Advice to young people

Question: “As advice to young people here, if you were given a second chance and you were starting out fresh [...] with all your present experience, what would you do, which things would you go for, and how would you organize your life to achieve that?”

“So my basic idea is to say, whoever you are, you’ve got a unique combination of talents that’s been given to you. Don’t decide ... Your life is kind of like a binary search, you try things and find out you did well in this, you try other things, you find out you didn’t do so well in that, you go on and continue discovering what are the best ways to use the abilities you were born with instead of what you think they ought to have been. And you also read what other people have done, and try to learn from that and extend abilities that you have in ways that appeal to you. And then, ... My experience was, once things start to click, then you can start producing and other people will be able to make use of what you did, and you can help them along in the same way. It sounds idealistic, but that’s really been the pattern all through my life, and it was based on this sort of idea, saying, well, just learn what you’re good at, and what you can do that other people might be able to use, that’s fun for you.”

Donald Knuth, quoted in TUGboat (The Communications of the TeX Users Group), Volume 23 (2002), No. 3/4, page 259.