High School Destinations: College Bound or Trade? – or Both?

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Growing up in the 1950s in Orange, California, there wasn’t much talk about going on to college once you graduated from high school. It was common for students to drop out of school and go get a job, like auto mechanic, which paid well and you learned your trade on the job by working on cars. Many found more success getting their hands dirty than sitting in long classroom rows, listening to boring teachers talk about quadratic equations and the Napoleonic Wars. You knew for sure you would never, in your entire life, have need of this useless information. You would play along with the game of school, and pray for the final bell to ring, or for someone to add a little excitement to the day by pulling a fire alarm so everyone had to evacuate to the ball field and waste a bunch of time talking to friends while the adults were trying to figure out the who, where, and why someone pulled the switch. At the ballfield, you were all talking about giving a high achievement award to the guy who set off the alarm. Or maybe (as happened to me during a ninth-grade fire drill), important decisions got made. All the guys were hanging out in one place on the fence and the girls at another. When we got back to class, the girls announced that they had all changed boyfriends (without talking to us, of course), leaving all the guys dazed and mumbling under our breath, “How could they even do that?” Ah, the mystery of ninth grade hormonally charged females, still a mystery to modern man. Anyway, we just went with the flow and learned to enjoy it.

Also, in the 1950s, it was common for high school sweethearts to get married right after graduation, the guy found a job in a factory, the girl got pregnant, and off they went into the proverbial sunset, starting a family of their own. School then was based on the industrial model where students were educated in standard subjects by large age groups. This model first began as an effort to meet the needs of the growing industrial age. In 1892, a group of educators met together as the “Committee of Ten,” to discuss establishing a curriculum standards, both for those students who were college bound, as well as for those students who would leave the educational system following high school graduation (“Committee of Ten’s Recommendations 1892,” retrieved 1/3/19). Their 1893 report lead directly to what we now see routinely in high schools today, with standard subjects taught at prescribed grade levels in a factory production line that produces a new batch of workers each year.

The trend toward early marriage and factory jobs has changed now as more graduates head to college, but the system of education is essentially the same in the clear majority of high schools across the country. We are still teaching the standard curriculum at the appointed ages with little consideration for the interests of the individual student. My father, born in 1920, played football in high school, graduated in Atchison, Kansas, immediately joined the navy merchant marines and served as an officer in World War II. After the war, he worked and stayed in the same industry as a truck driver, delivering bread to restaurants for the rest of his working life. He took one adult education class in woodshop and never did anything more with his education. He always provided for our family and lived a stable, if not always happy life until his death in 1980. Dad never had the ambition to go back to school for a college degree, nor did he want a promotion at work that would put him into an administrative role; he was simply happy where he was.

Mom, on the other hand, was a different story. Starting in high school she waited on tables at a San Francisco restaurant. When World War II broke out, she quit school and the restaurant, moved to Long Beach, California, where her sister, Jackie lived, and went to work in an aircraft factory building airplanes for the war effort. As a “Rosie the Riveter,” she knew what it meant to get her hands dirty; making something from a collection of parts and rolling a brand-new aircraft out the far end of the factory. My parents married during the war and moved between the Oakland Bay area and Long Beach, building their family to three children, I being the last.

When I was in the fifth grade, Mom was encouraged to go back to school and “make something of her life,” beyond being a stay-at-home mom. Her academic world included the entire spectrum of accomplishments between an AA degree in nursing to a PhD. She taught the very first critical care nurses, established the original critical care and cardiac care units, and started the first paramedic program. You can’t do all those things without getting some dirt under your fingernails. There are too many physical moving parts to rely solely on academic prowess. Human bodies are intricate, complex machines and the instruments of medicine must interact with flesh in the least invasive, least harmful manner possible. The attempted resuscitation of a patient following a heart attack appears a frenetic, violent flurry of flailing arms, barked commands and the sheer terror of as many medical personnel that can fit around a hospital bed. Without going into the various body fluids that are involved here, this is just an enormously messy situation. Imagine now the doctor who was valedictorian of his high school, took all the hard sciences in undergraduate studies, was at the top of his class in medical school, but who never had any practical experience handling a human body. I certainly would not want him working on me if I had a heart attack, and yet it does happen that students do little work in school with their hands until they get to the summer after their first year of medical school. Would it not be better to give students opportunities, starting at least in middle school, to use their hands and discover how to build a model bridge, airplane or catapult?

Personally, my life reflects the two ends of the spectrum between college and trade. At the age of ten, my father put a hammer in my hand as we were tearing down an old house to build a church, and pointing to a stairway said, “Take those nails out.” What followed were decades of experience in the construction trades, while at the same time advancing my education from elementary school to graduate school. A person who knows how to use both their head and hands, with the right admixture of heart and soul, will always have a job and plenty of work to do.

My wife and I moved to the Seattle, Washington area to be with our daughter and grandchildren. I work in one of the wealthiest areas in the state, but by no means could afford to live near work on a teacher’s salary. We purchased an old dairy farm about 45 minutes away from school with over nine acres and five buildings, the barn dating back to 1900. The property sold “AS IS” because everything on the property needed work. Fortunately for me, I have been working with construction projects since ten and had learned most everything I would need to do my own repairs and additions. Over the years, this “sweat equity” has yielded thousands of dollars in increased property value to my homes and is the only way any reasonable person with limited salary could afford to close escrow on the above property.

Teaching both science and woodshop has given me a unique perspective on the needs of children. There is no one more surprised than the child in woodshop who is able, after several failures, to produce a beautiful carving, following the method I instructed them. As a woodworker, I am a Master Craftsman, with well over the 10,000 hours of experience that demarcates the hobbyist from the professional. As a teacher, I have a Master of Science degree in Education, and once again, over the professional mark of time invested in my field considering I first started teaching kids as a youth in Boy Scouts. Here we have both/and rather than the either/or of college vs. trade. The one does not have to negate the other. My Mother taught nurses and paramedics the plumbing, electrical, insulation and mechanics of the human body, while at the same time advancing academically, and in the end, changed the way medicine is practiced throughout the entire world. We are training world-changers in our classrooms daily. Why not give them all the tools they need to do so?

References

Committee of Ten’s Recommendations 1892. (n.d.). Retrieved January 4, 2019, from

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