

A PATH WITH A HEART:

THE CULTURAL CONTEXT OF LEARNING ABOUT CAREERS

by Herb Shepard

Your central issue is a life fully worth living. The test is how you feel each day as you anticipate that day's experience. The same test is the best predictor of health and longevity. It is simple.

If it's simple, why doesn't everyone know it? The answer to that question is simple, too. We have been brought up to live by rules that mostly have nothing to do with making our lives worth living; some of them in fact are guaranteed not to. Many of our institutions and traditions introduce cultural distortions into our vision, provide us with beliefs and definitions that don't work, distract us from the task of building lives that are fully worth living, and persuade us that other things are more important.

The human infant is a life-loving bundle of energy with a marvelous array of potentialities, and many vulnerabilities. It is readily molded. If it is given a supportive environment, it will flourish and continue to love its own life and the lives of others. If it is starved in various ways it will survive, with some long-term deficiencies that it will spend the rest of its life trying to compensate for. This struggle makes it dependent on and controllable by any source that promises to remove the deficiencies. The deficiencies are often described as needs: needs for approval, recognition, power, control, status; needs to prove oneself masculine, or smart, or successful in others' eyes - and in one's own eyes, which have been programmed to see the world in terms of one's deficiencies.

How potentialities may be turned into deficiencies is suggested by a fable, "The School for Animals":

"Once upon a time the animals got together and decided to found a school. There would be a core curriculum of six subjects: swimming, crawling, running, jumping, climbing and flying. At first the duck was the best swimmer, but it wore out the webs of its feet in running class, and then couldn't swim as well as before. And at first the dog was the best runner, but it crash landed twice in flying class and injured a leg. The rabbit started out as the best jumper, but it fell in climbing class and hurt its back. At the end of the school year, the class valedictorian was an eel, who could do a little bit of everything, but nothing very well."¹

And how one's deficiencies, such as the need to prove oneself, can distract you from living fully, is suggested by the following account of a cormorant's career. Dr. Ralph Siu, when asked what wisdom the ancient oriental philosophers could contribute to modern man in modern organizations on how to preserve his mental health, developed a list of "advices" for modern man. One of them was as follows:

"The second piece of advice is: Observe the cormorant in the fishing fleet. You know how cormorants are used for fishing. The technique involves a man in a rowboat with about half a dozen or so cormorants, each with a ring around the neck. As the bird spots a fish, it would dive into the water and unerringly come up with it. Because of the ring, the larger fish are not swallowed but held in the throat. The fisherman picks up the bird and squeezes out the fish through the mouth. The bird then dives for another, and the cycle repeats itself.

"To come back to the second piece of advice from the Neo-Taoist to the American workers: Observe the cormorant, he would say. Why is it that of all the different animals, the cormorant has been chosen to slave away day and night for the fisherman? Were the bird not greedy for fish, or not efficient in catching it, or not readily trained, would society have created an industry to exploit the bird? Would the ingenious device of a ring around its neck, and the simple procedure of squeezing the bird's neck to force it to regurgitate the fish have been devised? Of course not.

"Greed, talent, and capacity for learning, then, are the basis of exploitation. The more you are able to moderate and/or hide them from society, the greater will be your chances of escaping the fate of the cormorant....It is necessary to remember that the institutions of society are geared to make society prosper, not necessarily to minimizing suffering on your part. It is for this reason, among others, that the schools tend to drum into your mind the high desirability of those characteristics that tend to make society prosper - namely, ambition, progress and success. These in turn are to be valued in terms of society's objectives. All of them gradually but surely increase your greed and make a cormorant out of you."²

Dr. Siu then goes on to list the ways in which modern man suffers the fate of the cormorant. But what parents are not delighted to be able to say that their children are ambitious, talented, and have a great capacity for learning? It is something to boast about, rather than something to hide. Thus all institutions, including the institution of parenthood, are suspect when they attempt to give career guidance. Suspect, because many of them have an outlook analogous to that of the fisherman, who is not interested in whether the cormorant has a life fully worth living, but only in those of its characteristics that serve the fisherman's purposes. Suspect, if they address only the development of a career, so that the rest of life becomes an unanticipated consequence of the career choice. Suspect, if they stress only the how-to's of a career and not its meaning in your life. Suspect, if they describe a career as a way to make a living, and fail to point out that the wrong career choice may be fatal.

Don Juan was explicit and clear on these points in teaching Carlos Castaneda about careers.³ To have a path of knowledge, a path with a heart, made for a joyful journey, and was the only conceivable way to live. And he advised us to think carefully about our paths before we set out on them. For by the time a man discovers that his path "has no heart", the path is ready to kill him. At that point, he cautions, very few men can stop to deliberate, and leave that path. In a life/career planning workshop for the staff of a midwest military research laboratory, a 29-year-old engineer confessed that he was bored to death with the laboratory work, but his eyes lit up at the prospect of teaching physical education and coaching athletic teams at the high school level. He emerged with a career plan to do just that, and to do it in his favorite part of the country, northern New England. He resolved to do it immediately upon retirement from his civil service job as an engineer - at age 65, a mere 36 years away.

Organizations have implicit ways of teaching about careers, regardless of whether they have explicit career planning and development programs. Reward systems are geared to common deficiencies - needs for status, approval, power - and a career consists of doing the right things to move up the ladder. A vice president of one company counseled his subordinates: "The work day is for doing your job; your overtime is for your promotion."

In many companies the message about careers is very clear: not only is your career more important than the rest of your life, it is more important than your life. In one large corporation great emphasis was placed on moving young professionals and managers through many company functions as their preparation for general management responsibility. The career plan was well understood: "When

you're rotated, don't ask if it's up, down or sideways; the time to worry is when you stop rotating." In such companies, successful careers are based on working hard at any job you are given whether you like it or not, and conforming to the organization's unwritten rules and the expectations of your superiors in such matters as office manners, dress, presentation style, language and prejudices.

Do these paths have "heart"? For some people they do. Others "burn out". In one company that recruits only the top graduates, that devotes a great deal of managerial time to tracking their performance, that moves each one along at what is judged to be an appropriate pace into jobs that are judged to be suited to his/her talents and potentials, the amount of burn-out observed in mid-career management ranks became a matter of concern. As a result, the company offered career planning workshops to midcareer managers, the main objective of which was, according to one executive: "to revitalize them by reminding them that in an ultimate sense each of them is in business for himself."

For deficiency-motivated people, moving up the hierarchy of management is likely to be such a compelling need that they may desert careers that did have some heart for them. In an informal survey conducted by the author some years ago of industrial research scientists, it was possible to identify the ones for whom their career path had a heart, by their responses to the question: "What is your main goal over the next two or three years?" Some responded in such terms as "Some equipment I've tried to get for three years has finally made it into this year's budget. With it, I can pursue some very promising leads." Others responded in such terms as: "I hope to become a department head."

Just as adult organizations teach about careers in the ways described above, schools teach about careers whether they have courses about careers or not. The ideal is the "Straight A" student - and these are the ones that many employers seek to recruit. What "Straight A" means is that the student has learned to do a number of things at a marketable level of performance, regardless of whether the student has any interest in or innate talent for the activity, and regardless of whether it brings pain, joy or boredom. The reward is in the grade, not the activity. And in collusion with the school, parents will bestow love and recognition for A's, while discouraging the student from working in areas of interest and talent, so that energies can be devoted to studies in which the student is "deficient". In adult life/career planning workshops, the author has found that of the things participants actually enjoy doing, less than 5% are things they learned in school as part of formal classroom work.

One outcome of these experiences is that many adults cannot remember, if they ever knew, what their unique talents and interests were, what areas of learning and doing were fulfilling for them, what paths had heart. These have to be discovered or rediscovered.

Another outcome is that adults distinguish between work and play. Work is something you have to be "compensated" for, because it robs you of living. Play is something you usually have to pay for, because your play is often someone else's work. Children have to be taught these distinctions carefully, for they make no sense to anyone whose life is fully worth living. As one philosopher put it:

"A master in the art of living draws no sharp distinction between his work and his play, his labor and his leisure, his mind and his body, his education and his recreation. He scarcely knows which is which. He simply pursues his vision of excellence through whatever he is doing and leaves others to determine whether he is working or playing. To himself he always seems to be doing both."⁴

What does "vision of excellence" mean? How do you acquire your own? We can be reasonably sure that it has little to do with getting A's, excelling others in competition, or living up to someone else's standards. It is one's own unique vision.

The idea of uniqueness is troublesome. It won't do in school, where each person must be comparable to every other person, so that grades and rank can be assigned. Such differences as exist between people should be differences in degree, not in kind. Consider the word "genius". The dictionary meaning of the term is "the unique and identifying spirit of a person or place". But to most of us it means a person with a high IQ. Differences in IQ are differences of degree, whereas the notion of "unique" makes it impossible to rank and compare.

Each person is unique, yet each person has much in common with every other person. For a life that is fully worth living, it is important to identify your uniquenesses and decide how to use them, and to identify the qualities you possess that others also possess, and decide how to use them.

In the search for your uniqueness, use still a third definition of "genius". By this definition, your genius consists of those of your talents that you love to develop and use. These are the things that you can now or potentially could do with excellence, which are fulfilling in the doing of them. So fulfilling that if you also got paid to do them, it would not feel like compensation, but like a gift.

Discovering your genius may be easy or difficult. At some level of your being you already know it; you are fortunate if it is in your conscious awareness. If not, there are several routes to discovery, and many sources of pertinent information.

The first source is play. Make a list of the things you enjoy doing and find the common themes. Observe what you do when you are not obliged to do anything. What activities are you likely to engage in? What catches your eye when you thumb through a magazine? When you are in an unfamiliar environment, what interests you, what catches your attention? What are the contents of your fantasies and daydreams? What do you wish you were doing? Your sleep-dreams are also important. Record them, for some of them contain important wishes that you may want to turn into plans.

The second source is your own life history. Record in some detail the times in your past life when you were doing something very well and enjoying it very much. What themes or patterns of strength, skill and activity pervade most of those times? What were the sources of satisfaction in them?

The third source is feedback from others. What do those who know you have to say about your strengths and talents? As they see it, what seems to excite, give you pleasure, engage you? And if you can find people who knew you when you were a child, can they recall what used to capture your attention and curiosity, what activities you enjoyed, what special promise and talents you displayed?

The fourth source is psychological instruments, which provide a variety of ways of helping you to organize and interpret your experience. There are many such instruments that can provide you with clues to your interests, strengths and sources of satisfaction. Perhaps the most valuable is the Myers-Briggs Temperament Indicator.⁵ It is based on the insights of the great psychologist, Carl Jung, who believed that each person has certain qualities that are innate, rather than learned after birth. (This will seem self-evident to parents of more than one child.) He identified four basic temperaments, four quite different ways of approaching life. One of these is oriented to tradition and stability in the world, and devoted to making systems work and to the maintenance of order. The second type loves action, freedom, excitement and the mastery of skills. The third type is oriented to the future and to

mastery of the unknown. The fourth loves to work in the service of humanity to bring about a better world. One can learn to perform competently in activities that do not fit one's temperament, but it always feels like "work"; if the activities are in accord with one's temperament, it feels more like play. It follows that your temperament is one of the important components of your genius.

As you take these four routes, you may find the same messages about yourself over and over again - and you may also find a few surprises and contradictions. In general, the truth strategy you employ is the one enunciated in Alice in Wonderland: "What I tell you three times is true."⁶ You may emerge from the search with some hunches to explore further; you may emerge with certainty about a new direction to take; or you may simply affirm what you already knew - confirming or disconfirming the life and career choices you have already made.

The discovery or affirmation of your genius is a first step. It needs to be nourished and developed, and you need to learn how to create the conditions which will support you in practicing it, as the following case illustrates.

Jerome Kirk, a well-known sculptor, discovered his genius through play, though not until his late twenties. Alone on an island off the Maine coast for a week, he amused himself by fashioning sculptures out of driftwood. It was a dazzling experience. But his education had prepared him for work in the field of personnel administration. For the following twenty years he developed his skill as a sculptor, while "earning a living" as a personnel administrator - and he was quite successful in this profession. After twenty years, his sculptures matched his own vision of excellence, he was a recognized artist, and the income from his art was sufficient to enable him to devote all his time to it. It was the realization of a dream. His comment: "I was good in the personnel field, but I never really enjoyed it. It wasn't me. And now I'm utterly convinced that if a person really loves something, and focuses his energy there, there's just no way he can fail to fulfill his 'vision of excellence!'"⁷

Passion, energy and focus: these are the qualities released when a person has discovered his or her genius. They are the mark of persons whose genius lies in the leadership of organizations⁸, as much as they are of a sculptor like Jerome Kirk.

After the discovery of your genius, then, the second step is to acquire the resources you need in order to build a world for yourself that supports you in the pursuit and practice of your genius. The process of acquiring these resources can be called the development of autonomy - learning the skills needed to build that world. If Kirk had been independently wealthy, he would have had that autonomy early. He put this to a test in his early thirties. He resigned from his job, rented a loft, and spent full time on his sculptures. But he could not sell enough of them, and had to return to employment as a personnel administrator.

Turning now to those qualities which you share in common with other people, three seem especially important to a life fully worth living. They can be called tone, resonance, and perspective.

The first of these, tone, refers to your aliveness as an organism. When you think of good muscle tone, you think of a relaxed alertness, a readiness to respond. As used here, the term tone refers to your entire being, your mental and emotional life as well as your muscle and organ life. Hence anxiety is as much the enemy of tone as drugs or being overweight. Lowen expressed this idea as follows:

"A person experiences the reality of the world only through his body....If the body is relatively unalive, a person's impressions and responses are diminished. The more alive the body is, the more vividly does he perceive reality and the more actively does he respond to it. We have all experienced the fact that when we feel particularly good and alive, we perceive the world more sharply....The aliveness of the body denotes its capacity for feeling. In the absence of feeling, the body goes 'dead' insofar as it's ability to be impressed by or respond to situations is concerned....It is the body that melts with love, freezes with fear, trembles in anger, and reaches for warmth and contact. Apart from the body these words are poetic images. Experienced in the body, they have a reality that gives meaning to existence."⁹

You began as a bundle of life-loving energy with a marvelous array of potentialities. As you grew up you learned to do many things and not to do other things. Some of these things were good for you, some bad for you, some good for others, some bad for others. Out of these things you learned, you fashioned an identity, a self-image. Your self-image is thus a cultural product, a distortion which probably prevents you from recognizing yourself anymore as a bundle of life-loving energy with a marvelous array of potentialities. If the latter were your self-image, you would have no difficulty maintaining your tone.

Acquiring that renewed identity, or identification with what is truly wonderful about yourself and therefore worth nourishing and loving, is not an easy task. It requires a lot of unlearning and letting go, as well as learning and risk-taking.

The first step is to become aware of the particular cultural distortions that interfere most with your tone. There are a number of common ones from which few of us escape on our journey through society's institutions.

One of the most common distortions is to comprise your self-image out of some role or roles you play in society. Great actors and actresses use their capacity for total identification with another human being as a basis for a great performance, but their self-image is not that of the person portrayed. That costume is removed at the end of each performance. Cornelia Otis Skinner declared that the first law of the theater is to love your audience. She meant of course that the actor or actress rather than the character portrayed must love the audience. You cannot love the audience unless you love yourself, and yourself is not a role. Thus it is vitally important to recognize your roles as costumes you wear for particular purposes, and not to let them get stuck to you. Your prospects at retirement from your profession or organization will otherwise be a very short life.

A second common distortion is to make your head (your brain) your self-image, and the rest of you part of your environment. Cutting your body into two segments places enormous stress on it, and your tone will suffer severely. "You don't exist within your body. Your body is a person."¹⁰

A third common distortion is to make your gender your self-image. The sexual-reproductive aspects of people are among their most wonderful potentialities, but to identify with your gender leads you to spend the first years of your life learning some bad habits that you spend the rest of your life trying to liberate yourself from.

Other common distortions include being the public relations representative of your family (often forced on boys and girls), being an underdog, a clown, or a representative of superior values.

All such distortions will exact their price by robbing you of tone: by causing you to eat too much or drink too much or worry too much or keep your body in continuous stress, and miss the joy of being alive.

The second quality which you share with other people is the capacity for resonance. This is the experience of enhanced, stimulated and yet relaxed vitality that you can experience in interaction with particular others and particular environments. Discovering those others and those environments can be one of the most fulfilling aspects of the journey through a life fully worth living. Once again, many of our traditions and institutions provide us with cultural distortions that cause us to avoid or destroy resonance, or prevent us from fully experiencing it. And once again, the first step is to become aware of the cultural distortions that rob you of the potential resonance in your life.

Four pervasive cultural themes can be identified as crippers of the capacity for resonance: adversarialism, materialism, sexism, and violence.

Ours is an intensely adversarial society. Almost everything is perceived in competitive, win-lose, success-failure terms. "Winning isn't everything. It's the only thing!"¹¹

By materialism is meant the tendency to measure one's self-worth by the number of kinds of possessions one has, and the tendency to turn experiences into things so that they can be possessions. Collectibles are a way of "life".

By sexism is meant the tendency to turn sexual relationships and partners into materials, and to use sexual labels to sum oneself and others up - gay, macho, or liberated. Morality and fidelity have lost all but their sexual meanings.

"Violence is as American as apple pie."¹² We have more guns than people. Our folk heroes were violent men. The word resonance was chosen rather than the word love, with which it has much in common, because the very meaning of love is distorted in an adversarial, materialistic, sexist, violent society. It becomes a commodity in short supply; it is a marketable item; it is a weapon used to control others; it is difficult to distinguish from exploitation or imprisonment.

The term resonance was chosen for other reasons as well. It conveys the notion of being "in tune" with other people and environments; it suggests the synergy and expansion of tone when your energy is joined with the energy of others. It also implies harmony. Harmony is a beautiful arrangement of different sounds, whereas noise is an ugly arrangement of different sounds. Resonance, as used here, implies people's capacity to use their differences in ways that are beautiful rather than ugly.

The world you build that supports you in the pursuit of your genius is not worth living in if it lacks resonance. Your capacity to build and maintain resonant relationships, and to transform dead or noisy relationships into resonant ones may have been damaged by the distorting cultural themes described above. The first step to regaining that capacity is to become aware of the particular cultural distortions that have damaged it. There are a number of common ones.

One of the commonest distortions is a win-lose outlook - the belief that the world is one's enemy. One must be either on the defensive or offensive, or both at once. One must conquer, control, exploit or be conquered, controlled, exploited. One must fight or run away. One may be experienced by others as shy and withdrawn, as hostile, aggressive or aloof, or as seductive and untrustworthy. Under these circumstances, resonance is hard to come by and short-lived.

For many people, win-lose competitiveness does not dominate all aspects of their lives, but is induced by particular kinds of situations - and destroys the potential resonance and synergy of those situations. For example, you can experience resonance and synergy when a group works creatively together, building on one another's thoughts, stimulated by each other's ideas, mixing work and laughter - when there is no thought of winning or losing, succeeding or failing, proving oneself or making points. The presence of the latter distortions accounts for the unpleasantness and low productivity of most seminars and staff meetings.

Various combinations of adversarial, materialistic and sexist themes are commonly destructive of resonance in intimate relationships, such as marriage. Jealousy, possessiveness and feelings of being exploited dominate the relationship and the partners become each other's prisoners and jailers. But if they are able to free themselves of these distortions, the relationship can be transformed and resonance restored. If you think of any intimate relationships as consisting of three creatures: yourself, the other person, and the couple, you can see that the phrase "a life fully worth living" applies to each. It follows that you would reserve for the couple only those things that are growthful and fulfilling for it. In pursuing the other aspects of your life your partner can be a resource to you, and you a resource to your partner. Rather than being each other's jailers, you become the supporters of each other's freedom - and this will enhance your resonance. An application of this principle is not difficult for most parents to grasp: delight in seeing your child leading a fulfilling life as a result of the support you provided. Cultural distortions make it more difficult to understand that the principle applies equally to intimate relationships among adults.

The third important quality that you share in common with other people is the capacity to develop perspectives that can guide your choices and inform your experience. If you have only one way of looking at the situation you are in, you have no freedom of choice about what to do. And if you have only one framework for understanding your experience, all of your experiences will reinforce the framework. For example, if your outlook is adversarial, you will interpret whatever happens as evidence that the world is hostile, and your choices will be limited to fighting or running away. If you fight, it will confirm your belief that the world is hostile. If you run away, you will know that you were wise to do so.

If you have multiple perspectives - for example, if you can see the potentiality of a new relationship to be collaborative or to be adversarial - you enlarge your range of choices. Thus, if you can see "the multiple potential of the moment", you will usually be able to make a choice that will make the next moment better for you and for the others in the situation.

The cultural distortions that lock you into a limited number of perspectives, or into perspectives that lead you to make self-destructive choices, are the same ones that interfere with your tone and self-image, or your capacity for resonance. That such distortions are blocking your access to useful perspectives is evidenced whenever you find yourself humorless. The essence of humor is a sudden shift of perspective. To be without humor is to be dying, and laughter is one of the most valuable sources of health and well-being on the journey called a life fully worth living.¹⁵

The foregoing pages have offered a set of perspectives, some of which may be familiar, some of which may be new. Like all frameworks, they should be used only when they fit your purposes. For example, the framework provided - the categories of genius, autonomy, tone, resonance and perspective - is arbitrary. These aspects of your life are not separate: poor tone will affect the resonance of your relationships, reduce your autonomy, and limit your perspective.

A perspective has also been offered on teaching about careers, namely, that it may be afflicted by cultural distortions which prevent you from finding a path with a heart. Does this mean, that for the well-being of all of us, the schools should refrain from teaching about careers? Does it mean that there can be no institution with a vested interest in you having a life that is fully worth living?

I believe the answer to both questions is no. Schools are to a large extent simply a reflection of the culture they serve; if the culture changes, the schools will change, though slowly. Two concurrent forces are operating to change the culture quite rapidly. One of these is the dawning realization in many American organizations that the theories of management and organization on which our society has operated in the past have failed us, and will not serve us in the future. And it is because they have regarded human beings as parts of a social machine, and treated as irrelevant individual genius, spirit, well-being and capacity for resonance. This realization is bringing about a transformation in industrial organizations; non-industrial organizations will eventually catch up. This failure of our traditions is made all the more severe by the second force: technology and especially electronic communication and computers. The more that routine operations are performed by machines, the more demand there is that the non-routine operations be performed with excellence. This kind of excellence in human performance can only be attained by persons who are fully alive and operating in the area of their genius. Only if the path has a heart will it sustain excellence.

When the aerospace industry was in its infancy, the technical challenge, and hence the need for creativity and teamwork, was immense. One of the most successful companies recognized this fully in its organizational structure and culture. It invented new organizational forms that were suited to its mission and the capacities of its members to work together creatively. In the process, it created most of the principles and processes of what is called organization development that are in use today.

Among other things, it offered its members Life and Career Planning workshops, to help them identify their talents and interests. The approach was somewhat different from the one outlined in this paper, but its intent was the same. The spirit of these workshops was summed up in the way the company introduced them: "What you do with your life and career is your responsibility. But because you are a member of this company, the company shares some of that responsibility with you.

Perhaps it's 80% yours, 20% the company's. This workshop is the company's effort to contribute towards its 20%." In a similar spirit, another company offers workshops based on their version of Paul Thompson's career-stages model, to help employees identify their position on the path, understand their potential more clearly, and find ways of fulfilling it.¹⁴

These companies have a vested interest in having their members discover a path with a heart. Teaching about careers in schools can help the student find such a path much earlier.

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