

I don't know what else to call it but a gift. It is something that has been given to the past four generations of us, at least. And I look to see if it will be given to the next generation as well.

I'm not talking about a talent, or a skill, or anything like that. It has to do more with knowing what we want to do in life. I'm glad to have it, but I also don't mean to imply that anyone is any less for not having it. It just seems that it is harder for some people to find their purpose in life. And it is a gift, a blessing, which I certainly did nothing to deserve.

It goes back at least as far as my grandfather. I didn't really know him, but growing up I got to listen to a lot of people who knew him. He had been crippled with polio as a youth and had to use crutches to get around. He graduated from high school and immediately began to teach school in the surrounding area. I have several pictures of him at various rural schools, and you can always pick him out because of the crutches. I think that he had a clear vision of contributing to the community, first as a teacher, then later in his life as mayor, school principal, and school superintendent. He was also worked in merchandise, farming, and real estate. His picture has been in the local hospital, for which he donated the land, and in the city school where he served. He went back to school and finished his college degree shortly before his death.

My father was the oldest son, and he had the gift, too. But he went in a different direction. He was absolutely not a farmer. His father sent him out once to plow a field, and when he went to check on him he found him under a tree reading a book. But I think that my grandfather understood and let him pursue his own course. Dad did tell the story, though, of how his father made him take Latin (which he failed miserably).

My dad was actually sort of the geek of his time. As a teenager he had a love for technical things such as radio and photography. He repaired radios and owned 8 and 16 mm movie equipment. I have videos of my grandparents that he took which make them so much more real to me. I also have a video of our home town that he took from an airplane. Dad eventually served in the Signal Corps in World War II and then worked in his own radio and TV repair business. He then moved back home and began working at a government test center as an electronics engineer. He was an amateur radio operator, and that's how I remember him best: in the ham shack making some kind of electronic device.

He provided a great environment for me to develop a love for science and technology. He was always bringing home some kind of hardware that had failed at work. He never pushed, but gently encouraged me to learn about science. He did suggest that I take public speaking and typing, and I thought he was crazy. But those two things turned out to be the best learning investment I ever made.

I can remember wanting to be a scientist from the time I was eight years old, and there was never any real question about what I wanted to major in at college: physics. I didn't really know what kind of employment I would be able to find, but I was clear in my purpose. Eventually I got a job at the same government test center that Dad worked at; we even carpooled together for a while. But I have enjoyed my work as much as I could have ever imagined.

My own son showed potential early on for building things. His favorite toys for years were Legos building blocks. And once he got into computers, he was on his way. Though there was that moment in the ninth grade when he told me that he didn't like computers anymore. It turned out that he was bothered by the "geek" label and having to help everyone else all of the time. But he got through that and accepted the fact that he really loved computers and wanted that to be his life work.

Getting him to go to college was not a sure thing, however. He also had a dream to be a drummer in a rock band. And he was good enough with computer systems that he felt he could just go straight to work. But I talked him into school so that he would have more options open, and after the first couple of years (when he couldn't take many computer courses), he is really enjoying it. So much so that he is now talking about graduate school. And he loves working with his own computer empire of old revamped systems.

We will have to wait and see about the next generation. But I hope the gift is passed on. It makes it so much easier when you know what you want to do. I see so many kids, even older people, who never really have this settled in their minds. So I feel that we have been so very lucky to have the gift of direction.

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