

Taking Your Next Step: The Choice Is Already Made

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Open yourself to the Tao,
then trust your natural responses;
and everything will fall into place.
- - Lao Tzu¹

While much has changed in the ensuing decades since I applied for college, two things remain the same: by asking thoughtful questions and trusting your instincts, the right school will come forward to select *you* (and, not the other way around). For me, the choice became clear upon discovering that majoring in music *and* medicine was all but impossible. And, after asking the advice of a number of professionals I greatly admired, the path emerged in which I would pursue a degree in education instead of performance. Looking back to my early childhood, a love of music along with skills in the art of explaining seemed even then to point in the direction I would later take.

Growing up in Iowa City, I knew the University of Iowa had an excellent reputation in music. However, my older sisters intoned, “Jimmy, you don’t want to go somewhere that mom and dad live only five minutes away and could stop in at any time.” Listening to my gut, I knew they were right! (I applied there only as a “safety”.) So, I then wondered about Luther College, where my oldest sister Margie had attended. It was also known for a strong music division and so I scheduled a phone conversation with a student in the program. Excitedly, I asked about the jazz band: “Well, there *isn’t* a jazz band, but there *is* a jam session at the student union every Monday night.” Obviously, I needed to keep looking.

Colleges in the region with established reputations in jazz became the new focus, and since I was not entirely sure of my musical pursuits, my parents recommended I attend somewhere diverse enough that a change of major would not mean a change of schools. After further research, I applied and auditioned at three institutions: the first stop was the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign. As I proceeded to play the Creston Sonata for the saxophone teacher, he couldn’t wait to eat his breakfast donut. Here, I had busted my hump for months to prepare this material, and as I played, his lips smacked while powdered sugar puffed and sprinkled everywhere – oh, the *thoughtlessness!* The second visit was to DePaul University in Chicago, which seemed nice enough. However, upon noticing that the entire campus was surrounded by a black iron fence with curved spikes at the top, my need for personal safety signaled the red flag.

Then, it was off to Minneapolis and the University of Minnesota. Even before getting to campus, I got a positive feeling from the city, and as soon as my father and I arrived at the new facilities, we were warmly greeted by the chairman of the Music Education department. The audition committee was friendly and as it turned out, awarded me a small scholarship. With the long and difficult process finally over, the U of M had chosen *me!* Of course, this was just one of the many twists and turns on the road of life, but to this day by asking questions and listening to my inner voice, wonderful opportunities continue to come my way.

¹Chinese philosopher [6th cent. B.C.], reputedly the founder of Taoism. It is uncertain that Lao Tzu [name translates as “old person” or “old philosopher”] is historical. His teachings were compiled in *Tao-te ching* [Classic of the Way and Virtue]. Its parables and verse, written in incantatory language, advocate passive and intuitive behavior in natural harmony with the Tao, a cosmic unity underlying all phenomena.