

For Tamara Lavender -
My student and my friend
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Dean Pleger, Colleagues, Members of Phi Theta Kappa, Honored Inductees, Families, and Friends:

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I want to talk with you for a few minutes about vocation.

I often ask my new students why they're in school. They typically respond by telling me what career field they're preparing for—or, in a great many cases, by telling me that they haven't settled on a field yet. I sympathize with the students who don't have well defined plans. As late as my senior year in college, I seriously considered a military career or the Episcopalian priesthood, or teaching, either in a secondary school or in college.

Often, the students who tell me that they don't yet have a major also tell me that they do, however, want a career that will pay them well! I remember one student in particular who asked me if I thought she should prepare for a career which would pay her a lot of money or one which would pay less but be more enjoyable.

First, I told her what my father told me when I was a college student. "Every adult needs a competence," he said. By "a competence," he meant enough money to cover living expenses. Some people inherit a competence; some people achieve it through marriage; most of us have to earn it. Once a person has achieved this competence in one way or another, that person can decide what to do with his or her life.

Then I told my inquiring student about Harry Mercier, the father of two kids I went to school with in a little village on the St. Lawrence River in the Thousand Islands. Harry Mercier came home from World War II with a devoted three legged Belgian dog named Garçon and a strong ambition to become a millionaire. He and his brother owned a boat yard, which housed, maintained, and sold boats. Boats were built there, too—beautiful boats. Business was good after the war, and I think Harry also made investments, which must have done well. In the early fifties he bought a tour boat line, and in just a few years, he had a monopoly on tour boat lines in our part of the river. By the mid-to-late fifties, rumor had it that he was indeed a millionaire—in 1950's dollars, of course—and I believe it. By then he had also been divorced and had become estranged from his two children and his brother. After Garçon died, I don't think he had a friend in town. Every night he'd sit alone and drink at the bar of the Riverside Hotel. No one ever drank with him.

I don't think I have ever known a more complete failure than Harry Mercier.

The business of our lives is to make meaning. Making money is not the same thing as making meaning. We each do, of course, need a competence to live on, but we all can lead deeply fulfilling, deeply meaningful lives without making very much money.

Dr. Tom Neal, a wise man, once remarked to me that most people don't find nearly as much meaning in making money as they do in making a difference. A great many people would rather make a difference in their jobs than make more money.

So how is an undecided person to choose a meaningful vocation, and how, for that matter, can someone who has a vocational inclination be sure that he or she is choosing well?

In my senior year in college, another wise man, a seminary dean, offered me three criteria for testing a vocation:

First, ask yourself what you can do well.

Second, ask yourself what you enjoy doing.

Finally, ask what needs doing.

He believed that we are called in life to do what satisfies those three criteria—and that we are not called to do anything that fails to satisfy any one of those criteria.

Of course one must weigh the answers:

How much talent is required for someone to be good enough?

How important is enjoyment in the mix of criteria?

What constitutes a need; how serious does it have to be?

In answering the dean's first question, about talent, I think immediately of the author Malcolm Gladwell, who has analyzed the factors that lead to the excellence of people as diverse as pro hockey players on one hand, and computer innovators like Steve Jobs and Bill Gates on the other. Gladwell suggests that every endeavor requires a person to have natural ability reaching a certain threshold, and that the degree of inborn ability a person may have above that threshold may not matter much, if it matters at all.

I'm reminded of a creative writing student who assured me that when she became a famous rock star, she'd come back to Wisconsin and give me free tickets to see her in concert. She wasn't kidding. After a couple of years, she went off into the world and soon formed a rock group. Her profession is a tough one, highly competitive. Still, she eventually earned an audition with the Smashing Pumpkins—but the big break came to somebody else; she was runner-up. She's found good work in the world of rock music, though, on the business end of things, booking tours and the like. Things didn't turn out quite as she planned, but they turned out o.k. She's got work she can do; work in the world she loves, with interesting people and interesting projects; work that really needs to be done. Her musical talent is essential to her job, and that talent is good enough, because she's a flexible enough person to use it effectively.

The dean's second question, about enjoyment, is also very important, maybe even more important than inborn talent. Enjoyment creates commitment, and commitment turns our natural abilities into meaningful performance. Without commitment, the greatest talent in the world is utterly useless. With commitment, even relatively modest talents can produce significant achievement. Every teacher sees this principle working in the classroom; every coach sees it in athletics; and it's true of vocations, too.

I know a woman who earned a business degree from the University at Madison with a double major in marketing and finance. But instead of selling securities after graduation, she became a

“One of his?” my colleague asked.

“Yes. He delivered me,” she replied.

William Carlos Williams was not only a major poet, but a physician, a general practitioner in northern New Jersey, making lots of meaning in his life with both of his vocations. Somewhat similarly, Wallace Stevens was an insurance executive. He retired as a vice president of The Hartford Insurance Company. In literature, in music, and in the other arts many, many people pursue this sort of dual career, and I believe that in many of these cases, both careers are real vocations simultaneously.

Maybe you’ll find more than one vocation, too, either sequentially or simultaneously.

If you, like my inquiring student of a few years ago, wonder whether you ought to prepare to make as much money as possible or if you ought do something you’d enjoy more, take it from me: making money is not the same thing as making meaning, and your mission for the next forty or fifty years should be to make as much meaning as you can, in your vocation as well as in your whole life.

Tonight, you, the members of Phi Theta Kappa, and I stand at opposite ends of our careers: You, looking forward to yours, and I looking back on mine. My hope for you is that you will find what I have had in the great good fortune to find: a vocation in which I have been able to do what I love to do, and get paid for doing it.