

NEVER FOLLOW YOUR DREAMS

THE RIGHT CHOICE?

In 2009, in an auditorium at Stanford University in California, a mature gentleman in a suit steps up to the podium. He is a professor, and he is here to tell the audience about his research on career development. After a moment he breaks the silence with these words: “Never follow your dreams,” then repeats, “Never follow your dreams.” In this room, already quiet before the distinguished professor began his speech, the silence is deafening.

European researchers in careers and career guidance cannot help but be fascinated by the country across the sea, often called ‘the land of opportunity’, where, we are told, people rich and poor have high hopes of successful careers. They may even envision themselves as the next Taylor Swift, Barack Obama or Elon Musk, since in theory American society gives everyone the same opportunities to fulfil their dreams, if they only work long enough and hard enough. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries such dreams spurred hundreds of thousands of impoverished immigrants from Europe to cross the Atlantic to take part in the race for a plot ‘out

west': A large tract of fertile land they could work into the basis of a life many times richer than the one they were leaving behind.

When John D. Krumboltz, a professor of psychology and education, stepped up to that podium, the realities of life were very different. By 2009, the 'American dream' had transmuted into the idea that in modern-day America, 'if you can dream it, you can do it'. Hence the deafening silence as Krumboltz opened his talk on careers by entreating his audience *not* to follow their dreams. But Krumboltz did not let his audience remain stunned. He went on to explain that young people preparing to choose a degree programme or moving into the early stages of their work lives are often encouraged to identify the field or activity they are most impassioned about, then do everything in their power to make it their livelihood.

However, Krumboltz went on, this only leads to problems. Recommending a person begin, and sustain, a career based on a dream that has been a long-held passion gives them a recipe for disaster. Instilling such career ambitions in very young people is simply too much, as it sets the expectation that their careers must also reflect and realise their greatest dreams in the future.

Krumboltz was presenting his reflections at a time when planning a career no longer meant following in your family's footsteps, as it did in the mid-1800s. Many novels have explored this once common experience. A good example by the Danish author Carsten Jensen is

Vi, de druknede (2010; translated into English as *We, the drowned*, 2012), much of which takes place on the small island of Ærø. Each and every one of the young men in the island's main port town, Marstal, either runs away to sail the seven seas or somehow works on or near the ocean. There is no question of career choices or realising a dream, since this was the only sort of livelihood they could imagine.

Even as the authors of this book on careers, we would have been very surprised if our school career guidance counsellors had asked us whether our dreams were to become professors of career guidance. Our responses would have been at best a resounding “no”, and more probably complete incomprehension that such a job could even exist. The image of a professor was that of the physics genius Albert Einstein in his later years, with his untamed head of hair and white lab coat in front of a blackboard full of enigmatic scribbles.

In elementary school Rie was convinced she wanted to be a veterinarian; she was good with animals and did well in maths. Her high-school Danish teacher suggested she study rhetoric. When she applied for higher education, she submitted her programme priorities in the following order: 1) a teaching course in the rural south Zealand town of Haslev, 2) occupational therapy in the large southwest Jutland town of Esbjerg and 3) sociology in the capital, at the University of Copenhagen.

She was granted a place at her first choice, earned her teaching degree and loved her job. Then, after teaching classes in the last year of lower secondary – the

Danish equivalent of junior high school – she was offered a supplementary course to become a career guidance professional. She took the course and never looked back. Luck and chance also created opportunities and ideas that led her to the position she holds today, as Denmark's first professor of career guidance.

Tristram's earliest career aspiration was to be a cook on a spaceship. Children often have fantastical career aspirations of this kind, which don't necessarily map onto real jobs. It is not uncommon for young children to answer the question "What do you want to be?" with responses like "a princess" or even "a dragon", but as they get older they start to link their dreams with the world they see around them. This gradual drift towards realism is good, as there aren't many jobs as space cooks or dragons. But it can also be dangerous, as it means aspirations that lie outside your immediate social or geographical environment are difficult to maintain, increasing the likelihood that you will do the kind of job your mother or father did. As the British sociologist Paul Willis noted, this process is one by which "working-class kids" aspire to and get "working-class jobs".

As Tristram came from a middle-class family, his aspirations developed within that frame of reference. After studying English literature at university, he worked in a call centre, then wrote press releases for a telecommunications company, before heading back to university to earn a PhD in literature. This mainly taught him that he hated literature (more specifically, the study of it), and he drifted into various other jobs with no real

plan, first into community history, then e-learning and then into career development. Maybe in this field he could make a life? After all, he would have to decide on something fairly soon: by this time he had a partner, a house, a cat and children on the way. Not because that was his dream, but due to a mix of luck (both good and bad), timing and the hope that he had found his way into a field where he seemed able to do well, and do good. After some progression upwards, with the support of a wonderful mentor and great colleagues, and various sideways moves, he ended up as a professor of career education.

Neither of our career paths followed a straight, logical trajectory from, say, late elementary-school dreams of being a veterinarian or early ideas of starship catering to holding chairs in career guidance. The same goes for countless other people. Indeed, it is probably true that such haphazard, unplanned and surprising careers are the most common. The British podcasters Sarah Ellis and Helen Tupper have named this phenomenon the “squiggly career”, which we think captures it well.

Even so, we often ask children and adolescents, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” We’re not simply fishing for answers like “a good person”, “happy”, “grateful” or “contented with my life”. We want to know what they want to *do*, professionally, in their work life, as their job. This question is not normally designed to elicit answers about their wider life, for example whether they want to get married, have children, run a marathon or play the flute. The ‘being’ that we are enquiring about

is primarily focused on the field of paid work; we would like reassurance that, even as a child, they have some kind of plan to move towards economic independence.

All young people must consider this question when deciding what to do after leaving school. At this point they are often confronted with the concept of the linear career pathway. This builds on the idea that people follow their dreams and plan their career steps logically and rationally. The dream of earning a specific degree and, later, getting a job to apply that degree comes to control the actions we must perform to fulfil our dreams.

You now know that our career paths looked nothing like this; they were much squigglier. This takes us back to that breathless moment during Krumboltz's talk about careers, when his words pierced the very heart of the American dream: "Never follow your dreams."