

The Most Important Lesson I Learned at Harvard

For decades we've been told to "follow your passion" to "find the career meant for you." "Do what you love and the money will follow." Such clichés have become a staple of commencement speeches, such as Steve Jobs' famed 2005 address at Stanford in which he said: "There is no reason not to follow your heart." And yet how often does that actually happen?

For most of my childhood, I was a figure skater and then later a dancer. Nothing excited me more than performing. You know how little kids bob around to music they hear –displaying that innate quality of self expression that we rapidly lose because it's "socially unacceptable?" That was me all the time. Free, fun and fluid. But I haven't felt that way in a long time.

So I'm going to tell you the most important lesson I learned in my four years at Harvard. Something which I could have garnered from a fortune cookie, though I probably wouldn't have taken it to heart if it hadn't come with the stress, meltdowns, all nighters in this very dining hall and tears that this did. I can't promise that it won't be cheesy, but I do promise that it's very real.

We have spent our entire lives achieving. Some of you I know very well and some I only know by sight. But what I do know is that everyone in this room is a rockstar at something – and most likely at more than one something. When I arrived at Harvard I thought that I could finally take a break from running on the hamster wheel. I had gotten what I wanted – the ultimate prize in my mind. But no – I started hearing words like Investment Banking and Trading and Private Wealth... and regardless of the fact that I did not know what any of those things meant for a very long time, I began to feel this enormous pressure to follow the herd – to achieve for the sake of success alone. With all of the opportunities that Harvard offered me, from theater to karate to dance, the only ones that seemed to matter were those recommended by the freshmen who affirmed knowledgeable that they were just going to do I-banking before moving to PE – I mean that's where the real money was after all, right? Sound familiar?

So I convinced myself that in order to call my successful and make my parents proud, there were certain things that I ought to be doing. Otherwise known as resume building. Most of the decisions I have made here have been for that precise reason. And to be totally honest, I have achieved nearly everything I set out to. But recently, I found something that my qualifications and leadership positions did not garner me, and I began to question the purpose behind the past three and a half years.

I thought back to how excited music and dancing used to make me and realized that most things I spent my time on currently filled me with dread. My choices had been logical and well-reasoned, but they lacked the motivation of something far more powerful – my heart. Why should we spend our time chasing after things if the journey is unbearable? I asked a really good friend that question recently and she answered me honestly that it is simply too much of a risk to pursue what actually makes us happy. I thought a lot about her answer, but ultimately I disagree. I believe it is too risky NOT to pursue what makes us tick. With the little time we have, it would be a shame to pass up on the chance to make those dreams you find yourself coming back to time and again, a reality. The tried and true route that we seem to constantly be pushed toward at Harvard may be safe, but what does it all mean if there is no enjoyment at the end of the day?

I'm not standing up here pretending to have all the answers, nor do I wish to preach. I simply hope that it does not take you as long as it took me to learn this lesson. So when you find yourself running at a high pace on that hamster wheel and you don't even want to catch whatever is at the end of that tiring battle, slow down. Speed is the enemy of nearly everything in life that really matters. It's addictive and it undermines quality, compassion, depth, creativity, appreciation and real relationship. Savor every moment — even the difficult ones. It all goes so fast. At 75, we won't remember the promotions or the grants or the mistakes. But we will remember the general feeling from over the years. Were we happy? Were we stressed? Were we unsatisfied? And so, I'm no longer focusing on what is going to be most impressive to my next employer or admissions officer. But instead, I'm learning to go after what makes me bounce around like a little kid again – in other words, what will add value to my life regardless of its place on my resume. I didn't learn this “most important” lesson in lecture, or in section or in cramming for a midterm in the depths of Lamont. But somewhere amidst all of these experiences, this is what I will remember most from my time in college. Perhaps it's not what Harvard wanted me to learn or what it will promote in its admissions materials, but I certainly wouldn't have had it any other way.