



Find career inspiration in the joys of childhood

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You might be 21. You might be 61. You might be the 82-year-old man who e-mailed to ask about what he should do for a living. Look for roots in childhood.

Psychiatrist Gabriela Cora says that it's essential to "rediscover the source of pleasure as experienced during childhood activities, and use this feeling to compare it with pleasurable adult activities."

For example, says Dr. Cora, president of the Executive Health & Wealth Institute Inc. in Miami, "the enjoyment from resolving puzzles might transfer to the adult ability to resolve problems. Creating a drawing might relate to coming up with a unique plan."

Dallas architect Betsy del Monte, sustainability consultant at the Beck Group, began working full time in architecture when she was 21. Growing up, she'd enjoyed summer camp in the mountains of western North Carolina, but she was also drawn to the vitality of cities.

"I'd always thought I'd be an engineer," she says, "because my dad was. But I applied to the school of architecture at the University of Virginia at the last minute; engineering, the only alternative, seemed very cut and dried." She found a childhood connection at age 30, when working on a project in Baltimore that led to speaking to the local chapter of the American Institute of Architects.

One attendee would be Joe Mason. "He'd designed our house when I was in the third grade," she recalls. "I'd thought that the whole process was magical . . . seeing an area of the woods where a hole was being dug and concrete blocks were set, and then it became our home. I'd thought Joe Mason was pretty cool, too. Then it dawned on me that he was the reason I'd gone into architecture."

At age 19, Sharon Livingston, now an industrial psychologist and president of the Livingston Group for Marketing Inc., in Londonderry, N.H., studied motivational research. She interviewed hundreds of college students "to figure out whether symbols or musical slogans [in commercials] were more memorable. For me at the time, it was fascinating and it felt like play." She finished college with a job using her interviewing skill.

"By 24," she says. "I decided that I wanted to use play in a business environment." She developed the "Snow White Theory of Group Process" for meetings, focus groups and leadership training, which uses skills she developed in a large family of diminutive people.

For Michael Webb, vice president of the San Francisco Bay-area staffing company CFOs2GO, the light bulb went on in the fifth grade. He disliked writing; when he had a choice, he'd give a speech. "It came easy to me," he remarks. "I started a speech and debate club in high school and did stand-up comedy at 17."

Then he used his passion for speaking when he became a Mormon missionary, where he found he was "touching" people. He kept looking for other avenues to touch more people and had his epiphany when called out of an audience of several thousand to speak. "This is what I'm supposed to be doing," he realized, but he had to work on it.

Ms. Del Monte advises you to study what's meaningful to you. Ms. Livingston says, "Figure out what's fun." Mr. Webb believes that through exploration, you'll find a way: "I didn't wake up and say, 'I want to be a recruiter.' I fell into it."

If you draw a blank when you look at your childhood or you're having difficulty exploring, Dr. Cora advises you to "find your center. I know that this sounds simple, but it is complex. Some people may be able to do many things but enjoy doing only a few things. Others may enjoy doing many things but they may find it difficult to 'transform' these into high-paying jobs."

It's never too late to center your work around what brings you joy.

Mildred L. Culp is a syndicated columnist who covers emerging trends in the workplace.