Wealth

Most people have heard the phrase; “There’s more to life than money.” While we may agree with the wisdom of the statement, many spend a majority of their lives pursuing material wealth. In doing so, they overlook the greater truth. Wealth acquired within the heart is the most valuable of all possessions. People often define their fortunes in light of the jobs that they perform. Though the work of both a locomotive engineer and a schoolteacher is regarded as valuable, vast differences exist between the occupations.

Money, time and fulfillment all contribute to the perception of wealth attained. An engineer’s income is often the first source of wealth that comes to mind.

One look at an engineer’s paycheck is enough for most people to consider a career in railroading. At union wage, with a minimum of seniority, an engineer makes between $18 and $25 an hour (in 1995). Most engineers can earn $50-70,000 in the course of a year. When driving to out-of town job postings, engineers receive $.30 per car mile, lodging and meal expenses in addition to their basic pay rates. The money adds up fast when an engineer spends 70-100 hours a week away from home.

Time is a commodity the locomotive engineer sells in bulk. A typical round-trip between Seattle and Portland consumes 24 to 36 hours. Engineers often make three round trips per week. In large metropolitan terminals, there are always more trains waiting to go than there are people to drive them. It’s not unusual for an engineer to complete one round trip, go home for rest, and eight hours later, be on another train leaving town. The days and nights get lost on a calendar whose pages turn all too quickly. The time spent on a locomotive eventually turns repetitive and stale.

Regardless of the scenery passed and maneuvers executed, the engineer has no choice but to repeat the runs he’s made before. Railroad tracks soon look the same whether they’re found in Seattle or Wenatchee. The mountain that once demanded total attention is now dispensed of with little notice. Familiarity and boredom replace the sense of challenge and accomplishment. As another train slips into his past, the engineer wonders if there isn’t more to life than paychecks traded for years of watching boxcars roll by.
High-paying jobs may feed the body yet starve the soul. The sweetest rewards arrive dressed in feelings not five dollar bills. A low-paying job may provide only modest material trappings and yet deliver great fortunes to the heart. Ask any schoolteacher where his compensation lies and the answer has little to do with money.

Americans verbally value teachers, but financially abuse them. Frugality becomes a necessity for those who choose to teach. After spending four to five years in college at a cost of tens of thousands of dollars, the starting salary for an elementary school teacher is barely $21,000. With only a high school education, many blue-collared laborers make twice the income of a college graduate teacher. What's lacking in salary is repaid, in part, with time.

While most teachers regularly spend 50-60 hours a week in preparation and performance of their duties, they do receive holiday and summer vacations not afforded other professions. Such respite is a luxury to be savored. For the teacher who spends the school year correcting papers in the evening and creating lesson plans on the weekends, the summer rewards him with time to be used at his discretion. Whether he takes another job to supplement his income or leisurely tends to his garden, a teacher revels in the freedom of choosing how he spends his time. As August draws to a close, a teacher's thoughts turn from his recess to his classroom. He feels a familiar anticipation asking, "What new surprises will I find this year? What new challenges will come seeking to be met?"

Each September, 30 fresh opportunities come walking into the teacher's life. The face of every student shows the potential for discovery and the teacher holds the key to break it loose. Often, the breakthroughs don't come easily. Student and teacher are both learners in the classroom, and each may struggle to understand the other's way. But when they do, a spark jumps the gap. A light goes on in the student's eyes, fanning the flame in the teacher's heart. He feels the success inside him, shouting, "Yes, this is what it's all about! This is why I'm here. For this one small moment, in this one simple gain, I've helped make a difference in someone's life." No freight train imbues existence with such noble meaning.

Running a locomotive offers great money but robs a life of time and eventually, satisfaction. Guiding a student promises so little cash yet delivers in freedom and fulfillment, a currency far greater than any gold. Wealth acquired within the heart is the most valuable of all possessions.