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College and Then What?

As he mused about these things, he realized that he had to choose between thinking of himself as the poor victim of a thief and as an adventurer in quest of his treasure. "I'm an adventurer, looking for treasure," he said to himself.

—Paulo Coelho, *The Alchemist*

I don't think I told you just how pathetic my first job was. Probably because I was embarrassed.

I was twenty-two years old, the ink still wet on my college diploma—from a prestigious West Coast school, I might add—and I had joined the workforce as a professional . . . errand runner. Some large companies employ people in positions known as rabbits. (Somehow I get the feeling these folks forgo the business cards.) I found my job on Craigslist under the title "Runner" and thought to myself, *I go running*.

It's not that my job was particularly demanding; in fact it was

the mind numbing triviality that I found so disheartening. To give you an example of an average day's list for the (very) wealthy family that signed the checks:

- one case Diet Coke
- three cases lime Perrier
- twelve single-serving AvoDerm cat food (No prawn or liver flavor. Their cat, Taco, has already sent me back to return said flavors on multiple occasions. And who names their cat Taco, anyway?)
- two gallons distilled water
- plain Greek yogurt
- Milton's crackers
- lunch for the staff of eighteen from a local hot spot (After triple checking that Angie's salad has sunflower seeds and that Lynn's custom smoothie is accounted for; all dressing on the side.)
- drop packages off at UPS, and a case of wine at a fellow board member's house in town

I felt like a joke. First jobs are infamous; everyone complains about them just like an angst-filled teenager would. But as I drove around town, flipping from station to station on the radio for what seemed like hours that would not end, I couldn't help but wonder, *What am I doing with my life?* My friends who took the business track landed jobs working for music advertising agencies and accounting firms; one was working for a tech start-up. A fellow English graduate manned the front desk of a fancy hotel so Paris Hilton could pursue her hobby of DJ-ing. But when we gathered around the table at Dargan's on Friday evenings, I wasn't so sure

the “business savvy” majors were really doing any better than me. They were disappointed too.

The weekends raced by, and I would return every Monday to my mind-numbing job so I could pay for food and rent, so I could go back to work, in order to pay for more food and rent. It felt so cyclical, the never-ending water-tread test to graduate into the adult pool.

Maybe this story should start in my sophomore year of college, back when the birds were chirping, the sun shone every day, and everyone laughed so easily. Back when we had to declare our majors. The decision felt like career day all over again—each student choosing what he wanted to be when he grew up. I chose English because I love story and creativity, and I want to be a writer. I still can’t stand the reaction when I tell people what my major is: “*Oh*”—always in the tone of someone hearing bad news—“What are you going to do with *that*?” I want to shoot back, “How does ‘not sit in a cubicle for the rest of my life’ sound, you sellout?” But now, two years later, it isn’t so easy to convince myself I made the right decision after all. I wonder, *Did I totally waste my time in college? Dad?*

The MBA who bussed my table last night and the bachelor of architecture who helped me find something at Barnes & Noble are wondering the same thing. And so the great battle begins in earnest: the battle for your heart, the battle to find a life worth living, the battle not to *lose* heart as you find a life worth living.

So take a deep breath, and step back from the ledge. Every move into the unknown usually feels like free-falling at first. I remember those feelings myself. College is a staging ground. But for what? To

think clearly about the college years, ask yourself, are you simply a laborer, a careerist in an endless economic cycle? Or are you a human being, and that heart beating deep within you is telling you of a life of purpose and meaning you were created to live? You see, Sam, the questions of who we *are* and why we are here are far more important questions than how to land a great job and make money. You don't want to fall into a life you end up hating. Years ago I was counseling a successful dentist in his late forties—listening to his confession, really. He was doing well, lived in a nice house, took exciting vacations—and was thoroughly depressed. After a long pause he lamented, “I had no idea what I wanted when I was in college; I was someone else when I chose this life.”

The idea that eighteen-year-olds have some grasp on who they are and what they ought to do for the rest of their lives is madness. A college freshman has barely begun to think about his life or separate himself from his family and culture enough to see the world clearly. Waking up in time for class is an accomplishment; remembering to do laundry a personal triumph.

My first year in college felt like camp. Everybody was so giddy to be there, so wrapped up in the excitement and freedom of it all, that it hardly felt like school half the time. We would blow off assignments, head to the beach, stay up late playing Mafia or beer pong, and flirt with everyone. Some took up smoking, others serial dating, and the only thing we could think of was the fact that we were free. Free from our hometowns and our parents' rules. Free from who and what we had been in high school. Plenty of time ahead of us to figure it all out. It was its own reality.

Which is fine—freshmen are freshmen. But you don't ask those campers to define their life course, for heaven's sake. They've got a world of discovery and a few rude awakenings ahead, all of which must come first. This is a season for exploration and transformation—discovering both who we are and what we love, what our place in the world might be. Our dreams and desires need to awaken, grow, and mature. *We* need to awaken, grow, and mature so that we might be able to handle those desires and dreams. The man I was becoming at eighteen was far from the man I had become by thirty and leagues from who I am today at fifty-three. There's no shame in that; this is how life works, for everyone. Who came up with the notion that the day you graduate from college you are a fully developed adult stepping into a wonderful and fully developed life? It's about as crazy as it is frustrating.

And it's a lie. I think you'd be better served if you picture this season as a journey through a wild country filled with beauty and danger—and a few swamps—than expecting it to be a clear and defined road of College-Work-Life-Done.

There are two basic approaches to college education. Plan A is merely “career grooming.” Choose the professional trajectory your life will take, follow the prescribed courses that will prepare you to enter that profession, and proceed as quickly as possible up the ranks. I understand the appeal of this approach because it seems to make sense and promise results—at least on paper. Colleges love to promise career results and parents love those promises. But there are an awful lot of disappointed econ majors out there working at Starbucks. “Follow this plan and you'll get this life” can be a real shocker when it doesn't pan out; it leaves you feeling betrayed if this was the assumption you were working under. This is especially true in a volatile global economy.

Plan A ignores one vital piece of reality: very few people end up working in the field they studied in college. I don't know anyone, personally. Even my doctor friend grew tired of the medical profession and now works in a nonprofit. I majored in theater as an undergrad and then did a master's in counseling; Mom chose sociology. Now we are both writers. Life just doesn't follow a clean, clear, and linear path. More importantly, *people* don't.

I'm reading a fascinating book called *Shop Class as Soulcraft*; the author is a young man who graduated with a doctorate in political philosophy from the University of Chicago, took a sweet job as executive director of a Washington think tank, found himself constantly tired and dispirited, and after six months quit to pursue his dream of running a motorcycle repair shop. Times have changed. My father came from the generation who graduated college, signed on with a company, and stayed for life. But today's signs indicate that your generation will have something like nine different careers—not merely jobs but careers—over the course of your life.

We are not our grandfathers, and we don't want to be. Sitting down at one desk for the rest of our lives doesn't have the appeal that it did to the generation that witnessed the Depression. But, even though I know you are right, that so many graduates never work in the fields they majored in, it feels like a contradiction to the “study what you love” concept. It feels like you are doomed to never actually do what you love.

Just the opposite. You *should* study what you love, because you'll thrive there and thus perform at your best, and because guarantees

of “this-degree-equals-that-career” have a noticeably short shelf life nowadays. Which brings us to Plan B: exploration and transformation. It assumes that a far better use of college is the transformation of you as a person, a human being, who will probably have a varied career life. This approach happens to be far more true to who we are and how we are wired (which intimates it might be a far better way).

Now yes, yes, I understand that certain professions require highly specified training. Neurosurgeons need those pre-med classes and biochemical engineers need to get calculus behind them and not fritter their time away on Plato and Dickens. *However*, those doctors and engineers are still human beings, and whatever their career course may hold for them, their first and primary task is becoming the kind of human beings that can be entrusted with power and influence. Medical schools grasped this quite a while ago, realizing that the doctor needs not only an understanding of human anatomy but also an understanding of real human *beings*—especially suffering human beings. If they neglect their own humanity for a rigorous academic track, they don’t turn out to be the kind of doctor people like to be with.

Our first and foremost task is education as human beings, not merely workers—human beings that need meaning in order to thrive.

My generation is desperate for meaning. And I mean in everything. It’s hard to find a category in which some company hasn’t sprung up to meet the demand for “a cause” these days. TOMS Shoes gives a pair to a child in need for every pair bought. (I’ve bought several from them; after about a month they get too stinky to wear in public.) Any self-respecting coffee joint—from the little guys to the corporate giants—knows that people are buying

more “fair trade” (no slave labor) products, as do the chocolate makers. Clothing manufacturers have learned that by avoiding sweatshops and advertising their high moral ground, they can pull in customers; I wish more actually did what they claimed. People pay for “conflict-free diamonds”; I have a plastic-free kitchen; even bicycles can be helping those in need through World Bicycle Relief. Throw in ethical eating, which rightfully targets the destructive and inhumane system of factory farms, and I think we have covered every inch of daily life. These are my people.

A couple of years ago we were passing around books like *Three Cups of Tea*, *Eating Animals*, and *Not for Sale* because they all addressed what was wrong and how we could change the world. In William Strauss’s book *The Fourth Turning*, he calls our generation a “Hero generation.”¹ We want to change the world. The environment, helping those in need, fairness, you name it—all these things matter to us. We want a revolution to get behind. Without one, we will fill our lives with little revolutions that flare up and give us the momentary buzz of an espresso. So many of those small revolutions are held out in front of us like the answer to all our longing. Often, it’s nothing more than marketing; but they are marketing to something real within us.

You have entered the Warrior Stage of a young man’s life. Young men have been at the center of most of history’s revolutions. Deep in your marrow lies a passion to bring down tyrants, overthrow oppression, and fight for a better world—to be part of something

big. And why did God give you such hearts? Isn't that fascinating—why you and all your peers have a heart to change the world? Was that placed in you simply to be killed? Never! I know older folks love to look down at you over their reading glasses and say something dismissive about “the idealism of youth” and how it's high time you settle down to real life, but that is not my opinion. I don't think it's God's opinion either. That counsel comes from folks who have killed their heart and soul in order to “get along” in the world. Christianity is all about revolution—*is* a revolution to its core—and that is why God gives young men and women passion to change the world. God gave you that heart in order that you might discover both the joy of being part of his revolution and your own unique place within it.

There is a lot of wrong to be set right in the world. Everywhere you look, the planet is bleeding, children are trafficked, slavery is on the rise, and truth itself has all but shattered. This is a time for revolution, and one of the great wonders of Christianity is the idea that you are born into your times, to set your times aright. What could be more exciting? Frederick Buechner believed that, “The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.”² What could be more hopeful?

One of the happiest periods of my life was in my early twenties. Your mom and I started a theater company right out of college—not because we were hoping to be Hollywood icons driving Maseratis but because we wanted to change the world. We did street theater in Los Angeles during the 1984 Olympics—dodging security and setting up anywhere we thought we could draw a crowd in order to present short, edgy pieces about the meaning of life and Jesus Christ. We loved those years.

That's really cool; that is exactly what I'm looking for, what all my friends are looking for. You actually got to live something you were passionate about. Did you get to do that for a living?

Not exactly. Not for several years, at least. I was working as a janitor for our church and Mom got a job as an office manager for a small high-tech company. I spent my days vacuuming, cleaning toilets, and taking out the trash; she was neck-deep in accounts receivable and employee relations. This is critical to keep in mind: your passion, your place of meaning—what the older saints referred to as your “calling”—may not be the same thing that you do to pay the bills. Jesus was a carpenter. Paul sewed tents. There may come a time when living out your passion pays the monthly rent, and you will be the richest man in the world. But getting the two confused is why so many people give up on their dreams. They do a quick assessment of their passions as “marketable skills”—or some professor stuns them with the improbabilities—and they abandon their dreams for a more “predictable” life. Which of course they end up hating, go on to develop a host of addictions, and wind up in therapy. As a counselor I used to make a living helping them out of their despair, and the line outside my door was endless.

You are not just a “worker,” an employee, or a careerist. You are a human being filled with passions and desires, and *God made you that way*. You are also a young man in the workshop of God in the training of becoming a man. Whatever else might be going on in his life, every young man is in the process of becoming a man. This is his Great Mission, the deeper stream, the far more important work than career, whether he's joined the Peace Corps or landed a marketing job in New York. You have a few lions to kill before you know you have

become a man and that God can entrust you with dreams coming true. Wouldn't it make a difference if you saw these years of simple work as warrior training?

Maybe. But my generation isn't going to like hearing "you have to wait." Right now, from my phone, I can transfer money from my bank account, while reading the top news headlines, while searching for the definition of a word I don't understand and then translating it into any language (which can then be spoken aloud through the tap of a button), while texting a friend, while taking a video and uploading it to Facebook. All within a few seconds. And you want me to *wait* for something? How many years am I expected to do that?

That is the boy speaking. The boy wants it easy and the boy wants it now. It will help you a great deal to recognize when the boy is operating—not to be unkind to him but to choose the path toward manhood. I love the phrase that is engraved in the wooden beams of Balian's blacksmith shop in the movie *Kingdom of Heaven*. It says, "What man is a man who does not make the world better?"³ This is his bearing, his North Star as he labors in the forge of his own transformation from boy to man. The boy wants to play; he wants most of life to be recess; the man wants something higher, greater, and so he accepts the process. As Dostoevsky put it, "to sacrifice, for example, five or six years of [your] ebulliently youthful life to hard, difficult studies, to learning, in order to increase tenfold [your] strength to serve the very truth and the very deed that [you] loved and set out to accomplish."⁴ That tenfold strength is worth it.

If I'm honest with myself I'm a little embarrassed by my generation's way of approaching work—me included. If I've got my history right, in the world before the Industrial Revolution young men felt no shame to take on an apprenticeship and work their way up until they knew their profession. But things have changed and keep changing so fast we don't commit to a particular career path because it may cease to exist when we get there. I don't know. Second-guessing every career move feels like a recipe for going nowhere. I don't want to go nowhere; I want meaning and purpose. I want to know that I am stepping into something that matters and that it is something worth doing. So did I waste college by pursuing what might not be a sustainable life path? Do I not get to step into those promises of purpose and meaning? I would happily leave my stupid job if there were something obviously purposeful, something fulfilling. So how do I find that? If the offer is only in the clouds or stuck as rhetoric, that is going to kill me.

I remember a joke my high school AP history teacher once told our class: "The science major asks, 'How does it work?' The business major asks, 'How can we sell it?' The engineering major asks, 'How can we build it?' The liberal arts major asks, 'Would you like fries with that?'" It was harsh back then; now it's haunting me.

Exploration and transformation, my son. There is a life you can love, but it takes courage, perseverance, and a little cunning to get there. It takes a warrior. You are in the thick of exploring who you are and what you are and why you are here, what the world is about and where God is moving, how and where he is moving *you*. I absolutely love what I do; my work is my passion. And I have the profound joy of

knowing I'm having an impact on the world. For the most part I love my life. You can find a life you love. You can. But I didn't step into this the day after college. There was a lot that had to happen in me as a young man before God could entrust me with the life I now live.

This all sounds a bit like, "Wait. Work. Maybe life will come one day."

There is the boy again—he is filtering what I'm trying to say. I am not pushing you down with, "Just go work and maybe one day life will happen." We are reframing what this time of life is about.

There's something important you need to know about our culture—your culture. Author Robert Bly called ours a "Sibling Society," meaning a society shaped by peers rather than by elders, a society shaped by a loss of fatherhood. Adolescence is forced upon children at a younger and younger age (twelve-year-old girls now dress like coeds), while at the same time adolescence is protracted out into adulthood so that adults want to remain adolescent. Women at fifty-five show up in bars also dressed like coeds; we call them cougars, and I want to say, "You're fifty-five—act like a mature woman, for heaven's sake." A Sibling Society worships youth and rejects the rigors of adulthood; it is the world of the perpetual freshman year. Bly said the fruit is simply this: "People don't bother to grow up."⁵

Yeah, when I think about the guys I know—Michael, Skye, Julian, TJ, frankly almost all of them—I really love their hearts, but yes, it does feel like there is a lot of "boy" inside of us. The boy

can be a source of wonder and creativity and spontaneous joy; but it also feels like he loses heart quickly, demands life now, and he's the one that makes us want to drink and play video games rather than doing something about our lives.

Exactly. Thus the choice before you is a bold one: to accept the wild, daring process of becoming a man.

Those hours I spent as a janitor were not wasted. I learned so much—the satisfaction of putting in a hard day's work, of pressing through tough situations to bring about a good outcome, and the rigor of perseverance—which strengthens you just as running or free weights strengthens you. I also learned how to deal with all sorts of people and their quirks. This is actually going to take an enormous amount of pressure off. The beauty of accepting the process releases you from the pressure of Be There Now.

I understand where you are headed, but this has a hint of “Enjoy the ride; the journey is the destination” stuff in there. I hope I'm wrong; that mantra is totally unhelpful and I always imagine it spoken with glazed eyes.

I don't buy “the journey is the destination.” That was made up by people who found themselves perpetually lost and needed to justify their disorientation. It is pure adolescent spin. The journey is the journey; the destination is the destination. The overnight flight to Istanbul is nothing like being in Istanbul. You've got to keep the hope of Istanbul—your dreams and desires—out there before you. Those

thirteen-hour flights can be brutal if you feel like you'll never get there, trapped in an endless "journey." The heart nosedives and your biggest hope becomes the next pass of the drink cart.

Yes, of course there is a journey before you. But it has a destination: manhood—possessing a wisdom and strength that allows you to love a woman for a lifetime, be a great dad, lead a movement, rule a kingdom, and change the world. You are in the dojo of the Warrior Stage. (This is also the stage of the Lover—we'll get to that in a minute.) This season of your life began around the age of seventeen or eighteen and has now become your job in earnest. The warrior learns to master the art of holding fast to dreams while accepting the rigors of becoming the kind of man who can be entrusted with those dreams; whereas the boy's passions are undisciplined and undirected, so yes, he loses his way and loses heart easily.

One of the great enemies your generation is going to have to fight is the attitude of entitlement. Yours was the childhood where every boy got a trophy—whether they won or lost or even played in the game at all. My generation owes you all a great apology. We were so afraid of screwing it up like many of our parents did that we overindulged and weakened the race, worrying more about your self-esteem than we did your work ethic. The entitled boy feels that life ought to be easy, dreams should come true, and everybody gets a prize no matter how they perform. That boy is truly shocked when he comes to realize—often painfully—that the world doesn't owe him a thing.

This is beginning to remind me of Santiago from Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist*. It is one of those stories that pulled me in, and I've gone back to reread it several times. Santiago is a young man who has a dream, of buried treasure to be exact, and he learns to

listen to his heart and watch for signs as he follows his dream. The plot really is that simple at its essence, but I love it. Here is a story about moving in the direction of your dreams, wrestling through doubt and setback, laced with love and danger, and in the end his dream is realized.

I love the story because I want it to be true—for me. That if I move in the directions of my dreams, and follow the “omens,” and fight my way through the setbacks, my life will be full of adventure and romance, and I will find my treasure. Early on Coelho gives this wonderful piece of hope in order to begin the journey—the “sage” character Melchizedek has come to the boy Santiago at the very moment he is choosing whether to follow his dream.

“Everyone, when they are young, knows what their Personal Legend is.

“At that point in their lives, everything is clear and everything is possible. They are not afraid to dream, and to yearn for everything they would like to see happen to them in their lives. But, as time passes, a mysterious force begins to convince them that it will be impossible for them to realize their Personal Legend.”⁶

Earlier in their conversation Melchizedek said,

“[They believe] the world’s greatest lie.”

“What’s the world’s greatest lie?” the boy asked, completely surprised.

“It’s this: that at a certain point in our lives, we lose control of what’s happening to us, and our lives become controlled by fate. That’s the world’s greatest lie.”⁷

I recommend the book to folks all the time. Some of my favorite conversations I've had with friends were late in the evening, when we just started talking about dreams and how nothing could stop us from going to Africa or starting a business or opening up the first newspaper to really tell the truth. Everyone was able to let their dreams run wild those nights. Somehow, under the stars, we felt again that anything was possible. I loved those times. But, like Santiago when he gets ripped off in Tangier, we forget that feeling and doubt creeps back in when the sun rises, and I don't know many people who are moving toward the dreams they voiced those nights. I feel so bad for my friends. I want each of them to move in the direction of their dreams, before they "change" (meaning surrender) with the voice of comfort or fear. Or they run off chasing everything, anything, hoping something will come of it.

Later in the story, when Santiago is near giving up on his dream, Coelho offers another piece of wisdom: "We are afraid of losing what we have, whether it's our life or our possessions and property. But this fear evaporates when we understand that our life stories and the history of the world were written by the same hand."⁸ I love that; it's so reassuring.

The reason you love *The Alchemist*—as I do—is because the story is speaking deep truth to you. It whispers a promise the heart yearns to hear: *It can be done. Life can work out. Dreams do come true.* But remember—you are watching Santiago from outside the story. What do you suppose it felt like to him within it? Probably very much like you are feeling right now—sometimes hopeful, other times confused, eventually disoriented and a little discouraged. We love Santiago because

he feels like us. And notice this—when the tale begins, Santiago is an adolescent. By the story's end, he has become a young man.

These stories are like maps; the view from up high gives you the lay of the land, helps you get your bearings, but it's a very different experience looking up from the map to the world right before you—the old forest-for-the-trees thing. This is vital for us to hold on to: living *in* a great story looks and feels quite different than watching one unfold. “The way through the world is more difficult to find than the way beyond it,” as the poet Wallace Stevens said.⁹ One of the essential messages of *The Alchemist*—or *The Hobbit*, *The Aeneid*, any of the great stories—is this: *Do not give way to despair; do not lose heart*. This battle toward a life worth living is far more art than science. It is the art of the warrior.

I was watching a remarkable documentary on the Dorobo hunters in southern Kenya. Their bows simply aren't strong enough to bring down big game, so they steal the kill off lions. In a stunning display of courage and cunning, they walk right up to a pride devouring a wildebeest; their unwavering confidence causes the lions to run off. In the next scene the men are roasting wildebeest flank over an open fire, talking, and laughing. One of them says, “But not everybody fights lions; some people are cowards.”¹⁰ That is the campfire you want to be at—the feast of the daring.

This is going to take courage, because fear is the number one reason men give up, sell out. It will take perseverance because nothing worth having comes without some kind of fight. It will take cunning because most men-who-are-really-still-boys move into the world with a childish naïveté, ignore the lions, fail to reach their dreams, and then blame the world or God when in fact they were simply insisting that life allow them to remain freshmen forever. You have a number of lions to slay—fear is one. Despair is another. Entitlement—the

entitlement of adolescence—is a third. Either you kill them or they eat you and your dreams for dinner.

Courage, perseverance, cunning—that's how you kill lions. Live that and you will have a story worth telling.