



A New Suit of Clothes

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I slip into the locker room -- my own Clark Kent style changing booth -- and adorn the suit. I put on the jersey, pull up the shorts, flip down the socks and lace up the sneakers -- it's my Superman suit. For there are no limits; I do feel as though I can leap tall buildings in a single bound. I am primping and preparing for another opportunity to press myself into one more "sterling" performance. From the moment I enter the gymnasium, my palms wring wet and the balls of my feet roll back and forth. The butterflies frantically dance in my stomach. I strut onto the floor. This is my game and it's show time! Time for the audience to watch me work my suit; like a runway model flossin' the latest in Paris chic. The roar of the crowd falls silent and their images bouncing upon the bleachers fade to black. There is but one focus, one challenge, one thing that makes my life right - playing the game. The orange is tossed in the air and it reaches the height of its vulnerability, as there are 10 suitors with 10 pairs of hands that seek to claim it as their possession. But, I got my hands on it this time, and I take off in my suit- the game has begun. Every game -- 40 minutes of pure passion. That passion burned within me for 16 years, as I played the game year round from age 6 to age 22. I can't count the times that I put on the suit to follow my passion. And I really didn't know how intense the passion was, not until I had to change my suit.

Growing up in a loving, caring environment surrounded by a gang of supporters was a blessing for which I am eternally thankful. For all of my life Mom and Dad heaped mountains of encouragement upon me so I was sure to carry around a high level of confidence of who I could be and what I could achieve. From where I stood, day-to-day, week-to-week and year-to-year, receiving deluges of parental praise was the experience of all the kids in the Freeman household. However, amidst the "atta-boys" and at the end of the face-wide grins as they beheld stellar marks on report cards, Mom and Dad were careful to infuse a sobering glint of humility during the Kodak moment. Specifically, after bringing home "straight A's" which happen to be routine for me, Mom asked, "Where are all the pluses"? As for Dad, he simply led by example. When I consider the humility, grace and self-effacing stride that marked his gait as he walked through this life, I have to wonder how any of his offspring could be the braggadocios type. Nevertheless, I had the labels of "very smart kid", "superstar", "gifted and talented" and "most likely to succeed" velcroed to me, as a result of supportive and hopeful parents, their friends who wished the same for their own kids and the way the experts tracked us in school.

I always knew that there were high familial and community expectations. Those high expectations were great motivators and confidence builders. In fact, as parent, I am about the business of raising the bar for my daughter. Her ability to achieve is a regular conversation of ours. At the same time, I have learned something interesting about high expectations and how they can potentially land with young people. High expectations can have a dubious effect. There can be a tendency for high expectations to empower and constrict, motivate and debilitate, enhance potential, yet stifle creativity. What I am offering is not something that I heard but something that I experienced.

As a young kid and on into college, my career aspirations changed so often that mapping them would have resembled one of those balls of tangled lines that resulted from my lack of skill with the Etch-n-Sketch. Of course today, I could simply say that I was deft at abstract art. But riffing through the world of professional possibilities and experiencing the ambivalence about just where I would end up was really what was happening. Many of us who chose to pursue higher education have experienced the "what do I do now" panic all the way to the bottom steps of the stage after receiving the coveted sheepskin. When we leave the steps we are still clueless.

For me, I was faced with the reality of stepping out into the real world. I finally decided that I would be a businessman, a professional in the financial services industry. Eventually I would be a "successful" investment banker, doing private placements or any transaction that had large dollar signs attached to it. This had finally won out over thoughts of being an orthopedic surgeon, musings of becoming an attorney, and fantasies of becoming a star in the NBA. Interestingly, the goal of being in the financial industry on which I settled did not really win out. However, I knew I did not want to go to medical school, I did not want to go to law school and as for the NBA -- I had the challenge of being on the shallow end of the talent pool.

I had to land somewhere. After all, I was college educated and went to "one of 'dem fine schools" as granny used to say. To be sure, I had to land somewhere, where people could look at my vitae and read "SUCCESS". I had to land somewhere where I could be decked out in two and three-button suits, a starch pressed white shirt, an extra tall striped tie, slightly baggy trousers with a smooth break in the pant leg finished by a banker cuff that "fell just right" over my wingtips. Every thing neat and "so fresh and so clean clean" to the end that I could go home and have the home folk tell me, "Boy, you sho' look good in that suit".

Then it dawned on me. Regardless of all of the compliments that well meaning folks hurled at me, punctuated by ego boosters like, "Man, you sure look well", "You look so prosperous", "The bank must be treating you well", I realized that I had on the wrong suit of clothes. People on the outside could not see the imperfections and the flaws and where things didn't fit, but I could feel the subtle tight spots that chaffed me as I walked and those loose places that made me feel naked. It seemed my banking career and the thoughts of other careers that I had conjured up, were all manifestations of me trying to wear clothes that did not fit me. My life was a case study in how not to tap true passion in life. Parker Palmer suggests that vocation is a calling from within. The challenge for most of us however, is that we tend allow major life decisions including those about our life's work to be guided by voices from without. As such we end up living lives based on pretense rather than passion. My 11-year odyssey of trying to make these unfit garments "fit", were the result of mishandled expectations.

I had taken a handful of Mom's support, a dash of Dad's encouragement and a pinch of well wishes from the village and whipped up a mess of expectations for myself. This was not a recipe for satisfying the hunger to be my true self in the world, but only one that would sustain me in short intervals just so I could be. I came to expect something of myself that I was never in touch with in the first place. I expected that my destiny was Wall Street or some tower that housed the agents of America's capitalistic engine. I expected that I would be involved in multi million dollar transactions. I expected to do this everyday adorned in a uniform - custom tailored suit - designed for the "perfect fit". I was convinced that I could be a success, that I could achieve, that I could prosper, albeit, no sweaty palms, no rocking and rolling on the balls of my feet, no flutter of the butterflies on the inside. I was being guided by a sinister conscience that convinced me that I could succeed at not being me.

You know, its funny. I was asked growing up, "What do you want to be or do in life"? But no one ever asked me, "What are you passionate about"? As a kid, I knew I was going to the NBA, the other things were there because of course I needed something to "fall back on". But I was never inclined to think about what it was that gave me butterflies, made my palms sweat and rocked me back and forth on the balls of my feet - like the game did. I played organized ball, year round all of my life and each time before the opening tip those same feelings of anticipation would well up on my insides. These feelings were engendered by a brave fear. I was always challenged by the prospects of not winning, not coming out on top; but simultaneously I was as free and as bold as I could be because I was on top, caught up in the act of doing what I loved doing. In the spring of 1992 when I graduated from Davidson and all were watching to see what I would make of myself, all hopes of dribbling into the NBA faded away. Then I got a job. You know, at the bank. No more butterflies, no more sweaty palms, no more rocking back and forth getting pumped for the game, just a job and a suit.

My struggle was not about being accomplished in a banking career, but about not wanting a banking career. There was no thrill of victory in cutting a deal. I did not feel a surge of triumph after making a sell. In fact, I have to wonder if sometimes potential victories slipped through hands attached to a conflicted will that could only muster a half-hearted grasp for them. I learned that I could only be half-way in the game for so long and still do okay. However, as time went on half-hearted play would not get the job done. Eventually, I was at a place that even when I was giving it my best, I wasn't giving it my best. The frustration level was so great, because I knew I had the potential to turn in a "sterling" performance. But corporate America was not my arena. Banking was not my game. I could , but did not want to play on that court. Toward the end of my time in that game, the agony of defeat was not as gut wrenching as it once was. So what if one deal got away, I thought. That kind of thinking showed me what I was becoming. I had never suited up unconcerned about taking an L - a loss. I knew then, for sure, that I was in the wrong game. I had to change the game. I had to change my suit.

I wore the suit for eleven years. I modeled the suit down life's runway and was glad to be the subject of others flashbulbs of admiration. I sat among my colleagues and accepted their assumptions that I was as comfortably dressed in my ensemble as they were in theirs - or were they? Eleven years of allowing my profession to front as my passion, rather than my passion be my vocation. Fortunately for me a break through came. Breakthroughs come in various ways for all of us. Mine happened to be in my experience with a leadership program called the William C. Friday Fellowship for Human Relations. It offered me the opportunity to spend some time with myself.

In spending time with self, I was able to move closer toward my true self. I began to understand that kid who had always been an encourager to others. I was reintroduced to that student who loved to stand before the class or school assembly and have his say. I remembered that ball player that played with emotion and got as much thrill out of reading a headline on a teammate as being in one. I was able to become more comfortable with my true self. I decided to stop ignoring the discomfort of the suit that didn't fit. I put myself under the light of interrogation and began to ask questions. What is it that motivates you? How are you spending your time here on this earth? What difference is your work making in your life? Attending openly and honestly to these questions put me on the road to rekindling the passion in my life. I was able to shed the suit. I was able to rid my self of a suit of shackles that had bound up my passions and was squeezing

the life out of my hopes, dreams and creativity. I was finally able to take off that suit of clothes somewhere other than at home, and sometimes that was a challenge.

Getting to that place of taking it off was not easy. It took the courage to face myself and tell myself the truth. The truth for me was that passion cannot be found in transactions that show up on the pages of a corporation's annual report, rather passion is found among the interactions of human beings which show up on the pages of our local weeklies, national periodicals and texts that educate our posterity. It took focus and resiliency to purge my ears of the voices of others and turn them inward to listen to my own. It took admitting that I was "vocationally dead" and it was okay to invite others to mourn with me. Taking off the suit was the opening of my grave and adorning a new suit was my resurrection. "I AM ALIVE!"

In June of 2003, I finally decided that no matter how much others liked me in that suit of clothes, it was not worth the effort I was investing in fabricating the look. It was no longer worth the pulling and tugging that kept me busy in order to attain some temporary relief from those uncomfortable places. In June of 2003, I finally decided to shop for a new suit of clothes. I acquired that new suit of clothes on August 18, 2003 when I became the Executive Director of the Wildacres Leadership Initiative.

The Wildacres Leadership Initiative operates a program called the William C. Friday Fellowship for Human Relations. The Initiative's formal mission states that it seeks to create a community of individuals who are individually and collectively committed to improved human relations and expanded opportunities among all North Carolinians. Since becoming Executive Director I have often spoken of the work of the Initiative in my own way. I see the Initiative as a catalyst for building a network of individuals who are willing to be self-critical enough to invest in new and diverse alliances with the goal of making a positive impact on that state of North Carolina. Having people come together to challenge themselves before others and challenge others. Watching people take cautious steps across chasms of trust to build authentic relationships. Bearing witness to the transformation of countenances as people come to know more about themselves and each other.

Prompting people to consider that there is a better way for us - increasingly complex and mostly problematic - to be together in this world.

To be a part of that is my passion. The old passion of being in the game has been awakened from its slumber and emerged from under the dark sheets of the "banker suit". And though I no longer put on the jersey, the butterflies are back. Though I no longer pull on the shorts and flip down the socks, my palms wring wet again. Though I no longer lace up the sneakers, again I am able to rock and roll on the balls of my feet. I have a new suit of clothes. But more than that, a suit of clothes that fits.