

## Renaissance

What if instead of devoting ourselves to one major, one career, one abiding hobby we spread ourselves out to embrace a number of disparate activities and areas of study? They say that if you want to make it in opera you must put all distractions behind you and focus on cultivating your voice. For this effort you get to be a diva. Same is true of dance, gymnastics and baseball I suppose. If we are to believe what the stars say of their great successes, we can assume that all of them got the most home runs and the highest score on balance beam, and the gig at the Met by being dedicated to their singular craft. While the other boys were doing their homework the diligent young athletes all passed on this joy and spent a bit more time in the little league batting cages. All the ballerinas were ignored by their peers and missed all of the fun that the cool kids were having, while they went on to their lonely studios with the other lonely ballerini.

These illustrations of dedication are restricted to the "formative years." But, we know that the truly successful in business are those singular driven men and women who live for the job. One would be hard pressed to show a handful of Fortune 500 CEO's who were not just a bit obsessed with their work. Of course this is a cliché, yet, as a friend of mine told me, "Clichés are not cliché for nothing." In the work place these commonalties are played out as little dramas on a daily basis. The role-playing in office politics becomes its own puppet show. At times the magnetism of the soap opera is such that we are led to join in: Who will I be? The simpering underachiever; the office clown; the driven, T-crossing, I-dotting, management-headed Guy Smiley? But, hopefully, we recall at the last minute that life is not work and work is not life. Really, it's not.

Of course, when you consider what you spent elementary school doing (for many it was trying to prep for the really important stuff that happens in middle school), and then what you did in middle school (which was preparing for high school where the important stuff is covered), and then high school is devoted to getting into college (at least for the kids whose parents warranted the sycophantic

attentions of the guidance department). So when a person gets into college, there is often the brief sense that they have reached a goal. And for those who die young this may be so, but by their Junior year there is the returned sense of urgency creeping in. It begins to become clear that the preparation for college was not a means to an end, but rather a means to a means. College was another shell in the shell game of *get to your destination*.

Schools do not have 100% graduation rates. Upon each of these academic steps there are those who opted out of the academic "mouse race" as noncombatants. The reasons are not as varied as the individuals who opted out. They generally fall into one of, or a combination of four reasons: 1.) Lack of ambition or academic vigor, 2.) Lack of ability or intelligence, 3.) Lack of the capacity to sit still, upon which most of current education rests, 4.) Or most often, the lack of foresight to see what was coming (*as a caveat I will submit that the vast majority of foresight is supplied by parents in the form of threats to continue getting little bottoms out of bed!*).

There seem myriad intelligent reasons to pass on formal public education. Of the reasons that seem valid, laziness, stupidity, poor self-control, and short sightedness do not seem to qualify. The fact that current public education is not adequately concerned about individual learning styles, individual needs nor individual strengths seems a valid disincentive. The fact that public education is financed inefficiently, spends too little on teacher's directives and feeds a bureaucratic zoo from principals who have never taught to legislators who have never learned, seems a powerful motive for civil disobedience. The fact that schools are so preoccupied with serving ill-behaved and legally protected miscreants and thus have a hard time focusing on intelligent teaching is a huge disadvantage to schools as they exist right now.

But, the largest problem with school is that it expects too little. Instructors are mandated by the government to follow set paths in advancing our children on the path to race blindly from level to level, meeting objectives and falling within standardized norms getting them ready for nothing more than an empty test. Oh

there's "nothing wrong with teaching to the test, so long as the test measures what we want to teach..." Yes there is. These are minimum competencies. School does not ask too much of its students and teachers, it asks too little.

Tests are designed to measure the ability of the child to take tests. It is the hope of the creators that this is indicative of other abilities, but that is not necessarily so. Tests do not measure whether a child is being beaten by a drunken father. Tests do not gauge how much joy a child can derive from observing beauty. Even fabulously creative tests do not accurately encourage the love of learning. Tests are not warm and fuzzy, nor should they be, but they become a measure. "A" measure. These tools must be used in concert with a raft of intuitive and subjective gifts that humans have using through time eternal not written by Princeton. The trouble with testing, is that it gives the impression that it is objective, when it is not, and it puts a reachable yet artificial goal in front of teacher, parent and child. Because this goal is reachable and definable it becomes THE goal.

Another artificial objective that is used as bribe or threat is graduation. I am all for dancing and jumping and singing when we hit this red step, but it is an artificial reward and indicates nothing except the release from one potentially dehumanizing institution into another. This may sound overly acidic, but institutions and their standards are generally not about enriching humanity as measuring and regulating it. Acing the SAT indicates that you aced the SAT. It guarantees nothing about being happy, or successful, or well rounded or creative. I am certain that there are those who can reference statistics on creativity, intelligence and test scores. But the SAT is not an intelligence test, and even if it were, MENSA members are given no get-out-of-jail-fee cards in this particular game of Monopoly. We graduate and it turns out that we are still in the position of getting up early and going to our desk and being good girls and boys. What if there were more than this? "Well, of course there is" we say. But this is the problem. We spent so long being encultured by our schools to get good grades and be good workers while knowing that we can't all be teacher's pet, or

employee of the week. We still place importance on it. Rather, I suggest that we see work and school as a series of opportunities for excellence in a fascinating and diverse life that includes much more than these. Knowing that if we place career and schooling in the role of "one more thing I do" then we may lose any hope of being a star in any single field. Oh I suppose that their need to be Ken Griffey's and Donald Trump's, but I don't know why.

This is not a call to mediocrity, but a call to diversity. What if we, as a culture began seeing that studying for the test is all well and good if we are still instilling a love of learning; if when the class loves Romeo and Juliet, we tossed out the next planned unit and read through Hamlet as well? What if instead of viewing graduation as a permission to allow our brains to atrophy we took it as an endorsement of our intellectual vigor and as an encouragement to absorb more? As we become proficient in one discipline we can approach another. Instead of working incessantly at knocking a stroke off one's golf game **forever**, perhaps it is more healthy to accept that score and it is now time to study haiku or volunteer at a retirement home or one of countless things that are out there. In addition to working hard, it is possible to learn to paint, or sculpt, or study physics.

Just because our schools, our work, and our culture's icons all demand devotion do we really owe it to them? Schools ask too many questions of us and provide too little space to fill in the blanks. Instead of asking why we live, they tell us to sit in our seats. Instead of asking teachers to help all individuals to their respective heights they ask them to raise all students (willing or not) to a common low. Our workplaces often expect a devotion that few spouses require. Our labor can be a joy, but when does it deserve more attention than our loves, our children, our art? Yet the food on our plates is provided by these tasks. Even Bob Cratchit remembered that Scrooge was the founder of the feast, but should we? Finally, I have issue with the culture worship of the wholly devoted athlete or performer. Perhaps it is the fantasy of doing what you love and being fabulously rich while doing it, but this is the wet dream of children admiring Richy Rich. Face it Richy Rich was a brat. So is Britney Spears, and Dennis Rodman and it is the rare

celebrity that comes to get the reputation of well balanced. How could they? They are, after all, a celebrity for a reason.

For every ride at the carnival we buy a ticket. School can be either one of the rides that we enjoy, or it can serve as a long line to another turn at the theme park, where you see that it was just the line to the next part of the line. Some graduate from one line to sit on a bench and waste their ride money on candy until the park closes. These are those who spend their days at work and their evenings with Oprah. I guess the analogy for the devotee of the single activity or career path is the kid who stays on one ride all night. He goes around and around using up his roll of tickets on the single roller coaster of his days.

But it seems to me that there are so many worthwhile rides, so many challenges, so much to learn, so many meet, and so many who need our help we should spread out instead of contracting. Learn more, do more, read more, create more.