

The Road Taken Jeffrey J. Smith

Thank you to Dr. Raudenbush and the rest of individuals responsible for allowing me the honor and privilege of returning to Wheeling Jesuit University to be the invited speaker on the 10th WJU Annual Research and Scholarship Symposium.

Many of my fondest memories of WJU involve Dr. Raudenbush and other members of our Psychology research 'Superlab' - attending conferences, analyzing data remotely over Christmas breaks, and serving excited students 'free beer' in the name of scientific inquiry. I hope each of you enjoys even a fraction of the intellectual and personal support I received from Dr. Raudenbush as part of your relationship with WJU's faculty.

I have had many excellent relationships in my life, personal, academic, and professional, but before I begin, I would like to mention three individuals instrumental to any success I've had as a dedication: my brother, who personifies authenticity and principle, my mother, with her love and compassion, and my father, who embodies courage and resilience.

My entire life has been blessed with thoughtful consideration and questioning rather than discouragement from many individuals, but these three have been there for my entire lifetime, ensuring that I never lacked the capacity for aspiration and hope through their consistent love and support.

The purpose of my words today is to help you discover and experience Life – the capital "L" life that is not encumbered by unnecessary stress and frustration related to the mundane – not necessarily this morning, or today, or this week, but at some point in your lives, I hope you recall my collection of my experiences and others' wisdom spoken today and leverage it to your benefit and the benefit of others.

The title of this talk is, as many I'm sure have guessed, a play on the title of a poem by Robert Frost, *The Road Not Taken*. I will begin by reciting this brief work for those of you who are not acquainted with it.

The Road Not Taken Robert Frost

TWO roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

Poetry and other forms of art are beautiful in that one can appreciate meaning on various levels. What I appreciate most about this piece, a favorite of mine, is the simplicity of its take-away message for my life.

Specifically that, while I have taken many roads and made quite a few missteps along the way, minimizing regret and any wayward thoughts of 'what if?' by appreciating the road I've traveled has made – and will make – all the difference.

Today I would like to talk with each of you about not only my road, but yours. One of my favorite activities is learning about and listening to the aspirations of others, discussing potential roads with their associated risks and rewards, without discouraging any particular experience during one's quest for self-discovery.

I would like to present a simple method for analyzing and organizing one's own life, experiences, and aspirations. A Disclaimer (I am a law school dropout and well-trained in the complexities of risk communication systems, after all): This method is an amalgamation of my life experience and the wisdom of others, no one in particular. The method is based upon the assumptions that, unfortunately, life is too short for experiencing everything one wishes and that many others are distracted by day-to-day necessities, as I often am.

It's certainly not the most sophisticated method, but I've developed it over the past decade for parsimoniously reminding myself what is most important and providing direction for improving not only the road I am taking, but also the roads presented to me.

The utility of this list has grown with me as my aspirations, priorities, interests, and relationships have evolved and increased in complexity; however, the categories have remained constant.

Start by drawing a line across your paper, about two-thirds of the way down.

Trivialities (Necessities)

Please write: We do what we have to do so we can do what we want to do. Laundry, dishes, oil changes, groceries, mortgages, rent, etc. Unfortunately, these endless, reoccurring, and uninspiring types of tasks dominate many lives, and, in my opinion, ruin many to-do lists. For today, we are accepting that we need food, water, and warm, clean shelter, so we are not wasting any time or energy being aggravated about the time and money required for bill paying. Please note, in some countries, gathering usable water is literally what we call a full-time job.

Please draw an "X" underneath 'We do what we have to do so we can do what we want to do' to reinforce that we are not thinking about these things right now.

Time to start back at the top. Please write...

God and Faith

Who is God to you right now? If you and Jesus Christ were going to have a face-to-face conversation this afternoon, would you be eager or would you be anxious? What would you want to ask Him? Why have you not asked him already through prayer?

Who do you wish God is? When do you experience God's presence most strongly?

When do you feel alone? Who and what in your life supports you in progressing from where you are in your faith today to where you would like to be in a year?

Please write... **Family / Friends**

Do you consider every interaction with family and friends an opportunity to be an uplifting contributor to the success and well-being of another?

Are you someone with whom your family and friends would relish more time and interaction? Are you someone that your family and friends avoid when possible, because you are frequently sarcastic or critical?

Are you someone who can be trusted? Are you a genuine listener or someone who just seems to be waiting for his or her turn to speak?

Next write... **Me – AM / PERCEIVED**

Building One's Brand I selected the word brand here because it reflects not only who one IS, but also how one IS PERCEIVED.

Next... **Professionally: Internal and External**

If you are currently employed, is it a position that utilizes your talents and strengths? If not, are you actively pursuing another position or career or working to shape your current position? If not, why not? If so, how so?

How do you coworkers perceive you? As someone who can be trusted? As a courageous, cowardly, or reckless leader? As someone who is resilient or weak, humble or arrogant, receptive or close-minded?

If you are a student looking for your first job, are you aware of what the ideal resume looks like for positions that interest you? Are you aware of the areas where your life experiences and education look weak compared to other candidates? Have you actually observed multiple people in the positions you are considering at work?

Opportunities for advancement and security occur both within and outside an organization. Who advocates for you within your organization? Who are your parachutes within your organization?

If you lost your current position, how current are your skills? How current are your industry contacts?

Academically

Past: How are your relationships with the individuals who helped you accomplish what you have accomplished so far?

Present: Who and what do you rely on to ensure that you're constantly learning and experiencing?

Future: What skills will be necessary for you stay competitive in 1 year, 5 years, 10 years?

Who are the leaders in your field of expertise? What experiences are valuable to individuals in your field? How can the insights you learn in classes be applied to real world activities and interactions? What are related fields in which you should be current? (For example, for human factors, I should be aware of trends in information technology, business, and design.)

Personally: Mentally, Physically, Playfully

Mental and physical fitness and whether you are nourished through play.

Consciously or unconsciously, people consider the way you look as part of who you are. What does the way you look say about you? Look in the mirror...are you someone that you would hire?

How is your health? Are you taking care of yourself the way you should? Are you engaging in physical activity when possible?

How happy are you? Do you awaken, invigorated for the opportunities about to be presented to you? Try **Happier.com** for an objective evaluation of your happiness.

What makes you accept stress into your life? How does stress affect your life? Are you minimizing stress effectively and safely? What are your vices? How do your vices affect you and others?

How do you play? How did you play as a child? What hobbies keep you mind sharp and active in ways that your career and your classes do not? Do you think that you are too old for play? Whether its pickup basketball or poker, you need opportunities to fully focus your energy in playful activity. This is simply no substitute for complete engagement in an activity.

Life Experiences - One's Bucket List

If you have not seen the recent film about writing a list of things to do before one 'kicks the bucket', please do. The movie wonderfully explains the importance of friendship and the idea that there is no substitute for experience when trying to shape one's paradigm. There are few things as satisfying as experiencing something you have always wanted to experience – and realizing that it merely whet your appetite to see more of the world.

What is one thing that you have always wanted to do that you have never done that you will commit to do in the next six months? I created a list like this one about five years ago (before the movie popularized the practice) and I always have it with me or nearby in case I think of something I hope to accomplish at some point in my life.

The most recent item I crossed off my 'bucket list' was receiving a US patent for an invention that I helped conceive. I will commit right now – with all of you as witnesses – that I will be jumping out of a plane and driving over 150 miles an hour (on a track, with a helmet, of course) by the end of Summer 2009.

Each of these areas that I have asked you to write down is extremely important for three simple reasons:

Firstly, each area is directly related to each other area that I mentioned. For example, our relationship with God influences our relationship with each other. Our mental and physical well-being and sense of play influences our professional and academic development.

Secondly, it is important to be mindful of where we have been, where we are going, and where we think we should go so we can not only appreciate where we are, but also identify opportunities that may be more fulfilling for us and those we love...

Because, thirdly, one never knows when, where, how, or why one will meet someone or experience something that will change the course of one's life.

My favorite exchange from the movie *Good Will Hunting* involves the listing of various authors as a response to the question, “Do you have a soulmate?” The discovery of virtue, vice, religion, and philosophy through books and other modern forms of expression, such as art, film, television, music and even video games, is critical. The book *Everything Bad is Good for You* describes the complexity of contemporary TV shows and video games favorably, noting that viewers are cognitively engaged throughout, in ways that many only thought possible through the classics.

For me, Robert Greene – an author most famous for collecting and analyzing narratives on seduction, power, and war, Gordon Ramsay – a successful, televised restaurateur who relishes the art of delivering gourmet experiences and inspiring others through overwhelming energy and explicatives on his show *Kitchen Nightmares*, Gordon Gekko – a fictional character from the movie *Wall Street* for whom “Greed Is Good,” have provided as much guidance on how-to’s and how-not-to’s of communication and utilization of passion as classics such as Shakespeare, St. Thomas, and, my favorite, C.S. Lewis.

Nontraditional sources of insight and inspiration exist all around us; I ask – who and what in your life edifies, motivates and inspires you for each of the areas we just listed?

Just in case nothing immediately comes to mind – or, even more unfortunately – the answer is ‘nothing’, please, let’s talk briefly about finding something.

For me, my *Flow* experiences – please at least wikipedia the word *flow* for an abridged description of the important concept – occur most frequently when I am engaged in strategic thinking or tactical problem solving tasks where multiple constraints must be considered, alone or with others.

For example, one of my favorite activities at IBM is creating intellectual property by discovering unique solutions to problems that frustrate users every day.

Another favorite activity, as I previously mentioned, is discussing possibilities for one’s future – personally, professionally, whatever – and helping others discover what makes them great.

So how did I discover these things about myself? Through experiences and the other individuals involved in those experiences.

- Although I graduated as a psychology and philosophy major from WJU, during that time, I took steps to become a physical therapist, a psychology professor, a philosophy professor, and even a dentist before deciding I wanted to become an attorney.
- I left law school upon realizing that legal practice appeared to live up to the utter lack of hype given to it by every practicing attorney I have ever spoken to.
- I spent a year analyzing data, assessing technology needs and considering the construct of inspiration, preparing for a career in educational technology or experimental psychology while enjoying the freedoms that came with my first meager paycheck after 7 years of minimum wage employment and the minimal expenses associated with sleeping under a porch.
- I discovered human factors psychology – managing constraints to optimize human interactions by using psychological research findings – by accident, while looking for experimental psychology programs.
- I learned about the principles of human factors and applied psychology for a year while craving the opportunity for real-world application.

I could certainly view some of the experiences above as failures and wastes of my time, and perhaps this viewpoint would be accurate.

However, looking back, I would not trade in any of these academic experiences.

Each helped me learn about what compels me to action in the areas we just spoke about. For example...

- Working collaboratively in a psychology laboratory made me appreciate the rigors of scientific pursuits and the importance of camaraderie, organization, and purpose, “even” in academic settings.
- The theoretical discussions of virtues and real-world examples of Christian values from my philosophy classes still guide my ethical decision-making today.
- A leadership presentation I gave in Kentucky while attending WJU helped me recognize why I craved strategic and tactical thinking – and, more importantly, why sometimes others did not.
- The methods of communication I learned in law school have proved invaluable for creating crisp, compelling arguments for usability improvements.
- The heartbreaking stories I heard daily about broken families while clerking for the Juvenile Court Project in Pittsburgh reminded me how precious my relationships with my family and friends are – and how valuable just listening to someone when they are truly in need can be.
- Conducting a needs assessment in Milwaukee while working for the CET helped me realize how much I enjoy watching others enjoy quality experiences with technology.
- Learning about risk communication systems has reminded me that in order to appreciate one’s level of success, one must appreciate the entire system – the entire life of opportunities and challenges, risks and rewards.

To start you down the road of discovering what motivates and inspires you, I ask...

When does your life feel filled with purpose?

Does it happen when you are in class, at work, at play, at church, or at home?

Is it when you are creating, analyzing, collaborating, coordinating, communicating, synthesizing, thinking, providing, solving, advising, counseling, consoling, or praying?

One of the most important questions – does your life feel filled with purpose when you are engaged in something you have never tried? During something you have always wanted to try but never knew existed?

The only method for answering these last two questions is acquiring knowledge through experience – seeing the world through the eyes of another, recognizing the value of a viewpoint different than your own, pursuing inspiration by trying activities that other individuals you know find inspiring, and devouring an eclectic array of books, movies, art, architecture, games, and, most importantly, searching out and adding novelty to your day when possible.

Unfortunately, it is unlikely that I will ever know what inspires each one of you.

It is also unfortunate that there are some individuals who spend the vast majority of their lives uninspired.

However, I can – and do – urge you to try **everything** that piques your interest – perhaps in less time-consuming ways than toiling away for a year in law school, hoping that you discover something fills you with purpose and resolve.

I would like to conclude with a short collection of thoughts unworthy of the word *poem*, especially compared to Robert Frost.

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I know I am blessed.
To have known God, family, and friends.
To have never truly known hunger, thirst, or cold.
To have never had less than enough.

I sometimes grow weary of wasting this precious life:
Entangled in the trivial.
Attending to the matters that do not matter.
Searching for the elusive intensity of inspiration.

The answer before I knew of the question: Whom shall I fear?
Untangles, provides, inspires, and reminds

That this moment – this very breath – is a gift.
That nothing is deserved.
That blessings are too numerous to count.

That each and every interaction is an opportunity.
That fortune favors the prepared and the bold.
That appreciating the roads given –
and the road taken – makes all the difference.

Thank you for your time.