If I Don’t Dig the Ditch, Who Will?

From the moment I entered elementary school it felt like the teachers had started a countdown for the days left until graduation. Every year the questions on tests and worksheets changed, but one question in the classroom remained the same: “What do you want to be when you grow up?” Which is really just the first stage of the never-ending question, “What do you want to do with your life?” In middle school it was all about trying to get accepted into the best high school possible. It made sense, since the next logical step after middle school was high school. Once I entered high school, it was like every step I took was a rung on a carefully constructed ladder towards success, and success meant college.

The only post-high school plans that were presented to us were college and the armed forces. If you did not choose one or the other, you were destined to become a cautionary tale. For a brief time I started to consider maybe just working right after graduating, but a guest speaker made it as clear as a shard of glass that that was not an option. Once during sophomore year, my English teacher invited her daughter, a student at a nearby university, to come talk to us. She mostly just gave advice on enrolling and how to deal with harder classes and such. At one point she asked how many of us were going to college. Most of the class raised their hand, but several of us, including myself, did not. The problem was not that I did not want to go, I was just unsure about it. Then she said something that still echoes in my mind. After seeing that not everyone raised their hand she said, “That’s fine. I don’t care if you end up digging a ditch for the rest of your life.” I chose to go to college.
I was in class trying to pay attention to a lecture so I could get a credit I needed as a requirement for a major I had not even chosen yet. Just as my mind was starting to drift off my professor made an offhand comment that most of the people in college should not even be there, and that what we really need are more tradesmen. I immediately focused again and waited for him to elaborate but he never did.

Even after several days I could not stop thinking about what my professor said, so I looked up what a tradesman was. Then from there I looked at different kinds of trades and trade schools and I wondered why no one had ever mentioned them. Then I realized that as far as I could remember, no one in high school had ever mentioned anything other than college. Any time the counselors showed up to talk to us it was always about how to choose a college, concurrent enrollment, how to fill out an application, who to ask for recommendation letters, where to get scholarships, tips on writing a good application essay, how to build your high school resume, the benefits of taking advanced classes, or how to get credit for Advanced Placement exams. They offered no advice about how to start a business, what jobs you could get without a degree, trade schools, how to get into an apprenticeship, or how to enter the workforce directly. They held your hand through the entire process of enrolling into a college but left you to investigate the murky waters of any other option alone.

I also realized that no one, not once, ever discussed how to know if college was for you. The fact is, not everyone is good at academics and not everyone likes it. That created a problem because it was an understood fact that if you did poorly in class that meant you were stupid, which meant you would be a failure later in life. If you had bad grades then you were doomed to become the pathetic “person working at McDonald’s their whole life”, a phrase I heard often. As
I dwelled on all this I could not help but remember one of my classmates from freshman year. We all sat in groups, and one day someone talked about what career they wanted, and another person from the group said that he already knew what he wanted to be. He wanted to be a construction worker. Another girl told him, “No, don’t be the construction worker. Be the architect.” At the time we all thought that what she said was very inspirational and agreed with her, and told him that he should be an architect instead. Now when I look back all I feel is guilt because his goal was a perfectly good one and we made him feel like he was not aiming high enough. Construction work is a hard, admirable job that needs many workers and we did not consider that. How many times has that happened? I wonder how many people are currently struggling to keep their head above water in college when they could have done an amazing job in something completely different, but did not pursue it because they either did not know it was an option or felt that they were not aiming high enough.

The more I think about the subject, the more it infuriates me. I find myself wishing I could go back in time and tell that classmate that he should be a construction worker. I wish I could go back to the day the guest speaker, my teacher’s daughter, came and tell her, “Well what if I want to dig a ditch? Is something wrong with that? What if I dig it better than anyone else ever could? If I don’t dig it, then who will?”

College and the armed forces should not be the only paths presented to students, and not pursuing one of those should not equal failure. Not everyone thrives in an environment where you sit still for hours absorbing as much information as possible, and most importantly, not everyone likes it. Anyone might be able to do it but without being good at it or at least having motivation to do it, school becomes a miserable and exhausting cycle. Not encouraging people to
consider options like becoming a carpenter, boilermaker, or a welder could cause problems somewhere down the line. Eventually, the older people who currently have those jobs are going to retire and if there are not enough young people who can replace them there will be a labor shortage in those kinds of jobs. It is not easy work to do. They require skill and experience and should be viewed with the same respect as jobs such as accounting. There is no such thing as an easy job, and making it seem like there is causes others to look down on the people who do them. For example, a truck driver might not need ten years of school to be qualified, but that does not make it a low-skilled job because not anyone can sit and focus for hours at a time and navigate through difficult streets. Every job is valuable in some way to society and there is nothing shameful about having one that does not require a degree. Students thinking that there is can be partially blamed on school for making it seem like good grades and college are the definition of success. The counselors often said that they wanted to help us plan our future, but that was not true. They wanted to help us plan how and where we would pursue our major.

High school counselors should give students real guidance on making decisions about their future. They should discuss how to know what kind of work someone is suited for, whether it is studying, hands-on activities, or physically active work, and how to go about pursuing each one. Or at the very least, they should pull back the curtain all the way and show that there are multiple paths to choose from. Parents should also reassure their children and tell them it is all right if they do not go to college. There are millions of jobs out there and students should know that they do not have to go down the carved out path that everyone has laid out for them if they do not want to. After all, no graphic designer can use running water without plumbers to install
and maintain it, and no engineer can give their partner an engagement ring without a jeweler there to make it.