

**Help! Save My Career!**  
**by Donald Asher, America's Job Search Guru**  
**(this article originally appeared in *USAirways Magazine*)**

Dear Guru Don:

I've been laid off and I'm trying to see the silver lining in this. What are your suggestions for getting some positive experience out of this?

Sign me,

Slightly Depressed

Dear Slightly,

Your experience is natural. Most people who get laid off suffer a bit emotionally. Here's my suggestion: Think of all the free or pretty cheap stuff you can that you enjoy doing. Taking a walk, riding a bike, checking books and movies out of the library, reading the paper, hitting the weights, training a dog, tutoring a kid, starting a side business, learning to play the guitar. Whatever you like to do, this time is a gift. Just watch the spending.

Next month, I'll cover recession-resistant jobs and businesses that can get you some income going.

My best wishes for your continued success.

Dear Guru Don:

I liked your column and decided to write to you. I'm not in crisis, really, but I'm curious about something. Does career testing really work? I mean, I took this aptitude test and it said I should be a writer or a actor. I think that's interesting, but not really useful. Do you know what I mean? Now I'm wondering. Where do career ideas come from? What leads to "career success" whatever that is. Frankly, I'm not sure how to get started. I don't plan on being too picky in this economy, but still, I'd like to get something that is interesting and has potential. I'm good at a lot of things, but I don't have some outstanding and obvious talent like some people do. People like me, and maybe I could go into some kind of sales. My major is business and I minored in communications. My dad says a job is a way to support a family, but I want more than that. I think he's last century. Most of my peers want a better life than just work, work, work. What do you think?

Taylor, a College Senior

Dear Taylor,

Well, since you have two typos in your email, a nonparallel construction, and a word repeated in close proximity, I agree with you that you should probably not become a writer. Nevertheless, that leaves a universe of possibility, doesn't it? You've asked a series of profound questions, which I will restructure as: What is success? Where do career ideas originate? How does one get started and advance toward success?

**What is success?** I think the definition of success is undergoing a revision right now, in part due to generational preferences, and in part due to the now-evident shortcomings of crass materialism. It's fun to have money and buy stuff, but it turns out that the *pursuit* of happiness is what satisfies. *Having* money, stuff, honors, praise, and awards is just not that satisfying.

One clear example is entrepreneurs. Entrepreneurs are happiest while building their companies; selling the company for a profit often depresses them, leaves them rudderless and confused, in spite of the infusion of capital into their personal lives.

A lot of materialism has a threshold effect. You definitely need a certain amount of money or a certain amount of house, just as examples, but beyond that, more money or more house does not make you happier.

The new field of Happiness Studies has a lot to say about ideas like this. To catch up on this, you might read Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention*, and Martin Seligman's *Learned Optimism* or *Authentic Happiness*. There's some fascinating scholarship coming out of this field right now.

Yes, we all want and need to be able to pay our bills, but do we really need to helicopter ski in Chile this July or buy another BMW because there's dust on the one we already have? Perhaps not. Besides, a lot of Americans are working way too many hours to play with their toys or bask in their glories. Even people like your dad may work too many hours to share in the family life his income has created.

I have long said that a life is made up of a series of days, so you'd better enjoy your days if you want to enjoy your life. Confucius said: "Choose a job you love, and you will never have to work a day in your life." The greatest success, in career terms, is in *finding your calling*.

Among those people who work, some have jobs, some have careers, and some have a calling. A calling is something you'd do even if you weren't paid to do it. A calling is intrinsically satisfying, regardless of compensation. And it turns out that finding your calling leads to more success.

When you love to do something, you'll do it longer, you'll invest your own money in doing it, you'll do it when you're tired, you'll do it when attractive distractions are available. And that extra effort brings extra reward. This is covered in Malcolm Gladwell's, *Outliers: The Story of Success*, and in Geoff Colvin's *Talent Is Overrated: What Really Separates World-Class Performers from Everybody Else*.

Your goal, Taylor, should be to find a calling.

**Where do career ideas originate?** They originate in the weirdest of places. I know of an exobiologist who got her original idea from a Tom Cruise movie, and now she's a NASA scientist. A lot of lawyers today were watching *Ally McBeal* a decade ago. People get a lot of career ideas from their families. Your name is a career idea, by the way, and people with that name originally had that profession. We're past the feudal idea that your father's profession shall be your profession, but if your mom was a realtor, maybe you'll be a developer; if your dad was a high school teacher maybe you'll be a corporate trainer. Here's a great way to get career ideas:

- First, what are all the career fantasies you've had so far in your life, however trivial or unlikely?

- What products, services, or ideas do you care about enough to sell them to others?
- If you won the lottery, how would you use your time, and how would you use your money?
- What would you pay to do or to learn?
- What do your best friends want to do in their careers?
- Think about famous or important people whom you admire. What do they do for a living?
- What are your favorite skills, talents, and activities? Are there any careers you can identify where those skills, talents, and activities would lead to accomplishment?
- What do *all* the people in your family do for a living? Is any of that interesting to you?
- What does career interest and aptitude testing say about you?

By the way, interest and aptitude testing is effective as an idea generator, but no one should ever take them as a roadmap to follow. For more on generating career ideas, see my book, *How to Get Any Job with Any Major*.

**How do you get started toward success?** The key to success is:

1. Identify a career or job that interests you.
2. Find someone with that career or job *right now*.
3. Talk to them.
4. Repeat until retired.

That's it! It is deceptively simple, yet extraordinarily powerful in practice. Try it. Taylor, you deserve more than a life of work, work, work. You deserve to find your calling and pursue it.

My best wishes for your continued success.

Donald Asher

Send your career emergency to [don@donaldasher.com](mailto:don@donaldasher.com), and watch this space for Asher's response.

BIO: Donald Asher is a nationally known writer and speaker on careers and higher education. He is the author of eleven books, including *Cracking the Hidden Job Market*; *How to Get Any Job: Life Launch and Re-Launch for Everyone Under 30*; *Graduate Admissions Essays*, the best-selling guide to the graduate admissions process; *Asher's Bible of Executive Resumes*; *Cool Colleges for the Hyper-Intelligent, Self-Directed, Late Blooming, and Just Plain Different*; and *Who Gets Promoted, Who Doesn't, and Why* (named Business Book of the Year 2008 by national career columnist Joyce Lain Kennedy). Asher speaks over 100 days a year from coast to coast, to college and corporate audiences. He is eager to hear your career emergency.