

A Dream Deferred
by Langston Hughes

*What happens to a dream deferred?
Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore-- And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over-- like a syrupy sweet?
Maybe it just sags like a heavy load. Or does it explode?*

When you were a kid, what did you think you were going to be when you grew up? Maybe you wanted to be a ballerina or a barber or an engineer. Perhaps by now you thought you'd have a clear vision of what it is you want to do with your life.

Why does our culture stress that a person should know what they're going to be doing years from now? Can't there be some play in the process? Can't there be an element of surprise in what we might end up doing with ourselves in the future?

Three Ouch fans have agreed to extend brief ponderings of their own deferred dreams and meandering paths toward a life's work. Some of them are O.K. with the current state of things and some suffer frustration and disillusionment. All of them are really cool because they've requested their true identities remain anonymous and they've shared themselves with Ouch.

Artist to Ph.D.

Jaqi's answer to the "watcha gonna be when you grow up?" question is as follows...

"I had a lot of alternatives. I thought I would be a ballerina, an artist, a teacher. So far I have been two of these 3 things in my life. When I went to college, I didn't know what I was going to do. I was 17. I liked art so I thought, 'why don't I go to art school?' Right?"

"I never had a set idea of what I wanted to be. I always envied people who knew what they wanted to be because I never felt that way. I never had a big goal."

At first, she was considering going into the art therapy program at her school, "...because it seemed like it was actual training for a job. It seemed like something vocational that I could learn how to do. But you had to do fine arts or commercial arts your first year before moving onto a specialty. By the time I was in my second year, I decided to stick with fine arts. I spent my time painting and, well, you know the sorts of activities young college students indulge in..."

Once she graduated she was fairly sure she would not be an artist for a living, but didn't really know. She ended up getting an administrative job at an anthropological foundation. "I did crappy office work: typing, copying, filing letters, some computer stuff. I did a wide variety of things there, but it was all administrative."

"During my employment at the foundation, I decided I wanted to earn a graduate degree of some sort -- something more academic rather than artistic. I went to school at night, so it took FOREVER to get my Master's. I started therapy and finished up getting my Masters degree simultaneously. It was a very difficult time for me."

Unfortunately, the pain didn't end when Jaqi got her Master's Degree. She decided to go for her Ph.D., too. And as if that wasn't a huge undertaking in itself, after slaving away for 2 years in a Ph.D. program, she's found herself faced with some really lame university politics that are forcing her to continue her studies at another university. Not to mention the massive student loans that are piling up.

"I really love teaching -- it's the best thing I've ever done and I would like to keep doing it. But recently things just haven't been easy for me. It's like I'm being rewarded for all my hard work by being able to teach and share the knowledge I've absorbed, but am being tortured for no apparent reason with the obstacles involved in my graduate program. I might need to go to Mexico -- a friend told me about someone there who removes curses that have been put on people. I think I might have a curse on me to prevent me getting my Ph.D."

Jaqi is currently a Ph.D. student in a history program and an adjunct professor at two colleges in New York City.

PC Academic to Financial Analyst

Veronica: "Ok, if you want to go way back, I can give you the direct quote... In kindergarten my *all about me* project stated..."When I grow up, I want to be a barber or a doctor."
"What did I think I was going to be, when I was in college, before I randomly got this job? I wasn't really sure. I probably thought I was going to do something a little more academic -- definitely more socially conscious."

Veronica's present situation is as a Financial Analyst at one of the biggest and most-recognized investment banks in New York City. "I make bonds for investors."

She comes up with "dumbed down cheat sheets for the sales force so that they can understand" what she's doing. "The bond sellers really are jackasses. I have not encountered this many stupid people in a long time. I'm amazed they're able to sell anything. I mean, I just don't understand it."

"I did not study to become a financial analyst. I studied history and languages. I had a Mellon Fellowship for research in history of marginalized cultures."

"I ended up here -- I know it's kind of dumb -- but it goes back to a boy..."

While still in school, Veronica had a boyfriend who wasn't in school. He lived and worked in New York. She wanted to be with him the summer of her junior year. But because she wasn't from New York, she couldn't really afford to take the type of summer job or internship that probably would have suited her interests at the time.

This particular boyfriend (now ex) worked on Wall Street. He directed her toward a summer internship program that was designed for minority students to work on Wall Street. "I was like 'oh, whatever'. I filled out the application and I got the position. They placed me as a summer analyst. I told myself, at the very least, it's just for the summer. If I hate it, I leave and it doesn't matter. So I was able to be in New York for the summer and it paid really well. What I didn't realize about this summer internship was, that if the people where you ended up working liked you, they would make you an offer when you graduated school. So I got an offer, and I liked these people -- it also helped that the pay was pretty nice. Why did I take the job? Because I was a senior who didn't want to have to interview

for a job. That's how I ended up where I am. It was just totally by accident."

"I like my present job because I feel like I use my brain every day. I'm not getting anyone coffee. I'm actually doing stuff that I know makes a difference and is valuable. When I'm out for a day, people act like it's the end of the world here. Honestly, though, I'm really overworked. And I have not had a raise since I was an intern (2 1/2 years ago) -- so I'm still making what I was as an intern. Which is crap. I'm definitely underpaid and I probably work 100 hours per week."

"Looking back, a better job for me probably would have been to be a veterinarian."

Architecture to Architorture

According to the online U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics Occupational Outlook Handbook, "In 2000, almost half of all architects worked more than 40 hours a week, in contrast to about 1 in 4 workers in all occupations combined." Maybe this is why Jack the architect is so cranky...

"I didn't really know what I wanted to be when I was little. I just knew I wanted to do something that would make some kind of difference. I did have destructive tendencies when I was young -- a friend and I would go out into the field near my parent's house to build things and then tear them down. I also once constructed a water balloon so powerful (one balloon inside another, then the water), that when I threw it at the front of a passing school bus, the windshield shattered."

Jack started out in the engineering department of the university he attended. "I never felt like I fit into the future engineers' social group. Those guys were only concerned about their GPA's and were a bunch of jerks. I had some friends in the design school and really liked the artistic attitude there, so I figured I'd switch my major to incorporate something creative into my technical and mathematical background. I picked architecture."

"In school it seemed like there was a world of possibility for me as a designer. I really believed I had a future

ahead of me working on cool, modern, cutting edge buildings and structures. It seemed completely in my grasp to work on projects that would involve churches, community centers, glass and steel buildings and environmentally sensitive spaces."

Jack has been working as an architect in Philadelphia for about 10 years. "In a way, I was better off right when I got out of school. Then I had potential and hope. I'm having a real dilemma recently. At my current job, the types of projects I'm working on consist of correctional facilities and county maintenance buildings -- not to mention the pile of military work available right now. Nothing remotely as forward thinking as what I had once envisioned for myself and my career. At this point, I'm not even sure if I should stay in architecture. I feel like I've already worked at all the decent architecture firms in town, so it wouldn't really do me any good to quit. I need to suck it up or move on."

Hopefully our frustrated architect friend won't feel compelled to dismantle anything important as a result of his misery.

Ouch readers, perhaps you've found some inspiration and maybe even a sense that you're not alone in your quest for the right path. Embrace your dreams and let them grow and change. The careers our grandparents had no longer exist. Nobody's going to give you a job that you'll have for the next 30 years. Why not find some comfort in this and get on with it?