Life after college is more than a career, the rat race and 'striking it rich'

By H. Paul Santmire

My 18-year-old daughter is pondering her future. The college she will enter this fall is reputed to be strong both in music and business. What should her major be?

If she's anything like most college-bound youth these days, she probably will make the wrong choice. And many in her parents' generation probably are going to applaud her and her like-minded, wrong-headed peers.

The problem is in the idea of choosing a career. From an early age, my 18-year-old has been encouraged (by me, among others) to be career-conscious. This is especially important for young women, many of us have assumed, because so much has been denied women for so long.

As a result, she probably will feel pressured in the next few months to figure out what she wants to be and may quickly choose her major accordingly, with the right career path in mind.

But if she bows to that social pressure, she will be making a serious mistake, whether she decides to major in music or business.

Daily work as it is portrayed in popular expression is a drag. Daily work is the rat race. The real thing in life takes place somewhere else.

The word career, it so happens, is derived from the French word for racing, running a course with haste, especially with horses. The word has its home in the milieu of an event like the Kentucky Derby. Around and around they go in a circle, heading nowhere, while everyone cheers them on with the hope that somebody's going to strike it rich.

Is it any wonder that my daughter, in pondering her future, seems to be sure of one thing — that she wants to make money? How else will she be able to rise above the rat race to experience something else that's "as real as it gets" — like Miller time after work or condo-comfort in the country woods on her weekends?

The parents clung to the hope — which the professors then professed — that there are higher values, that there's something more to life than chasing after the prize at the end of the racetrack.

Not too long ago, the director of career services at a prestigious women's college interviewed the numerous incoming students who had choosen a premed major. She was aghast. Not one of those bright young women wanted to serve humanity or anything like that. They all wanted to be physicians, to make money and be comfortable.

In the good old days, I would like to believe, it was different for some. Young people at least knew what it meant to choose a profession — that is, to choose to profess something. Some of them even appeared to know that they did not have to choose a career at all, if they could identify a calling for themselves.

I take it that is why some parents used to underwrite a liberal arts education for their children. The parents clung to the hope — which the professors then professed — that there are higher values, that there's something more to life than chasing after the prize at the end of the racetrack.

In those days, some students appeared to ponder the good, the true and the beautiful, with the help of Socratic-minded professors. Some students, challenged by their chaplains, even raised the question whether God might want them to make something out of their lives other than money.

But in our time, it appears, students are too busy charting their career paths to listen to archaic or arcane questions put to them by professors or chaplains.

Maybe the good old days were only a fantasy, kept alive by the self-interest of the professors and the chaplains. But I would like to believe that professing the higher values was the real thing and that careerism was an idolatry of the unreal.

I hope that my daughter discovers sooner rather than later that life does not have to mean going in a circle as fast as possible in order to do something else.

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