Deciding Whom to Become[1]

Robert Klitgaard

It's that time of year—graduation near, people asking you, "So now, what are you going to do? Who are you going to become?" The question occurs for the rest of us throughout the year, throughout our lives perhaps, especially as points of transition occur. How might we help ourselves answer it?

The Idea of a Calling

The psychologist Abraham H. Maslow studied "self-actualizing people," his term for the "more matured, more fully human" among us. Their basic needs of belongingness, affection, respect, and self-esteem are gratified. They are spontaneous, natural, "more easily themselves than other people." What motivates these people? "*All such peopl*e," Maslow writes, in italics, "*are devoted to some task, call, vocation, beloved work ('outside themselves').*"

What does this mean? Maslow elaborates.

> In examining self-actualizing people directly, I find that in all cases, at least in our culture, they are dedicated people, devoted to some task "outside themselves," some vocation, or duty, or beloved job. Generally the devotion and dedication is so marked that one can fairly use the old words vocation, or calling, or mission to describe their passionate, selfless, and profound feeling for their "work." We could even use the words destiny or fate. I have sometimes gone so far as to speak of oblation in the religious sense, in the sense of offering oneself upon some altar for some particular task, some cause outside oneself and bigger than oneself, something not merely selfish, something impersonal.[2]

How do people find their calling? If you haven't found yours yet, what might you do?

"My Calling Just Came to Me"

The great maker of stained glass windows Rowan LeCompte found his calling suddenly. Here is how in his eighties LeCompte recalled an experience he had in his teens.

> I was passionately interested in architecture and in painting, and I could never decide which I wanted to do first. When I first saw the cathedral, however, by chance it was dazzling summer day with cool temperatures and brilliant sun.

[1] University Professor, Claremont Graduate University. Revised May 2013. A shorter, earlier version was given as a graduation speech at University of North Carolina, Charlotte, 2002.

[2] Abraham H. Maslow, "A Theory of Metamotivation," in his *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature*. New York: Viking, 1971: 301.

> The building was half built. We walked up a set of concrete steps and across a great walk of wood to a big tin wall held up by vast beams of wood and then in through a door into darkness, but it wasn't darkness. There was a marvelous rose window floating in the dark, and I was inside a vast building, the like of which I had never seen or been in. It went up to an unthinkable height, and the air was filled with music because the organ was only one year old then and the organist was practicing, and he was playing Handel and I recognized it at once. But I did not recognize the building as anything I had ever seen before. It was a magic, marvelous, dim, ravishingly beautiful place. And I was stunned. Really, I was stunned. And I think of that as my second birthday, because it did change my life utterly and from that time on I was obsessed with it.[3]

When we see LeCompte's beautiful stained glass windows in the National Cathedral in Washington—the first of which was commissioned when he was sixteen—and when we hear him describe kindness and love as his ideals, we are grateful that he found such a good and proper calling for him.

When he was an eight-year-old boy, the philosopher R.G. Collingwood came across a book of Immanuel Kant's in his father's library. Fascinated though confused, Collingwood felt a kind of calling.

> It was Abbott's translation of the *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*; and as I began reading it, my small form wedged between the bookcase and the table, I was attacked by a strange succession of emotions. First came an intense excitement. I felt that things of the highest importance were being said about matters of the utmost urgency: things which at all costs I must understand. Then, with a wave of indignation, came the discovery that I could not understand them. Disgraceful to confess, here was a book whose words were English and whose sentences were grammatical, but whose meaning baffled me. Then, third and last, came the strangest emotion of all. I felt that the contents of this book, although I could not understand it, were somehow my business: a matter personal to myself, or rather to some future self of my own. It was not like the common boyish intention to 'be an engine-driver when I grow up', for there was no desire in it; I did not, in any natural sense of the word, 'want' to master the Kantian ethics when I should be old enough; but I felt as if a veil had been lifted and my destiny revealed.[4]

Collingwood felt his calling as a philosopher as a mere boy. Other people, too, just seemed to know that they would become a doctor or a painter or a nuclear physicist.

Or a musician. Andris Nelsons decided to become a conductor when he heard Wagner's Tannhäuser live at the age of five. He had heard the music before at home, but the live

---

[3] Interview with Scott Simon on National Public Radio, April 11, 2009. http://www.npr.org/templates/player/mediaPlayer.html?action=1&t=1&islist=false&id=102977788&m=102997707

[4] R.G. Collingwood, *An Autobiography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939: 3.

performance had a transformative effect. "It had a hypnotic effect on me," he told Richard Morrison. "I was overwhelmed by the music. I cried when Tannhäuser died. I still think this was the biggest thing that happened in my childhood."[5] He later explained to Harriet Gilbert the calling he felt.

> Harriet Gilbert: I read somewhere, Andris, that it was while you were watching a Wagner opera at the tender age of five that you decided you wanted to become a conductor. Is that right?
>
> Andris Nelsons: Yes, you know it's true. I was five years old when my father took me to the opera house and it was Wagner's Tannhäuser. I was so touched by this opera and I was crying and I was so so emotional after that. And interestingly enough, during the performance I was watching the conductor, and I was thinking, "Oh my God, it must be such a great responsibility. If he does something wrong, everything goes wrong, and it's his fault." So I was thinking, it must be great to be involved in the music so much as the conductor. That was subconsciously my dream. Someday I would like to become a conductor, not because of being you know in front of the people but because of being involved in music all the time, you know, from the first to the last bar. You know, as the conductor you can't take any time off.[6]

Or a naturalist. In his seventies John Muir recalled,

> When I was a boy in Scotland I was fond of everything that was wild, and all my life I've been growing fonder and fonder of wild places and wild creatures. Fortunately around my native town of Dunbar, by the stormy North Sea, there was no lack of wildness, though most of the land lay in smooth cultivation. With red-blooded playmates, wild as myself, I loved to wander in the fields to hear the birds sing, and along the seashore to gaze and wonder at the shells and seaweeds, eels and crabs in the pools among the rocks when the tide was low; and best of all to watch the waves in awful storms thundering on the black headlands and craggy ruins of the old Dunbar Castle when the sea and the sky, the waves and the clouds, were mingled together as one. We never thought of playing truant, but after I was five or six years old I ran away to the seashore or the fields most every Saturday, and every day in the school vacations except Sundays, though solemnly warned that I must play at home in the garden and back yard, lest I should learn to think bad thoughts and say bad words. All in vain. In spite of the sure sore punishments that followed like shadows, the

---

[5] Richard Morrison, "Andris Nelsons's rapid rise to the top: The young Latvian conductor is as amazed as any by his rise to fame" *The Times of London*, Dec. 18, 2009. http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/music/classical/article6960663.ece

[6] http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p008lmss#p008y24c

> natural inherited wildness in our blood ran true on its glorious course as invincible and unstoppable as stars.[7]

Or perhaps people knew early the *kind* of life they wanted, without yet the specifics. As a girl Annie Dillard voraciously read biographies of great men and women. She discerned a pattern that became her goal. "This was life itself: the big task. Nothing exhilarated me more than the idea of a life dedicated to a monumental worthwhile task." She carried "a secret knowledge, a secret joy, and a secret hope: There is a life worth living where history is still taking place; there are ideas worth dying for, and circumstances where courage is still prized. This life could be found and joined, like the Resistance."[8]

How Is the Calling Discovered?

For many people, especially young people, our calling isn't evident. Especially, perhaps, for the multi-talented. So many possibilities. This very multiplicity can become a source of both pride—and of unreality. Søren Kierkegaard explains:

> Possibility then appears to the self even greater and greater, more and more things become possible, because nothing becomes actual. At last it is as if everything were possible — but this is precisely when the abyss has swallowed up the self … Possibility becomes more and more intense — but only in the sense of possibility, not in the sense of actuality; for in the sense of actuality the meaning of intensity is that at least something of that which is possible becomes actual. At the instant something appears possible, and then a new possibility makes its appearance, at last this phantasmagoria moves so rapidly that it is as if everything were possible — and this is precisely the last moment, when the individual becomes for himself a mirage.[9]

We may also sense that the standard paths just don't seem to fit us. Many of the usual answers, phrased in occupational or familial terms, may strike us as banal. What can we do to help us find our calling?

One idea is to sit down, think hard, and figure it out. Harvard professor Howard Raiffa, one of the pioneers of decision theory, tells a story about the late 1960s, a time of social upheaval and uncertainty about what really mattered. One of Raiffa's students decided to write a senior honors thesis on the topic, "What I Should Do after Graduation." The student employed mathematical techniques to analyze his options. He laid out every contingency pertaining to every choice. He assigned a numerical value to each possible

---

[7] John Muir, *The Story of My Boyhood and Youth* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1913): 1.
http://www.sierraclub.org/john_muir_exhibit/frameindex.html?http://www.sierraclub.org/john_muir_exhibit/writings/the_story_of_my_boyhood_and_youth/

[8] Annie Dillard, *An American Childhood*, reprinted in *Three by Annie Dillard*, New York: Perennial, 2001: 451. (*An American Childhood* was originally published in 1987.)

[9] *The Sickness Unto Death*. Radford, VA: A&D Publishing, 2008 [1849]: 29.

outcome. Then he calculated which path had the highest expected utility for him. This was the calling he should follow.

The answer shocked the student. His analysis concluded that he should join the Army.

During the Vietnam War, this was certainly not the usual answer. Something, the bewildered student concluded, was wrong with decision analysis. He immediately consulted Professor Raiffa. How, he asked, could this mathematical analysis of his life choices have produced such a bizarre result?

Raiffa went back to the beginning. What was the student's utility function? That is, what mattered to him? What did he value, and how much compared with other things? The student had found it uncomfortable to try to list all the so-called "attributes" of his utility function—and then, to try to trade them off against one other. But he tried again, and he and Raiffa reviewed the list of valued attributes one by one. Suddenly, the student lit up.

"I see what I forgot," he exclaimed. "I left out my sex life!"

This is not an omission I would expect many seniors in college to make. But it is true that when we think about the future it is hard to know or to remember all the things that matter to us.

Most formal techniques for analyzing choice assume that the things we value are given. But these may be precisely what we need to discover. What values should we pursue? What calling should we follow? We probably can't find out by writing a senior thesis. We probably can't reason our way to a satisfying answer. Instead, we may need to try out different callings and see how they feel to us. We may need, in short, to experiment.

Experiments

It's a truism that experience is the great teacher, but I like that word, *experiment.* It emphasizes that our learning from experience need not be haphazard, that we can plan our experiences and evaluate them.

How might you think about experimenting to find your calling? As a start, let's consider five categories of callings. Under each of the five, a large variety of specific callings reside. But thinking about the big categories may be a useful beginning.

The first category of callings relates to one's own happiness. It might be called naïve egotism, to distinguish it from a sophisticated or large-scope egotism that can embrace another of the basic values. (More on this in a moment.) The calling here is to be as happy as you can. If someone asks you why you are doing thus-and-so with your life, the appropriate answer is "Because it makes me happy."

This calling is also familiar from what you'll hear some parents say about their child. "I don't care what he does, as long as it makes him happy."

But what will make you happy, or happiest? It turns out not to be so easy to know. Indeed, upon further examination this first category proves rather unhelpful. It

describes a possible result of pursuing a calling rather than the calling itself. The problem of what specifically to do is just pushed one step back. But the point of considering the category of naïve egotism is that this first alternative treats your own happiness, no matter how narrow or wide its reach, as the objective to be sought. It is this calling that you should experiment with.

Contrast a second basic calling, altruism. Here the idea is to increase everyone's happiness, not just your own. You should choose a life that would contribute to the greatest good for the greatest number—to use a formulation that is familiar but is strictly speaking impossible—and you should do so even if some other path would leave you yourself better off.

Attention: it turns out not to be so easy to say what makes mankind happy, either.

A third basic value might be called scientific. The goal here is not to make yourself or others happy, rather to seek and to attain truth. Forget about serving yourself or serving others. No great scientist, advised Max Weber, "has ever done anything but serve his work and only his work."[10]

A fourth calling is artistic. The idea here is to create something authentic and uniquely yours. "Within the world of art," writes the philosopher Stanley Cavell, "one makes one's own dangers, takes one's chances—and one speaks of its objects at such moments in terms of tension, problem, imbalance, necessity, shock, surprise."[11] Notice that he does not include happiness, altruism, or truth among the objects of art.

Finally, a fifth basic value might be called religious. Describing the objective here is difficult. One may speak of trying to engage infinity, or ultimate reality, or God. The psychoanalyst Erik Erikson refers to the "*homo religiosus*,"

> who looks through the historical parade of cultures and civilizations, styles, and isms which provide most of us with a glorious and yet miserably fragile sense of immortal identify, defined status, and collective grandeur and faces the central truth of nothingness—and, *mirabile dictu,* gains power from it.[12]

How should we evaluate these five categories of callings? We should immediately admit that they are neither exhaustive nor exclusive. The five callings do not necessarily conflict. On the other hand, these diverse callings do not automatically overlap, and you may not know which should be yours. How might you find out?

My suggestion is that you can't do it in your armchair. You need experience. So go ahead and get experience in the most efficient fashion: experiment. Make a willful

---

[10] Max Weber, "Science as a Vocation." In *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. C. Wright Mills, trans. H.H. Gerth. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1958. This talk was given in 1918.

[11] "Music Decomposed," in his *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays*, Updated Edition. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002 (1969): 199.

[12] *Gandhi's Truth: On the Origins of Militant Nonviolence.* New York: Norton, 1994 (1969): 399.

effort to put yourself in circumstances—and in the frame of mind—where you can test alternative ways of valuing the world. Be an experimenter—with your own life.[13]

For example, you might test your altruistic values by placing yourself in an impoverished setting, where you define your concerns as helping those around you. You might experiment with your artistic side and try, for a while, painting or sculpting or composing. To explore a religious dimension, you might try for a period of time to pass four hours a day in prayer and meditation; or more generally, to prove its truths for you experimentally.[14]

Gestation

If you undertake such experiments with your life, you might expect several things to happen. It will probably take time for an answer to emerge for you. The process may be likened to pregnancy. After a gestation period, a clarification of your deepest values, even that feeling of wholeness you have been looking for, may emerge, naturally.

If you are fortunate, your calling may combine a personal problem, *your* personal problem, with a problem outside yourself, in historical time. Such a combination, Erik Erikson observed, distinguished the lives of Luther, Darwin, Freud, and Gandhi. Combining "my problem" and "the world's problem" forged each of their callings—and provided them with the passion that enabled them to change the world.[15]

In none of their cases, Erikson notes, did the calling come by their seeking it. The calling arrived during a time of what Erikson labels a "moratorium," after a period of great preparation and a period of crisis. Darwin left the university on a boat trip around the world. Gandhi departed from his legal studies in London—where occasionally he dressed in a top hat and gloves—to work with the poor in South Africa. Luther had a personal crisis just as he was about to become a Catholic priest, and his moratorium was a time of protected reflection under a sympathetic mentor.

You, too, may need a "moratorium." Finding a calling does take preparation—it is not passive in that sense. But it is not something one does simply by pursuing a degree or

---

[13] Friedrich Nietzsche—from whom more in a moment—posited and exhorted "philosophers of the future" who "will certainly be experimenters. Through the name with which I have ventured to baptize them I have already expressly emphasized experiment and the delight in experiment…" *Beyond Good and Evil*, §210.

[14] Martin Luther wrote of the need to experiment: "Christian faith has appeared to many an easy thing; nay, not a few even reckon it among the social virtues, as it were; and this they do because they have not made proof of it experimentally, and have never tasted of what efficacy it is. For it is not possible for any man to write well about it, or to understand well what is rightly written, who has not at some time tasted of its spirit, under the pressure of tribulation; while he who has tasted of it, even to a very small extent, can never write, speak, think, or hear about it sufficiently." "Concerning Christian Liberty," trans. R.S. Grignon, *Harvard Classics*, Vol. 36. New York: P.F. Collier & Son, 1938: 344-5. The original was written in 1520.

[15] Erikson, *Gandhi's Truth* and Erikson, *Young Man Luther: A Study in Psychoanalysis and History*. New York: Norton, 1958.

taking a particular job. In fact, finding your calling may even be hindered by trying too hard or too soon to define it. Consider Nietzsche's advice:

> To become what one is, one must not have the faintest notion of *what* one is. From this point of view even the *blunders* of life have their own meaning and value—the occasional side roads and wrong roads, the delays, "modesties," seriousness wasted on tasks that are remote from *the* task. All this can express great prudence, even the supreme prudence: where *nosce te ipsum* [know thyself] would be the recipe for ruin, forgetting oneself, *misunderstanding* oneself... become reason itself…
>
> So many dangers that the instinct comes too soon to "understand itself." Meanwhile the organizing "idea" that is destined to rule keeps growing deep down—it begins to command; slowly it leads us *back* from side roads and wrong roads; it prepares "single" qualities and fitnesses that will one day prove to be indispensable as means toward a whole—one by one, it trains all *servient* capacities before giving any hint of the dominant task, "goal," "aim," or "meaning."[16]

Accidents made good, even what W.V. Quine calls "happy confusions," turn out to be welcome in many areas of life. "Happy confusions are frequent in biological evolution: a disused organ or accidental growth becomes diverted in a later generation, by natural selection, to a vital new use. Boons, like people, are to be valued for themselves and not for their origins. Serendipity and opportunism are laws of nature."[17]

In deciding whom to become, William James describes an incubation period. "When the new center of personal energy has been subconsciously incubated so long as to be just ready to open into flower, 'hands off' is the only word for us, it must burst forth unaided."[18] Thich Nhat Hanh, considered by some of his followers to be a "Living Buddha," expresses a similar idea: "Sitting and looking deeply into your body, your consciousness, and your mental states is like being a mother hen covering her eggs. One day insight will be born like a baby chick."[19]

Experiment with your life and your calling. If you are lucky, you will experience something akin to falling in love. Maslow puts it this way:

> I hesitate to call this simply "purposefulness" because that may imply that it happens only out of will, purpose, decision, or calculation, and doesn't give enough weight to the subjective feeling of being swept along, of willing and eager surrender, or yielding to fate and happily embracing it at the same time.

---

[16] *Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufman. *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*. New York: Modern Library, 1992 (1888): 710.

[17] W.V. Quine, *From Stimulus to Science*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995: 28-9.

[18] James, *Varieties*: 210.

[19] Thich Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*. New York: Riverhead Books, 1995: 49.

> Ideally, one also *discovers* one's fate; it is not only made or constructed or decided upon. It is recognized as if one had been unwittingly waiting for it…
>
> The best way to communicate these feelings to someone who doesn't intuitively, directly understand them is to use as a model "falling in love." This is clearly different from doing one's duty, or doing what is sensible and logical. And clearly also "will," if mentioned at all, is used in a very special sense. And when two people love each other fully, then each one knows what it feels like to be a magnet and what it feels like to be iron filings, and what it feels like to be both simultaneously.[20]

So, if you feel anxious about what you're going to do with your life and if you don't have the answer, take heart. You probably don't yet know exactly what you should value—and that's all right, whatever your age. To find your calling, don't just think about it, get experience. Better still, *experiment*.

---

[20] Maslow, "A Theory of Metamotivation": 303.