

THE IMPORTANCE OF FALLING IN LOVE WITH SOMETHING

E. Paul Torrance

My experience and research have increasingly made me aware of the dreadful importance of falling in love with “something” –a dream, an image of the future. I am convinced that the driving force behind future accomplishments is the image of the future of people. Positive images of the future are a powerful and magnetic force. These images of the future draw us on and energize us. Giving us the courage and will to take important initiatives and move forward to new solutions and achievements. To dream and to plan, to be curious about the future and to wonder how much it can be influenced by our efforts are important aspects of our being human. In fact, life’s most energizing and exciting moments occur in those split seconds when our struggling and searching are suddenly transformed into the dazzling aura of the profoundly new, an image of the future.

During recent years, scientists have accumulated considerable evidence that our image of the future is a powerful motivating force and determines what we are motivated to achieve. In fact, a person’s image of the future may be a better predictor of future attainment than his past performances. Several scholars (Polak, 1973, Bundy, 1976) have pointed out that societies have always been dependent upon a creatively gifted minority for their images of the future. History also warns that societies that lack vigorous, realistic images of the future perish. Certainly, we need new, positive images of the future throughout the world, ones that are compelling and exciting to the imagination. Each unique, creative individual also needs such an image.

FALL IN LOVE WITH YOUR DREAM

If you have a dream of the future and have fallen in love with it—if you are committed to this dream and willing to persist with it, you are doubly lucky.

One of the most powerful wellsprings of creative energy, outstanding accomplishment, and self-fulfillment seems to be falling in love in love with something—your dream, your image of the future. The autobiographies and biographies of many of those who have produced the ideas that have changed the world and made it a better place to live in reveal that the wellspring of the creative energy that produced their achievements was their being in love with something, usually at an early age and persisting throughout their lives.

Strong research evidence for this conclusion emerges in a 22-year longitudinal study I am now completing of elementary school children I began studying in 1958. In the third, fourth, and fifth grades, I asked these children what they were in love with, what they wanted to do when they grew up. Some of them consistently said, “I don’t know.” Others were inconsistent, changing their future images each year. Most of these continued to change and are now in careers different from any of these that they mentioned as youngsters. Surprisingly, about half of them were consistent in their choices and have persisted in careers consistent with the future career images they expressed as children. Using five different sets of criteria or indicators of creative achievement, ranging from the number of publicly recognized and acknowledged creative achievements to the number of unrecognized creative style of live attainments, the childhood future career images proved to be a significant predictor of each of these five indexes of creative adult achievement. As a matter of fact, this indicator (having or not having a future image that they were in love with) was a better predictor of adult creative achievement than indexes of scholastic promise and attainment in school.

YOUR SEARCH FOR YOUR IDENTITY

Many people have no dream, no clear image of the future. Some have a dream, even a clear image of the future but they are not in love with it—they may feel that it is not really them.

How might one search for her/his identity and discover a dream and fall in love with it? In my opinion, this search for identity is one of the most important things that a person ever does. It has been a basic concern of my research.

Sometimes a story—even a fantasy—can capture the essence of a problem such as this and distill the truth more powerfully than our most sophisticated researcher and our fastest and most complex and ingenious computers. Lloyd Alexander (1967) in his story, *Taran Wanderer*, has accomplished just such a feat regarding a gifted young man's search for his identity. In this delightful fantasy, Taran, the hero, goes forth to come to grips with a merciless opponent, the truth about himself, and to reshape his life out of his own inner resources.

The dreadful importance of finding one's identity is reflected in the following speech Taran made when a king, recognizing Taran's giftedness for leadership, offered to make Taran his own son and turn his kingdom over to him:

It is my heart to learn the truth about myself. I will not stop short of it. Were I to do so, who I am would forever be unknown and through all my life I would feel a part of me lacking. (p.85)

The king was sad but recognized the truth that Taran spoke. After a moment he clapped Taran heartily on the back and cried:

My breath, blood, and beard! You've a will to chase the wild goose, will-o-the-wisp, or whatever it may be; and I'll say no more to keep you from it.

Seek it out, lad! Whether or not you find it, come back and Cadiffor will welcome you. But hasten, Taran was able to do something that many talented and gifted young people are never able to do—walk away from the games that others try to impose upon them. Some of the world's greatest tragedies are the lives of gifted young people who

never find the courage to walk away from the games others want to play, when these games are not really theirs.

In the story about Taran, there is a beautiful description of Taran's struggle in deciding whether to set out on the search for his identity. The orchards were white with fragrant blossoms. The newly planted fields were light as green mist. These sights and scents gave Taran no joy. His world was empty. He carried out his tasks of weeding, cultivating, and tending the white pig as carefully as ever, but he went about his tasks distractedly. His supervisor tried to help him "snap out of it" by offering to teach him "the high secrets of planting turnips, raising cabbage, or whatever he might want to know." Taran wanted to know who he was and he knew that his supervisor could not tell him.

Taran's search for his identity and something he could fall in love with was a long one. He was a gifted person so he was able to succeed in many occupations. While others tried to influence him to stay with these occupations, each time he would say, "It is not me. My heart is not in it." For example, when he left his apprenticeship with a craftsman, he said.:

By rights, I should be more than happy to dwell here all my life. I've found peace and friendship—and a kind of hope, as well... Yet, somehow this way is not mine. A spur drives me to seek more than what Small Avren brings.

What I seek, I do not know. But, alas, I know it is not here. (p.218)

After this, Taran was apprenticed to a masterful swordsmith, the best in the land. The swordsmith passionately loved what he did. It was his life. While Taran loved his teacher and excelled as a swordsmith, he finally said:

But I know in my heart your craft is not mine. A spur drove me from Small

Avren, and it drives me now. And so must I journey, even if I wished to stay.

(p.227)

Taran also became an excellent weaver, but this too was not his game, not his way. Then he was apprenticed to a famous potter, a man who was truly in love with being a potter, Taran was captivated by the possibilities of life as a potter. About this, he said

When my hands touched the clay, I knew I would count myself happy to be a potter. More than smithing, more than weaving—it's as though I could give shape to what was in my heart I understand what Annlaw meant. There is no difference between him and his work. Indeed, Annlaw puts himself into the clay and makes it live with its own life. If I, too, might learn to do this (p. 245)

However, this was one kind of giftedness that was denied Taran. In parting he cried.

What lacks? I could forge a sword well enough and weave a cloak well enough. But now, what I truly long to grasp is beyond my reach. Must the one skill I sought above all be denied me? Is the gift forbidden? (pp.247-248)

The understanding potter comforted Taran, saying. There are those who have labored all their lives to gain the gift, striving until the end only to find themselves mistaken, and those who had it born in them yet never knew: those who lost heart too soon, and those who should never have begun at all. Count yourself lucky that you have understood this now and not spent your years in vain hope. This much you have learned, and no learning is wasted (p.248).

Although Taran's story is a fantasy, his story—the struggle for identity—the search for one's dream—is repeated in each person's life I would like to share with you some of the “real life” stories of the young people in my longitudinal study of creative behavior.

TWO CONTRASTING SEARCHES

First, I shall describe two contrasting cases, one the son of physicians and surgeons and the other the son of musicians. Naturally, the physicians and surgeons thought their son was a physician and the musicians thought their son was a musician. Both the surgeons and the physicians and the musicians loved their work and their lives. They could think of nothing better for their sons. At first, their sons agreed or seemed to agree.

First, let's look at the story of the son of the surgeons and physicians. He is now quite successful as a creative musician in Hollywood and New York. He completed the follow-up questionnaire for my study just after he completed work on the music for *The Rose*, starring Bette Midler. He wrote asking if there was anything about his creativity tests in elementary school that would have caused me to predict a successful career as a creative musician. While we have never tried to predict a specific creative career, I was curious to examine his responses to the creativity tests he took in elementary school. His scores on the tests each year were quite high and one would certainly see in his responses much creative potentiality. Each year, when asked about his dream for the future, he said that he wanted to be a physician or surgeon. Yet, his responses were filled with thoughts of music and musicians. When asked to "make objects" from two pages of circles, he drew the Beatles, drums, horns, and other symbols of music. It was clear that "music was on his mind," even though he said that he wanted to be a physician or surgeon. In the fifth grade, he obtained a scholarship to a summer music camp and slowly began to realize that he was really in love with music and being a musician. Fortunately, his parents became reconciled to their son's walking away from the dream they had for him. He seems quite happy in living his own dream, something he is in love with.

PERSISTENCE OF CHILDHOOD DREAMS

Many of the young people in my 22-year study, however, fell in love with something in the second or third grade and have persisted with these early dreams to create highly successful careers.

For example, Mack began making science fiction drawings in the second grade and in the third grade he was writing science fiction stories and writing space dramas that his classmates enacted. He was also gifted in music, art, science, and many other fields. His interest in science fiction has persisted. While in high school, he organized the Minnesota Science Fiction Society which still publishes a science fiction magazine and holds annual meetings. He has completed a Ph.D. degree with a dissertation on utopian political theory. His list of awards, creative musical and acting performances, musical compositions, business entrepreneurships, and art works is most impressive. He has earned money through illustrating, composing and producing music, editing, working as a forecaster in a large business, and the like. However, he never forgets that his real love is writing—something he discovered at least by the time he was in the third grade. Being able to do these other things gives him financial security and provides him with much of the raw materials with which his imagination creates science fiction and other kinds of literature.

Robert, one of Mack's classmates, fell in love with inventing in the third grade and kept the classroom cluttered with his inventions, just as Mack kept things covered with his space age drawings. He has a PH.D. degree in engineering and is still inventing with a corporation on the forefront in his field. At the time he completed his follow up questionnaire, his aspiration was to become an independent inventor. This would free him to “play his own game in his own way” to a greater degree. A couple of months after he had returned his questionnaire, he had an inventive breakthrough that he believes will make him an independent inventor.

Karl. Another member of this class, had fallen in love with acting in the third grade. He played leading roles in Mack's space dramas. His academic performance, however, was disappointing to his parents who were university professors. Karl's great talent as an actor and his love for it was not noted and acknowledged, however, until he was in the fourth grade. His fourth grade teacher recognized this and helped his parents to recognize it. When his parents showed pleasure in Karl's newly-recognized talents, Karl began to feel better about himself and his success in academics began to soar. He holds graduate degrees, is a successful repertory theatre actor, and theater director in a large city. He has received acclaim for his acting in the United States, London, Edinburgh, and other theatre centers.

Some of the girls in this same class had also fallen in love with things by the time they were in the third and fourth grades and have persisted in them. Alice was in love with words and each year said she wanted to be a semanticist. Drawing pictures was not her "game," and her fourth grade teacher's efforts to get her to express her creativity through drawings were disasters. After a very successful college and graduate school career and a brief career in advertising and public relations, she is now rearing a family. However, she continues to be a semanticist by operating an editorial business in her home and keeping several typists busy with the dissertations, books, and other literary works of graduate students and faculty in a large, prestigious university, a very fitting outlet for her love of words.

Just as Alice was in love with words, Katie was in love with pictures and making pictures tell stories. In the fourth grade, her art work was of professional quality. It was easy for her to get a job as an illustrator of children's books. However, her fourth grade teacher had interested her in writing and illustrating children's stories. She fell in love with this and has come back to it only recently and is doing just this.

The struggle to play their own games and pursue their dreams, however, has not been easy for some of the girls in this study. Patricia is a good example of this. Year after year, her scores on the creativity tests were consistently high, yet she felt that she must hide her creative talents from her teachers and classmates. On the follow up questionnaire she described her plight back then as follows;

I am a writer today, but not until college did I realize I had any unusual ability. My elementary school experiences were awful. I got perfect marks for organization, spelling, and punctuation, but was graded down for having lousy handwriting I also was never told that anything I did was original...My father was mentally ill and most of the things I could have written about I knew were different from what the other kids would write...I wanted to be creative, but I was terrible in art, and thought I was a dud...If somebody had told me back then that I was “creative” I would have had something to hold onto. All I knew was that I was different.

CONCLUSION

All of the young people in my 22-year study have exciting stories to tell of their search for identity and their struggle to find ways of “playing the game” and doing the thing that they are in love with. Some of their stories are heartbreaking, yet we learn important lessons from them. Many of them have had the good fortune of having teachers, parents, or mentors who understood their dreams and respected the things that they were in love with. These teachers, parents, and mentors helped them learn how to “play their games” and this has made a difference

in their lives and in their achievements. These people helped them free themselves of the expectations of others and the “games” that others expected them play so that they could pursue the thing that they are in love with and make useful social contributions.

I believe that these young adults would now give advice that would add up to something like this:

1. Don't be afraid to fall in love with something and pursue it with intensity and depth.
2. Know, understand, take pride in, practice, develop, use, exploit, and enjoy your greatest strengths.
3. Learn to free yourself from the expectations of others and to walk away from the games that others try to impose upon you. Free yourself to “play your own game” in such a way as to make good use of your gifts. Search out and cultivate great teachers or mentors who will help you accomplish these things.
4. Don't waste a lot of expensive energy in trying to do things for which you have little ability or live. Do what you can do well and what you love, giving freely of the infinity of your greatest strengths and most intense loves.

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