

Life is not a Jigsaw Puzzle

by Swanee Hunt, Scripps Howard News Service, June 11, 2003

The graduates of 2003 face tough job prospects. Nearly nine million Americans are out of work. Our national debt is once again growing at an astronomical rate. Employers are reluctant to hire.

Quite a change from a few years ago, when engineers and computer scientists were nearly guaranteed a job. But now, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reports unemployment for people ages 20-24 rose to 10.5 percent in May, a steady rise since 2000. The national unemployment rate rose to 6.1 percent, its highest level in 9 years.

For the lucky hired, salaries are down. Some college graduates are moving back home with their parents. Many who find work will be underemployed.

Graduating students confront an array of complicated life decisions. A shortage of jobs means rethinking priorities. Recalculating direction. A propos to the season, I've sorted through my own experiences to see what guidance I might offer. Looking back on five decades, I've identified a few homegrown principles that have served me well.

1) Success is not arriving at a destination. It's how you keep your balance along the way. The emerald glow of Oz rarely holds up to close examination. Meanwhile, the road dips and curves, and just staying upright takes enormous effort. Chief executive officers, medical specialists, wealthy financiers, and partners in law firms are probably no more contented than you are today. Define your success along the way, as you help a fellow traveler and maintain some semblance of grace during the most tortuous times.

2) There's virtually no chance your life will unfold according to plan. Long-term thinking is necessary when you're choosing a graduate school or a retirement benefit package. If you're a list maker, make your lists. If you're a worrier, carry your lists around in your wallet to calm you. But don't let your plans keep you from following your passions as they unfold.

3) As you decide about children and career, suck up. You have three choices. You can give up parenting to devote yourself to your job and always wonder if you've denied yourself one of the great life experiences. You can give up your career to be a full-time parent and always wonder if you're making the most of your intellect. You can try to be both a committed parent and a top-notch employee and repeatedly feel torn and frustrated. Take your pick.

4) Don't underestimate the guys and dolls phenomenon. There's a reason 497 of the top 500 business executives are men. There's also a reason 70% of the higher degree applicants to some colleges are women. Men are more aggressive physically, but women shred their opponents in verbal arguments. Learn the differences and learn how to live with them.

5) Even good people have bad blind spots. Don't give away your power, becoming paralyzed by slights that affect you. Instead, apply your energy against injustice that affects others.

6) Learn to forgive. Be as gracious with others' foibles as you'll hope they'll be with yours. In the process, don't become apologetic. Claim your strength, even as you acknowledge your limitations.

7) Do your small part to right a giant wrong: illiteracy, homelessness, racial discrimination. Volunteer your time at a nursing home, a public school, a shelter. Call Big Brothers or Big Sisters to befriend a child that needs a mentor. Join Amnesty International or the Sierra Club to stop torture or save the ozone layer. Work on a political campaign. As you connect to the wider world, your life will have deeper meaning.

8) Sometimes the right thing to do is only 55 percent right. Learn to honestly acknowledge and live with the downside of your choices, without beating yourself up about it.

9) Life is not a jigsaw puzzle; the pieces don't fit. You may consistently hold inconsistent points of view. Your talents and interests may be spread across different spheres. Think three dimensionally as you build the unique puzzle that is your life. Some of the pieces will have to be glued on top of others instead of snapped into place.

10) Don't fear failure of yourself or your dreams. To borrow from e.e. cummings, joy is at a right angle to happiness and suffering. So lean forward into life. Commit to relationships, as a friend, a lover, or a social activist. Engage in opportunities spread before you, whether you're employed, unemployed, or underemployed. Distinguish between reality TV and your life. One is yours to watch. The other is yours to celebrate.