

What Are You Going To Do With That?

Williams Deresiewicz *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (2010)

THE QUESTION MY title poses, of course, is the one that is classically aimed at humanities majors. What practical value could there possibly be in studying literature or art or philosophy? So you must be wondering why I'm bothering to raise it here, at Stanford, this renowned citadel of science and technology. What doubt can there be that the world will offer you many opportunities to use your degree?

But that's not the question I'm asking. By "do" I don't mean a job, and by "that" I don't mean your major. We are more than our jobs, and education is more than a major. Education is more than college, more even than the totality of your formal schooling, from kindergarten through graduate school. By "What are you going to do," I mean, what kind of life are you going to lead? And by "that," I mean everything in your training, formal and informal, that has brought you to be sitting here today, and everything you're going to be doing for the rest of the time that you're in school.

We should start by talking about how you did, in fact, get here. You got here by getting very good at a certain set of skills. Your parents pushed you to excel from the time you were very young. They sent you to good schools, where the encouragement of your teachers and the example of your peers helped push you even harder. Your natural aptitudes were nurtured so that, in addition to excelling in all your subjects, you developed a number of specific interests that you cultivated with particular vigor. You did extracurricular activities, went to afterschool programs, took private les-

sons. You spent summers doing advanced courses at a local college or attending skill-specific camps and workshops. You worked hard, you paid attention, and you tried your very best. And so you got very good at math, or piano, or lacrosse, or, indeed, several things at once.

Now there's nothing wrong with mastering skills, with wanting to do your best and to be the best. What's wrong is what the system leaves out: which is to say, everything else. I don't mean that by choosing to excel in math, say, you are failing to develop your verbal abilities to their fullest extent, or that in addition to focusing on geology, you should also focus on political science, or that while you're learning the piano, you should also be working on the flute. It is the nature of specialization, after all, to be specialized. No, the problem with specialization is that it narrows your attention to the point where all you know about and all you want to know about, and, indeed, all you can know about, is your specialty.

The problem with specialization is that it makes you into a specialist. It cuts you off, not only from everything else in the world, but also from everything else in yourself. And of course, as college freshmen, your specialization is only just beginning. In the journey toward the success that you all hope to achieve, you have completed, by getting into Stanford, only the first of many legs. Three more years of college, three or four or five years of law school or medical school or a Ph.D. program, then residencies or postdocs or years as a junior associate. In short, an ever-narrowing

funnel of specialization. You go from being a political-science major to being a lawyer to being a corporate attorney to being a corporate attorney focusing on taxation issues in the consumer products industry. You go from being a biochemistry major to being a doctor to being a cardiologist to being a cardiac surgeon who performs heart-valve replacements.

Again, there's nothing wrong with being those things. It's just that, as you get deeper and deeper into the funnel, into the tunnel, it becomes increasingly difficult to remember who you once were. You start to wonder what happened to that person who played piano and lacrosse and sat around with her friends having intense conversations about life and politics and all the things she was learning in her classes. The 19-year-old who could do so many things, and was interested in so many things, has become a 40-year-old who thinks about only one thing. That's why older people are so boring. "Hey, my dad's a smart guy, but all he talks about is money and livers."

And there's another problem. Maybe you never really wanted to be a cardiac surgeon in the first place. It just kind of happened. It's easy, the way the system works, to simply go with the flow. I don't mean the work is easy, but the choices are easy. Or rather, the choices sort of make themselves. You go to a place like Stanford because that's what smart kids do. You go to medical school because it's prestigious. You specialize in cardiology because it's lucrative. You do the things that reap the rewards, that make your parents proud,

and your teachers pleased, and your friends impressed. From the time you started high school and maybe even junior high, your whole goal was to get into the best college you could, and so now you naturally think about your life in terms of “getting into” whatever’s next. “Getting into” is validation; “getting into” is victory. Stanford, then Johns Hopkins medical school, then a residency at the University of San Francisco, and so forth. Or Michigan Law School, or Goldman Sachs, or McKinsey, or whatever. You take it one step at a time, and the next step always seems to be inevitable.

Or maybe you did always want to be a cardiac surgeon. You dreamed about it from the time you were 10 years old, even though you had no idea what it really meant, and you stayed on course for the entire time you were in school. You refused to be enticed from your path by that great experience you had in AP history, or that trip you took to Costa Rica the summer after your junior year in college, or that terrific feeling you got taking care of kids when you did your rotation in pediatrics during your fourth year in medical school.

But either way, either because you went with the flow or because you set your course very early, you wake up one day, maybe 20 years later, and you wonder what happened: how you got there, what it all means. Not what it means in the “big picture,” whatever that is, but what it means to you. Why you’re doing it, what it’s all for. It sounds like a cliché, this “waking up one day,” but it’s called having a midlife crisis, and it happens to people all the time.

There is an alternative, however, and it may be one that hasn’t occurred to you. Let me try to explain it by telling you a story about one of your peers, and the alternative that hadn’t occurred to her. A couple of years ago, I participated in a panel dis-

cussion at Harvard that dealt with some of these same matters, and afterward I was contacted by one of the students who had come to the event, a young woman who was writing her senior thesis about Harvard itself, how it instills in its students what she called self-efficacy, the sense that you can do anything you want. Self-efficacy, or, in more familiar terms, self-esteem. There are some kids, she said, who get an A on a test and say, “I got it because it was easy.” And there are other kids, the kind with self-efficacy or self-esteem, who get an A on a test and say, “I got it because I’m smart.”

Again, there’s nothing wrong with thinking that you got an A because you’re smart. But what that Harvard student didn’t realize—and it was really quite a shock to her when I suggested it—is that there is a third alternative. True self-esteem, I proposed, means not caring whether you get an A in the first place. True self-esteem means recognizing, despite everything that your upbringing has trained you to believe about yourself, that the grades you get—and the awards, and the test scores, and the trophies, and the acceptance letters—are not what defines who you are.

She also claimed, this young woman, that Harvard students take their sense of self-efficacy out into the world and become, as she put it, “innovative.” But when I asked her what she meant by innovative, the only example she could come up with was “being CEO of a Fortune 500.” That’s not innovative, I told her, that’s just successful, and successful according to a very narrow definition of success. True innovation means using your imagination, exercising the capacity to envision new possibilities.

But I’m not here to talk about technological innovation, I’m here to talk about a different kind. It’s not about inventing a new machine or a new drug.

It’s about inventing your own life. Not following a path, but making your own path. The kind of imagination I’m talking about is moral imagination. “Moral” meaning not right or wrong, but having to do with making choices. Moral imagination means the capacity to envision new ways to live your life.

It means not just going with the flow. It means not just “getting into” whatever school or program comes next. It means figuring out what you want for yourself, not what your parents want, or your peers want, or your school wants, or your society wants. Originating your own values. Thinking your way toward your own definition of success. Not simply accepting the life that you’ve been handed. Not simply accepting the choices you’ve been handed. When you walk into Starbucks, you’re offered a choice among a latte and a macchiato and an espresso and a few other things, but you can also make another choice. You can turn around and walk out. When you walk into college, you are offered a choice among law and medicine and investment banking and consulting and a few other things, but again, you can also do something else, something that no one has thought of before.

Let me give you another counterexample. I wrote an essay a couple of years ago that touched on some of these same points. I said, among other things, that kids at places like Yale or Stanford tend to play it safe and go for the conventional rewards. And one of the most common criticisms I got went like this: What about Teach for America? Lots of kids from elite colleges go and do TFA after they graduate, so therefore I was wrong. TFA, TFA—I heard that over and over again. And Teach for America is undoubtedly a very good thing. But to cite TFA in response to my argument is precisely to miss the point, and to miss it in a way that actually confirms what I’m saying. The prob-

lem with TFA—or rather, the problem with the way that TFA has become incorporated into the system—is that it’s just become another thing to get into.

In terms of its content, Teach for America is completely different from Goldman Sachs or McKinsey or Harvard Medical School or Berkeley Law, but in terms of its place within the structure of elite expectations, of elite choices, it is exactly the same. It’s prestigious, it’s hard to get into, it’s something that you and your parents can brag about, it looks good on your résumé, and most important, it represents a clearly marked path. You don’t have to make it up yourself, you don’t have to do anything but apply and do the work—just like college or law school or McKinsey or whatever. It’s the Stanford or Harvard of social engagement. It’s another hurdle, another badge. It requires aptitude and diligence, but it does not require a single ounce of moral imagination.

Moral imagination is hard, and it’s hard in a completely different way than the hard things you’re used to doing. And not only that, it’s not enough. If you’re going to invent your own life, if you’re going to be truly autonomous, you also need courage: moral courage. The courage to act on your values in the face of what everyone’s going to say and do to try to make you change your mind. Because they’re not going to like it. Morally courageous individuals tend to make the people around them very uncomfortable. They don’t fit in with everybody else’s ideas about the way the world is supposed to work, and still worse, they make them feel insecure about the choices that they themselves have made—or failed to make. People don’t mind being in prison as long as no one else is free. But stage a jailbreak, and everybody else freaks out.

In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, James Joyce has Stephen Dedalus famously say, about growing up in Ireland in the late 19th century, “When the soul of a man is born in this country there are nets flung at it to hold it back from flight. You talk to me of nationality, language, religion. I shall try to fly by those nets.”

Today there are other nets. One of those nets is a term that I’ve heard again and again as I’ve talked with students about these things. That term is “self-indulgent.” “Isn’t it self-indulgent to try to live the life of the mind when there are so many other things I could be doing with my degree?” “Wouldn’t it be self-indulgent to pursue painting after I graduate instead of getting a real job?”

These are the kinds of questions that young people find themselves being asked today if they even think about doing something a little bit different. Even worse, the kinds of questions they are made to feel compelled to ask themselves. Many students have spoken to me, as they navigated their senior years, about the pressure they felt from their peers—from their peers—to justify a creative or intellectual life. You’re made to feel like you’re crazy: crazy to forsake the sure thing, crazy to think it could work, crazy to imagine that you even have a right to try.

Think of what we’ve come to. It is one of the great testaments to the intellectual—and moral, and spiritual—poverty of American society that it makes its most intelligent young people feel like they’re being self-indulgent if they pursue their curiosity. You are all told that you’re supposed to go to college, but you’re also told that you’re being “self-indulgent” if you actually want to get an education. Or even worse, give yourself one. As opposed to what? Going into consulting isn’t self-indulgent? Going into finance isn’t self-indulgent?

Going into law, like most of the people who do, in order to make yourself rich, isn’t self-indulgent? It’s not OK to play music, or write essays, because what good does that really do anyone, but it is OK to work for a hedge fund. It’s selfish to pursue your passion, unless it’s also going to make you a lot of money, in which case it’s not selfish at all.

Do you see how absurd this is? But these are the nets that are flung at you, and this is what I mean by the need for courage. And it’s a never-ending process. At that Harvard event two years ago, one person said, about my assertion that college students needed to keep rethinking the decisions they’ve made about their lives, “We already made our decisions, back in middle school, when we decided to be the kind of high achievers who get into Harvard.” And I thought, who wants to live with the decisions that they made when they were 12? Let me put that another way. Who wants to let a 12-year-old decide what they’re going to do for the rest of their lives? Or a 19-year-old, for that matter?

All you can decide is what you think now, and you need to be prepared to keep making revisions. Because let me be clear. I’m not trying to persuade you all to become writers or musicians. Being a doctor or a lawyer, a scientist or an engineer or an economist—these are all valid and admirable choices. All I’m saying is that you need to think about it, and think about it hard. All I’m asking is that you make your choices for the right reasons. All I’m urging is that you recognize and embrace your moral freedom.

And most of all, don’t play it safe. Resist the seductions of the cowardly values our society has come to prize so highly: comfort, convenience, security, predictability, control. These, too, are nets. Above all, resist the fear of failure. Yes, you will make mis-

takes. But they will be your mistakes, not someone else's. And you will survive them, and you will know yourself better for having made them, and you will be a fuller and a stronger person.

It's been said—and I'm not sure I agree with this, but it's an idea that's worth taking seriously—that you guys belong to a “postemotional” generation.

That you prefer to avoid messy and turbulent and powerful feelings. But I say, don't shy away from the challenging parts of yourself. Don't deny the desires and curiosities, the doubts and dissatisfactions, the joy and the darkness, that might knock you off the path that you have set for yourself. College is just beginning for you, adulthood is just beginning. Open yourself to the possibilities they

represent. The world is much larger than you can imagine right now. Which means, you are much larger than you can imagine.

The essay above is adapted from a talk delivered to a freshman class at Stanford University in May.

