

# Tend to Your Dreams

May 21, 2006

The Reverend Roger Fritts  
Cedar Lane Unitarian Universalist Church  
Bethesda, Maryland

In a book called *The Ambitious Generation* I read about a young woman named Sarah. She was a good student in high school and she spent a lot of time deciding which college to attend. She took the Princeton Review course to prepare for the SAT college entrance exam. She followed her high school's guidelines for preparing for college and went to the school's special programs for college admissions, including the college fairs. She met with the school's college counselor, who recommended several colleges. She applied to seven schools, two of the colleges on her list were schools she was unlikely to be admitted to, and two were "safety schools," places that she would likely be admitted. The remaining three in the middle were considered real possibilities.

Sarah, her mother, and her father visited the seven colleges. During the visits Sarah fell in love with one college and it became her first choice. She began the time-consuming process of applying to the seven schools, but her heart was set on being accepted by her first choice.

In the spring of her senior year Sarah received the acceptance and rejection letters. She was not admitted to her first, second, or third, choices and was wait listed at her fourth choice. She was admitted to her two safety schools and to a large State University. Upset by

the rejections, Sarah decided to enroll in one of her safety schools, a small private college where she planned to major in English. The cost for attending the college was about \$25,000 a year. To obtain a bachelor's degree in four years the total would exceed \$100,000. Because of her parents income, Sarah was not eligible for financial aid.

In her first semester Sarah found the English classes difficult and changed her major to communications. The communications courses were uninteresting, so she changed her major again, to business. Because she changed majors twice, she needed to attend an additional semester to earn her bachelor's degree.

As I read this description, in a book about today's young people, I wondered what advice I would give to Sarah, in her junior year of college, if she stopped by Cedar Lane Unitarian Universalist church, and asked to talk with me as the minister. In my imagination I can see Sarah asking:

"Rev. Fritts, You are 55 and I am 20. You're a minister. What I need to know is this. Why am I here on earth? What was I put here to do? What is it that I should accomplish with my life?"

If a twenty year old asks you this question, what would you say?

One possible answer would be to quote Henry David Thoreau. I could read *Walden* to Sara:

If one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours.

But is this really very helpful advice? After all, most of his adult life Thoreau worked in his father's pencil manufacturing business.

He never married, never had children, and died at the age of 45.

Another possible answer is to explain to Sara that her confusion may be do to the fact that American culture has undergone significant changes during the past five decades. In 1940 only 16% of high school graduates went to college. Today 62 percent of high school graduates go to college.

Over the last fifty years the curriculum at high schools was transformed with an increase in the number of academic courses and a decline in vocational training. American high schools have become college preparatory schools for almost all students. So today, student's ambitions and dreams, are channeled towards college and professional work, when in fact there are not enough jobs in these fields. We need clerical workers and truck drivers, carpenters and electricians, but high schools are training everyone to expect to go to college. For example, about 15 percent of high school students want to be writers, artists, entertainers or athletes—but these jobs make up only about 1 percent of the labor force.

I might go on to explain that the cost of going to college has gone up dramatically. Beginning in the Reagan administration, federal and state funding of colleges started to decline. This has resulted in an increase reliance on tuition for funding college. In the 1990s after adjustments for inflation, tuition at public colleges rose by 21% and at private colleges by 26%. As a result most college students are now incurring a large debt.

So young people are encouraged to go to college to become a writer or an artist, or an athlete. They go deeply into debt to prepare for a career that does not exist.

No wonder 20 year olds are asking, Why am I here on earth? What was I put here to do? What is it that I should accomplish with my

life? Young people are encouraged to go deeply into debt to prepare for jobs only a few of them will actually get.

I might say to Sara that work that does not require a college degree can be as satisfying and as meaningful as work that requires college. In my own life I have worked with farmers who are as wise and as skilled as any college graduate. I have worked with carpenters whose artistic skill and sense of beauty is a good as any sculpturer. I have worked with secretaries whose sensitivity in dealing with people is as good or better than any personal manager.

I would be tempted to tell Sara the story of my own brother. In the 1960s my brother took vocational courses in cooking. One of his teachers got him a job as an apprentice in a restaurant. My brother, now in his mid-40s, has a career as a chef. He loves his opportunities to be creative and his favorite part of his work is the carving of ice sculptures with a chain saw. In other words, it is possible to live a meaningful life without a college degree.

Thomas Friedman in his book *The World Is Flat* says that Western Europeans behave as though the world is like a retirement home. He points to six-week vacations and their 35 hour work weeks as evidence of the retirement home mentality of countries like France and Germany.

The United States, says Friedman, is more like a gathering of teenagers. In trying to answer the question, What is it that I should accomplish with my life? we focus on entertainment, on amusing ourselves. Our culture is dominated by stories about this week's latest blockbuster movie or the latest trip to Disney World or Las Vegas. Perhaps the elimination of 90 percent of high school vocational classes and the fact that 62 percent of high school students go to college to be artists or athletes, feeds the culture of entertainment.

In contrast, the people in the countries of China and India, Friedman says, are most focused on working and producing products that can be sold to make money and strengthen their economy.

My point is not so much that hard working Chinese and Indian young people are going to dominate the world economy in the future. My point is that people who come from villages in China or India are less confused about the purpose of life, because they've had to struggle just to survive and therefore are more aware that a basic purpose of life is simply being able to survive. We in the United States, having achieved survival, are more unsure about what our purpose is.

So young people like Sarah ask clergy, "What was I put here to do? What is it that I should accomplish with my life?" If a 20 year-old ask you this question, what would you say?

My best answer is to encourage her to look back and recall her childhood.

In our childhood play the answers often are found. Something about that period made us see things more clearly than we knew, for we were innocents and our task was to play. It was our business as a child to daydream. The phrase we often hear, today – "Find the job of your dreams" – hearkens back to our childhood dreams, when dreaming was what we did best. (*What Color Is Your Parachute?*)

As we grow older we loose touch with these childhood dreams. We take on the education and responsibilities of college loans. Our vision narrows from seeing a broad landscape to the tunnel of earning a living. We accept our responsibilities and we accept our limits. We see childhood dreams as unrealistic and unproductive.

I would say to Sarah, and to anyone of any age who asks, What was I put here to do? What is it that I should accomplish with my life?

Look for ways to tend to your childhood dreams.  
Look for a way to both pursue those dreams and also make a living.

It is good to tend to our dreams. I know a young man who is learning to build musical instruments in England. I know of one young woman who is in the Peace Corps in the Pacific. I know another young man who is teaching English in China. On a pacific island, in an English village, in the crowd streets of China they live their dreams. I encourage all of you, no matter what your age, to tend to your dreams.

Knowing that the best teaching is by example, I might say, "Sarah, when I was a child I dreamed of travel. My dreams were fed by the color photos and maps of *National Geographic Magazine* that arrived in the mail each month from far off Washington D.C. I remember staring one summer afternoon at a map of Australia, and tried to imagine what it might be like to visit that continent so far away."

Two days ago I got an e-mail from Australia:

Dear Rev. Fritts:

Apologies for not answering sooner. I understand the frustration in regards to this application for a three month religious work visa and I have let my manager know of the details. I have assessed this application and it is ready for a final decision and I am trying to get this finalized as soon as possible

for you. I will endeavor my hardest to get this finalized so that you can be here for June.

Sincerely,  
Helen, Department of Immigration and  
Multicultural Affairs the Government of Australia

So as soon as I get my “religious worker visa” I will head off to save souls at the Unitarian Church in Adelaide, Australia. I would say to Sarah that even a fifty five year old minister should tend to his dreams.

In some ways we should all remain children dreaming of adventures. In the words of Thoreau, “If one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours.” So I invite you all, what ever your age, to advance confidently in the direction of your dreams. Endeavor to live the life that you imagine. And may you meet with unexpected success.