So Good They Can’t Ignore You: Why Skills Trump Passion in the Quest for Work You Love

By Susan Roudebush


Following Todd Henry’s inspiring Accidental Creative blog for years, I trusted his latest advice to read So Good They Can’t Ignore You. This book reframed my “find your passion” paradigm and my thoughts about skills. What I now believe is that passion typically evolves as one becomes more skilled rather than before, and the best plan, usually, is to begin with skill identification and acquisition, next apply those skills to increasingly challenging and engaging problems. If you work as a career development professional serving high school or college students who are trying to achieve career goals, or if--like me--at sixty, wondering what to do next, read this book. So Good They Can't Ignore You will change your methodology.

Telling individual stories to make his points, Newport articulates his central premise: following your passion is unwise advice because very few teens or young adults know enough about life to select something about which they feel passionate (some one perhaps but not some thing), and if they do feel passionate about something, they will likely change their minds. Newport cites Steve Jobs, whose early passion was to serve as a Buddhist monk.

Second, while most people would love to have a job that allows them to be creative, autonomous, and impactful, jobs like that are rare and valuable. The typical route to acquiring something valuable is to offer something special in return. Newport purports that the only way to acquire a position where you can make an impact on the world, have control over how you spend your time, and exercise your creativity is to master a difficult skill, acquired through hours of work and practice. He calls this “career capital.”

Taking this model a step further, Newport asserts that to develop career capital, in addition to skills, you must also have quality relationships, a remarkable mission, and a sizeable body of work. This process of capital building is time-consuming. Malcolm Gladwell provides a good example of career capital in his book The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference. He observes that the Beetles phenomenal success may well be attributed to their extraordinary hours effort, following their “instant hit“ success with the Ed Sullivan debut. The Beetles routinely worked 16-hour days, rehearsed very long hours and performed almost daily, which Gladwell notes honed their skills and their understanding of what their audience wanted.

Newport would call the Beetles “career craftsman” as opposed to passionate musicians. He believes that career development begins with the mastery of something rare and valuable. We typically define great work by the impact, recognition, and freedom it affords. These traits are rare and valuable in and of themselves. To achieve these qualities, one needs to offer something valuable in return. He says, no
one owes you a fulfilling job; you have to earn it. You must create value to acquire value, and that takes time and deliberative practice. This is the path to becoming so good that others simply can’t ignore you. Rather than being good at something because you love it, you might love doing something because you are so good at doing it.

Therefore, skills identification and acquisition are critical keys to success. We can better help those seeking their passion if we help them identify and build their skills, as we do with the CIS SKILLS program. As H. B. Gellatt advocates in his positive uncertainty philosophy, be open to possibility. Your future will find you if you give life your best.

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