

# Finding Your Heart's True Calling

Gary Selby

**W**elcome to Pepperdine!

If you're like most incoming students, you've probably been asked this question repeatedly by your friends, your family members and, especially, your parents. Maybe you've asked it of yourself.

*"What are you going to major in?"*

Coming right on its heels is a second question:

*"What can you DO with that major?"*

(That's the one your parents are asking.) They're important questions. You do need to choose a major. And when you leave college, you'll have to get a job.

But during your time at Pepperdine, you will also be challenged to ask questions that go deeper than just what your major or your occupation will be. In his book, *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey poignantly captured those deeper questions when he invited us to engage in what at first seems like a pretty depressing mental exercise: Imagine attending your own funeral, hearing speakers from among your family, your friends, your work associates, and your church talk about you.

What would you like each of these speakers to say about you and your life? ... What character would you like them to have seen in you? What contributions, what achievements would you want them to remember? ... What difference would you like to have made in their lives?<sup>1</sup>

These are the deeper questions—questions that

have to do with your purpose for living, your gifts and passions, your place in the world, the meaning of your life, the kind of person you are becoming.

These questions lie at the heart of an ancient concept that you will hear a great deal about at Pepperdine, the idea of "vocation" or "calling." Finding your calling has to do with discovering the person you were meant to become and embracing the unique work that you are called to do in the world. Many people equate vocation with career, with a particular kind of work that we (hopefully) enjoy, that fits our personality and talents, and that we find fulfilling. Certainly, that's a goal to aim for, to find work that integrates your passions and gifts. But the idea of vocation goes much deeper.

## *Your Ultimate Calling*

The idea of "calling" suggests that there is someone *doing* the calling and Christians, of course, under-

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Imagine attending your own funeral, hearing speakers from among your family, your friends, your work associates, and your church talk about you.

stand that person to be God, so that one's "vocation" is ultimately a call from God. Historically, Christian thinkers have understood this sense of God's calling in two different ways. One way, which they often called a "*particular* vocation," sees God calling us to a specific kind of work. This notion of calling is supported by numerous examples in scripture. One is the story of

the life of Moses, which unfolds in a way that culminates in his encounter with God at the burning bush, where God calls him to lead the Israelites out of Egyptian slavery (Exodus 2-4). Up to that point, he had spent half of his life as a member of Egypt's royal family and half herding sheep out in the Sinai wilderness—a perfect combination for the precise work God had planned for him. (Of course, he didn't get a clear sense of where that journey was leading until he was 80 years old!) Similarly, before his conversion to Christianity, Paul, the great early Christian leader, was a Roman citizen with a brilliant legal mind, as well as a “rising star” among the Jewish religious leaders of his day. On top of all of that,

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he had also masterminded one of the earliest systematic persecutions of Christianity. When Paul became a Christian, however, he discovered that his remarkable combination of experiences and gifts made him uniquely qualified to lead the earliest large-scale Christian mission in history, as well as to be the one who would develop a systematic account of the message of the Gospel—which Christians to this day read in the New Testament book of Romans. Looking back on his own life, Paul would marvel at the way that his path had led to this particular calling, describing himself as an apostle “abnormally born”:

For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me. (1 Cor. 15:8-10, NIV)

Examples abound in scripture of God calling people to a particular life's work—Joshua, Gideon, Samuel, Isaiah, and Amos in the Old Testament, John the Baptist and Timothy in the New. These examples suggest that God sometimes calls us to specific roles in the world, a sugges-

tion that has led some Christian thinkers to seek the integration of “vocation” and “occupation.”

At the same time, others have cautioned us from too quickly equating “vocation” and “occupation.” Historically, few people have had the luxury of choosing from among different career options for the one that best fits their gifts and interests. Your grandparents and great-grandparents, like many people across the globe today, probably had to find whatever job was available, and they may have worked faithfully at that job for their entire lives. William Placher, in his book *Callings*, writes, “Much work today seems to be what Karl Marx called ‘alienated labor.’ Assembly-line workers tighten a single bolt on a product they never see completed; it is hard for them to feel pride in how well they do jobs that leave no room to achieve excellence.” He goes on to note that many careers actually seem to hinder spiritual development:

The promise that technology would lead to a shorter workweek has proven untrue; on average, people work longer hours than they did a generation ago, and a long commute often adds to the length of the working day, with less time to spend with spouses and children, less time to be an active church member or an active community citizen. Corporate careers regularly involve multiple moves around the country: spouses change jobs, children change schools, parents and grandparents get left behind, to be visited only on rare occasions. In such a context, to urge people to think of their job as the call from God that gives their life meaning may be to push them in exactly the wrong direction, toward centering their lives ever more on jobs that already possess them.<sup>2</sup>

This is not to say that we shouldn't aim for the integration between our occupations and our vocations—I believe that we should. And in my own experience, I feel like I've been given the gift of being able to do work that integrates my career and my calling. But it does suggest that the idea of “particular vocation,” this *one* job out there that God has in store for you, is complex and sometimes problematic. Certainly, you shouldn't expect to find that integration in your first job out of college. (My first job was spreading horse manure around the azaleas at my alma mater!) At best, finding the work that truly reflects your sense of calling is a goal to strive for, and most who find it do so after years of struggle and searching, facing as many false starts and blind alleys as breakthroughs.

There's also a second way that Christian thinkers have understood vocation—they often called it one's "general vocation"—which had to do with an "ultimate" calling that transcends what we do to earn a living. Augustine captured this broader sense of vocation in his prayer, recorded in the *Confessions*: "Thou hast made us for thyself and restless is our heart until it comes to rest in thee."<sup>5</sup> Your ultimate vocation is a call to know God and to be in relationship with God. It is the call not simply to do a particular kind of work, but to become a particular kind of person, one whose character is pervaded by what the New Testament calls the "fruit of the Spirit": "Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (Gal. 5:22-23, NIV). At this point in your life, it's easy to become preoccupied by questions like "What will you study in college?" and "What kind of job will you get when you leave Pepperdine?" Finding your ultimate calling, by contrast, confronts you with this deeper question: "Who will you become in the process?" From this perspective, all of the other roles we play in life—worker, boss, husband, wife, father, mother—are means to a greater end, the end of discovering our true identity as God's daughters and sons. The particular job that you happen to work in is simply a laboratory in which you develop into the kind of person you were created to become.

A crucial element of vocation in this ultimate sense involves fulfilling what Jesus taught us to pray in the Lord's Prayer: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10, NIV). This dimension of calling has to do with making the world a better place, and it grows out of the relationship that we enjoy with God. The prophet Micah connected those elements of our vocation in this way:

*What does the Lord require of you?  
To act justly and to love mercy  
and to walk humbly with your God. (Mic. 6:8, NIV)*

We are called to actively seek what in the Hebrew Bible was called God's "shalom." It's translated "peace," but it means so much more. It represents a world in which things are "in order," where there is wholeness and harmony. The Hebrew prophet Isaiah caught a glimpse of this shalom in the vision God gave him of the "new heavens and the new earth." "I will rejoice over Jerusalem and take delight in my people," God says.

*The sound of weeping and of crying  
will be heard in it no more.*

*Never again will there be in it  
an infant who lives but a few days,  
or an old man who does not live out his years;  
he who dies at a hundred  
will be thought a mere youth....*

*They will build houses and dwell in them;  
they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit.  
No longer will they build houses and others live in  
them, or plant and others eat. (Isa. 65:17-22, NIV)*

Do you see the kinds of things he envisions? Those who suffer find relief. Children do not die in infancy. People live to

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a ripe old age. They have a place to live and food to eat. They are free from exploitation, no longer slaving away at work that simply makes others wealthy. Their lives are marked by harmony, community, and contentment.

So when you begin to think about vocation, the starting point is not your career but your ultimate purpose. Regardless of what job you do for a living, what is your reason for being on the earth? Whatever else we do, scripture affirms that this is our ultimate calling: to know God, to be God-formed, and to seek God's vision of harmony in the world. The exciting news is that you can begin to fulfill that calling now, as a student, as a roommate, as a fraternity brother or sorority sister, as an athlete, and, of course, in whatever job you find when it comes time to launch out into the world.

### *But What About My Career?*

Although the concept of vocation is more about building a life than finding a job, a big part of what you will do here at Pepperdine will be designed to prepare you for a career. For this reason, this is also a time to think about vocation in that "particular" sense, in the sense of the work to which you will give your life. Here's how one writer, Frederick Buechner, captured that narrower sense of vocation:

It comes from the Latin *vocare*, to call, and means the work a [person] is called to by God. There

are all different kinds of voices calling you to all different kinds of work, and the problem is to find out which is the voice of God rather than of Society, say, or the Superego, or Self-interest. The kind of work God usually calls you to is the kind of work (a) that you need most to do and (b) that the world most needs to have done. If you really get a kick out of your work, you've probably met requirement (a), but if your work is writing TV deodorant commercials, the chances are you've missed requirement (b). On the other hand, if your work is being a doctor in a leper colony, you have probably met requirement (b), but if most of the time you're bored and depressed by it, the chances are that you have not only bypassed (a) but probably aren't helping your patients much either.

Buechner then adds this poignant conclusion: *"The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet"* (emphasis added).<sup>4</sup> Many people find that intersection in their careers—in the work that they do for a living. For many others, the work they do for wages supports their true life's work. But in either case, finding your own particular vocation demands that you struggle with these questions: Where is your deep gladness? What is the world's deep need?

An old "Family Circus" cartoon pictures mom (she's actually named Thelma) calling little Billy, who's out in the far corner of the backyard, to come in for dinner. If Billy were to take a straight line, he could be at the table in about 25 seconds. But of course he doesn't go in a straight line. In fact, in the cartoon you see him follow a path that takes him all over the backyard before he finally comes to the table. He walks past the swing set and stops for a quick swing. He climbs up the ladder and whooshes down the slide. He pauses to play in the sandbox and then climbs up one side of his favorite climbing tree and down the other. He gets distracted by the neighbor's cat and chases her over the fence and into the neighbor's yard. But in the end, he eventually makes it to dinner.

That cartoon captures my own vocational journey.

On the one hand, at this moment in my life I feel like I am doing exactly what I'm supposed to be doing. My career, my passions, my personality type, my experiences—they all seem to come together in the work I'm doing now. I love teaching. I'm a born performer, and when my students and I are in the "zone" and there's this amazing

energy in my classroom, it feels like a natural high. I'm also a nurturer. So a student will come to my office with a problem and we'll talk through it and I'll see this look of relief come over his or her face—it's like the clouds suddenly open and the sun bursts through—and they're so grateful that I've taken the time to talk with them. But here's the secret: I also experience a deep sense of personal fulfillment in those encounters. At the same time, for all of my love of working with people, I'm also an introvert. And amazingly, my job requires times when I hole up in the library for hours at a time, reading and researching (or writing essays about vocation). It's a perfect combination! I'm also the kind of person who loves closure—I like for things to be nailed down, to mark completed tasks off of my list. Again, being a university professor is a perfect job for someone like me. I teach a class and mark it off of my syllabus. At the end of the semester, I turn in grades and I'm done. Then, a couple of weeks later, it all starts again. One more example. I'm wired up to feel passionate about the institutions that I'm part of. In other words, if I don't believe deeply in the mission of the institution that I work for, I wither up in-

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side. And here I am at Pepperdine University, an educational institution committed to "strengthening lives for purpose, service, and leadership."

You get the idea. I love my job. I'm never bored. I never look at the clock and think, "Ugh, two more hours before I can leave." In fact, my bigger problem is turning it off, because I love what I do. It enriches me, and I feel like I'm making a difference in the world.

That's the good news—it really is possible to find this in your own life.

But here's the bad news. I'm almost 50, and my path to this place has been a lot like Billy's path to the dinner table. It's taken me all over the map. That journey included my first job after my college graduation—working on the landscaping crew at the university where I'd done my degree. The ink was barely dry on my diploma and there I was, spreading manure on the azaleas. It also included a desperate summer in my mid-30's when I applied unsuccessfully for five different adjunct positions at local community colleges (in the hierarchy of academia, community college

adjuncting is the bottom of the food chain). With two kids and a mortgage, I couldn't get the community colleges to return my phone calls, and I felt as if I'd wasted the past fifteen years of my life. The journey also included periods of deep dissatisfaction, as I worked in jobs that I knew didn't represent what I was really here to do, and yet at the time I couldn't seem to find what it was that would fulfill me.

That's why we call this "vocation" thing a journey.

Most of us don't come out of college knowing exactly what we're supposed to do or where that journey should go. Often, the journey includes as many wrong turns as breakthroughs, times when you're trudging in the fog, alongside times when the view is spectacular. I wish I could give you a simple map that would tell you which path to take, which direction to go as you come to the fork in the road—some simple formula that would eliminate the mystery and make everything clear. But that formula doesn't exist.

### *Finding Your Life's Work*

While there isn't a magic formula for finding that special work to which you are called, there are some things that will help you in that journey. Here are three:

**Discover Yourself.** The ancient Greek philosophers put it this way: "Know thyself." That challenge is a perfect place to start thinking about your own vocation. What

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are your gifts? What do you love? What makes you tick? What are you passionate about? Do you love to be outdoors? Indoors? Do you love being with people? Do you crave solitude? Do you enjoy solving problems? Are you an organizer? Do you live in the details? Are

you a big picture thinker? Do you love "new and exciting" or do you prefer "routine and predictable"? In short, who *are* you?

This path to self-discovery is a life-long process (I'm still living with these questions!), and the insights that it brings can come from all kinds of different sources. One source can be standardized personality inventories, things like the Strong Interest Inventory or the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (these and other assessment tools are available to you free of charge through the Pepperdine Career Center). I discovered that as an introvert, even though I love being with people, I get my batteries recharged and I process information internally, in the "inner world." That's helped me seek work that balances people-time with periods of solitude.

But another path to that insight is simply spending time thinking about what Buechner called your "deep gladness." Here's an activity that will help you discover that for yourself. Spend some quiet time just thinking about the moments in your life or the activities you've been involved with that you have enjoyed the most. You know those times—you become so engrossed in something that you completely lose track of time or you forget to stop for lunch. It might be a school subject or a volunteer activity or perhaps a hobby that you've pursued. Make a list of four or five of those, and that list will give you a powerful insight into the kinds of things that make you tick.

However you do it, commit yourself to self-knowledge, and what you learn about yourself will help you discover the unique work to which you've been called.

**Seek Mentors.** Homer's *Odyssey* tells of how Odysseus, as he prepared to leave for the Trojan wars, entrusted his household to the care of a wise old friend who provided special guidance to his son, the young Telemachus. At one point in the story, Telemachus, confused and lacking in confidence, cries out for direction, and the goddess Athena comes to him in the form of this same wise man who speaks words of comfort and advice to the young prince. That wise old man's name was Mentor, and his name has lived on to describe those persons we seek out who have the wisdom, experience, and integrity to provide us guidance for our own journeys. One of the best ways for you to discover your own identity and direction is to find mentors you can trust and respect, who are grounded and have a clear sense of direction in their own lives, and with whom you can feel safe. Good mentors give you valuable insight and advice, helping you see things about yourself that you would otherwise not see.

One of my early mentors was a high school teacher. At the time, I was planning to major in history and then become a lawyer. I'll never forget sharing my future plans with him one night. In response, he made this simple prediction: "I predict that you'll become either a teacher or a minister." His words proved to be prophetic. After I graduated from college, I spent fifteen years as a minister, and then I transitioned to the work that I continue to do today—teaching. He was a wise man who was able to see gifts in me that I couldn't see in myself. All these years later, I still find myself seeking the guidance of mentors as my own life's work unfolds.

I'm not alone in that experience. At our annual New Faculty Retreat, new Pepperdine teachers are asked to share their "vocational story" with the other retreat members, and I'm always amazed at how many of them describe how they discovered their call to teach through the words of a mentor. And almost invariably, they tell of being surprised that someone they respected saw this potential in them!

In your time here at Pepperdine, you will rub shoulders with people who will become your heroes. They might be teachers, staff members, spiritual leaders, or older students. Don't be afraid to seek them out, to ask them the tough questions. Ask them how they got to be where they are. Ask them for their advice. Ask them what they see in you—both strengths and areas where you need to grow. Be specific: "What do you think I'm good at?" Their words can unlock the secret to your future.

**Stretch your boundaries.** One piece of advice that you will often hear about finding your calling is to expand your range of experience. Try new things. Visit places you've never been. Volunteer in service activities that take you out of your comfort zone. It can be difficult to find that work to which you have been uniquely called if your range of experience is so narrow that you don't know what possibilities are out there. By stretching your boundaries you begin to discover your "deep gladness." You will also expand your network of people who work in companies and organizations where you might one day find yourself. (Most people discover their dream jobs through personal connections!)

In particular, those service and volunteer opportunities will help you begin to see more clearly that second element of true vocation that Buechner called the "world's deep need." One of the themes that runs through all of the literature on vocation is that the people who find happiness in their work aren't in it for the money. (Of

course, some do end up making large sums of money—there's nothing wrong with that. But the fact is, although we do need money to meet our basic needs, money really doesn't buy happiness.) Rather, those who find true bliss in their work are those who find their work meaningful, who believe that their work truly makes the world a better place.

During your time at Pepperdine, you'll have opportunities to serve that will take you places geographically and spiritually that you never imagined you'd go. (Visit the Pepperdine Volunteer Center to get a taste of what's out there for you.) That journey might take the form of a "Project Serve" experience volunteering in an inner city school in New York City, teaching art to children on a Native American tribal reservation, or providing medical care at a clinic in Honduras. It might take you to a village in Africa as part of a study abroad program. Or it might mean working in the S. O. S. ("Standing on Stone") program serving meals to homeless people in Malibu.

Whatever form it takes, stretch yourself. Take advantage of opportunities that make you feel like you're in over your head. You will grow as a person, and you will see opportunities for meaningful work that you never imagined existed. And in the midst of it all, you might just find your life's true calling.

### *A Final Word*

A couple of years ago I was driving along an interstate highway in western North Carolina when I noticed that every overpass had someone's name attached to it. Intrigued, I did a little checking and discovered that North Carolina had a program that allowed towns along the highway to name overpasses after their local heroes. My

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first reaction was cynicism: "You do something great and you get an overpass named after you!" But the more I thought about it, the more I was struck with how much this illustrates the degree to which we want our lives to count.

We want to be able to look back and feel like we've made a difference. That's why thinking about vocation at this moment in your life is so important. On the one hand, it complicates things. After all, if the only thing that mattered was getting a high paying job, then the choices would be pretty obvious. But you've been called to so much more than that. And so I add my voice to the chorus of those across the centuries who have said, "It's worth the struggle."

But I also want to give you this word of encouragement. I often talk with students beginning their senior year who find themselves gripped with panic because they don't know exactly what they're supposed to do with their lives. It sounds trite, but I typically give them the same advice that people gave me when I was at that point myself: "Work hard—give every job, even the most menial one, a hundred percent. Keep your eyes open. Don't be afraid to take risks. Trust God and be patient. It'll unfold."

When I think about my own vocational journey as I was actually living it, it felt like Billy's journey to the dinner table. As it unfolded in my lived experience, it all seemed so haphazard and meandering. Several of my most important career developments came through what looked at the time like chance encounters and spur-of-the-moment decisions. At other points, the position on which I'd staked my entire future wasn't offered to me. At still others, I said "yes" to new opportunities that immediately made me feel like I was in over my head.

And yet when I look back, amazingly, I really can see the outline of a coherent plan. Each position prepared me for the next. With each stage of my life, I've found myself growing closer to that integration of my sense of mission and my life's work.

Out of that experience and out of my faith in God, I offer you that same advice. "Work hard—give every job, even the most menial one, a hundred percent. Keep your eyes open. Don't be afraid to take risks. Trust God and be patient. It'll unfold."

Your future is bright!

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Stephen R. Covey, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* (New York: Fireside Books, 1990), 97.

<sup>2</sup>William C. Placher, *Callings: Twenty Centuries of Christian Wisdom* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 327.

<sup>3</sup>Augustine, *Confessions* (tr. Albert C. Outler), *Library of Christian Classics*, vol. 7 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1955), 11.

<sup>4</sup>Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (New York: HarperCollins, 1973), 95.

### *For Reflection*

1. What was your overall reaction to this reading? What was new to you? What surprised you? What challenged you?
2. Have you ever been involved with a conversation about vocation before you read this? Describe that conversation.
3. What was your concept of vocation before you read this essay? How has your idea of vocation changed?
4. What was your reaction to the Frederick Buechner quotation about vocation?
5. Make a list of some of the moments or activities that you have most enjoyed—those times when you were so engrossed in an activity that you completely lost track of time or forgot to stop for lunch. What do they have in common? What do they tell you about yourself?
6. Who are your mentors?
7. What questions did this essay leave you with? What do you see as the next step in your own vocational journey?