

4 Rules for Identifying Your Life's Work

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My oldest son graduates from college this month. Graduation is a leap into uncertainty even during ordinary times, and COVID-19 times are far from ordinary. It's a scary moment to be heading out into the world. But my advice to my son—and to all graduates—remains the same as it would have been without a pandemic: *Find your marshmallow*.

Maybe that sounds like some groovy '60s code language for dropping acid or joining a commune, but it's actually just a nod to a classic social-science [experiment](#). In 1972, the Stanford University social psychologist Walter Mischel undertook a psychology experiment involving preschool kids and a bag of marshmallows. He would sit across the table from each child, take out a marshmallow, and ask, "Do you want it?" Obviously, they did. He told them it was theirs—but there was a catch. He was going to leave the room for 15 minutes. The child could eat the marshmallow while he was gone, if he or she wanted. But when the researcher came back in, if the first marshmallow was still there, the child would get a second one.

Mischel found that a majority of the kids couldn't wait, and gobbled up the marshmallow when he left the room. He [followed up](#) on the children in the study, and found that those who were able to delay their gratification found greater success as they grew up: They were healthier, happier, and scored higher on their SATs than the kids who had eaten the marshmallow.

In the years that followed, other researchers [pointed out](#) that Mischel's results were about far more than just willpower; they also involved a child's family background, socioeconomic circumstances, and other factors. But the implication remained: Good things come to those who wait—and work, and sacrifice, and maybe even suffer.

The question for today's graduates is not whether they could have passed Mischel's marshmallow test; they just passed their own version of it by working and sacrificing to get their diplomas. The question is: *What exactly is your marshmallow?* Do you know what you sacrificed and suffered for? Do you have a professional calling that is worth having deferred your consumption and gratification all these years?

If you are scratching your head, don't despair—you don't have to find an answer immediately. Here, I offer four rules to keep in mind to guide your quest.

Rule 1. The work has to be the reward.

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Rule 2. An interesting career is better than a fun career.

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Rule 3. A career doesn't have to be a straight line.

Young people today—especially those currently in college and graduate school—have grown up in a culture that worships entrepreneurial success. Vast fortunes have accrued to tech start-up founders in their 20s, and those founders come with a certain mythology. Whether it's true or not, the entrepreneur is often depicted as having a single abiding passion for which he or she is willing to pay any personal price. Their enormous worldly rewards are portrayed as the ultimate marshmallow.

But this model doesn't describe how many—perhaps most—happy, fulfilled people have survived and thrived. Scholars at the University of Southern California have [studied](#) career patterns and come up with four broad categories. The first are linear careers, which climb steadily upward, with everything building on everything else. The concept of the “corporate ladder” is a very linear one. This is also the model of the billionaire entrepreneur.

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Rule 4. Beware of unhealthy passions.

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