

Santa Ana High School Article of the Week # 22

Why Anderson Cooper's advice to 'follow your bliss' is so wrong

Instructions: READ and ANNOTATE

- Mark your confusion.
- Purposefully annotate the article (1-2 mature, thoughtful responses per page to what the author is saying)

Student _____ Class Period _____

Why Anderson Cooper's advice to 'follow your bliss' is so wrong

by Emily L. Hauser for *The Week*, 5/26/15

I like Anderson Cooper. I respect Anderson Cooper. In fact, I have a crush on Anderson Cooper (my marriage and his sexuality notwithstanding). But sometimes people we like, respect, and have crushes on can make our hair stand on end — as was the case for me last week, when *Fast Company* ran an excerpt from Cooper's contribution to *Getting There: A Book of Mentors*.

Headlined "Why No 'Plan B' Is The Only Plan," Cooper's essay is, when stripped of its particulars, fairly standard Advice To Young People: Work really hard; don't give up when the going gets tough; believe more in yourself than in naysayers.

It being graduation season, there's a lot of this going around, and most of the people proffering the advice are not unlike Anderson Cooper: They beat some kind of odds, and achieved success by following their passion. Indeed, "follow your passion" is something of a leitmotif of the Advice To Young People genre — or, as Cooper's mother put it to him, "follow your bliss." Following one's passion/bliss is, we're given to understand, the only way to lead a fulfilling life.

I do not doubt any of the details of the grinding work and loneliness that Cooper endured on his way up, and, like him, I know more than a little about having one's life shaped by loss and grief. But Cooper, like many well-meaning advice-givers before him, elides two facts: He was born into multiple layers of privilege, and for every success story, there are at least a dozen people who actually fail.

"No 'Plan B'" makes no mention of the fact that Cooper's follow-your-bliss mother is Gloria Vanderbilt. There's no mention that Cooper's gender might have been an advantage as he flew into war zones with \$5 and a cheap camera. Skin color, the genetic jackpot of movie-star good looks, and his formidable education don't factor in. And there's not even a hint that as he followed calamity around the globe, Cooper did so in the knowledge that in a pinch, someone would be able to get him home.

Most people who follow their passion, even most talented people — even most talented people who work *really really hard* — will never be as successful as the people who give Advice To Young People. Most really good ball players don't make it to the majors; most really good musicians never win a Grammy; most really good scientists don't land at NASA.

Talent and dedication are crucial, but much of this process is subjective, biased, or blatantly unfair, and a lot of it comes back to the simple and deeply troubling fact of economic disparity. It's easier to achieve your dream if you can afford to work for free; it's easier still if you've spent your entire life around people who've already made it. There's a point at which talent (or belief in oneself) has absolutely nothing to do with it.

Indeed, just the notion of following one's passion/bliss is steeped in historic, economic, and social privilege. For the vast majority of human history, you were grateful if you and yours ate today and could know with some certainty that you would also eat next week. In fact, I feel safe in saying that this remains true for most humans alive today. Those of us who can even entertain the idea of following our passion

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