

Nice Work

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Mamas, don't let your babies grow up to be cowboys.
Don't let 'em pick guitars or drive them old trucks.
Let 'em be doctors and lawyers and such.
(Willie Nelson and Waylon Jennings)

Parent: (Beaming) Gee, Honey, you've made us so proud. You have really thrown yourself into your academic work, made the Dean's List, taken advantage of all a strong liberal education had to offer. Do you have any idea what you might like to do after graduation?

Child: Well, Mom, I think it must be pretty clear by now that there is something I'm really interested in, in fact, something I'm totally head over heels in love with. I've decided I want to go to graduate school and study art history—I'm pretty sure I want to teach—you know, be a professor, like the great teachers I have in college.

Parent: (Sinking into chair) Holy Mother of Mercy, you can't be serious! I knew you were really preoccupied with art history, but I figured it was just a youthful phase, like being a socialist, or liking the *Backstreet Boys*. Please tell me you're joking . . . where did I go wrong?

Child: Honestly, Mom, I really thought you'd be happy about this, after all you studied art history, in fact you're the one who got me interested in art history in the first place! You and Dad have always told me to "follow my dream," and I can't think of anything better than studying the thing I love and offering my knowledge to others, in the hopes that they will love it as much as I do.

Parent: Of course I wanted you to be "interested" in art history, and English, and history and lots of other good things that develop your cultural sensitivities and improve your writing and critical thinking skills—so you would be better prepared to "follow your dream," preferably a dream of being a lawyer, or a pediatrician, or an actuary. I never meant for you to get carried away and throw your life away on some pipe dream! Do you know what kind of life you are setting yourself up for? You'll spend ten years in graduate school, go heavily into debt, and have less than a 50 percent chance of getting a job—and even if you get a job—haven't you read this issue of *Peer Review*, for gosh sakes?!

Child: (in a steely voice) Mom, it's *what* I want to do, it's

what I'm interested in—and it's not like I was telling you I wanted to be a street mime, for heaven's sake.

Parent: (Shrilly) Hey, at least a street mime has a *marketable* skill! And compared to college teachers, street mimes get respect! Believe me, young lady, there's a big difference between knowing what you're interested in and knowing what's in your best interest. (Voice softening, with note of pleading) What happened to your wanting to be an actress? You love the theatre, and it's a union job. When you were nine you wanted to be an astronaut—it's not too late! You could start brushing up on your physics now!

Child: (Eyes narrowing) I really don't understand this. Both you and Dad got Ph.D.s in the humanities, why are you *really* so freaked out?

Parent: I just don't want you to go through what we have gone through! Years of un- or under-employment, the financial insecurity, the lonely and nomadic existence following the academic job market, the pain of training for years for a profession you'll never practice—no one wants their child to go through that!

Child: Sure, sure. I know you guys never seem to have as much money as my friends' parents, and that some of our relatives *do* think you are just a couple of irresponsible deadbeats. In fact, when I was growing up I was never actually sure what it was you and Dad actually did for a living. But I always knew that years of studying something you loved changed your life, and continues to be central to your work.

Parent: What are you talking about! The closest I ever got to getting work in my field was a depressing chain of adjunct positions—and what I do now seems pretty far away from art history.

Child: Mom, you're talking about jobs and not work! As Hannah Arendt says in *The Human Condition*, the tragedy of modern life is that "too few people consider what they are doing in terms of work, rather than in terms of making a living." The "work" of your life—your life as a citizen, thinker, parent, solver of problems, and producer of knowledge—is what makes you who you really are, not the weird jobs you've had.

Parent: *Damn* that liberal education—Wait till your father hears about this, it will break his heart! ■