

Your Personal Coach

Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D.

Dear Kathleen,

I am a college student home for the summer and am having a lot of problems with my father. I've been studying electrical engineering because that's what my father wants. He is also an engineer and wants me to join his firm when I graduate. He says it's a good profession and I'll always have a good income. I agree but there is one big problem: I hate it and I have no real talent for it. I've been much more interested (and successful) in my English and creative writing classes. My dream is to write novels. I'd like to switch majors for next year. That wouldn't be a problem with my university since I'll only be a sophomore and most of my first year classes are ones that everyone has to take regardless of their major. I have a chance for a great summer job teaching English as a second-language and I would like to do that, but my father wants me to spend the months before school starts interning with his engineering firm. How can I resolve this without any hurt feelings on his part?

-- Dan

Dear Dan,

I'm going to assume that your father means well by trying to direct you to a career that he believes will be good for you rather than believing that he is vicariously trying to live through your career choice. I do you find it interesting that he's prodding you to make the same professional choice that he has!

You're in college and as an adult and it's up to you to make decisions about the direction your life will take. One of the worst mistakes a young person can make is to go against their own feelings in order to please someone else. You could become a very successful engineer, live to a ripe old age and sadly realize – as mythologist Joseph Campbell has described – that you've gotten to the top of the ladder only to realize that it's been up against the wrong wall. While you risk hurting your dad's feelings now, you must trust that your father would be more hurt, in the long run, to realize that you are an unhappy and frustrated engineer.

You have two responsibilities: 1) To follow your heart and your bliss; and 2) to become a responsible adult. Writing novels can a competitive, challenging, and capricious career. Nevertheless, some writers make a grand living doing exactly this (just ask John Grisham if he would have made a better living sticking with his law practice). There are other successful but not-so-famous writers who have developed a loyal following of readers and support themselves and their families with their efforts. You may have to have another job (e.g., teaching, editing, or hawking hammers at the Home Depot) while you build your writing muscles, learn your craft, and get your work published. If you are willing to do this, you will have become a responsible adult and not a "starving artist" emailing home for rent money from your engineer dad.

Sit down and talk with your father. Tell him that you appreciate his interest in your future career, but that you must follow your own dreams, not his. Let him know that you prefer to take the teaching job over the summer and change your major when you are back on campus. Have you already made a commitment to intern for his firm? If so, tell him you will fulfill that obligation, but only until such time that a replacement can be

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found. Can you help him with that? I'll bet you have fellow students from your engineering program that would love this opportunity for summer employment. If you have made no such commitment, call the teaching job and ask them when you start.

Finally, I suggest both of you sit down and listen to the words to Billy Joel's song, "My Life." There's a lot of wisdom in rock and roll.

Send your personal coaching questions to kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com or call 473-4004. Kathleen is a personal and executive coach, clinical psychologist, and writer. (©2004 Kathleen Brehony. All Rights Reserved.) Columns are archived at www.fullpotentialliving.com.