

Seek What You Love: To Discover

Our Dreams and Passions

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“I don’t enjoy my work. No, that’s not a strong enough statement. I really dislike my work. I don’t look forward to going in each morning. The day drags. I’m doing things that are of little interest to me. I’m not certain they were ever of interest. You would think that being an executive at a financial institution would bring me a feeling of accomplishment but it hasn’t. The reality is that I’m in a high paying position that I would love to leave, but I can’t change careers now. I’m 45 years old and I have too many financial obligations: a large mortgage, country club membership, two teenagers ready to begin college. You reach a certain lifestyle and you can’t just give it up. I feel trapped. I don’t know why I ever went into the financial field.”

As this man shared his feelings in therapy, the extent of his unhappiness was apparent in his tone of voice and the sadness conveyed through his facial expressions. If a twinkle or sparkle ever existed in his eyes, they were deeply buried by ongoing regrets about the decisions he had made about the direction of his life years before.

While each of our lives is unique, common themes abound. This man’s story of regret, unhappiness, and feeling trapped is one that far too many people have experienced. They limit their options and choices, often blaming circumstances “beyond their control” for their unhappiness when, in fact, their own fears are the main obstacles to a more enriching life.

I recently thought of this man and other individuals who have been burdened by similar emotions of sadness and regret. These thoughts may have been triggered in part by the coming of the New Year. While I have written that self-reflection should not be limited to a particular week or month, the ending of one year and the beginning of a new one is an especially inviting period to examine our goals, our priorities, our dreams, and our accomplishments for both our personal and professional lives.

During this past holiday season I was prompted to read once again the Commencement Speech given by Steven Jobs, founder and CEO of Apple Computers, to

the graduating class at Stanford University. His words deserve careful consideration as we reflect upon our lives and our pursuits.

Jobs began his speech by saying, “Truth be told, this is the closest I’ve ever gotten to a college graduation.” He then shared three stories from his life to capture three main points for the graduates to remember. The first was about “connecting the dots.”

Jobs described his reasons for dropping out of Reed College, noting, “After six months, I couldn’t see the value in it. I had no idea what I wanted to do with my life and no idea how college was going to help me figure it out. And here I was spending all of the money my parents had saved their entire life. So I decided to drop out and trust that it would all work out OK. It was pretty scary at the time, but looking back it was one of the best decisions I ever made. The minute I dropped out I could stop taking the required classes that didn’t interest me, and begin dropping in on the ones that looked interesting.

“It wasn’t all romantic. I didn’t have a dorm room, so I slept on the floor of friends’ rooms. I returned coke bottles for 5¢ deposits to buy food. . . . Much of what I stumbled into by following my curiosity and intuition turned out to be priceless later on.”

Jobs offered an example of taking a calligraphy class at Reed College and finding it fascinating even if at the time he did not believe it would have “any practical application” in his life. “But ten years later, when we were designing the first Macintosh computer, it all came back to me. And we designed it all into the Mac. It was the first computer with beautiful typography. If I had never dropped in on that single course in college, the Mac would have never had multiple typefaces or proportionally spaced fonts.”

Jobs noted, “You can’t collect the dots looking forward; you can only connect them looking backwards. So you have to trust that the dots will somehow connect in your future. You have to trust in something—your gut, destiny, life, karma, whatever.” As I read these words I couldn’t help thinking about the personal story I conveyed in last month’s article, namely, of switching my major to psychology in my senior year of college although it meant remaining in school beyond my graduating class. Thanks to the encouragement of one of my psychology professors, Dr. John Bauer, I knew in my “gut” and mind, it was the right thing to do.

The second story Jobs described was about “love and loss.” He recounted that at the age of 30, a year after the release of the Macintosh, he was fired from Apple. He asked, “How can you get fired from a company you started? Well, as Apple grew we hired someone who I thought was very talented to run the company with me, and for the first year or so things went well. But then our visions of the future began to diverge and eventually we had a falling out. When we did, our Board of Directors sided with him. So at 30 I was out. And very publicly out. What had been the focus of my entire adult life was gone, and it was devastating.”

As I have emphasized in many of my writings, especially in the books about resilience that I have co-authored with my close friend and colleague Sam Goldstein, there are events in our lives over which we have little control. However, we have more control than we often realize about our attitudes towards these events, attitudes that will determine our future actions.

Jobs continued, “I was a very public failure, and I even thought about running away from the valley. But something slowly began to dawn on me—I still loved what I did. The turn of events at Apple had not changed that one bit. I had been rejected, but I was still in love. And so I decided to start over. I didn’t see it then, but it turned out that getting fired from Apple was the best thing that could have happened to me. . . . It freed me to enter one of the most creative periods of my life.”

Jobs used his energy to start a new company called Pixar, which created the world’s first computer animated feature film, *Toy Story*. As the saying goes, “The rest is history.” Jobs reflected, “Sometimes life hits you in the head with a brick. Don’t lose faith. I’m convinced that the only thing that kept me going was that I loved what I did. You’ve got to find what you love. . . . The only way to do great work is to love what you do. If you haven’t found it yet, keep looking. Don’t settle. As with all matters of the heart, you’ll know when you find it.”

In reading Jobs’ words, I thought about the sentiments voiced by the man at the beginning of this article. Unfortunately, he had settled. He felt trapped, not allowing himself to search for other possibilities. I have seen several individuals in my clinical practice who were fired from jobs that brought them little satisfaction but from which

they were afraid to leave. Once forced to move beyond the boundaries of their so-called “comfort zone,” they discovered exciting opportunities—opportunities that had actually existed for years.

One is left to wonder what direction Jobs’ journey in life would have taken had he not been removed from his position at Apple; I sense given his positive attitude, he would have continued to ignite his passion, but in this case the process was hastened by external forces. We can all strive towards adopting a more positive outlook even during dark moments. Interestingly, Jobs eventually was called back to Apple and has been immensely successful with the design and marketing of the iPod as well as new Macintosh computers.

The third story he related was about “death.” Jobs said that a year ago he was diagnosed with cancer of the pancreas. “The doctors told me this was almost certainly a type of cancer that is incurable, and that I should expect to live no longer than three to six months. My doctor advised me to go home and get my affairs in order, which is doctor’s code for prepare to die.”

Later that evening, a biopsy was done. “I was sedated, but my wife, who was there, told me that when they viewed the cells under a microscope the doctors started crying because it turned out to be a very rare form of pancreatic cancer that is curable with surgery. I had the surgery and I am fine now.”

Having been given a death sentence, even if just for one day, Jobs waxed philosophically, “No one wants to die. And yet death is the destination we all share. . . . Your time is limited, so don’t waste it living someone else’s life. Don’t be trapped by dogma—which is living with the results of other people’s thinking. Don’t let the noise of other’s opinions drown out your own inner voice. And most important, have the courage to follow your heart and intuition. They somehow already know what you truly want to become. Everything else is secondary.”

Jobs ended his speech by recalling a publication from the late 60s and early 70s, *The Whole Earth Catalog*. The final issue contained the words, “Stay Hungry, Stay Foolish.” Jobs concluded, “It was their farewell message as they signed off. Stay

Hungry. Stay Foolish. And I have always wished that for myself. And now, as you graduate to begin anew, I wish that for you.”

Lest we believe that such advice is meaningful only for a college graduating class, I would argue that it is relevant at all ages. Also, some may contend that not everyone is a visionary such as Steven Jobs who could turn a seeming failure into new and exciting pursuits and accomplishments. I would counter that while there may not be many individuals in the mold of a Steven Jobs, none of us should minimize the strengths or “islands of competence” that we possess and none of us should accept a daily existence devoid of purpose or meaning.

I appreciate the reality that in many instances it is difficult to change the course of one’s path in life, especially as we venture deeper and deeper into that path and are hesitant to turn back. However, if that path offers little satisfaction, challenge, or passion, should we continue to follow it simply because it is there? Or, as psychiatrist M. Scott Peck has suggested, should we take the road less traveled? The latter road may be difficult to locate and even when we find it we may be faced with many obstacles, but the opportunity of forging a life filled with passion, purpose, and fun may be worth the uncertainty and effort we endure along the way.

I am not suggesting that one undertake an “extreme makeover,” a title that has been popularized on television shows. I have long believed that attempting to change too many things too quickly is unrealistic and often leads to unfavorable results. However, I do recommend that we regularly ask what is most important to us and what activities bring us the most satisfaction. Almost all of us are required to engage in some activities that may be classified as boring and lacking in excitement and passion (just ask my wife about my response to “handyman” work in our house). However, if our personal and professional lives are dominated with these activities at the expense of experiences that bring us meaning and joy, we would be wise to ask, “What are some of the small steps I can begin to take to lead a life in concert with my values?” It may be one of the most important questions to consider and act upon if we are to nurture both our emotional and physical well-being.

My best wishes for a satisfying and purposeful 2006, a year filled with adventures along the path you choose.

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