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## Even if not Flashy, Any Work That Benefits Humanity has Value

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## Even if not Flashy, Any Work That Benefits Humanity has Value

**By Tom Cavanagh**  
UCF Forum columnist  
Wednesday, January 1, 2014

I have had the privilege to twice witness presentations by Sir Ken Robinson. If you are not familiar with his work, Robinson is famous for research related to creativity development and educational reform, and he has the most-viewed TED Talk (a popular website featuring interesting and inspiring video presentations). He is smart, funny, and his insights really resonate with me.

So I have recently been reading his best-known work, “The Element: How Finding Your Passion Changes Everything.” In it, Robinson explores how to find your “element,” which is the point at which natural talent meets personal passion. It is the activity that allows you to be your most authentic self. To illustrate his concept, Robinson uses a variety of real-world examples and case studies.

Frankly, I have been surprised by my own reaction to the book. On one hand, I wholeheartedly agree with his premise, which is consistent with the adage that if you find work that you love, you will never work a day in your life.

I agree with his references to developmental psychologist Howard Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences. In my own experience, I have seen how people are intelligent in many different ways. I appreciate his observations about childhood creativity and how the traditional school system in many ways discourages rather than encourages true creativity.

And yet...

While reading I find myself growing a bit weary of Robinson’s parade of prominent examples. He leans heavily toward the arts, which makes some sense since he feels that they are undervalued in our traditional educational system. However, rather than be

inspired by his tales of famous actresses, athletes, musicians, choreographers, cartoonists and physicists, I can't help but feel a bit discouraged for all of the many unsuccessful people out there who feel that those pursuits really are their elements.

Let's face it, reaching the pinnacle of a highly competitive profession such as acting or sports is so rare as to be unrealistic for the vast majority of people who pursue it. Just nine in 10,000, or .09 percent, of high school senior football players are ever drafted by an NFL team. The ideas of the starving writer and the waitress wannabe actress have become such truisms as to border on being clichés. There simply aren't enough of these jobs for all of the people who believe that those are their elements.

I can't help but feel that in Robinson's utopian vision we will all be wildly successful pursuing the most creative of our inner passions. We will be a society of sculptors, dancers, musicians and writers. But then I wonder, who will be left to drive the taxis for all of these successful artists? Who will file their insurance claims? Who will fix their leaky roofs? Who will clean their public toilets? There doesn't seem to be any room in Robinson's vision for the quotidian work of daily life. Society would be like an unbalanced ecosystem with too many herbivores and too few predators. Such an ecosystem is unsustainable.

I am all for people pursuing their passions. I have published three novels and won some awards for writing. If I could, I would probably choose to write fiction all day long. But that simply isn't realistic. However, I have a job I truly enjoy, working in UCF's distance education where I honestly believe that I am making a difference in people's lives, helping to provide greater educational access. I can still write novels in my spare time, satisfy my creative interests, and not have to be John Grisham to feel like my authentic self.

The main problem I have with Robinson's examples is the implication that there is somehow less value in the less glamorous work. I simply disagree with that. Just because someone was unable to become the Broadway musical star they always dreamed of and instead chose to sell insurance doesn't mean that there is any less societal value associated with their work. Perhaps there is actually more value in the effort since they work hard, offer a service needed by many, provide for their family, and contribute to society in significant but completely unrecognized ways.

According to St. Benedict and the monastic order he founded, there is dignity in all work, especially manual labor. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. is quoted as saying quite eloquently, “If a man is called to be a street sweeper, he should sweep streets even as a Michelangelo painted, or Beethoven composed music, or Shakespeare wrote poetry. He should sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven and earth will pause to say, ‘Here lived a great street sweeper who did his job well.’” King also said, “No work is insignificant. All labor that uplifts humanity has dignity and importance and should be undertaken with painstaking excellence.”

I doubt that the street sweepers that King had in mind felt called to the profession as their element. But that doesn’t diminish from the dignity of the work and the value that it provides to society. Frank Capra’s *It’s a Wonderful Life* comes to mind. George Bailey never traveled the world or built the great structures he yearned to construct. But by doing the small, mundane, everyday work of life, as unglamorous as it may have seemed, he was able to make a positive and lasting impact on society. The world was a better place for having George Bailey in it, complete with all the choices he made.

Now, having said all this, I am still a great fan of Sir Ken’s work. I would encourage you to watch his TED Talk and read “The Element.” By all means, be creative and pursue your passions. Write that book. Paint that canvas. Audition for that role. I hope you succeed beyond your wildest imagination. However, just know that even if you don’t end up winning the Nobel Prize, an Olympic medal, or an Oscar, you still make a real difference every day.

And that’s worth celebrating.

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