

Steve Jobs and Other Dirty Hippies

The road to success isn't always straight.

/ Eye on the News

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You may have read recently about [Joe Therrien](#), the Occupy Wall Street protester who left a perfectly good teaching job, earned a master's degree in *puppetry*, amassed \$35,000 in student loans, and then demonstrated against the injustice of his predicament in Zuccotti Park. Like a lot of people, when I read his story, I sneered at Therrien's meager judgment—why didn't he go to engineering school?—and mammoth sense of entitlement.

And then I thought about Steve Jobs. As Walter Isaacson describes him in his endlessly fascinating new [biography](#), Jobs, the adopted son of a hardworking machinist, also suffered from a severe case of entitlementitis. In fact, in his youth, Jobs was quite literally a “dirty hippie.” Alternately a vegetarian and a “fruitarian” convinced that his diet made bathing unnecessary, Jobs assaulted everyone he met with his smell. He walked around barefoot and rested his distressed feet on tables and chairs for all to admire. Nor was his hippie identity limited to matters of hygiene. Throughout his adolescence and early adulthood, he took impressive quantities of LSD. He spent seven months in India, where he shaved his head and sought enlightenment.

After graduating from high school, Jobs went to Reed College in Portland, but don't imagine for a minute that he donned a pocket protector and enrolled in computer-science courses. In fact, after a semester, he dropped out. To his credit, he saw no reason to have his parents waste tuition dollars when he had no idea why he was there. But he continued to hang around campus and occasionally audited classes subsidized by actual tuition payers. Back when he was still living with his parents, he had audited physics and electronics courses at Stanford. But now, at Reed, he found a subject that really got him going: calligraphy.

Laugh if you want, but the meeting between Steve Jobs and the Trappist monk who taught his calligraphy course changed the world. Jobs was never an electronics geek like his friend and partner Steve Wozniak or his frenemy Bill Gates. His genius was to bring design, simultaneously elegant and playful, to the cold tech world, humanizing the machine. When he and his team were designing the Macintosh computer, he later said in a Stanford graduation speech, the lessons of calligraphy—“beautiful, historical, and artistically subtle in a way science can't capture”—came back to him. Jobs often referred to himself as an artist, and he believed that MP3 players, tablet computers, and even Windows, the Microsoft operating system that imitated his operating system for the Mac, wouldn't be such a pervasive presence in our lives today if not for his calligraphy detour.

Jobs's story has several lessons, especially for members of Generation Jobless and those of us who worry about national decline. The first is that studying the so-called STEM fields (science, technology, engineering, and math) isn't for everyone—not even Steve Jobs. Nor is it the only route to innovation. The second is that in a complex, diversified, but highly specialized consumer economy like our own, some young people will take predictable career paths and become lawyers, doctors, veterinarians, or biotech researchers—but others will wander in the wilderness as they try to find a way to align their interests with the labor market.

That process is often (and unfortunately) called “following your passion,” and it may seem a pretty dumb thing to do at a time when even recent college grads are facing an 8 percent unemployment rate. But the economic growth of the previous decades gave us a flood of new [creative](#) jobs: Web designers, social-media consultants, content strategists, actors in one of the many new regional theaters. I could barely suppress a guffaw when a friend told me that her daughter was going to “circus college” a few years ago. Joke’s on me: the daughter is now a trapeze artist for Cirque du Soleil in Florida. (The company, founded only in the mid-1980s, employs 5,000 people.) Another friend’s son wanted to be a blues singer. Who doesn’t? But after living in the Mississippi Delta for nine months and playing nameless bars for many more, he is now signing record contracts and doing European tours.

Of course, these are the lucky ones. Following your passion can be a risky proposition, and you always need a Plan B. The problem with Joe Therrien, the disappointed puppeteer, isn’t that he took a chance on doing something he loved. It’s that he blamed others—Wall Street, the 1 percent, greed—when his passions turned out to be of little interest to the world. Steve Jobs was rude, irascible, and entitled, but that’s a mistake that the design and marketing genius of Apple and Pixar would never have made.

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