bins, and at last a bureaucratic castle. I am here to show you what I’ve seen and am sending this out to you as a mirror. Reflect on the places that you’ve been while reading about the places that I’ve been. See the change in me and note the changes in yourself. Where you will go all depends on this moment, but until then take some time to reflect. This is for you, and you are here.

Hell’s Call Center
You Are Here

My first experience with work was comprised of: Air conditioned cubicles, half-broken headsets, and supersized managers giving and taking orders around the clock. My script went something like this: “Hi. Thanks for calling Pizza Hut, will this be a pickup or delivery? Can I get your name please? Alright, how may I take your order?” These lines were branded into my memory and identity as a Pizza Hut Call Center Customer Service Representative. It was my junior year in high school when two of my best friends and I decided to apply for jobs. One of them, Trisha, had family connections to Pizza Hut as a manager, so we decided to apply for a job at the call center. My palms were sweating during the interview. Gail, the head manager, asked me to read her the specials from a brightly colored, laminated menu. I stuttered nervously and faltered as I read them aloud to her.

She smiled and then leaned in close to me and whispered “Now I don’t mean to scare you dear, but a lot of people cannot handle this job. It’s stressful and angry customers will blow your eardrums out. Your managers will be there to support you; however, if you’re not comfortable with the stress then please don’t feel bad about declining this job offer.”

Thrilled that she had just offered me a job, and burying my reservations about the stress I agreed that I would be able to handle the job. I was interested in saving up some money for college, as well as gaining some idea of what work was like outside of high school. Above all else I wanted to learn how to talk with people without there being an awkwardness about it. It wasn’t long before I realized why call center jobs have such a high turn around rate.

My first caller was drunk, and thank god he was a happy drunk. While I clumsily stumbled my way through the call center script for the first time, the man on the other end laughed heartily and talked to himself. In a few months’ time I became a competent CSR. I would begin the workday by busing to Kapolei with my friends, going to McDonalds for a $3 lunch snack, and then head into the battlefield of ceaseless chatter. Due to the threats of angry customers we had to be “buzzed in” to the elevator by a manager. It was absolutely forbidden to give our location out to the customers. There were so many times during the calls that I wish I were bilingual. Whether it be a
Japanese grandma or a Filipino auntie on the other end, sometimes trying to understand what they were saying would be so unbearable I would have to pass the phone to my manager. After a few months with the company I received my first performance review. My manager at the time, Yvonne, was a very friendly grandmother figure who calmly guided the nervous newbies at work through the training. She graciously walked me through what I had done well and what needed to be worked on. Although I was always very friendly with the customers I did not push sales as high as I could have. To improve, I could push offers of desserts or drinks on the customer right before they checked out. Yvonne also told me I could improve the time it took for me to wrap up the call. My average call per minute was below their standards, and so I had to type faster, chat less with the customer, and professionally move the call forward without being frigid. As soon as the performance appraisal was over, Yvonne handed me a root beer lollipop and a diploma for graduating from the training program.

I took the appraisal to heart and pushed myself to boost my numbers in both cash and speed. My heart hurts thinking about how much I stressed myself out in doing this with each call. I soon felt incapable of having a normal conversation with someone; I was more like a robot, duly taking orders and sending them electronically to the stores. Occasionally, I would screw up the order, and whichever manager on duty would scold me for not taking my time. They would monitor our calls and listen to them. There was a time when I botched an order and my manager made me listen to the call. Listening to your own voice with another person while they point out your flaws is quite a humiliating exercise, especially if the mistake had been a simple human error. My anxiety increased each time I came to work. The only thing that stopped me from quitting was the fact that I would be able to chat with my friends when things were slow. One of the things we liked to do while we were on the clock together was to doodle in our downtime. We would pass each other goofy little pictures and hold in our laughter when the phone rang. I loved some of these scribbles so much that I posted them on my wall so that I would remember them. These doodles are reflective of how young we were when we started working:
I suppose the only thing that I loved about the job was the fact that I could make people happy. Some customers were cheery and had a brightness in their voice. They would make me laugh and we would joke together on occasion. Hell, even getting the prank caller who everyone knew as Lady Gaga would make my day. Unfortunately, even if you have a line of callers that make you happy all it takes is one pissed off customer to ruin your day. Sometimes, you would be yelled at for a mistake that one of your co-workers had made. Most of the time, I felt more sympathetic towards the customer than angry at them for screaming into my earpiece. Whether it was someone who couldn’t eat the pizza due to allergies or a single mother who had her hungry children screaming in the background, I would feel completely terrible after talking to these people. For the rest of my life, I vowed that I would be nice to anyone who worked minimum wage, or had to deal with people all day. It is not healthy for a human to be denied so many times a day. We are social creatures, and getting yelled at hurts, even if we are told not to take it personally. I remember screaming out of the window at the top of my lungs on the drive home with my mom. I wouldn’t scream anything in particular, but rather just let out all the frustration that I had held in.

At some point within a year of working at the call center I was forced to quit due to the mental stress. While the work was not at all physically demanding I would leave
work feeling completely drained. With the small amount of cash that minimum wage provided, I would go out with my friends and burn money eating junk food. The acidic environment and food that I had been consuming made me miserable, and it wasn’t long before I began developing something of an ulcer. My stomach was in constant pain, and I finally decided it was time to resign. Before giving my two weeks’ notice, it dawned on me as to why the managers always smelled like tobacco and why they talked about driving home wasted every weekend. Vices were the only way to stay regular in a job that required you to act so unnatural. The most important thing that I learned in such a volatile environment was that I never wanted to work in such a foul place ever again.

**Becoming a Pseudo Parent: My Experiences as a Camp Counselor**

Wary of wasting my summer away at another unfulfilling job for minimum wage, I decided to become a camp counselor. For two and a half months, I lived my job. Evergreen Camps is a Christian camp, located in the backcountry of Missouri. My church worked together with the camp to send me there free of charge. I went in to this experience ready to help out wherever I was needed. I had been to camp five times before as a camper and knew firsthand how a fun and exciting counselor can make summer away from home a paradise. Sitting in a comfy loft behind the mess hall, we were told to write a self-reflective letter about what we wanted the upcoming camp session to be like. Aside from just getting mentally prepared to basically be a surrogate parent, we also set up for the session by cleaning the camp and taking certification tests. During this time I learned about being a lifeguard and how to perform CPR. Here, I bonded with several other counselors as we learned how to rescue someone drowning at the bottom of a 12 foot pool without breaking their spine. Yes, nothing brings people closer together than the threat of a child’s doom. All facetiousness aside, it was a very rewarding experience becoming a lifeguard because I gained a fair amount of confidence in knowing that I could save someone’s life.

During pre-camp I lived with several other counselors in a small wooden cabin. It was here that I made friends, which made me feel at home during that first week. We
You Are Here

would eat breakfast, lunch, and dinner together in the grand lodge, spending our time bonding over hot meals. Conner, a tall young man with bright blue ocean eyes, had already been through the counselor-in-training program the year prior.

When lunch was over and we started to walk back to our cabins I asked him, “What was it like being a counselor your first time? Was it stressful?”

He replied with a kind smile “The stress comes in bursts, but luckily so does your adrenaline. You’ll be just fine.”

This line changed my approach to problems completely, and has stuck with me even to present day. After he told me this, I felt a breeze of relief wash over me. This brief scene changed my perspective on stressful work, and a seed of confidence was planted in my mind.

For my first session as a counselor I was put in the Lyon’s Den cabin and watched over eight 4th graders. Most of these kids were angels. They followed directions for the most part, and there was really not much discipline that was needed. Complicating the situation a little bit were two special needs children who needed extra care, one of which loved taking off his clothes during bath time and walking around the cabin. In these moments I was extremely grateful for the relaxed yet stern aid of my co-counselors. Daryl, Derrick, and I would work together to make sure that every counselor’s needs were taken care of. The other special needs child with whom we worked with had Aspergers. I knew very little about what type of care he needed upon first meeting him, but after a day it seemed evident that he was extremely self-conscious and thought constantly that everyone hated him. I had a special tender spot for him, so when all the other kids were ready to go to pool time I would stay behind to help him get ready at his own pace.

Time goes by very quickly, and a lot can go by unnoticed by the counselors, so it made sense that every evening my co-counselor and the head counselor would meet after the children had gone to bed. Here, we would fill out a sheet discussing all that went well with the day, all that didn’t, and how we could improve upon it the next day. While it seems like it would be monotonous to fill out this form, I actually found it quite useful because we were able to make sense of events and relationships between the
You Are Here
campers that may have been previously overlooked. For example, if someone was being bullied then we would report it to the group and work together the next day to end any harassment. Taking time to reflect on problems with others and feeling safe enough to share your pitfalls of the day is crucial in a work environment. I have to say, another thing that made this session go so smoothly was the work ethic of my coworkers. They both cared deeply about the children and were very happy with the work they were doing. It was a very positive work environment.

At camp we were given hour-long breaks along with pre-planned days off to make sure that the children were always taken care of. Days off were wonderful, because we could choose who to spend them with. My friend and co-counselor Daryl and I would go into town, grab a burger, and head to the little movie theater. Relaxing together without responsibilities really helped to deepen our friendship because we had time to talk about life outside of camp.

The only fault that I can find when thinking about my experience with camp life was that they did not give the counselors adequate time to relax during the actual workday. Every single moment of the day was planned and so from dusk to dawn we would be moving from activity to a meal to another activity. One might think that during lunchtime it would be a break; however, it was our job to make sure that order was maintained at the table. Imagine now for a moment a gigantic Hogwarts-esque dining hall. Tables would be set for six campers and two counselors on both ends. The two hosts, or counselors, on each table were there to make sure that everyone had a good time and that good manners were practiced. Each meal you would find yourself at a random table, talking to new people, and learning about what people from different parts of camp were doing. This environment was an introvert’s hell and an extrovert’s heaven. Since I fell in between both categories of social interaction levels, I was in a limbo of sorts. It was not until the end of camp when I felt completely accustomed to this family mealtime situation. How else can one describe it: Camp does function as a family, and there’s very limited free time for parents.

Due to the fact that my only certifications were in lifeguarding and CPR, the camp coordinators would mainly assign me to water activities where I would watch the kids
You Are Here

like a mother eagle to its hatchlings. This experience really made me feel empathetic towards lifeguards that have full day shifts just walking around the edge of a pool. For the most part, you’re just standing there with a whistle making sure kids don’t play rough, but if an emergency happens then you are legally obligated to save someone’s life. You become the firefighter, or at least the temporary one until a fully equipped ambulance arrives. During the first two weeks of life guarding I was definitely more stressed out, but as time went on I began to realize that I could relax for most of the time while on duty. It’s strange knowing that you’re both chilling and working. This liminal space actually is representative of all of my sentiments on being a counselor.

Ultimately I stopped going to camp because I wanted to a change in my summer and a change in my life. This termination was not simply about choosing not to come back, but also my personal choice to explore other religions. When I left Pizza Hut it was because my body could not handle the stress. Leaving camp for good was more about wanting to discover myself in a different context and finding a place somewhere new.

At this point in my life I had just started attending University of Hawaii at Manoa and just finished my first semester. Up to this point, my parents had been supporting me by helping me with my tuition. The company that my mom had worked for since she was in high school had shut down and uncertainty about our financial situation was really unsettling for my family. I did not want my parents to be burdened by the cost of my education, so with this motivation I applied for a simple job as a student janitor.

Cleaning Up My Act

Every morning I caught the bus to Sinclair library, leaving my house at 5:30am. I would arrive at school at around 7:00am and start my duties at 7:30am. The commute was hell; looking back, though, I felt a sense of pride waking up so early, being an adult, and helping my parents. The first day I arrived on the job, the janitor staff, mainly composed of old timers, looked at me with raised eyebrows.

“Ey, da fuck dis haole boy tink he doin hea?” I could hear them saying in their minds. “He stay serious?”
“Of course I’m fucking serious,” I would think to myself as I swept the floors and emptied the trash cans that smelled of rotting flesh. The bags under my eyes grew as big as the stinky gray bags that I hurled over my shoulder like a homeless Santa Claus.

Once I had proven that I could do hard work, the staff there more or less accepted me as one of them. When I would go to bend over and unlock the deadbolt on the floor of the library entrance they would say, “No, don’t bend over! Save your back! Trust me...in a few years you’ll feel em.” They proceeded to show me how to kick it open. There’s this type of self-preservation that hard labor jobs require. If you are no longer strong enough to do things, then sorry, buddy, you’re shit out of luck.

After a few months of working with the Sinclair library team they also had me help another group of janitors that would clean several buildings. Immediately, I felt so much more comfortable with this team. Instead of just rushing into battle like the guys from Sinclair these folks would sit down for about ten minutes, have a coffee, talk about the news, and then get to work. We all congregated in the break room, talked about everything that needed to get done that day and what we should focus on before facing the day. This group really adopted me as one of their own. After noticing that I did not have any breakfast, one of the aunties pulled a muffin out of the fridge for me. It was the small details like this that I really appreciated while working for them. As I munched on the reinvigorating blueberry muffin she told me a story about her work life.

“You see I work hard for my kids,” she said with pride. “I was born in the Philippines and came here when I was young. Work hard you know, it will pay off in the end. You want to go to the mainland to study? So good up there. My daughter and son, they’re both up there right now. I help them out a little bit but they’re doing great up there. Up there more competitive you know? Yeah, more difficult, but not as expensive as Hawaii. My daughter married a Mormon up there. Kinda weird, yeah? I mean they’re good people, but just kind of strange. She had to learn about the things they can and can’t do. Ah well, at least once I retire I can go see them.”

When we finally did get to work, they worked me hard, but at least with this group we would talk story (whereas with the library group they would leave me alone to do my own thing). It was a nice community to be a part of, and I found that while working with
them that we were all connected through a similar past. Most of us are descendants from the plantation workers that came here to farm sugar cane. In the text The Value of Hawaii: Knowing the Past, Shaping the Future, Chun-Hoon briefly describes the way that workers came to the islands. He states: “Hawaii's labor history is largely described by the successive arrival of different immigrant ethnic groups as plantation labor, the consolidation of these workers into working class labor organizations, and their dramatic success in achieving greater economic security and job protection.” (Howes and Osorio 61). My co-workers were reaping the benefits that their ancestors fought for through strikes and political movements. It was because of these events that my kalabash auntie would one day be able to retire and see her kids. The unique history that our lives were born in result of was a common connection that my coworkers and I shared. For once that summer I didn’t feel so alone.

Office Space

Although I was fully involved with this group at the time, I also decided to apply for a second job on campus in order to become more fiscally independent. Linda, my aunt-in-law, had started working at UH a few months before I arrived as a freshman and offered me a job when she heard that I was looking for work. Although I did have the upper hand in applying for the job, I nevertheless took the interview extremely seriously. I walked into the Electrical Engineering Office for the first time that day wearing a very professional shirt, black formal pants, and shiny shoes. Oddly enough, this was one of the most nerve-wracking interviews of my life, as I was being interviewed both by Linda and by her student helper, Cindy.

After asking me a plethora of questions and placing me in hypothetical situations to see how I would respond, Linda told me “We’ll think about it and discuss it, then call you back.” I nodded and thanked them for the opportunity, walking out of the office with crossed fingers.

My heart pounded like that of a nervous Chihuahua when I saw Linda on my caller ID about a week later. I had gotten the job, but was forewarned that things would not be taken easily on me just because we were related. I would come to work every
You Are Here
day at noon, after I had finished my work as a janitor. Cindy, secretly angry that I had
gotten the job instead of one of her friends, took no pity on how exhausted I was when I
came in. I got this feeling that she felt superior to me as I waddled around the office like
a toddler. I did not understand spreadsheets, how to professionally reply to emails, what
to say to customers when I got there. Could you blame me for following her lead? It was
very disorienting learning several dozens of names each day, and I stumbled when it
came to very simple tasks. When it came down to it, I was just really nervous in the
office. Luckily for me, Linda assuaged my anxieties by being both a boss and a friend.
She looked after me and is still looking after me till this day.

   After summer was over, I had to choose which job I wanted to keep, because I
could not keep up with the exhaustion of both with my full-time studies. Although I loved
the family of old-timers that had taken care of me in the janitorial department, I
eventually concluded that the office made more sense. I would not have to wake up as
early, my hours were easily determined, and mental labor would be less tiring for me
than that of physical labor. Now in this narrative we can jump to the future, or more
accurately, my present.

   You Are Here
   Two years ago I was a timid freshman, afraid of my own shadow and of anyone
who would come through the door of the EE office. Now I send out emails effortlessly,
tend to weary students, and often times even befriend professors. My job is one third
paperwork processing, and two thirds interacting with the variety of undergraduate,
graduate, faculty, and staff on a daily basis. This being said, I've really fallen in love with
this college over my course of employment. The students, while sometimes the
stereotypical awkward engineers, are (most of the time) very friendly and cool. Often
times, many of them are international students that “warm up” through the course of the
semester and tell stories about where they’re from. Over the summer there is a lot more
downtime. One day while I was scanning paperwork, a student from India came in and
we started talking casually about friendships. He told me about the little town that he
grew up in, and how it was basically a single company. They lived on the edge of a river
far away from the city, intimately connected with his neighbors who he grew up with. Since the town was so secluded and their friendships were so tight, he continues to this day to contact his childhood friends (who now work at other universities). Growing up in Hawaii, people would constantly be moving either because their family was in the military, or because they couldn't continue to afford the high cost of living. Since most of my best friends now live across the sea, the office provided me a source of unending social interaction. While I was initially fearful of these interactions, scared of what others think of me, I now revel in it. There's something very rewarding and fun in making small talk with the students. Ultimately, that small talk can turn into big talk, which can transform into hangouts and friendships.

Of course, being exposed to people all the time also has its downfalls, as you get both the good and the bad. In 2013, when the department chair (Linda's boss) changed ownership from the carefree Dr. Kuh to the poker faced Dr. Tsutsumi, everything changed for our office. At the time, we had just let go of Cindy and added on Daynjah, a laidback surfer girl from Kauai. Dr. Tsutsumi is the type of man who answers emails at 3am, working endlessly to make our department perfect. When we screw up, he knows about it. He has 15 email chains that he can shove in our face about it. He dyes Linda’s hair white with stress, which raises all of our blood pressures, because if momma ain't happy then no one is. Daynjah, who was happy till he showed up, eventually quit, primarily due to his anger and frustration with her. I've had to adapt to his style of management. He reminds me of my Japanese father; stern, rigid, and extremely disappointed when things don't go according to the plan that he's worked on for the last 12 hours. I can recall a time when he marched in to our office and said,

“Shall we do something fun as an office?” with hands clasped together.

Linda immediately became excited. “Ooh, like a hike or a lunch together?” she asked with a smile.

“No, I had more of a personality test in mind.” Tsutsumi replied with a stoic look on his face. Linda and I gave each other a small glance of disbelief when he said this, as we often do in such strange situations. While around him, I am extra professional, taking care of his tasks first and then dealing with lesser duties. Since Linda does not
feel comfortable around him, I will often ask how he's doing to break the ice. I'm not gonna lie, it is extremely awkward, and his long stares can make you shiver with uneasiness, but when I genuinely want to know how he's doing I think he really appreciates it. In fact, within the past year, he's even offered to take me out to ramen (which I hastily have denied as to not angering Linda). The tension is still palpable in our office when he walks in, but I just give him a smile which seems to put him at ease a little.

The culture of our office now is very different from what it used to be. After Daynjah's departure, it was just Linda and I for a whole semester. We somehow balanced work that was actually made for three between the two of us. That was one of the busiest times of my life, but also a very fun time, since Linda and I had our duties down to a science. The days of rushing from here to there are now over as just a few months ago we hired Nicholas. Before this job, Nick worked at the Apple store, which was a high mental stress sort of job. Now that he works for us, he actually gets bored of the trivial tasks that office life presents. He detests that he has to deal with our slow Windows computers, and has a very sassy disposition about him. After Daynjah (the Bonnie to my Clyde), I maybe had an unrealistic sense of having a new partner. I just get this sense of cultural differences when I talk to Nick, because he was raised in Southern California and lives a rather luxurious life for a college student. I tried my best to befriend him and break the awkward silences between us, but he just does not like talking (at least not with me). This semester, I'm grateful that our schedules do not collide at all. While this may not be good for our camaraderie, it really just works for us. In the end, Linda keeps us all together and provides us with a space to work and learn about one another. She has taught me more than any of my other jobs in the past. For the past two years I've learned about personal skills, networking, and how to keep really good records. She's also given Nick and me some leeway to change the processes of the office to make it function better. I know that once I graduate I won't just take away a recommendation, I will also bring the necessity to genuinely help others in some way. That's what makes this job so rewarding.
What's Next?

After four years of bussing to University of Hawaii and dealing with the horrific traffic, I am more than ready for a change in scene. Over the summer I will be traveling abroad to France, where I will develop my confidence even further and face living alone in a foreign country for about two months. My ideal work environment upon returning to Hawaii would actually be at home, or something comparable to that (like a laidback office). For a while, I've toyed with the idea of teaching abroad; I've actually decided upon returning to work in Hawaii, and then transferring to the West Coast of the continental U.S. when I have enough money. Right now, I'm looking into internships and teaching work composition for next semester so that when I graduate there will be practical options for me. Hell, I'm even considering doing technical writing now because it sounds like a pretty rad way to make a living. What it all comes down to is that I'm looking for an environment where I feel most comfortable. I want to live in a community with eco-friendly transportation, affordability, and a blooming nightlife culture. I DJ on the side, and would like to turn my passion into a side job wherever I go, both for weddings and nightclubs. I feel like I'm a pretty versatile cat and am always ready to pounce when good opportunities come out of their mouse holes. For now though, I'm not going to stress about the future. Yes, graduation is coming up quickly. Yes, I will be out in the "real world" before I know it. Even with all of these pressures, I still feel pretty confident that I will be able to find my ideal living conditions. I strive to travel and learn with the same intensity as a drowning swimmer struggling to breathe. This is my life, and you are the voyeur that has witnessed it on paper. Now catch me if you can, and we'll go out for drinks.

Works Cited