

**Foreword to *The Question is College: On Finding and Doing Work You Love*
by Herbert Kohl
Boynton-Cook/Heinemann, Innovators in Education series, 1998**

What do I really care about? What do I want to do with my life? Such burning questions occupy the minds of young people – or would, if we gave them half a chance. But we occupy them instead with questions of getting into a good college and finding a good job. As Herbert Kohl points out, “Exploration of young people’s interests and talents is not part of the usual school curriculum.” No wonder so many young people see work more in terms of its eventual benefits than in terms of the intrinsic meaning or satisfaction it might offer.

In the later 1970s, the writer and educator John Holt recalled talking to a group of students about the difference between jobs, careers, and work. A job, Holt said, was something you did for money, “something someone else told you to do and paid you to do.” A career was a succession of such jobs, each presumably with increasing pay, responsibility, and prestige. Work, on the other hand, was:

something altogether different, what people used to call a “vocation” or “calling” – something that seemed so worth doing for its own sake that they would gladly have chosen to do it even if they didn’t need the money and the work didn’t pay. I went on to say that to find our work, in this sense, is one of the most important and difficult tasks that we have in life.

Twenty years ago, most of the students in Holt’s audience found his notion of work “not just impossible, but unimaginable.” But in *The Question is College*, Kohl persists in raising the question of vocation and in believing that there lurks even within today’s young people a hunger for this question, though they may be scared of or discouraged from admitting it. *The Question is College* is about growing up – which is to say, about finding out how you will connect with the world, move through that world, make a place for yourself within it. It’s about figuring out what you love so much that you would do it without thought of reward.

How does college enter in? Kohl questions college because college is nowadays presumed to be the only, or at any rate the best, route to adulthood. He isn’t opposed to college categorically; he’s opposed to going without thinking, without having reason, without having first asked oneself the question about what one really wants from life. He recognizes that there are students who resist this automatic, unthinking procession into higher education.

From my own discussions with young people, I know that Kohl is onto something. “I don’t know how to tell my parents that I’m not sure I want to go to college next year,” says a child in a middle class academic family, the sort of family in which it’s assumed

that children will go to college just as it's assumed that they'll grow taller and get driver's licenses. What is such a young person saying? That she's not sure it's right to spend all that money on college when she isn't yet convinced it's the best choice for her? That she isn't ready, at so young an age, to submit to the notion that there is only one path? That she isn't sure whether, or how, college will contribute to the process of finding out what she really wants to do, and that her hunger, especially after so many years of schooling, is for a taste of the real world and a glimpse of what people actually do in it?

Kohl knows how to listen to young people and to hear the deeper beliefs or fears or passions that underlie comments that may sound like belligerence or aimlessness. In fact, he makes it clear that if he hadn't listened to young people – his own children included – he might not have learned enough to write this book. But he has. With extraordinary sensitivity to generational differences, Kohl allowed himself to realize that his children's lives were simply not the same as his own had been at their age. He listened to the students who had plans or dreams that didn't include college and students who had no idea what they dreamed of but wanted a chance to find out. The book ends up being a powerful discussion of how to navigate generational differences and how to survive when children don't meet their parents' expectations. No matter how many times I read Kohl's stories of parents cutting off communication with their children for deciding against college, I find them heartbreaking. Don't be more committed to your expectations than to your children, Kohl is saying.

The young people Kohl listens to are speaking from a deep part of themselves, the part that knows growing up is about something more than doing what everyone else says you're supposed to do. Finding a vocation is an old-fashioned notion, now so obscured by contemporary pressures that it actually strikes us as radical and new – and so very welcome. The years when *The Questions is College* were out of print were barren ones; I had to keep summarizing it for families and telling them wistfully that someday it might come back into print. Now it has, and a new group of readers can benefit from its wisdom, compassion, and rich menu of possibilities.

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