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WISE Academy

Finding a Path With a Heart

I'm my dream, I'm old—probably seventy-five or so—and I'm looking more and more like my dad: graying, with white skin so thin and pale that the veins are showing through. I'm a little embarrassed by that, yet I'm fundamentally happy. There is this solid anchor of happiness that I am safely tethered to, and as I look to my right I see my wife. We are holding hands and smiling, still happy together, and I think that I am ready to step off the world and out of this temporary existence forever, ready to ease into the infinite that surely awaits us all.

That's the dream/vision. Reality, as it often does, is waiting to trip me up and skin my knees on this concrete life. Sometimes that's how life feels: I'm banging into everything around me. It takes a ton of effort to get a pound of results. I'm running all day only to find my feet in the exact same place they started in the morning. Dammit—I want to make some progress, to achieve some small finality in some minor job I have to do. This is where I struggle the most, where my path makes me “curse [my] life”, as Castaneda wrote. It is at these times that I find myself focusing on the ends—the goals—rather than the means. I forget, as Castaneda continued, that “[all] paths are the same: they lead nowhere.” I forget about living in each day, breathing in every moment and exhaling in the present, tingling with the intensity of being alive. Then I come back to this memory: each year, I begin again. Each year comes to and end. And no matter how much I battle with the universe for some finality, this endless cycle of beginning and ending continues, taking me with it like a leaf in a stream. If there is a forever happiness, it's not waiting at the end of any thing—be it a week, or a season, or a school year, or our lives. It's waiting for us just around the corner of each day. It is now.

It is true, as Robert Frost writes: this path which I am on “has made all the difference”. It has made all the difference in my life. Despite my struggles, teaching fills my life with meaning and makes it worthwhile. Sure, I could have focused solely on playing guitar or on racing bicycles and made either of those pursuits my career...but at what price? As beautiful as the creative discovery of making music is, it just doesn't involve me with people enough. It doesn't challenge me on all these human levels like teaching does. And as exhilarating as the wheeled flight of cycling is, it doesn't do a damn thing for anybody else. It doesn't make the world a better place by teaching people—as Jeff Smith said in the great film *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*—to have “a little looking out for the other guy” in mind as we go about our lives. This is one of the things that I try to convey to my students, to each one of you here who clearly care about not just your own lives, but the health of our world and this one precious planet.

A few years back, a student asked me, “Why do you teach high school?” There have been times when I've loved to hear that question...but if I were to hear it today, I'll confess that I'd be afraid. My fear isn't that I don't know the answer, but that I've gone

astray from the path that is truly rewarding for me: connecting with you all, inspiring a few of you, seeing you make connections to the world around you. This year, I feel like I haven't given you all you deserve, and I'm sorry for that. I apologize. Now, rather than get mired in regret, I'll make this pledge: next year, it will be different. I remember why I'm on this path of teaching (and learning, I might add—learning constantly): I'm on it because it is fulfilling in a way that no other profession can match. I feel like I can give something back to this society which, by some colossal accident of good fortune, I was born into. As far as I can remember, I did nothing to deserve to be born into the wealthiest country on earth as a white male, and thus to have several decades of privilege laid at my ruby-slippered feet like Dorothy's yellow brick road. I know I'm lucky, so I feel like it's only fair to do something to improve this world. Teaching lets me do that—to share with you all this world of wonders which surrounds us, which breathes life into us, which enriches our minds and offers us infinite choices of paths to pursue.

Am I rambling here? I always ask that question at some point in these personal papers. That's a part of who I am, a part of what makes my path so damn enjoyable: I love seeing connections between things, and following thoughts like unexplored trails through the woods, watching how “way leads on to way”, as Frost wrote. Sometimes I end up in places I totally didn't expect to be, the Forrest Gump of my imagination running headlong through the concourses of life to finish right back where I started again...but with a new perspective on why I am where I am, and what I'm doing along the path. It's always made me feel better about my life, this introspection into why I do what I do, and it's often raised an important red flag to alert me when I've been stomping on the path way too hard, like some rude-boy traveler.

That's an important point which I want to re-emphasize. I don't always get it right, and I've been one damned ignorant bushwhacker from time to time. I had—or more accurately, I am having—such a realization over the past couple of months about the work that I do. Simply, the realization is this: I've become way too concerned about the grades that you guys get & your plans for the future, at the expense of appreciating what incredibly rich, wonderful, thoughtful, fun people you are. I've paid lip service to the idea that no lives are more important than the lives you are living right now, that there is nothing inherently more valuable about being an adult than being a teenager, that there is nothing more virtuous about aspiring to be a college graduate than there is in aspiring to be a mechanic. I've said these things, but it's phony—I haven't meant it with my heart. It bums me out that I've done this, and it bums me out because these ideas are ones in which I believe wholeheartedly.

Yet simply bumming out won't get me anywhere; it should just be a red flag that alerts me to ways I've gone astray. I thought of this some time ago when I went out to dinner with my family & we bumped into a former student of mine who worked at the restaurant. He was glad to see me (the feeling was mutual) and we hugged and took a minute to catch up on how things are going. As we left the restaurant—I was well ahead, struggling to carry this sleeping 50-pound lump of sugar known as my daughter, so I didn't hear the conversation—he said to my wife, “Your husband changed my life.” Let me tell you, I've never heard a greater compliment. I know why and how I changed his

life, and I know that only a small portion of that had to do with academics. Truly, an interest in academics comprises only a small portion of the force that drove me into teaching. A much more profound influence, which I have spoken about before, was remembering what it was like for me in high school, and how just a few caring adults completely altered my outlook on life. In a way, being a teacher who cares too much about grades and “what are you going to do next?” is like following a path that leads nowhere—I mean ‘nowhere’ in terms of reward, fulfillment, making a difference, all the things which give a path a heart. Caring about people, caring about their growth and happiness, caring that you all have the same confidence in yourselves that I have in you...that, to me, is what gives a heart to this path of teaching.

And that, if I do it even halfway well, is clearly a sustainable path. I don’t pretend to be the best teacher any of you have ever had. But if, in our interactions over the past year, I’ve given some of you a reason to believe in yourself, a cause for hope, an attentive person to talk to, or an adult who can laugh and not get too bent out of shape—well, if I’ve done any of those things, then I’ve done something well. My hope/plea is that you’ll go on to do that for others, and that you’ll realize that we don’t just live on this planet—we ARE this planet. I’ve tried to live differently through this knowledge, especially to cut down on my energy usage in all aspects of my life. Have I succeeded? Well, I ride my bike to work sometimes; the rest of the time I drive a hybrid. We put CFLs in most of the lights in our house. We “turn off the damn lights”, the conclusion many of you came to in Energy Audits this year. And I promise that I will continue to do those things that can make our world better—to become the change that I wish to see in the world.

I think I’ve done an admirable job in this. I’ve explained why I do what I do honestly and (I hope) with some degree of humility. We should take time, far more time than we currently do, to not only examine our lives honestly but to honestly give ourselves the credit we deserve for doing rightly the things that we do well. I hope you’ll bear this in mind when you write your papers. As Aristotle said, that life which goes unquestioned is not worth living. But that was not to mean that he was going to fall into the paralysis of self-doubt or criticism. No, the point was to assess the whys and the hows of living, so that he—and I—and you—can live well. Correct the ways we’ve fallen into error, and remember, as Don Juan implores us, that there is nothing wrong with changing how we travel or which path we travel on. The irony is that the goal is the process: to live our lives, as Mark Twain once said, so that when we come to die even the undertaker will be sad to see us go. As for us, the goal is to live so that when that last hour comes, we can smile inwardly with the full confidence that we lived rightly, and well, and on a path of our own choosing. Thanks for listening.