

Don't Follow Your Dream



Mike Faille, National Post
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Everywhere you turn today, our children are urged to "follow your dream." It seems like a harmless, even inspiring bromide to motivate children to achievement. It isn't.

A lot of damage is being done to young minds by how this rampant (and particularly nauseating) philosophy is interpreted. There seems to be an air of entitlement in it, which encourages people to expect rewards for simply having a dream and not working toward it with blood, sweat and tears.

Somewhere along the line, responsibility has been discarded in favour of infantilism. Scream loud enough from the cradle or the American Idol stage and mama/nanny/Simon Cowell will come running. And when in the latter case, this does not happen, many people are bewildered and angry.

Wanting something, they have been told, is the only requirement needed to get it. This is, of course, absolute nonsense.

The simple fact is that people who achieve excellence in their fields didn't just have a dream. They got up at 4:00 a.m. to practice on parallel bars or had to forego other desirable activities and paths in order to get in six hours of violin practice a day, or stayed off the several million absurd writing advice blogs

with their overheated little cliques that dispense useless regurgitated maxims and empty praise and decide to actually confront their thoughts on a page. Or they read Beowulf and Dante carefully and deeply when they didn't see any point, since all they were interested in was Sylvia Plath, because someone of more experience and wisdom told them to do so. I don't know whether we're overly lazy, stupid, or childish these days. But the idea of preparing oneself for excellence has somehow disappeared.

Case in point: I was Writer in Residence and an English professor at a British university some years ago. In my second year there, when one of my students actually lifted, word for word, two pages off a website and handed it in as his own work, I ended up being the one reprimanded!

I had given him a zero for the paper, of course. But the policy then was that I wasn't allowed to give him a zero. Instead, the entire English faculty met to go over his paper and give him credit for all the things he didn't plagiarize. This, to me, is akin to a criminal breaking into your house and stealing your jewellery, silver and art, and when appearing in court for indictment after pleading guilty, being given credit by the judge for not stealing your television or computer.

I was both disillusioned and livid at this so, contrary to university policy at that time, I called "Trevor" into my office and asked him why he had done this despicable thing. He responded that he had always had a dream to have a degree. ("Have" not "earn"!) I said to him, "Trevor, you will never have a degree if you keep on doing this. Oh -- someone may hand one to you one day, but you will always know that it isn't yours. It will never be yours. It will always belong to all those from whom you stole it. Never you." And he started to cry. I was glad to see those tears, which were, in the end, the only entity in the university acknowledging responsibility for such an unworthy act.

My friend James Strauss, a talented novelist and writer for the television show, House, among other things, found a similar situation in his recent (and brief) foray into teaching.

"Our public almost never understands what it takes to put a production on, or the vital necessity of good writing," he wrote to me. "Everybody thinks they can 'at least' write. I taught a screenwriting class last year and was amazed that almost all my students thought they had a screenplay in them. I assigned them a one-hour, fifty-page, screenplay by next week's class. I said I'd do the same. The following week we met (only 11 of the 16 showed) and there was one screenplay written. Mine. Not one page of any other work was available, although the excuses were endless and complex."

This is worrying. Even our universities are filled with people who have dreams but no plans; desires but no talent; talent but no work ethic, and because the few people who could make a difference in their lives will not step up to the plate and say "You can't have this until you earn it," I am concerned that there is no end in sight.

So -- my advice to dreamers: Don't just follow your dream. Do what it takes to earn it. To achieve it. To be worthy of it. Because if you don't, it will never, ever, really be yours.

- This article originally appeared on aolnews.com. Harrison Solow is a writer, English professor, ex-nun and winner of the Pushcart Prize for Literature in 2008. She has written, edited and executed more than 400 publications and projects. Her latest book is Felicity & Barbara Pym, a tale about reading, writing, and true education. Read her blog on the Red Room redroom.com/author/harrison-solow

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