**Living in the Zone** by Janet King & Dennis Welch, School Counsellor, Apr 2006.

***Helping students take a good look at their skills and values will go a long way toward ensuring they end up in a career that lets them be productive, valuable, and happy.***

P

op culture has many cute and catchy names for it: "the zone," "the sweet spot," "the wheelhouse." These are typically used to describe that special place we all recognize when we're there, that place where it's obvious we are doing our best work and it feels effortless and free We suddenly become exponentially productive, and, chances are, we are happy and confident Somehow, our passion and gifts and talents have all converged to produce a magic moment. These mountaintop experiences lead us to ask the inevitable question Could this happen again?"

The answer is a resounding "yes." It could happen But, working in the zone is a lot less common than it should be Data from the 2004 U.S. Employee Engagement Index from *Gallup Management Journal* indicates 17 percent of employees are "actively disengaged," in other words, organizational saboteurs who are busy disturbing the cu1ture and spreading negativity. Many others are "disengaged,” bodily present, mostly in neutral gear, not necessarily contributing anything of note to their organizations

There are a lot of myths about happiness floating around in the culture at large, and they apparently have half-lives rivaling enriched uranium. In spite of the fact that these myths are debunked and exploded on a daily basis, these hard-to-kill shadows of the truth live on, wreaking their havoc in people's everyday lives. They show up often in popular movies, music and television shows and that exposure gives new credence to the ideas all over again. These partial truths and outright falsehoods have a huge influence on today's middle school and high school students and the choices they make about their futures Let's explore four of these myths and challenge their veracity.

**Myth #1 Money and happiness are somehow** **related**. Myth 1 goes something like this Money is the scorecard in our culture. What's most important gets paid the most If people are poor and happy, it’s only because they haven’t come to their senses yet, or they're too ignorant to know they're unhappy. Ballplayers get millions while school counselors get thousands. Missionaries oftentimes get only hundreds Does that mean that the work that they do is insignificant? Does the fact that their bank account has a few million shekels less than an NBA center mean they are automatically unhappy? Not even close I know a lot of school counselors who live for their jobs. They are in their zone when they are working with students. Yes, they should be paid more of that there is no doubt. But, for school counselors in the zone, the joy of doing it isn't diminished one iota because of the size of their paycheck.

On the other hand, stories abound about people leaving high -paid jobs because they want more. More of what? Here's a stunner, they want more of what money ant necessarily buy. More time with their families, a healthier working environment less stress more work that has significance. I have a friend who was a high paid real estate developer who turned in his license, moved to a smaller home scaled back his lifestyle and began doing something that in his mind had the ability to change the world in some small way and have those changes outlive him He's never been happier.

So, if there is -a one-to-one relationship between happiness and money, no one would ever leave these high paying positions Yet, they do Every day

**Myth #2 Moms a doctor, so you'll be a doctor, too.**  The pressure is enormous. The par ents have been great achievers and excelled at a particular role Success is genetically guaranteed, right? Too often we have said. about our children, 'He's got the hands of a surgeon," or "She's got the mind of a lawyer". Perhaps those statements are true But, the notion that your offspring has the same passion you do for healing the sick, defending the indigent or selling a million widgets is misguided at best and downright destructive at its worst. The pressure to be something they are not may mean years of missteps and hollow days and nights for the obedient children who can't imagine letting their parents down.

**Myth #3: If I just had this job, it would somehow make me complete.**  This dangerous myth says, "In spite of my deep misgivings, I think I can handle this career. The prestige will more than mike up for the fact that I am not quite a fit for the job," or "I have no passion for doing this job at all let alone doing it well, but if I can succeed at this Management consultant, author and university professor Peter Drucker said that one of the terrible tragedies in this life is to climb to the top of the ladder of success and find that it's leaning against the wrong wall. People choose occupational roles for a lot of reasons, perhaps none of which has anything to do with their actual talents or passions. They work and work to secure the job, and then, to their horror, find they have very little to help them excel and succeed. Unhappiness ensues as the waters get deeper. Finally, they sink, leave or get fired. Not only do they end up not "completed" but devastated and gun shy as well.

**Myth #4: You can be anything you want to be.**

This one makes great books and movies, but it's simply not true. For example, it would be misleading and borderline cruel to tell a mediocre golfer that she could be a pro if she just practiced enough. Honing less-than- average skills might bring us all the up to mediocre, but it will almost never produce greatness. It will, however, produce a great deal of frustration.

**Replacing Myths with Truths**

School counselors have an important role in helping students replace these four myths with the truth. Encourage students to find happiness in their work. There is nothing fundamentally wrong with making a lot of money. It can be used to do a lot of good. Well- meaning people often say, "Money is

the root of all evil." The verse actually says, "The love of money is the root of all evil." Making a career decision based solely on the potential financial reward is a recipe-for-disaster—True-career-success is born out of the satisfaction of spending time doing what you love.

**#1** - Ask your students to ponder this question: **How do I want to invest my life in the working world?**

**Inspire students to be who they were created** **to be.** It's not bad for students to follow in their parents' footsteps by becoming a doctor or lawyer or salesperson or candlestick maker, not a bad thing at all. But we must help our students make sure they are living out their own passions and talents, which aren't necessarily the same as their parents' passions and talents. Discerning the difference between the student's and the parent’s vision for the future requires objectivity. Comprehensive career guidance helps students independently focus on their values, interests, personality type and abilities. After all, the only way to be in the zone is to be in your own zone, right?

**#2** - Invite your students to consider this question: **In what career could I best use passions and talents I have been given?**

**Validate students for who they are, not what they do.** Depending on career success for self-worth will always leave a person disappointed. Put in its proper perspective, feeling prestige and being acclaimed and having influence can be valuable. But, they should be byproducts of an educated and well- thought-out choice, not the end in itself.

**#3 -** Dare your students to ask: **Even if no one ever commends the work I do, wjll I still feel good about the choice I made for my career?**

**Challenge students to be realistic about their skills, talents and motivation.** Individuals can be anything they have the talent and passion to be. Hone a very good skill or talent, and there is the real possibility that it will produce greatness.

Gone are the days of school counselors telling students they "won't amount to anything," but help students assess: Do I have the talents and the dedication required to be successful in the career I envision?

**The root problem**

So, how have these myths persisted? Somehow, these myths continue to live

on. Some of the root problem may lie in the fast-paced culture we live in,

which, quite frankly, doesn't 'allow or encourage a lot of time for introspection and self-examination. We just keep moving, rather than stopping and taking the time to do some self-discovery. Cvndie Morris, a long-time middle school counselor in Georgia, says, "Not enough thought goes into these major decisions. This is evidenced by the large number of students in college who change their majors multiple times and also by the large number of career changes most people make over a-lifetime." And, it could be as simple as a case of denial. "I have known parents who have come to grips with their own limitations but who refuse to consider the possibility that their child might have any limitations," Morris said. What can we, as school counselors do to abolish these myths? (What can you do as a student to clear your faith in these myths?)

**Provide objective assessment.** Effective advisement requires providing students (and their parents) objective data to digest. The first step is to help students assess their values, interests, abilities and personalities using scientifically validated instruments. There are many valuable assessment tools out there that are objective and accurate. The assessment process needs to be comprehensive, which means it should include accurate measurement of the student's interests, talents and values. The results of such measurements can be a great reality cheek and should be evaluated along with other valuable evidence, such as academic performance, extracurricular activities, hobbies, motivation to learn, etc.

**Nurture student expertise**. Pay attention to areas of excellence, easy learning, etc. These can be harbingers and signposts of talent and passion. Help students look for opportunities to explore careers through volunteering, job shadowing, -apprenticeships and research. Help students investigate broad career, categories before they zero in on a specific career goal.

**Offer an ounce of prevention**. One area of career guidance, often overlooked, involves critical decision-making skills, especially in regard to potential career blockers. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, in 2003, 14 percent of the people undergoing drug rehabilitation began using drugs prior to age 13.

Real-life examples and face-to-face candid discussions with students about risky behavior and the impact it could have on their life choices are crucial to helping students navigate dangerous waters. Demonstrate these realities in thought-provoking ways so students determine for

themselves the steps required to avoid trouble. You can't force good decision-making skills on about risky behavior must become something systematic and part of the school culture.

There is a well-worn adage that says, "The truth will set you free." Knowing the true story about themselves; their potential and the hurdles that may lie ahead will go a long way toward allowing students to live and work and be their best, to truly live in "the zone."

**Reflection Assignment: (Value /10) \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (Name)**

After reading the article re-read and reflect on the points of interest to you. Be prepared to hand in your written work and discuss your thoughts with the class.

1. Write a personal response to each of the 3 questions the article asks of you. Each response should be at least 3 sentences in length.
   1. **How do I want to invest my life in the working world?**
   2. **In what career could I best use passions and talents I have been given? What evidence can I use to support this choice?**
   3. **Even if no one ever commends the work I do, will I still feel good about the choice I made for my career? Explain fully.**
2. In at least 1 paragraph but less than 1 page explain the main message of the article and how it relates to your future plans.