

Commencement Speech by Henry Aubin

Marianopolis College, Montreal; June 16, 2015

Board Chairperson Taddeo, Director-general Even, Congregational Leader Badali, distinguished faculty, esteemed staff – and, in particular, relieved and beaming parents, serene and all-knowing grandparents, restless students who are impatient to celebrate, I thank you for the honor of being here.

Standing before you is a privilege, but experience tells me it is certainly no ego-trip. As a beaming parent, I have sat with you at four Marianopolis commencements, one for each of my children, and I can't remember a word from the speeches -- I can't even remember who gave them. Same thing with my own high-school and university commencements.

Barney Frank, a US. congressman, once made a humbling observation in this regard. Speaking at a commencement, he noted that such a speech was a bit like singing the national anthem before the World Series. "No one has come to hear your words but it's not an official event unless you speak, and the only time anyone will ever remember your words is if you screw up real bad."

Commencement speeches are also occasions for giving unsolicited advice to a captive audience, and the most famous advice is to follow your passion.

Now that's an excellent principle – much of the time. I've seen it happen with one of my kids. When he was 12 he declared that one of the most thrilling things in the world was the workings of the atom – imagine the mystification of his non-scientific parents -- and today he's a professor of atomic physics. Yet I'm not sure if advising people to “follow your passion” is **always** the most useful career advice. That's because many young people don't happen to have such early inspiration. My other three kids didn't when they left Marianopolis. I didn't until **after** I graduated from university.

My point is that pursuing your passion is superb advice **if** you're lucky enough today to have one, but the advice isn't of much use if you don't happen to have a passion. Or if you think you might have a passion, only to discover down the road that it's really not for you. That happens a lot in university – people are always changing majors. Being uncertain about one's career path is probably more the norm than the exception.

Shortly before he died several years ago, Steve Jobs was asked by his biographer, Walter Isaacson, what he thought about the standard advice of pursuing one's passion.

Jobs scoffed at the idea. He said:

*“Yeah, we’re always talking about following your passion, but we’re all part of the flow of history.... you’ve got to put something back into the flow of history that’s going to help your community, help other people... so that 20, 30, 40 years from now people will say, this person doesn’t just have a passion, he **cares** about doing something that other people benefit from.”*

Jobs’ remark jibes with my own experience, such as it is. Shortly before leaving university with a BA, when I still had no idea of what to do with my life, one of my professors of literature asked me if I would like to be one of his graduate students. At first, I was immensely relieved – a door had unexpectedly opened, and that door might lead to a respectable, well-remunerated life in the ivory tower. But the more I thought about it, the more I realized that the particular academic career that lay before me would be irrelevant to society. Few people besides myself would benefit. The world had many needs, and getting one more professor in my specialty – the narrative techniques of the

19th-century English romantic novel – was probably not much of a priority.

My new criterion in pondering a career then boiled down to one question: **How can I be relevant?** That's how I came to be an investigative reporter and later a public-affairs columnist.

To be sure, a journalistic career has not been as financially rewarding as would have been a cloistered career devoted to studying narrative techniques. But informing fellow citizens about issues actually affecting them has been immensely rewarding in terms of feeling socially useful.

What did Steve Jobs mean by making a contribution to the “flow of history”? He obviously didn't mean we should all strive to develop a technology that would change civilization. He didn't mean we should all pursue fame and fortune.

Jobs didn't actually define what he meant by the “flow of history.” I see it as a suggestion that we step back and look at the historical currents of our time – the great challenges. We know what they are. There's uncontrolled climate change. There's mountainous public debt that will cause deeper cuts to public services. There are ominous new diseases popping up here and there. There's growing income disparity. There's often corruption in high places.

There's a public education system that's often failing. Still closer to home, the challenges seem to get steeper every year for parents trying to raise solid, well-grounded children.

In choosing a career, it's easy to ignore these difficult realities – and to focus instead on the more conventional attractions that a given occupation might offer – its income, its social status, its working conditions. But bear in mind what Steve Jobs said: *“You’ve got to put something back into the flow of history that’s going to help your community, help other people.”*

How do we define “community”? That's up to each of us. A community can be our planet, our nation, our city, our neighborhood, our disadvantaged fellow citizens.

Being useful to the community of our choice has two benefits.

First, it makes the world a better place -- and it is very true that every slight improvement matters.

Second, and less obviously, helping others has a fringe benefit: it makes one **feel** good – not smug, but good. If you even pick up a bit of trash lying in an otherwise clean street and put it in a receptacle, don't you feel good – even if no one is watching? And that's just the most trivial

example I can think of. Studies have shown a striking correlation between one's personal happiness and being useful to others. It's one of life's great deals: Helping others happens to be fulfilling.

We all want **success** in life. But what is "success"? The poet Taylor Mali offers an answer that has a razor edge. Let me paraphrase his poem.

*Guests at a dinner party were discussing the state of the world. The talk at the table soon turned to education, and one guest, a CEO, declared, "What's a kid going to learn from today's teachers? You know, it's true what they say: 'Those who **can**, do; those who **can't**, teach.' " He put down his glass and turned to another guest. "You're a teacher, Linda. Be honest, what do you make?"*

Linda thought a moment, then said, "I make kids work harder than they ever thought they could. I can make a C-plus feel like a Pulitzer Prize and an A minus feel like a slap in the face – 'Charlie, how dare you waste my time with anything less than your very best.' I can make parents tremble when I call home." Linda picked up steam. "I make kids wonder. I make them question. I make them apologize and mean it. I make them write. I make them read, read, read." She stared at the CEO. "I make them

understand... that if anyone ever tries to judge them by what they make in income, ignore them.”

She concluded with this: “You want to know what I make? I make a difference. What do you make?”

What I’m saying is that if you have a passion, treat it as a precious thing and go with it. But if you don’t happen to have one, look at the world and ask yourself, What skill can I develop to be of help? To make a difference.

In closing, let me leave you with some advice from Satchel Paige, an unforgettable baseball player from a few generations back. He said, “Work like you’re not doing it for the money.”

And he also said this: “Dance like nobody’s watching.”

Thank you, and good luck.