

## *Vocation Education*

I want to distinguish between two radically different approaches to making life choices — the professional and the vocational. The *professional* approach is so familiar as to be a cultural commonplace. It has such primacy in personal power, economic currency, and institutional warrant that it claims near monopoly status: Is there any other way to make a decision? This professional approach is based in logic and is susceptible to quantitative analysis.

Imagine a college undergraduate deciding whether or not to pursue a career in medicine (or law or accounting). Using a professional approach to making this choice, she might begin by considering its advantages and disadvantages. Under “Advantages,” she lists the reasons to pursue a career in medicine — personal satisfaction, substantial income, social prestige. Under “Disadvantages,” she lists the drawbacks — difficult training, job stress. If the list of advantages accumulates to a much longer length than the disadvantages,

the logic of a professional approach is satisfied. Her parents and teachers will validate the sensibleness of her decision. It's *rational*.

Alternatively, this hypothetical student might calculate the odds of making it in the proposed profession. "Doing the odds" is another methodology of the professional approach to decision-making. "What are the odds that I'll make it into med school, or later, become board certified?" If the odds for success are high, then the decision is approved.

There's nothing wrong with this professional approach to decision-making. It's sensible. It receives such high societal endorsement as to raise the question whether any other approach is required.

Here's the rub.

Imagine a second college undergraduate who wants to become a novelist (or actor or cellist). He tries using the conventional predictors for successful decision-making. He eagerly lists as one "advantage" to becoming a novelist: "I really *want* to do it." Under "disadvantages," a longer list grows: unreliable income, no job security, publication is difficult. When this student does the odds, things look even worse. The odds against an unsolicited manuscript at a major New York publishing house are 18,000 to 1 — dubious as the basis for a major life choice. What's more, his parents or

teachers are unlikely to support his choice. Responses range from the patronizing ("That would make a nice *hobby*") to the anxious ("How will you make a *living*?").

This second student needs a whole other logic than the professional approach to affirm his choice. How, then, does anyone choose against the odds, ignoring a long list of disadvantages, and still experience validation of his or her decision?




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"Vocation" represents a radical alternative to "profession." The two approaches cannot compete with each other because they do not occupy the same field of play. They're completely different, rooted in soils from different planets all together.

The word "vocation" derives from the Latin infinitive *vocare*, to call, carrying inside it the Latin noun *vox*, or voice. The simplest English translation of "vocation" is "calling." In common parlance, "vocation" and "profession" are sometimes used interchangeably. For my purposes, however, they must remain distinct because

they are decidedly different. In the 1960s and 1970s, the word “vocation” was co-opted by a technical education movement, or “voc-tech” for short. This label usually meant instruction in auto mechanics, refrigeration, or electronic repairs. Again, for my purposes, one must strip such connotations from the Velcro surfaces of the word. I’m aiming at the *ancient* understanding of “vocation.”

In Hebrew Scripture, Moses had a vocation. In Christian Scripture, Mary had a vocation. There is no profession called “Liberator of Slaves” and, if there were, the list of disadvantages to such a career choice would be much longer than the list of advantages. Likewise, there is no profession called “Mother of God.” Again, if there were, the odds against success would be infinite. Neither Mary nor Moses subscribed to a professional approach when making their life-defining decisions. Each understood this alternative paradigm.

Recall the story of Moses, whether from its biblical text or from its Hollywood retelling in *The Ten Commandments*. Moses, a Jewish slave raised incognito in the home of the Egyptian pharaoh, struggled with his own identity. He experienced increasing empathy for his kin, the Hebrew slaves. One day, while he was walking in the desert, from the midst of a burning bush a voice called out: “Moses, set my people free.” Moses recognized the

Speaker as the God of his people. And his first response was to offer a minor correction to God. “I believe you have my brother, Aaron, in mind for this job. He’s the one who got straight A’s in Public Speaking.” Interestingly, this initial reaction of Moses represented a rational, professional approach to the life choice facing him. He encouraged God to compare résumés, his own versus Aaron’s, believing that Aaron had a better chance of succeeding than did Moses, better *odds*. Notwithstanding, Moses was the one God had in mind after all, and Moses would have to choose whether or not to accept this calling on the basis of some logic other than career planning.

Mary, a mere teenager, faced a similar dilemma when called by an angel of God to bear a child by the Holy Spirit. Mary didn’t ask for this assignment. She never typed “Mother of God” at the top of a résumé after “Career Objective.” For Mary to pursue this destiny as a career option, rather than accepting it as her vocation, would have been presumptuous in the extreme, even blasphemous. To say yes, Mary had to invoke the logic of vocation, not profession.

Common to every story of vocation within the biblical traditions, both Hebrew and Christian, are four characteristics. First, a person is called *for a special purpose*, Moses to lead his people from captivity to

the Promised Land, Mary to give birth to God's son. Accepting a call means committing to its fulfillment.

Second, the person who is called has a *special gift*. This should not be confused with aptitude, skill set, or talent. A special gift associated with vocation must be revealed to the individual.

Third, implicit to vocation is the presence of a *Caller*. In biblical narratives, the Caller has a name — Yahweh, God, Jesus. The Caller's voice is heard as something outside the person called.

Fourth, accepting a vocation leads to *a life of sacrifice, faith, and, often, darkness*. Neither Moses nor Mary could have predicted what answering the call would mean. Each had to sacrifice other life possibilities in order to say yes to the Caller. Each had to exercise faith in order to accept the unknown, to walk into darkness in order to find the light.

Vocation focuses on obedience, accountability, and faithfulness to the Caller. Vocation demands life-ordering disciplines to ensure responsiveness, requiring silence in order to be attentive to the Other.

Discerning one's vocation relies on a process quite different from choosing a profession. A vocation must be heard or felt with passion. This passion — to write, to paint, to heal, to teach — must be confirmed first by oneself. Second, it needs to match one's *gifts*. And,

finally, it needs to be confirmed by a *community of others* or by a *mentor*. This final step helps preclude mistaking a personal compulsion with a genuine vocation.

Elizabeth O'Connor wrote insightfully of vocation from a religious perspective:

*If I develop one gift, it means that other gifts will not be used. Doors will close on a million lovely possibilities. I will become a painter or a doctor only if denial becomes a part of my picture of reality. Commitment at the point of my gifts means that I must give up being a straddler. Somewhere in the depths of me I know this. . . . My commitment will give me an identity. When asked who I am, I will be reminded that the answer lies in the exercise of my gifts.\**

Almost all the support systems for personal development in U.S. society favor a professional approach to decision-making over a vocational approach. Formal education — beginning at least with high school and continuing through college with its near-exclusive emphasis on career planning — can hardly recognize anything *other* than the professional paradigm.

My own *profession* is higher education; I am a professor and a dean. However, my *vocation* is writing; I

\*Elizabeth O'Connor, *Eighth Day of Creation: Gifts and Creativity* (Waco, Tex.: Word Books, 1971), 42–43.

am a novelist. I bootleg my vocation through my profession as, frankly, most artists have done throughout Western history. As an educator who orders his personal life according to vocation, I worry that university life provides scant vocabulary for discussing vocation. I worry that the perceived urgency to build a student's résumé leaves too little time for silence, for listening to the still, small voice of the Caller. I worry that all parties to the educational enterprise (students, parents, and teachers) have come to expect too little for their tuition and their time.

As a college dean, when I speak to incoming freshmen and their parents, I say, "Please expect more of this institution than merely whether you will obtain an entry-level job when you graduate. To place the bar there is to place it too low. While an undergraduate, experiment rigorously and radically to discover your God-given gifts. Develop the spiritual discipline and emotional maturity to go on 'internal retreat,' listening for the Voice of a Caller, hearing the possibilities of Vocation. Turn your focus from the want ads to your own wants, and to the wants of your Creator. Anything less is not worthy of the name *higher* education."

Rainer Maria Rilke, the wonderful German poet, in the volume *Letters to a Young Poet* wrote what could be a primer on vocational thinking:

*Nobody can counsel and help you, nobody. There is only one single way. Go into yourself. Search for the reason that bids you write; find out whether it is spreading out its roots in the deepest places of your heart, acknowledge to yourself whether you would have to die if it were denied you to write. This above all — ask yourself in the stillest hour of your night: Must I write? Delve into yourself for a deep answer. And if this should be affirmative, if you may meet this earnest question with a strong and simple "I must," then build your life according to this necessity: your life even into its most indifferent and slightest hour must be a sign of this urge and a testimony to it.\**

There is nothing wrong with the professional approach to making major life choices. It's just not sufficient. Vocation offers a radical alternative, and a more ancient approach. Professional thinking may be necessary to ensure economic success. Vocational thinking is necessary to ensure personal fulfillment. To extrapolate from Elizabeth O'Connor: *Not* to use one's gifts, regardless of excuse, is to live an anguished life apart from creativity. Look around and see if it isn't true.

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\*Translation by M. D. Herter Norton, Norton Library edition (New York: Norton, 1954), 18–19.

