

# Follow Your Passion?

## *BAD ADVICE*

There are only two things I can tell you today that come with absolutely no agenda. The first is “Congratulations.” The second is “Good luck.” Everything else is what I like to call “The Dirty Truth,” which is just another way of saying, “It’s my opinion.” And in my opinion, you have all been given some terrible advice, and that advice, is this: follow your passion.

Every time I watch the Oscars, I cringe when some famous movie star—trophy in hand—starts to deconstruct the secret of their success. It’s always the same thing: “Don’t let anyone tell you that you don’t have what it takes, kid!”; and the ever popular, “Never give up on your dreams!”

I understand the importance of persistence, and the value of encouragement, but who tells a stranger [never] to give up on their dreams, without even knowing what it is they’re dreaming? How can Lady Gaga possibly know where your passion will lead you? Have these people never seen American Idol? Year after year, thousands of aspiring American Idols show up with great expectations only to learn that they don’t possess the skills they thought they did. What’s really amazing though is not their lack of talent; the world is full of people who can’t sing. It’s their genuine shock at being rejected—the incredible realization that their passion and their ability had nothing to do with each other.

If we’re talking about your hobby, by all means let your passion lead you. But when it comes to making a living, it’s easy to forget the dirty truth: just because you’re passionate about something doesn’t mean you won’t suck at it. And just because you’ve earned a degree in your chosen field doesn’t mean you’re gonna find your “dream job.” Dream Jobs are usually just that—dreams. But their imaginary existence just might keep you from exploring careers that offer a legitimate chance to perform meaningful work and develop a genuine passion for the job you already have. Because here’s another Dirty Truth: your happiness on the job has very little to do with the work itself.

On Dirty Jobs, I remember a very successful septic tank cleaner, a multi-millionaire, who told me the secret to his success: “I looked around to see where everyone else was headed,” he said, “And then I went the opposite way. Then I got good at my work. Then I began to prosper. And then one day, I realized I was passionate about other people’s crap.”

I’ve heard that same basic story from welders, plumbers, carpenters, electricians, HVAC professionals, hundreds of other skilled tradesmen who followed opportunity—not passion—and prospered as a result.

Consider the reality of the current job market. Right now, millions of people with degrees and diplomas are out there competing for a relatively narrow set of opportunities that polite society calls “good careers.” Meanwhile, employers are struggling to fill nearly 5.8 million jobs that nobody’s trained to do. This is the skills gap, it’s real, and its cause is actually very simple: when people follow their passion, they miss out on all kinds of opportunities they didn’t even know existed. When I was 16, I wanted to follow in my grandfather’s footsteps. He was a skilled tradesman who could build a house without a blueprint. That was my passion, and I followed it for years. I took all the shop classes at school, I did all I could to absorb the knowledge and skill that came so easily to my granddad. Unfortunately, the handy gene is recessive. It skipped right over me, and I struggled mightily to overcome my deficiencies. But I couldn’t. I was one of those contestants on American Idol, who believed his passion was enough to ensure his success. One day, I brought home a scone I had made in wood-shop that looked like a paramecium.

After a heavy sigh, my granddad gave me the best advice I’ve ever received. He told me, “Mike, you can still be a tradesman, but only if you get yourself a different kind of toolbox.” At the time, this felt contrary to everything I believed about the importance of “passion” and persistence and “staying the course.” But of course, he was right. Because “staying the course” only makes sense if you’re headed in a sensible direction. And while passion is way too important to be without, it is way too fickle to follow around.

Which brings us to the final Dirty Truth. “Never follow your passion, but always bring it with you.”

Congratulations, again - and good luck.

– Mike Rowe

