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My Life or Yours?

by Lesley Dawson

It was just that he was unsuited to being a child. A child was typically seen as a blank page upon which his parents and teachers can write. A piece of blotting paper that would gradually soak up all the experiences and lessons of life and gratefully take upon himself the attitudes and values of his elders.

He was expected to become a doctor or a lawyer and earn enough money to support his parents, grandparents, perhaps his brothers and sisters and sometimes his uncle, aunts and cousins. He knew this from the first day in primary school. Decked out in his new school uniform he had his picture taken outside the front door with his school satchel proudly displayed over his right shoulder and an inane grin on his face. Nobody had to say anything he just knew what was expected of him.

This feeling was reinforced at the end of each school year when his father went over his school report with a fine-tooth comb and quizzed him on all the subjects that didn't have top marks. He tried valiantly to show off his excellent marks in art, drama and English literature but these were considered unimportant, secondary, just back up subjects. What was important was excellence in maths, science and economics

His mother contributed even more to his uneasiness as she invited all his friends to tea. As they all sat around the kitchen table, she plied them with her son's favorite food. She wouldn't accept refusal of seconds and even third helpings all the while explaining that they would need to be healthy if they wanted to be good doctors and lawyers. A practice in Harley Street or The Old Bailey was envisaged.

As year succeeded year, A levels got closer, and his grades began to suffer as the weight of expectation became more and more unbearable. How could he tell his father that his dream was to work as a teacher in some low resourced country in Asia, helping the folks there to improve crop yields and find new sources of water and energy. He tried to broach this idea one Sunday evening when he and his dad were drinking beer out on the back porch. The look of horror on the face of his parent disabused him of any possibility of support for what he really wanted to do.

“I never had the chance to go to university, so I want you to try for Cambridge,” was the reply that sank his heart into his boots. He began to dread going to school and thus began his days of skipping classes and the beginning of his double life.

A possible loophole in the family plan came when a volunteer came to his school suggesting a year out before going to university. There was an opportunity to spend time in Malawi in sub-Saharan Africa at a secondary school sponsored by the Church of Scotland. Could he persuade his parents that this would be a good idea? He would at least try. As it happened his grandfather came down from Fife to stay for a few weeks and was obviously very taken by the Church of Scotland link. That managed to persuade his dad to agree.

Having managed to scrape the grades he needed for Cambridge and passing the entrance exam there was nothing to hold things up any longer. One warm August day the whole family drove to Heathrow to see him on to the plane to Nairobi, where he would have to change to reach Blantyre. Once on the plane his heart began to expand with joy. He had done it. He was not going back before he was ready.

Emails and zoom meetings connected them all over the next twelve months and they expected him home before the Cambridge term began. The first his dad heard about changes to the plan was an email, “Dear Dad, I am not coming home yet. I have succumbed to a severe bout of malaria and am not allowed to travel. Will keep you informed of my progress. Your loving son James.”

That was the last they heard of him for five years, by which time he was a famous man with an international reputation in cross-cultural education with numerous journal articles to his name and a doctorate from the University of Western Cape. In his email saying he was coming for a visit to the UK, he said, “Dear Dad. I hope you are well. I have had the chance these last five years to be the child I wanted to be and now I have grown up satisfied with my life.”