

Missing the game

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [April 18, 2001](#) issue

I should be attending a conference in New York, but I am at home staring at my computer, with an entire week of travel wiped out because of a pesky bronchial infection. I have no intention of saying anything further about an annoying medical matter. But I have learned something from this experience.

What I learned has nothing to do with illness, but everything to do with purpose and passion. While I was calling the airlines and hotels to cancel my reservations, I was struck with a strong memory, a recollection of a childhood moment so vivid that all the details played out like a scene from a movie.

It wasn't just the facts I remembered, but the emotional response I felt as a young child sitting on the floor of my front porch, reading a newspaper story that reported that Georgia Tech football coach William A. Alexander was in a hospital bed, stricken with something so serious that he had been forbidden by his doctors even to listen to Saturday afternoon's game.

I found this to be an absolute impossibility. For me, Saturday afternoons from September to November belonged to Georgia Tech football, and I knew that Coach Alex had to care even more than I did about the game. So if he couldn't be with the team, nothing would stop him from listening to a play-by-play account. But there it was. He was forbidden to listen to the broadcast. And I remember being overwhelmed with the question: What purpose can there be to life if you can't listen to a Tech game?

Alexander played under Coach John Heisman, whose name adorns the famous trophy given each year to the top college football player. He succeeded Heisman as head coach in 1920. (He retired as director of athletics in 1950, when I was covering sports myself.) He was a strong presence in my life, which is why the memory of his serious illness has returned to me from time to time.

Of course, it is not a brilliant deduction to realize that one's work can become the whole sum of one's purpose in life, but why would this strike a boy of eight or nine

with such force? Was I already measuring my existence by linking passion with purpose? One thing is sure. For me, Georgia Tech football was my central passion.

And if I assumed this for myself, of course Coach Alex must have felt the same thing. But now he couldn't even turn on the radio to hear the game. The man who was the embodiment of Tech football had to lie in bed engulfed not by the sounds of cheering but by the sound of someone raking the fall leaves or washing dishes. Life's central meaning had been removed.

Like most people, I too often define my worth in terms of work assigned and work accomplished. I know this is wrong, and I've preached sermons about castles built on sand. But my memory of that boy on the front porch tells me that for me, the connection between work and worth started instinctively, in early childhood.

In recent years my own work assignment has shifted from that of editor to a columnist who writes and travels. This week, after more than two years in this new role, it struck me with a certain force that my current job worth is validated not by a permanent position, but by self-assigned trips and tasks.

And when I am told I have to stay at home while the big boys play the game without me, I remember William A. Alexander and his missed game.

I wish I could draw some wise conclusion from this memory, some breakthrough into maturity where I could report with absolute finality that purpose is found not in work.

But I can't do that. What I can do is respect the experience of that childhood memory, and long for the opportunity to go back and sit on the front porch with that child as he read the startling news that Coach Alex would miss Saturday's game. If he were to look up at me and ask, How can the coach survive without listening to Saturday's game? I would speak wisely to him about how there would be other games and other Saturday afternoons. But I know my words would be wasted, because for him there was only this team, this game, this week.

I would tell him not to invest his passion in things like football teams that change from season to season, and to save his passion for things that matter. No, I couldn't tell him which passions should be important to him, only that he should learn to feel passionate about those things that make a difference.

I would tell him that someday, when he has children and grandchildren, he should remember the moment when he questioned passion and purpose and worth. The

story of Coach Alex, I'd add, would make more sense to him later, when it would become a memory. I wish I could go back and sit with that boy on that porch, but I can't, can I?