

OH THE PLACES YOU'LL GO!

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“You have brains in your head. You have feet in your shoes.

You can steer yourself. Any direction you choose.”

As Dr. Seuss suggests in those lines, we each have dreams and goals for our lives. However, I have come to understand that there is a difference between the two. Dreams are what we hope for. Goals are what we actually set out to achieve. It takes action to turn dreams into goals and commitment to reach those goals. Commitment is our repeated dedication to our goals on the face of distractions and obstacles. Fortunately, I have learned a simple, but ironically difficult rule for dealing with those distractions and obstacles: don't look left and don't look right; look straight ahead and keep my eyes on the prize. I learned this lesson from my grandmother.

Meet Penny. She was 16 years old and was burdened with the difficult task of telling her parents the news – she was pregnant. They would be devastated. They had dreams for her, and she had her own. Now it would all change.

Penny married and the child was born. To say the child was born into humble beginnings would be an understatement. Being full-time students, and having one part-time job between them, left them to struggle. They lived in a camper for the first six months of the child's life before they were able to save enough money to move into an apartment. However, this story is not about Penny. Well, not exactly. It is about her son.

Meet my dad. He was 18 years old and burdened with the difficult task of telling his parents the news – the girl he was seeing, was pregnant. They would be devastated. They had dreams for him, and he had his own. Now it would all change, or would it?

My father was set to attend college. He would be the first one in his family to go. He had dreams of becoming a lawyer and everyone was so proud of him. But becoming a lawyer takes a lot of money, education, and drive. As a senior in high school, my father had only drive, until he had me.

Now it was time for him to make a decision. He decided to turn his dream of becoming a lawyer into a goal. He would commit. The first year of my life, my father went to college fulltime during the day. At night, he worked the midnight shift at a factory. In between, he took care of me. I think the only sleep he ever got was when I would take a nap, which I understand was not as often or as long as he would have liked. The distractions and obstacles in his life were growing heavier. School became too expensive, and his grades were slipping. The road to becoming a lawyer seemed insurmountable and was certainly no fun. My father managed to attend college part-time for the next two-years before finally dropping out completely. Becoming a lawyer was again just a dream.

I was four years old, and I don't know if I truly remember or if I think I do because I have heard the story so many times. It is my father's twenty-second birthday. Most of his friends are in their last year of college and my father is particularly disheartened that he hasn't followed his dream. He wanted to go back, but simply couldn't afford to. Instead, while his friends would soon be starting their careers, my father would be faced with the midnight shift. However, all of that was about to change.

For my father's birthday, he got two gifts in particular that touched him enough for me to ask if he was going to cry. I now understand that one of those gifts was a check from my Grandma Penny for a semester of college tuition. The other gift, a Dr. Seuss book titled, Oh, the Places You'll Go! would prove to be more valuable to my father. However I would not discover why for many years.

My father returned to college. I went with him, literally. When no one could watch me, my father would take me to class. We would sit in the back, and I would color. At night, I would watch movies while my father studied. He took a lot of classes and studied very hard and did very well. During the next two semesters he followed the same routine. His dream of becoming a lawyer was again a goal. But then something changed.

My father had taken enough classes that he only needed two full semesters of school to graduate. However, the college required that my father have four semesters of a foreign language. He had none. That meant he needed an additional two-years of school just to get his requirement in. He was nearly heartbroken. But there was another way, a very difficult way. He had the choice of going to school in Spain for one semester to fulfill all of his requirements.

My father accepted and today it is difficult for me to imagine all of the distractions he had to face. The incessant wailing of a crying baby while trying to do his homework; the fragile balancing of a limited budget with the needs of a student and his family. But at least we were always together. His greatest distraction now would be overcoming the silent sound of being separated from his family by thousands of miles, in a foreign land, for months on end.

He told me about his decision to go as he read me that Dr. Seuss book he had received for his birthday. "Daddy has to go to Spain, but I'll be back." I remember those words clearly. I didn't know where Spain was or have the concept of time that I do now, but I understood from the way he fought back tears that he was going "bye-bye" for a long time.

Pain and nausea consumed me as I stood watching him board the plane. He put on sunglasses to cover up what I am sure were tears in his eyes. Those next several months were so hard. The words of his letters were animated, but they echoed of loneliness. I know now that he had to do this, as much as he didn't want to, but he knew I didn't know that then, and that is what hurt him.

Joy and excitement overtook me as I stood waiting for him to exit the plane. My dad had returned. He had remained committed to his goal, despite the distractions and obstacles he faced. He graduated that following semester near the top of his class. It was a very proud day.

My father worked for a year after he graduated until my mother graduated. He then went to law school. You might say we went to law school. We lived near Philadelphia, and when I didn't have school, I would sometimes go with my father and sit in the back of the class and read books.

Over the next three years, every class, every exam, and every tuition payment was an obstacle that stood in the way of his goal of becoming a lawyer. But he never got distracted. He even graduated near the top of his class. It was a very proud day.

I have learned from my father that one does not become a lawyer by simply graduating law school. One becomes a lawyer by passing the bar exam, a three-day long maliciously oppressive test. To pass takes nearly three months of chronic studying. He had implemented a rigorous study schedule. I remember my father starting at 7:30am and sometimes studying all day until midnight. This test would be his final and greatest single obstacle.

The night before the exam, I watched my father pack. Along with several of his law books, he packed that Dr. Seuss book. My curiosity and finally peaked. How could this simple book, mean so much? I took the book out of his pack and sat down and opened it. There, in there inside cover, were written the words: "What would you do if you knew you could not fail?....So do it! Don't look left, don't look right. Look straight ahead and keep your eyes on the prize." My Grandma Penny wrote those words to my dad and he took them to heart.

How does this apply to me? I have learned the difference between dreams and goals. I have also learned that the road to success is a road that I must pave through my commitment to my goals. Challenges will certainly come my way, but I am confident that if I don't look left and don't look right, but look straight ahead, and keep my eye on the prize, I will eventually get there.