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Have You Found Your Calling?
April 16, 2015

We have a few people who are here today that are retired, and perhaps a few who are in between jobs. But the large majority of you find yourself currently employed. You have a job of some sort. But I wonder if you would say you have a vocation. The word vocation derives itself from Latin word *vocare* which means “to call.” You might say then that the word vocation carries with it more than just the idea of doing something to get a paycheck, but the idea of doing something which you were made to do, or is important for you to do, or you are gifted to do. So let me ask the question: do you have a vocation? Are you doing something you are called to do?

I think there are few times during our career when we might ask this question of ourselves. We might ask it when we first enter the job market. We might ask it when we find ourselves not really enjoying the work we are currently doing. We might ask it when we find ourselves in between jobs and have a chance to chart a new course. We even might ask it when we have been wildly successful and yet don’t find a whole lot of fulfillment in what we are doing. So given that it is a question we are bound to ask along the way, let me provide you today with a few signs you have found your calling. I have taken some of these thought from the work of Jeff Goins,¹ but have built a good bit on them.

Sign 1: Familiarity

The first sign of having found your calling is that what you are doing is familiar. By familiar I don’t mean you have been employed at task for a while. Suppose you are chef, and you have been working in a restaurant for the last several years. Of course, working in that kitchen would be familiar to you, but that is not what I mean by familiar. What I mean by familiar is that what you are doing harkens well back into your days. Were you a person who always deeply noticed the taste and texture of food? Were you the one who was always cooking up new things at home? You may have only been 8 or 9 years old, but were you adding different spices and ingredients even when other kids were saying, “Ew yuck?”

My best neighborhood friend when I was growing up always wanted to cook something for me when I came over. He'd ask me what I would want when we were perhaps 10 years old and then make it for me. It was nothing fancy, but how many 10 year olds offer to do such a thing. It's not surprising then that he later became a chef at some very fine restaurants and became known as the best Italian chef in Chicago before moving to a restaurant in his home state of California a few years ago. My friend found his calling no doubt, and it was something familiar to him. So the question is: is what you are doing familiar to you? Were you the kid who was always gathering up other kids to do something in the neighborhood and now you find yourself forming teams for new ventures, then you may well have found your calling. Perhaps numbers always made more sense to you than history and geography, and finance and accounting are your gig. Then you might have found your calling. Or perhaps you were the kid who always had to build something, and you find yourself in construction and or as an engineer, then you might have found your calling. You see, I think it is safe to say that every person who has found their calling has actually been pursuing their calling in some manner or another their whole life. They just can't help but do so. That's why a calling always involves something that is familiar.

Sign 2: Others See It

Secondly, you are likely to have found your calling when others recognize you are particularly good at something. Oh sure, there are always those kind of people who as a part of being nice will say we do all kinds of things well. But if you find that people in different contexts and in almost offhanded ways tell you that you are good at something, that is a very good sign your calling is somehow attached to what they have said. Let's suppose that someone says something like, "Well sure that worked out well for you because you are really good with people," and some others say the same. You can suspect then that your calling probably has a strong relational component to it. That doesn't necessarily mean you're a salesperson as opposed to an engineer, but if you are an engineer and you happen to be gifted with relationships (I know, I know that doesn't happen very often!) then your calling is probably more in how you lead a team in the midst of projects than in the actual designing of a pipeline.

My son loves math. He has always loved math. And he loves the struggle that goes with figuring out problems. He has always received kudos for his math skill and even has the opportunity to study math at Princeton right now. In fact, I am quite certain his calling will have to do with mathematics. But I have also noticed a second thing about my son, whenever he has taught others (he tutors quite a bit), he receives different kinds of kudos. Students say things like, “I understand a lot more when you tutor me than when my teacher at school teaches me.” It’s comments like this that are really important to listen to. He hopes soon to pursue his Ph.D. and become a college professor, and knowing that others think he teaches well might be very helpful in finding his calling. You see, there are universities who select professors based primarily on their ability to produce new and novel research, and there are those who select professor based primarily on their ability to teach. If he ends up in a school looking for the former, he may miss his calling, but if he lands a professorship at the second kind of school, he might be right in his sweet spot.

Sign 3: It’s Not Easy, But You Love the Challenge

Third, you might have found your calling if what you are doing is challenging, but you love the challenge nonetheless. A calling must always be something that is difficult enough that not everyone can or wants to do it. You would never say your calling is taking walks. But you might say your calling has to do with managing nature trails that requires a good deal of walking. The first task is something anyone can do; the second one has a definite challenge to it. It requires a certain aptitude, passion, and skills. It also involves a figurative mountain that most others don’t have an interest in climbing. That doesn’t mean that there aren’t others who are willing to climb it like you, but those others are just a small percentage of the larger population who have no interest at all. Nor does it mean that you are better at meeting that challenge than anyone else in the world. That is too high a bar. It just means that compared to most people, you are invigorated by the challenge of your calling rather than worn down by it.

Sign 4: It’s More Than an Activity

Fourth, you may have found your calling if what you do well is not just an activity but has an essence to it. I think most of us would recognize we cannot become a great artist by just taking a class, even if we take it from a great artist. Oh sure, there are certain things we can learn about

art from taking a class, and there are certain things we can get better at when we take such a class, but that does not mean that we will necessarily become a great artist, or even a good one. And that's because there is a certain essence to what it takes to being a great artist that can't be broken down into certain teachable steps. There is an intuition an artist has that lets her know the next stroke to paint or that right shade of color. And if you take a look at your profession, whatever it might be, the people who seem to be a fit for what they are doing are not just following textbook practices, they are following a certain internal compass that gives them the solutions they need. They understand the essence of what must be done or how people work together, and they accomplish the task with excellence even if they can't tell you just how they managed to do it. It is these people who have probably found their calling.

Sign 5: It Involves the Good, the Noble and the Beautiful

Fifth and finally, you may have found your calling if, in addition to the things I have already said, what you do brings about something that is good or noble or beautiful. That means if people say you are really good at deceiving people and you salivate at the challenge of developing internet scams, I would not say you have found your calling. A calling lifts people up. It provides for people. It makes something useful, or it elevates or creates something beautiful. One passage in the Bible says: "Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things" (Philippians 4:8). And based on other things found in the Bible, we know it admonishes us not just to think about them but to do them.

Some people think a true calling takes people to the other side of the world to care for the world's poor or downtown to help with the homeless. Some might be called in to do just that, but I think we must also recognize the good in the less dramatic services we provide. A couple years ago ExxonMobil ran an ad that started by showing a woman cooking an egg in the kitchen, then it ran backwards through all the necessary steps and processes involved in getting the energy to her stove so she could boil the egg.² In effect the advertisement said, "We produce energy and in doing so we bring good to the world." I would say that kind of good is worthy of a calling. And if you forget about the good or the beautiful or the noble in what you do, even something

worthy of your effort might become somewhat shallow and meaningless.

So there you have it, five signs you have found your calling. I am quite sure there are many more things that could be said about finding one's calling. But I think the signs I have shared are enough to point you in the right direction.

¹ Jeff Goins, *The Art of Work: A Proven Path to Discovering What You Were Meant to Do* (Thomas Nelson, 2015).

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WvRH19H-J4pU>