

If I were 21

Published: January 13, 2026, 7:45 am

I have mentioned the fact that the last three days' relative inactivity here has had much to do with taking time off to do the final university taxi run from Leeds for my elder son, and to go walking with him on Ilkley Moor.

We did, of course, reflect on what he thinks to have been a great three years, despite Covid. And I can see enormous changes in him, and massive leaps forward in his ability, of which I am proud for his sake.

That said it's an odd experience to watch your child wondering how to set out on a working life when you happen to be of an age when I am quite often asked when I plan on retiring (never, I hope). I have mused a little on what I might have done differently if I had been starting now.

I seriously wonder if I would now have planned to go into one of the formal professions, as I did back in 1979. When I became a chartered accountant it was a boring licence for security for most. It was also, as I saw it, an opportunity for entrepreneurial opportunity, both commercial and social, and I placed my hopes on this second dimension. Does it provide that opportunity now? I am not convinced.

Like all the professions, ever tightening regulation; enhanced expectation unmatched by reward; and most importantly, the sheer human impossibility of meeting all the multiplicity of simultaneous demands made upon the new practitioner seem to me to have reduced that opportunity for innovation, creativity and personal expression which I sought within my chosen profession.

I fully accept that I might be looking back with hindsight, imagining a better world than the one I actually witnessed. But the evidence of professional burnout across so many professions appears to suggest that this is not just me rewriting the narrative after 40 or more years. The trend is real, and depressingly so.

Professional life is not, I think, as attractive as it was, and in no small part because the role of the expert has been diminished. That's partly a politically driven, societal

attitude. And maybe it's also, in the case of accountants, the consequence of professional firms failing to do their own jobs properly, with obvious consequences. Whatever it is, I am not convinced the entrepreneurial younger me if relocated to this moment would have seen a professional qualification as important in the way that I did in the late 70s.

The person would not have changed though. Presuming my interests, and my desire to pursue my interests through work, would be the same what would I do now, facing this very different world? I suspect I would have combined my interests in writing (very much in existence at 21), media, social change and politics into seeking training in social media.

We are a world that now consumes media, and which is willing to pay for it. Young people are very aware of this. I see and admire those willing to take risks in this area. It seems to me that this is where opinion is both now formed, and is changed. It is also capable of being sustainable (again, an unchanged concern since I was 21).

Would I have had the gall at 21 to try something on my own? I doubt it. I think I knew my education was not complete then. But equally, the whole process of learning has changed so much now. One of the fascinations of working with the late Mark Cooney, who I made videos with, was to watch him carving a new career based on learning from YouTube videos. Of course some rough edges remained as a result, but he worked continuously to remove them. He was an inspiring entrepreneur as a consequence, intent on creating both the media and the message, and unworried about the boundaries between the two.

Is that what I might have been tempted to do? I think so. I might have wanted to fill in all the gaps I now have in my knowledge on the media I use, and make that knowledge my skill set to deliver the change I want in the world, just as I wanted reform when I was 21.

I would have missed out some other skill sets. But maybe in the light of where we are going as a world that is a trade off I would and happily could have made.

And even saying all that has me thinking. My retirement is a long way off.....