

Timothy G. Wellman

I'm a senior political science major born in St. Petersburg, Russia, but raised in Palmyra, Missouri! I hope to one day inspire kids in a classroom setting and pursue higher education for teaching following my graduation.

“When may quitting, pivoting, or falling back be the best steps forward?” - 1040 words

Children's Hope International

“Those who cannot do, teach.” This phrase is one I have been met with a number of times when I inform people that I intend to go into the education profession. While usually said in jest, I have come to realize that this belief is much more commonly held than I initially thought. After reflecting on why that could be, I concluded that the saying has been both misunderstood and misinterpreted. Rather, instead of disparaging teaching and implying that the job is a “fallback option,” the real wisdom of the phrase lies in knowing when to pivot, when to fall back, and even when to quit, as often these can be the best steps for aspiring young educators like myself and so many others across the country.

The idea of quitting typically holds a negative connotation, similar to that of surrender or failure. To quit a task is to abandon it, to leave it behind, and to never pick it back up again. However, quitting can very well be one of the most courageous acts one performs, as it allows us to acknowledge that the path we are on no longer serves our goals or values. Take Jaime Escalante, for example: Escalante was a Bolivian engineer with a gift for math and physics who had spent over a decade studying in his home country. However, after a while, he discovered a new passion that had risen up inside of him, and, after choosing to quit his job, he immigrated to the United States and taught himself English. Escalante would discover his passion for teaching in Los Angeles, California, and draw nationwide attention for how he was able to educate students on calculus and physics in a predominantly low-income, impoverished community. He had no obligation to leave a career field that he would have undoubtedly become successful in and wealthy from, but he chose to quit that life to pursue a dream that had no guarantee of working out. All for the sake of helping those less fortunate and giving them a better future. Quitting is not just giving up. It is a method of freeing oneself from activities that siphon the spirit, stunt personal growth, or that you have just lost passion for; it allows us to focus our efforts on new opportunities that come our way.

That philosophy can be applied to pivoting as well. Such an act encourages us to change course in our lives while not abandoning the journey ahead entirely. Here, the ends are left relatively unchanged, but the means by which they are achieved start to shift. History has shown that our dreams can still find success even if we do not follow the path we had anticipated. Just look at Ron Clark. Clark was a teacher as well and had been aiming to become one since he graduated high school, specifically at his alma mater, East Carolina University. His first job out of college was at an elementary school near his hometown of Chocowinity, North Carolina, and it was where he developed innovative methods of teaching that utilized positive reinforcement, hands-on learning, and character education in unison with one another. However, that proved to not be the proper environment for his gifts, because just a few years later, Clark pivoted and took his talent to an inner-city school in New York City, which earned him praise, awards, but most importantly, recognition for his work caring for youths who may not have had many people in their lives who were able to give them that. Pivoting is a testament not to one’s weakness or inability to stay committed, but rather it exemplifies their adaptability, resilience, and willingness to learn from the past, which can eventually change their future.

And lastly, there is the decision to fall back. Falling back differs from quitting in that while the latter is a conscious decision to stop doing something, the former is the strategic choice to take a step back, regroup, and gather a new perspective before deciding what the next move is. This process can allow for a multitude of advantages, including furthering one’s education,

gaining new experience in a particular area, or constructing a stronger foundation and understanding with which to better help you in the future. To exemplify this, there is no one better than John Corcoran. Unlike the previous two individuals, Corcoran started as a teacher. He taught high school social studies right out of college. Unfortunately, he started to find it difficult to accomplish his job at all due to the fact that he was illiterate. Corcoran is honest about how he only got where he did up until that point by cheating. On multiple occasions, he has admitted that he was not proud of it, but it happened nonetheless. And after continuing as a teacher while simultaneously trying to avoid addressing his inability to read, he recognized that he just could not do it. So Corcoran fell back, opened up a real estate development business, and chose to live his life from a different angle. It was only after seeing a televised address from Barbara Bush that he realized it was possible to not only make a comeback in the world of education but to help himself in the process. John Corcoran enrolled himself in a tutoring program, learned to read, and has since written two books, created a foundation that trains tutors and assists students in becoming literate, and continues his teaching profession in a new way. All it took was a little falling back.

I look at these success stories, and I see strong, talented individuals who each faced personal or professional dilemmas that forced them to make difficult decisions that some would characterize as signs of weakness. Yet, in hindsight, their decisions to quit, pivot, and fall back were anything but. Those who yearn to teach may not have started off wanting to be teachers at all. Even still, the education profession grew on them over time, and eventually, they chose to walk another path. A path that is fruitful, rewarding, and impactful. A path that inspires others. So no, I do not believe that those who cannot do, teach. Rather, I believe that those who *want* to do, teach.