

Cicero, On Individual Talents and Appropriate Fit

(The following paragraphs have been freely selected, revised and adapted from Walter Miller's translation of Cicero's *De Officiis (On Duties)*, Book I. XXX-XXXIII, by Richard Freis.)

We must realize also that we are invested by Nature with two characters, as it were: *one of these is universal*, arising from the fact of our being all alike endowed with reason and with that superiority which lifts us above the brute. From this all the moral and [humanly] fitting are derived, and upon it depends the rational method of ascertaining our duty. The other character is the one *that is assigned to each one individually*. In the matter of physical endowment there are great differences: some, we see, excel in speed for the race, others in strength for wrestling....Diversities of character are greater still....*Everybody, however, must resolutely hold fast to his own particular gifts, insofar as they are particular only and not faults, in order that appropriate fit...may the more easily be secured*. For we must so act as not to oppose universal human nature, but, while safeguarding this, *to follow the bent of our own particular nature*; and even if other careers should be better and nobler, we may still regulate our own pursuits by the standard of our own nature. For it is of no avail to fight against one's nature or to pursue anything which you cannot attain. *From this fact the nature of that appropriate fit defined above comes into still clearer light, inasmuch as nothing has appropriate fit "with Minerva [the goddess of wisdom] unwilling" as they say, that is with one's nature opposing and resisting*.

Everyone, therefore, should make a proper estimate of his own natural ability and show himself a critical judge of his own merits and defects. In this respect we should not let actors [on the stage] display more practical wisdom than we have. They select, not the best plays, but the ones best suited to their talents....We shall, therefore, work to the best advantage in that role for which we are most fit. But if at some time necessity shall thrust us into what will not be to our talent, we must devote to it all care, thought, and painstakingness, so that if we are unable to do it with appropriate fit, at least we can do

it with the least inappropriateness; and we need not strive to pursue goods that have not been vouchsafed to us so much as to avoid faults.

There is one class of people that is very rarely met with: it is composed of those who are endowed with marked natural ability, or exceptional advantages of education and culture, or both, and who also have time to consider carefully what career in life they prefer to follow; *and in this deliberation the decision must turn wholly upon each individual's natural bent.*

If, therefore, anyone has conformed his whole plan of life to the kind of nature that is his (insofar as it is not faulty), let him go on with it consistently---for that most of all has appropriate fit---*unless, perchance, he should discover that he has made a mistake in choosing his life work. If this should happen (and it can easily happen), he must change his vocation and mode of life.* If circumstances favor such change, it will be effected with greater ease and convenience. If not, it must be made gradually, step by step, just as, when friendships become no longer pleasing or desirable, it is more proper (so wise men think) to undo the bond little by little than to sever it at a stroke. And when we have once changed our calling in life, we must take all possible care to make it clear that we have done so with good reason.