

The Story of the Tree

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My father almost never gives me advice, so when he does, I always listen. I was 24 years old, working on a Ph.D. in economics at Stanford University, and he called me one night when I was in my dorm room, sweating over my econometrics problem set.

He said, “What’s econometrics?”

I said, “It’s the application of statistical methods to mathematical models that predict empirical irregularities.

He said, “Why would anyone want to do that? That doesn’t sound like *you*, Steven.”

I said, “Because, well, econometrics is the most prestigious macho subdiscipline in economics, my friends are very impressed, and econometricians make a lot of money.”

“Steven,” he said, “You sound depressed. You are doing something very foolish. You are getting good at something you hate. And when you get good at it, people will pay you, and you’ll have to do it for the rest of your life.”

It was profoundly comforting to discover that my father did not expect me to complete the econometrics course, and I went and dropped it that day.

Two years later I was on the academic job market when he called to ask, “How’s the job hunt going?”

I said, “Fantastic. I’ve got an offer from Pepperdine, an offer from Oberlin, I’m negotiating with the University of Texas, and I’m holding out for a position at Harvard.”

“Steven,” he said, “you sound depressed. Tell me. How would you want to spend your day if no one knew what you did and you didn’t have to worry about money?”

And I had no idea whatsoever, because I had to that point spent my entire adult life completely focused on doing whatever it would take to get good grades, to win awards, to impress people, to keep climbing to the next level of success, and any muscles I had for enjoying life for its own sake had atrophied.

He said, “Go lie under a tree and don’t leave until you can identify three things that you enjoy doing for their own sakes.”

I said, “Does it have to be a tree?”

He said, “Yes, this is an emergency. The tree is not an option.”

So I went and I lay under a tree and I watched the wispy clouds pass through the branches and I felt bugs crawling on me. And I was bored, and I was angry, and I was surprised that someone who was ostensibly an adult could have so little knowledge of his own heart.

And finally, after a while, I had a revelation. It occurred to me that I loved *bowling*. And I hadn’t been bowling in years, and why not? And I liked telling stories. And I liked making dinner with friends. And long speculative theological conversations. And walks at night. And teaching children. And singing. And when I left the tree I had rekindled a bit of passion.

The key to a very happy and productive life is never lose the capacity to know your passion – what it is that you truly love, because that is the only source of direction for you as you plan your career and make decisions. It’s the only reliable source of motivation - the only thing that is going to get you out of bed morning after morning after morning to fight a good fight or create things of beauty. It is a reliable source of inspiration.