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Choosing a Life Work.

by

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It has been said that, since vocation is the chief support of the home and tends to develop individual character and manhood, just so it clearly underlies the welfare and prosperity of the nation. Because of this great importance of choosing well our life work and a realization that many hundreds of young men are each year merely drifting into any opening that presents itself, I am led to undertake a detailed study of the influences attending the choice of a life work. In this strenuous educational age, when we find many of the so-called "college men" still at that stage of life when the energy of growth in the boy's body has not yet given place to the energetic development of the man's brain, it seems absolutely necessary for us to pause for a moment and discover, if possible, the best means of guiding each of our future citizens into his position of greatest usefulness. Considering the countless individuals to whom this is a vital question I recognize that it would be impossible to formulate a fixed rule by which one will find his proper sphere, but the fundamental principles are applicable to every man who wishes to make the most of his life.

From the little boy of ten years who has for his ideal a show-man and whose highest ambition is to run the merry-go-round when he gets to be a man, to the young man who has aspirations of the president's chair, there is a broad span; but I maintain that only by nourishing and feeding this ever-changing ideal will the true manhood and character in the boy be developed. In the growing boy new fields of operation are continually attracting attention and, when wisely guided, this determination of purpose is a character to be fostered, not smothered.

The question which now arises is, "When is the proper time

definitely to decide upon our life work?" To this question we must make a three-fold answer and we must consider the social era in which the rising generation will become mature men. For the boy who simply "scamps" through his early education and drops school and study as soon as his age permits I would give the advice to choose immediately. There is not much choice for him then, but with every year that he defers the choosing, the opportunities vary inversely. This is surely an unfortunate class of coming citizens with which society will be burdened.

Passing from this lower order, we must answer the question for those more admirable boys who are forced to begin the support of their family as soon as their high school training is completed. Circumstances have here forced a premature choosing with which we must deal justly. The youth may be forced into employment which offers a livelihood and in this he may find his life work. But I pity that boy who is content to be fettered so soon by a calling in which he cannot put his whole energy and life. Under such conditions he should begin to broaden his views of life's activities by reading or personal investigation and never cease his search for a chosen work until he is satisfied with his findings. This may mean that he must continue his education after years of waiting. There is no determinable age at which we choose; it is, I would say, rather a state in the development of the mind and character.

Thirdly the question comes with all its force and formidable bearing to that class of men who are availing themselves of the privileges of a higher education. And under this head, I believe, should come all those who are not included in the first and second divisions; for there is little excuse for the lad who discontinues his education after a high school training unless

forced by extreme circumstances.

The question is greatest to college men because the responsibility of the nation and of the people will undoubtedly be upon their shoulders. Then, when shall we make our choice of our part in the advancement of our country? I believe the purpose of institutions of higher learning is, primarily, to broaden a man's view of life; to make him see life as it is and from all sides; to fit him to take his active part in it; to prepare him to make it better. It stands to reason then, that the choice of a life work does not properly come early in the college course.

In this day of specialization, the institution that enables a man to specialize is fulfilling a purpose of good to society; but the system now in use in many schools, of deferring the specializing until the second year, is admirable, especially so in the technical schools. Then, is the second year the time to make the decision? The college man must here make a choice as to the course he will pursue, but I would say that this decision should not necessarily be final. Many are the men who are taking, for instance, a course in engineering and who feel themselves utterly unfit for such a vocation, but continue in it because they dread giving up that which they start to do. Is this strength of character or weakness?

Yes, at the time when one must begin to specialize in a certain branch of knowledge, is the time for a partial choosing. But we must be cautious or this choosing will make us so narrow that we are not open to the call of a more congenial work.

Then why not make our final choice of a life work upon the eve of our graduation from the institution, having gained a broad view of life? There are several reasons why we should not defer this important step until so late. First: It is usually

the case with a man who is about to be cast upon his own responsibility, that he begins to look for a position, in the latter part of his senior year. If he is competent and well recommended, a position in line with his training is offered him and the question is settled easily. However there is often a chance that the right position does not appear, and being undecided as to what he wishes to make his vocation, our senior shifts about until finally he accepts the position with the best immediate salary. Thus his life work may be determined without the exercise of that valuable trait in a man, decision of character.

Second: When the question is not answered until the senior year there is less opportunity for preparation. However little time is given for preparation essentially different from the course being followed, the very purpose of the life work and the trend of thought along that line is a school in itself.

Thus by the process of elimination we arrive at the conclusion that under ordinary circumstances the purpose of a life work should be formed while the student is in his third year at college. We must not consider this as an unvarying rule but by adaptation to its fundamental principle the energy of a life is conserved and its usefulness increased. The value of a purpose in life cannot be overestimated.

Here let us formulate a definite idea as to why we have been placed in these surroundings of social communion and what is our duty to those with whom we come in contact and to our posterity. Is my life to be lived for material gain for myself and my descendants?, is a question to be gravely considered by every man who makes the choice. I cannot comprehend how a man who can see the beauties of nature about him; who can feel the thrill of social contact with his fellow men; who can appreciate the brevity

of our existence, yes, of the existence of the human race; I cannot conceive how such a man can believe that the best lies in storing away an immense amount of wealth for wealth's sake. I do not mean that money getting is not good. It is truly a necessity. But the all consuming greed of obtaining and hoarding money as a purpose in life is most detrimental to the development of the miser's character and to the welfare of the country. To be sure the exigencies of our modern life demand that a certain portion of our citizens set apart their lives to working out the more mechanical and routine affairs and thus their vision of the humanitarian life is partially obscured. Even so, the choice of this field of labor should not be allowed to so narrow the view that the purpose in life is made sordid and material.

When Bryant said:

"He who, in the love of Nature
Holds communion with her visible
forms,

She speaks a various language,"

he did not limit the possibilities of any man to approach into the sanctuary of Nature. Likewise the gate of the idealistic purpose is open to the engineer as well as to the philosopher: to the scientist as well as to the minister.

In making the choice of a life work which will enable us to advance best the interests of our fellow men we have a peculiar right to demand certain qualifications of any activity before it can be considered truly a life work. Foremost among these qualifications is the material question, Will it give sufficient remuneration to support the worker and his family? Until recent years the work in Christian fields has failed in a large measure to meet this requirement of a vocation and has consequently been

less considered in the choosing. This objection has been largely overcome with a fuller realization of its necessity by placing it upon a business basis.

A second qualification is that it must be truly a life work. The idea is prevalent, for instance, that the term of usefulness in the Young Men's Christian Association secretaryship is reached at the age of forty-five or fifty, thus debarring it from a status as a vocation. This has been conclusively proven, by many specific instances to be an erroneous idea, and that branch of Christian work now offers a most useful career and is indeed a life work. On the contrary many activities which appear at first as a complete labor find a sudden terminus at an age when the support is most depended upon. These must surely be avoided in making our choice and this qualification is of essential importance.

To be really a vocation, a work must be one which is ever opening its possibilities of advancement, one which is ever ahead of the laborer; one in which he can expend his entire self, "burn himself out;" one which offers a reward in results obtained. These features are invaluable to the development of the character and mental possibilities.

Having now a definite idea of a purpose in life and the qualifications of a life work we shall now discover, if possible, by what means, external to ourselves, we can aid in guiding our lives into the niche God intended us to fill.

And having thus suggested the thought that our purpose is to conform to some plan our Creator has for us, I believe we have our most valuable asset to aid us, in prayer. Is it not reasonable to believe that He who placed us upon this earth for the fulfilment of His purpose, will guide us with unerring faithfulness if we place our will in harmony with His? With Bryant let

us say "He who, from zone to zone,
 Guides through the boundless sky
 thy certain flight,
In the long way that I must tread alone
 Will lead my steps aright."

Then among the best methods of finding out God's will for our lives is to appeal to our closest and most trusted friends, to men of broad experience, to men who know our characters, to men in whom we have confidence. God works through practical means and by employing every possible opportunity for knowing oneself, we find exactly what we are fitted to do.

Finally, in the words of Shakespeare: "To thine own self be true - then thou canst not be false to any man." Introspection is indeed dangerous when improperly used, but wisely used it reveals our possibilities, our inmost desires, our characters, in such a light that we must live up to all that in us lies.

My purpose in this discussion has not been to make an exhaustive study of the practices and ideal methods of choosing a life work. It has been rather to present some of the vital, fundamental principles involved in making this essentially difficult and important choice. The adaptation of these principles are individual and widely varying problems to be worked out in each case according to environments, educational advantages, and tendencies of the individual. I believe in the rising generation; I believe in the future of our country; but I also believe that the greatest danger to the American people today is this habit of its youth of drifting into a life work. Let us help solve the problem justly, logically and firmly.