WHAT DO YOU WANT OUT OF A CAREER?
by Janice Arenofsky

Gold medal Olympic skater, Tara Lipinski, Academy Award winning screenwriters Matt Damon and Ben Affleck, and computer programmer John Romero (who created the game "Doom") all have something in common. They have made career choices based on knowing what in life is most important to them.

Lipinski turned pro because skating as an amateur took too much time away from her family and friends. Damon and Affleck rejected a traditional desk job in favor of the creative expression they found in acting and writing. Romero found a way to combine the fun of action games with his skill at computer programming. (He taught himself to program when he was 12, after becoming addicted to Pac-Man.)

People want different things out of life and career...whether it’s fame, fortune, excitement, knowledge, creativity, or service to others. The trick is to find out what those things are—for you!

No career is perfect, but your objective should be to obtain those things in life you feel are vital to your happiness. These may be material rewards such as money or a big house or emotional rewards such as respect and power.

To discover the career that will give you the biggest “payoff” in happiness, however, you must first examine your values.

IDENTIFYING YOUR VALUES

Values are important beliefs and ethical standards. You cannot function well without them, and with them your life takes on more meaning and power.

For instance, say you feel that your life would have more meaning if you could do something for other people. You have identified a purpose, or personal value, that may give you the strength and perseverance to pursue a career in the helping professions, such as teaching or psychology.

In The New World Teen Study, which surveyed about 2,800 U.S. high school students, a majority of teens said that a happy life, the chance to learn, and a good job were top priorities for them. In a similar 1996 study of about 900 teens, happiness and an enjoyable life also were ranked high, with 78 percent of teens convinced that a satisfying career is important to personal fulfillment.

How can you best identify YOUR values? Search for clues in the kind of people you respect, your favorite activities/experiences, your opinions, and the occasions when you feel needed. What do you feel you really need to achieve? What do you daydream about most? For example, do you fantasize about being a celebrity guest on a talk show, or do you envision yourself addressing a jury? Be honest—it’s the best method for pinpointing values.

For many people, fun on the job is tops on their list of career values, says the director of research at a job-placement firm in California. In fact, many career experts, including author Joyce Lain Kennedy, suggest choosing a career you would do without pay. That’s because many "happiness" surveys show that earning lots of cash does not always translate to contentment.

"I want work that’s morally fulfilling," says a former interior designer who switched careers midstream to become a teacher.

"Job jumpers," such as this new teacher, are increasing in numbers. The reason? About 80 percent of today’s workforce are in jobs that are a poor fit, says career counselor Karen L. Kirchner. Sometimes that’s because our values change over time, which means a lot of "square pegs" are trying to fit into "round holes."

But another reason is that many workers, when they were teens, never thought enough about their values. They never considered what was truly essential to their well-being.

SPEAK OUT, AMERICA!

CAREER WORLD asked teenagers throughout the country what they wanted most from their careers. Here are some of their responses. How do theirs compare to yours?

Wasan Al-Azzawe, 18, lists intellectual stimulation and career enjoyment as her priorities. “Life is about growth, self-discovery, and learning—it’s not only about making money,” she says. “There are a lot of things you can do to support yourself financially, so why not pick something you’re good at and love to do?”

Al-Azzawe also prefers a high-status job—she would be delegating tasks—not bossing people around. “I like to take the initiative and be a leader,” she says. It is less important to her to make a contribution to society because, although she thinks humanitarian goals are “admirable,” she doubts if they can be achieved.

Alan S., 19, believes financial success in a career is the route to his happiness, with education serving as the open door leading to both goals. “You need to be educated to have employers want you,” says the college freshman.

Thomas T.,18, who is interested in a career in the entertainment industry, places a higher value on social contributions (“making as many people smile as I can”) and on creativity than on monetary rewards. “I’m a strong motivator and an excellent communicator,” says Fantini, “and there are things I feel I can change in this world. But I need the freedom to think as free and wild as I like.”

Kristin Sneller, 16, is a teen with similar priorities. “Getting involved in your community and reaching out is very important to me,” says Sneller, who volunteers for organizations assisting the poor, the homeless, and people with disabilities. Sneller would like a career in the helping professions because she not only enjoys helping people up, but also likes organizing activities and making decisions. She says she will always make time for nonprofit events such as Special Olympics. “I just love the feeling of seeing people having fun and smiling.”

Janelle Sagmiller, 18, says too, values making a contribution to society more than landing a high-status job. But she realizes her views may change over time. Above all, she says, she needs an exciting job. “I would rather pick pine cones in a forest where I have a chance of running into a bear than sit behind a desk waiting for my pencil to break.”

Her ideal career would take her to exotic places throughout the world, and since she is interested in medicine, she believes a career as a traveling midwife would be perfect. “I would travel from country to country delivering infants while integrating each country’s cultural beliefs into my practice.” Satisfaction and
enjoyment would come from knowing she was "guiding a newborn into the world" and learning new things. "I also feel that being a midwife would leave much time for play, which is a must."

Kate Hawken, 17, is another person who lists travel as an important career value. While Hawken rejects the need for riches, she does not want to be in a routine job. "This would make me feel yucky," she admits. Hawken says her ideal job would be as a photojournalist for a travel or outdoors publication. "I need to be able to move around and learn new things," she says. "And I love photography and writing. Combining these would be absolutely fantastic."

In general, most teens surveyed felt education, combined with a passion for a particular area, would bring career satisfaction.

Nicholas Beckius, 16, who looks forward to a computer-related career, says, "Nobody likes a boring job. Although money and respect are important," he says, "none of that stuff matters unless you like what you're doing."

Whether your career lands you in the Hall of Fame or the Halls of Academia, happiness will depend on how well your values line up with your current commitments. "No amount of material success or public recognition will fill us up," says popular talk radio psychologist Dr. Laura Schlessinger in a recent article in PARADE magazine, "if we don't believe our life and work serve some higher purpose."

Here are two young people's work experiences and how they have or have not jelled with their values.

DENNIS GREEN: KEEPING AN EYE ON THE BALL

After graduating from Indiana University, Dennis Green knew exactly what he wanted: a TV sports broadcasting career in a large city.

Green's first job was a low-paying sports broadcasting position with a regional cable operation. But starting small had its benefits: The job recognition allowed him to interact with athletes, attend major-league games, and get the "best seat in the house."

"In my 20s I was focused on career," says Green, 33. "I had little personal life and took few vacations."

For five years Green worked on and off the camera at public TV and cable operations. He wrote copy, hired sportscasters, and sometimes ran the entire newsroom. "Early on I wanted power," Green says. "I figured if I wasn't going to get paid well, I would just as soon have the title."

When Green finally accepted the fact that he "didn't have the right look" for advertisers, he decided he would redirect his career away from broadcasting and into media syndication. He relocated to Chicago, where he got a master's degree in business.

After several jobs in Chicago, Green took a position with a financial news service based in New York City. Recently married, Green accepted the job for several reasons: an increase in salary, the broadening experience of working in various media, and an opportunity to network in the sports industry. He also enjoys the travel his job demands and the occasional celebrity he meets.

On the downside, though, "This is not my passion," he says. Also, Manhattan is a hectic and sometimes nerve-wracking place to live.

Two years from now, Green says he will reevaluate his career options and determine if the financial compensation is worth putting his interest in sports on the back burner. His ideal job, he says, would be handling his own sports syndication or serving as general manager of a sports operation or franchise. Says Green, "I'm not where I want to be yet in terms of sports, but I feel I can get there from this point. My eye is still on the prize."

JUDITH ASHER: COOKING UP A TASTY CAREER

"From high school on, I knew I loved the food business," says Judith Asher, 29, director of marketing for a Chicago-based restaurant company. "Every job I'd had aside from baby-sitting had been in restaurants or a local bakery."

Her excitement about food plus the importance of interacting with people, being creative, and encountering variety on the job led her to get a degree in public relations and to complete three internships before graduating. Within a year, Asher got a PR position with a restaurant and entertainment complex in Lombard, Illinois. She stayed there for four years and then decided to seek another position. Her reasons: lack of personal growth and a stressful work environment. "I also wanted to get more into the restaurant end of the business."

Through networking, she secured a position with her current employer, Bravo Restaurants. As the marketing person in charge of media relations, advertising, and promotions, Asher says she couldn't be happier—thriving on the variety of tasks, the road trips to different restaurants, and the autonomy.

She realizes the heavy workload could easily turn her into a workaholic. But, because values a "balanced life" with time for family and social activities, she doesn't let that happen. Says Asher, "I explained to my boss that I need time outside of work to keep my sanity."

Meanwhile, she says she enjoys getting paid for a job she loves doing. "It also helps that I love to eat."

TELL IT LIKE IT IS

Judith Asher and Dennis Green have looked into their hearts and learned what gives them happiness. You, too, can learn to prepare for a career compatible with your values.

It's a lot like planning for a party. List what (values) you need (from life), then find the best store (career field) to shop in.

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ARE YOU HEADED FOR "CONTENTMENT USA."

Answer the following questions. For every yes, list one or more values you derive from the activity, job, etc. (See the list of values below for help with the questions.)

Example. Do you participate in at least one extracurricular activity you really enjoy?

Yes—school newspaper

Value—interacting with people

1. Are you involved in at least one recreational activity you love?

2. Do you volunteer or have a part-time or summer job in an area of great interest to you?

3. Do you get up each day looking forward to something?
4. Is there at least one subject area you get excited talking about to your friends or family?

5. Have you recently made a decision you feel enthusiastic about?

If you answered "no" to any of these questions, your "joy thermostat" is set too low. What changes can you make to bring more happiness into your life?

knowledge
friendship
freedom
family
adventure
helping others
power
security
creativity
recognition
challenge
risk-taking

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GETTING PERSONAL

Here are a few famous names. From what you have read or heard about these notables, can you guess what their top three career values might be?

Example: Movie director Steven Spielberg
1. Enjoyment of work in movie industry
2. Creativity and imagination
3. Respect from his peers, family, and audiences

Talk show host Oprah Winfrey
1.
2.
3.

Former Olympic skater/sports broadcaster Scott Hamilton
1.
2.
3.

Pope John Paul
1.
2.
3.

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