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whistle while you work

HEEDING
YOUR LIFE'S
CALLING



BY THE AUTHORS OF THE BESTSELLING BOOK *Repacking Your Bags:
Lighten Your Load for the Rest of Your Life*

An Excerpt From

***Whistle While You Work:
Heeding Your Life's Calling***

by Richard J. Leider and David A. Shapiro
Published by Berrett-Koehler Publishers

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Introduction

if you can't get out of it, get into it!

Look around: How many people do you know who are living their lives on hold, just biding time until the right job comes along that will magically fulfill all their hopes and dreams?

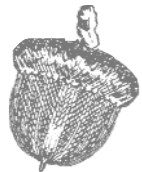
Look within: How often do you find yourself longing for “something more,” fantasizing about suddenly getting the perfect job, relationship, or living situation?

Look again: How many of us feel trapped? How many see no escape from jobs and lives we never chose?

Dick has seen firsthand how people get stuck in situations that they feel are inescapable. He recalls an incident that showed him what we believe is the only way out.

Africa—at last!

I have always dreamed of coming here. And now, I've finally made it, invited by Derek Pritchard, Executive Director of the Voyageur Outward Bound School, and former director of the Kenya Outward Bound school on the slopes of Mount Kilimanjaro. Derek is leading a group of seasoned outdoorspeople—Outward Bound leaders and board members—on this East African adventure. Little do I know that the real excitement and growth on our trip will be the inner journey—the “inventure.”



We are taking a route that probably should not be taken—it is that challenging. But this group wants to “push the envelope,” to have an authentic wilderness experience. And so, we find ourselves with full backpacks in a remote area along the eastern edge of the Serengeti Plains, climbing up from the Rift Valley—scrambling along the great rift itself—as we make our way forward under the brutal African sun. Our goal is to hike across the Salei Plain to the Ngorongoro crater where we will meet the truck that left us several days ago. None of us have taken this route before; it is new even to our Masai guide. And so, we are unsure of what lies ahead, nervous about our limited water supplies holding out.

Animals are everywhere; their screeches, growls, and yelps are a constant counterpoint to our own sounds of labored breathing and heavy footfalls. There are ten people in our group—men and women—and we are mostly silent, conserving our energy for the trek ahead. Our thoughts do not stray far from the experience at hand; ancient fears of the wild and savage continent lie just beneath the surface for us all.

And at the moment we have good reason to be on edge. We are hiking through tall grass that obscures our view beyond just a few paces. It is called, appropriately enough, “lion grass,” because it is a favorite habitat of lions on a hunt. They hunker down in the dry stalks to hide from their prey, ready to spring when an unsuspecting animal comes across their line of sight.

Our group is spread out in a line behind our guide. I am near the rear, taking my time, trying to experience each moment of our trip as fully as I can. The only other member of our brigade that I can see—and I glimpse him only occasionally through the tall grass—is a man I’ll call “Tom,” a fairly experienced hiker, an Outward Bound board member, who in the “real world” is an extremely successful New York City attorney. Tom is on his first trip to Africa, too, and seems even more blown away by the experience than I am. He has certainly prepared well for the journey; his gear is brand-new and of the highest quality. If nothing else, he certainly looks the part of the intrepid African explorer.

Suddenly, though, out of the corner of my eye, I see him freeze. He stands, still as a statue, then sits down heavily, the tall stalks swallowing him up from my view. I swim through the grass to where he now sits. As I come upon him, he is trembling.

“Lion,” he whispers, pointing off into the distance behind us. I scan

the area where he is pointing but can't see anything. "Lion," says Tom again, his eyes saucer-ing.

Still unable to see anything, I try to get Tom to move, but he won't budge. He is paralyzed with fear. Leaving Tom, I rush ahead to our group and fetch Derek. He tells our guide to hold up the march and returns to Tom with me, who is still sitting where he was, shaking like a leaf.

Derek, an Englishman, questions Tom with the stereotypical straightforwardness of the classic British explorer. "What it is, old chap? You can't sit out here in the sun all day, you know."

Derek's right. It's late afternoon; the temperature is well over 100 degrees. Even standing still, we can feel the sweat pouring off our bodies. Tom just purses his lips and stares into space.

"Dick tells me you saw a lion. Not surprising, really." Derek brushes a clump of the tall grass with the back of his hand. "They call this stuff lion grass after all, don't you know?"

Tom is not amused. He shakes his head and mutters something.

Derek leans closer to the sitting man. "What's that?" he asks.

Tom is silent a moment and then repeats himself. "This is insane."

"I'm not sure I'd go that far," replies Derek, assuming Tom is talking about his reaction. "But I would agree that it's not the most useful response to seeing 'Simba' in the bush."

The mentioning the lion again seems to send shivers through Tom's body and loosen his tongue. "No. It's us. Here. This is crazy. Too dangerous. We shouldn't be here."

"Well, be that as it may," says Derek, "we ARE here. And there's only one way out—the way we're headed."

"I'm not going," insists Tom. "No way. No."

Tom's intransigence has brought home the seriousness of the situation not only to Derek and me but also to the rest of the group, who have filtered back and are now standing near us in various states of concern and disbelief. They are wondering whether our expedition will—or should—continue.

Derek tries reasoning with Tom. "Listen, old chap, you can't just sit here. It will be getting dark soon and if we don't find a camp near water tonight we'll all be in serious trouble tomorrow. Lions or no lions."

"I just want out of here," says Tom. "I want to go back."

Derek reminds Tom that we've already come two days' walk from

4 whistle while you work

where the truck dropped us off. And besides, it's no longer there. At present, it should be making its way in a big semi-circle to where we plan to rendezvous next week. "There's nothing to go back to, Tom," says Derek, rather mildly.

"I just want out," repeats Tom. "Out of this. Right now."

Derek kneels down next to the group. He speaks to Tom, but what he says is clearly meant for us all. "Tom, you can't get out of it. There's no getting out—this is what it is." He pauses a moment and then continues, louder, as if announcing to everyone: "We have a motto at Outward Bound precisely for this sort of situation: 'If you can't get out of it, get into it!'"

Derek's words have an immediate impact on the entire group—Tom included. "If you can't get out of it, get into it!" When there's no way out of a situation, there's only one thing to do: get into it.

At that point we realize that we're in so deep that our only recourse is to dive even deeper. Our situation is inescapable and so, instead of trying to escape it, we must embrace it. To get out of it, we have to get into it.

And so, we do.

After only a few words, the group decides to press on. We realize that heading back to where we came from is not an option; our only way out is to get into it.

Derek's motto becomes our group's mantra for the rest of the trip. We face other near-crises in the days ahead, but with each one, we accept that the only way around it is through it. By the end of our trek, we need only give each other a look which says it all: "If you can't get out of it, get into it."

In the years since that first trip to Africa, Derek's words have come back to me often. The motto never fails to create a shift in my perspective. I have been involved in wilderness experiences—whether in the plains of Africa, the mountains of Colorado, or even the boardrooms of corporate America—and whenever I find myself or my group becoming stuck, I am reminded of this simple truth: "If you can't get out of it, get into it."

We recall these words now because we see so many people who are "stuck" in their current career situation. They want out of where they are. They fantasize about winning the lottery, about becoming

a millionaire, about meeting someone who will hire them and solve all their problems, about space aliens making contact with humanity and changing the entire world as we know it. In short, they fantasize about getting out of it.

But the simple fact is this: there is no getting out of it. The difficulties and dissatisfactions of work are only met in one way: head on. If we want to get out of our current situation, if we want to experience real joy in our work, there's only one thing to do: get into it.

And for us that means getting into the process of hearing and heeding our calling.

So then, let's get into it.

The Call

Calling is the inner urge to give our gifts away. We heed that call when we offer our gifts in service to something we are passionate about in an environment that is consistent with our core values.

Considering the concept of "calling" metaphorically, one of the great success stories is the telephone. What else comes so quickly to mind when we think of hearing a call?

The story of the telephone's success depends in no small part upon its simplicity. The fact that it doesn't (or at least historically didn't) require a number of complex steps to operate has made the telephone accessible to everyone. People with little or no technological sophistication are easily able to make and receive calls. The simplicity of the telephone has given people everywhere access to connections. Had it not been so easy to use, it's unlikely that its impact would have been felt so powerfully today.

As explorers of a different concept of "calling," we also hold simplicity in high regard. It's our belief that the message of calling is best presented in a manner that is straightforward and uncomplicated. It ought to be as easy to use as the telephone.

Thus, we would like to dial in four guiding principles of calling:

1. *The Call comes from a Caller.*

Each and every one of us is called. Where does the call come from? There is no calling without a Caller. Calling is an inherently spiritual concept that challenges us to see our work in relation to our deepest beliefs. The concept of calling is founded on the recognition that we are all born with God-given gifts to fulfill specific purposes on earth. Our calling emanates from a Source much larger and more powerful than we are. No one fully understands all that is “hard-wired” into newborns, but it is clear that we come into the world already endowed with unique gifts. These gifts have the potential to enrich our lives immeasurably if they are unwrapped and given away. And yet, calling is not revealed to us automatically at birth. Heeding our calling requires an effort on our part. It is an effort, though, that can be performed almost effortlessly. Quite simply, we must *listen*. We must choose to hear what summons us. We must open ourselves to that inner urge to share our gifts with the world in a meaningful way. When we are clear about our life’s calling—when we have heard the call and can heed it—our full potential for joyful work can be realized.

2. *The Call keeps calling.*

Calling is revealed to different people at different times in different ways; it may not come to us in a time or a form we expect. And yet we become aware of it in consistent themes that run through our lives: those things we remain passionate about, the work that we continue to believe needs doing in the world. Discovering our calling is a process that has stages, much like the process by which we learned to walk. Each stage—rolling over, crawling, walking, running—had to be experienced in turn. Likewise, we move from *jobs* which pay the bills, to *careers* which help us grow, to *callings* which give us meaning. All three—job, career, and calling—are related, but at different levels and stages. And the com-

mon theme that ties them together is the gradual revelation of our calling over time.

3. *The Call is personal.*

There are as many callings in the world as there are people on the planet. This isn't to say that other people might not do the same things we do or that they can't be passionate about the identical issues that compel us. It does, however, mean that each of us is called directly; no one else is called to do the same things we are *in the same manner we are*. Our calling is our embedded destiny; it is the seed of our identity. The emphasis here is on *being*. We express calling not only through the work we do, but more importantly, through *who we are willing to be* in our work. *Heeding* our calling involves a conscious choice to be ourselves—to uncover in the here and now our God-given nature. Our calling is like our signature or thumbprint, uniquely ours. *Heeding* our calling means we realize that we are here to contribute to life on earth something that no one else can contribute in quite the same way.

4. *The Call is long-distance.*

Heeding our calling is a deliberate choice to use our gifts to serve others and make a difference in the world. Our calling is made manifest through service to others. We come alive when our efforts make a difference in other people's lives. It's paradoxical but true: we are more likely to receive the satisfaction and fulfillment we seek when we enable *others* to achieve the satisfaction and fulfillment *they* seek. When what we do is grounded in a sense of calling, we experience a special joy—a whistle—in our work. As a result, we are even more willing and able to give our gifts. We are in it, then, for the long-term; the overall meaning of our lives is revealed through the long-term expression of our calling. Calling is thus the active source of our legacy.

These four guiding principles represent the essence of our message about calling. Of course, there's much more to be said about how calling is revealed to us and the ways we can bring a heightened sense of calling into our lives and work, but the basic idea is quite basic—as we hope to show in the following chapters.

In *Chapter 1: What Do I Want To Be When I Grow Up?* we provide a framework for reflection upon a question we all need to revisit sooner or later. We also explore how our answers contribute to our fulfillment on the job—that is, the degree to which they put a whistle in our work.

Chapter 2: What Is My Calling Card? features the “Calling Card” exercise, a powerful interactive way of developing a clear sense of one's calling. Once we discover the “golden thread”—our embedded destiny—we can then begin to examine it in light of our current or future work.

Chapter 3: Gifts—Is My Job My Calling? asks us to think about the work we were doing the last time we were so absorbed that we lost all track of time. This provides us with a way to explore the *gifts* component of calling. We also begin to look at ways in which people can take charge of their current work lives in order to express their calling. This is intended to illustrate that heeding our calling does not necessarily mean that we change jobs; another alternative is to change the job we have.

Chapter 4: Passions—What Keeps Calling Me? explores the *passion* component of calling. Passions are the specific questions that obsess us constantly; they are the particular issues, interests, and problems that attract us—at work, in our lives, and with the people around us. Understanding our passions gives us insight into the many arenas where we can put our gifts to work.

Chapter 5: Values—Where Do I Make the Connection? gets at the *value* component of calling by exploring calling in a wider context than just on the job. Values frame the sort of environment in which we are most likely to flourish. Consequently, this chapter offers guidance and direction for figuring out what environments we're mostly likely to thrive in.

Chapter 6: How Do I Heed the Call? centers around an exploration of the challenges associated with heeding our calling. We

share many examples of how people have dealt with the frustration of hearing a “busy signal” when trying to connect with their calling. This broadens the discussion of calling, and helps us to keep listening in spite of the inevitable missed connections we all experience.

Chapter 7: Legacy—Did I Answer the Call? explores the *legacy* we leave through the choices we make around calling. What do we want our lives to have been about? How do we want to be remembered? Who will we see when we look back upon ourselves? In this chapter, readers will have an opportunity to reflect on others' stories to draw lessons for their own lives and legacies.

Through these chapters, we hope to provide a process for readers to hear and heed their own unique calling. Ultimately, the discovery of calling is about connecting who we are and what we do. So our own exploration of calling can perhaps best begin by connecting with the question that, for most of us, is the source of our current experience: “*What do I want to be when I grow up?*”

Chapter 1

what do I want to be when I grow up?

Everything Happens for a Reason

I'm already late for my plane. The alarm in my hotel room didn't go off—or maybe I slept right through it. I'm stressing hard; if I miss this flight, I'll be two hours late for my meeting, not to mention deeply embarrassed in front of my clients when I finally do show my face.

Traffic is awful. My taxi driver coughs and shifts in his seat as he faces the long line of cars ahead of him. I see his reflection in the rear-view mirror. He looks like he's straight from Central Casting's cab driver department: the big, red, Karl Malden nose, the watery bloodshot eyes, the few greasy strands of hair sticking out from under the flattened wool cap.

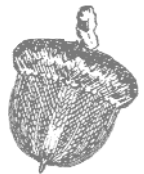
"What time's your flight?" he asks, glancing up at the mirror to meet my gaze.

I tell him—the hopeful, pleading tone of my voice all too apparent.

The driver shakes his head. "You ain't gonna make it. Sorry. This traffic's outta control."

I sigh involuntarily and mumble something about the meeting I'm going to miss.

My driver waxes philosophical. "Everything happens for a reason," he says. "You wanna know why I'm a cab driver?"



Why not? I've got time to kill now.

"Because the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor."

This I've gotta hear.

"Yeah," continues the driver. "You ever hear of the Sullivan Act?" He doesn't wait for me to answer. "Four brothers—all Navy—got killed in the bombing. So Congress passes a law that if you have a brother on active duty, you can't be drafted. Okay. My brother, who's a cop, is in Vietnam. And back in 1969, I'm just outta high school, and because I always do everything he does, I'm gonna enlist and go over there, too. I write him a letter telling him my plans and he writes back saying don't do it, this place is a mess, so I stay home, get into some trouble with the law and disqualify myself from following my brother's footsteps onto the police force. 'Course I wouldn't have that option if it wasn't for the Sullivan Act—I'd a been drafted. My number's already called. So you see, if it wasn't for Pearl Harbor, I'd be a cop today. Instead, here I am."

Sounds like he was fated to drive a cab.

"It's a good thing, too," says the driver, smiling wryly. "If I were a cop, I'd be dead. I got the kind of personality, you put me on the street with a gun, I'm not so sure things would work out, know what I mean? So, you see? Everything happens for a reason. If it wasn't for Pearl Harbor, I wouldn't be driving this cab. And if weren't for missing your wake-up call, you wouldn't have met the best taxi driver in town."

Think about your own life and the complex turn of events that led you to where you are today. Perhaps you can't trace the origins of your current career all the way back to the Second World War, but you probably recognize that a few key events played a major role in determining who and what you are today. The question to ask is "How involved was I in the course of those events?" Did you make choices that reflected what you really care about or were you pretty much borne along by forces outside your control? Are you, in other words, being what you wanted to be when you grew up?

Whistle While You Work

The Disney classic, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, features the unforgettable song, "Whistle While You Work." The tune, sung by

Snow White and the forest animals who come to her aid, captures the feeling of work done with a sense of joy, commitment, and focus. As Snow White works and whistles, we are reminded that, ultimately, the way we work is an expression of who we really are. And we share in Snow White's feelings of accomplishment and satisfaction as she busily completes her many tasks.

In doing so, we are naturally led to wonder about our own jobs. Like Snow White, many of us have too much to do. And like her, we are bothered by many troubles. How many of us, though, are able to put on a grin and start right in? How many of us find ourselves really able to whistle while *we* work?

Of course, Snow White's whistle is only half the story. Behind the scenes, the movie offers an even clearer model for joyful, committed work: the model of Walt Disney himself. Through his movies, his artwork, and his vision for the fantasy kingdom, Disneyland, Walt Disney created a legacy that any of us could hope to aspire to. An incredibly gifted animator, director, and businessperson, he was also incredibly passionate about his work; his values for high-quality family entertainment came shining through in all he did. Who can doubt that Walt Disney, as he created the many characters and stories that are now so deeply a part of our culture, whistled while he worked?

Naturally, we can't all be Walt Disney. Most of us, in fact, probably have jobs more like Snow White's friendly dwarfs. But this doesn't mean we can't bring to them the powerful sense of calling that Walt Disney did. And it certainly doesn't mean that we can't find a way to whistle while we work.

This feeling of doing what we were meant to do—of performing the work that we were born for—is something every one of us craves. We have a deep hunger to feel useful and to know that our natural abilities are being employed to their fullest potential. The desire is especially powerful because we've all had a taste of it; we've all had the experience of being deeply connected to what we're doing—that sense of timelessness and flow that fills us when we're doing exactly what we were meant to do.

When we were kids, we imagined work would be like this when we grew up. When parents and teachers asked us what we

wanted to be, we usually had a ready answer. “An astronaut. A fire fighter. An explorer.” We envisioned a life of excitement and challenge on the job—a life in which we’d employ our best-loved talents on projects we were passionate about.

For many of us, though, it hasn’t exactly worked out that way. We find ourselves in working situations that are far from what we envisioned as children. Our jobs are *just jobs*. They pay the bills, but they don’t provide us with the joy that, in the end, is what really matters. We’ve lost the whistle in our work. Even worse, we’ve forgotten what we wanted to be when we grew up.

So maybe it’s time to ask ourselves again:

What do I want to be when I grow up?

Maybe it’s time to take a lesson from a group of sixth-graders Dave worked with in a Seattle middle school. They all had very strong feelings about what the future ought to hold for them—and even stronger feelings about what it ought not. Each of them had already answered the question that we’re still asking:

What do I want to be when I grow up?

Dave tells a story that made this abundantly clear to him, in a way that helped him realize what his own answer finally was.

David A. Shapiro
Writer



*Fostering
Understanding*

We’re playing a game called “Hand Dealt,” which explores the question, “Is life fair?” by providing each player with a predetermined “life.” Students are each dealt three cards; one card determines a fictional relationship they are in, one establishes a fictional job or jobs; the third tells them where they live. There is a wide range of relationships, occupations, and accommodations, from the quite affluent to the extremely poor. Thus, one player may end up having been dealt a “life” of two parents, one of whom is a chemical engineer making \$80,000 a year, the other of whom is a banker earning \$125,000 annually, two kids, living in a four-bedroom house, while another player is dealt a “life” of an unemployed single parent of 4 children living in a one-bedroom apartment. Not surprisingly, the kids who get the “good” lives tend to respond to the question of life’s fair-

ness in the affirmative while those who are dealt less desirable lives usually respond that life is horribly unjust. This gives us the opportunity to wonder aloud about the relationship between monetary success and happiness, and ultimately, about just what it means for life to be fair or unfair.

But that's not all. It also gives us a chance to explore what it feels like to be dealt a life we didn't choose. And this, more than anything else, is what energizes our discussion. The kids are adamant about the injustice of having to live with choices they didn't make.

"I wouldn't mind being a janitor," says a boy I'll call Carlos, whose bleached-blond surfer look belies an unusual level of thoughtfulness for an 11 year-old, "if being a janitor is what I wanted to be. But since it isn't my choice, I don't think it's fair."

But the cards were passed out fairly, weren't they? Didn't everyone have an equal opportunity to be whatever they ended up being?

"That's not the point," says Miranda, a rather small girl with a rather large personality. "What makes it fair or not is that it's your own life and that nobody's forced you into it."

"Yeah. Some people are actually happy being, I dunno, schoolteachers. But that for me would be like worse than prison." This comment from Will, one of the class's several class clowns, elicits a humorous grimace from his teacher and chuckles from his classmates.

"Could you imagine coming to school for the rest of your life?" shouts curly-haired Maya with a theatrical shiver. "What a disaster!"

Amidst the general assent of her fellow students, I wonder out loud what kinds of things these 11- and 12-year-olds could imagine doing for the rest of their lives. I'm taken aback at the assurance with which they respond.

"When I grow up, I'm going to be a movie director," says Erin, a seemingly shy girl who spends much of her time drawing. "I'm going to start by doing commercials and then videos and then feature films."

Ryan, who collared me the moment I entered the classroom to show me his daily journal, in which he is recording tidbits for the autobiography he is working on, pipes up that he's going to be a writer. "Maybe I can write your movie scripts," he says to Erin.

Other students have similarly well-formed notions of what they love doing. I'm enjoying immensely talking to them about what they plan to do, how they plan to do it, and the philosophical implications of

their choices—and their freedom to make those choices. I’m wondering how they manage to have such optimism and clarity about their lives at this young age. I’m wondering how—at this age—they seem to know themselves so well. When did they have the discovery that so often eludes adults: the discovery of what they want to be when they grow up?

And suddenly, I come to understand that I am having that same discovery myself. As I stand in a classroom, doing philosophy with children, I realize that finally, after years of searching, I am at last doing what I most love to be doing. All the other jobs I’ve ever had—from busboy to videodisc designer to corporate training consultant—have been merely steps upon the way to where I am now. I feel completely connected to the process of inquiry we’re conducting; I’m immersed in the subject matter and delighted by my young colleagues and their inquiring minds. Time flies by. What I notice is how authentic it feels for me to be helping these students to better understand the questions and answers we are exploring and in the process, to better understand themselves. And it occurs to me that in all the other jobs I’ve ever had, this is the common theme that has given me satisfaction. At some level, “fostering understanding” has consistently been key.

And I realize that after all these years, I’ve finally become what I always wanted to be when I grew up. It’s taken me more than 40 years to rediscover the answer to the question that my young friends in this classroom have found for themselves in just over a decade.

What do you want to be when you grow up?

The Roots of Calling

At a fairly young age—by fifth or sixth grade, certainly—most of us have a pretty good sense of what we love to do—and what we don’t. Of course, we usually can’t put a job title on it at that point; for an 11-year-old, loving to draw doesn’t translate into being an art director; nor is finding math class fun a sign that a youngster should think about becoming an accountant. Moreover, given that well over half of the jobs that kids will grow up into haven’t even been invented yet, it’s obvious that we can’t expect too much specificity in career choice at such a young age.

Still, the essential core is already there. Our gifts, though nascent, have already begun to take shape. Deep within, a part of us knows that we are here on this planet for a reason. A sense of destiny, unformed as it is, lies just beneath the surface of our awareness. And, even as children, we naturally incline towards the experiences that allow us to express this.

Somewhere along the line, though, we get sidetracked. We silence that voice within that speaks to us about what really matters. We make choices—or have them made for us—that are driven by practical concerns. We set aside “childish” dreams in the interest of making a living or satisfying someone else’s plans. We seem to forget what we knew as boys and girls—what we most love to do.

But that wisdom never really goes away. It can be revived. We can open ourselves to that innate knowing that guided us when we were young: the inner urge to give our gifts away.

The roots of calling in our lives go back very deeply—to even before we were born. Calling is an expression of our essence; it’s our embedded destiny. The seed of this destiny lies within us; one way or another it seeks to fulfill itself in the world. So the question we need to ask ourselves is whether we’re doing all we can to bring the fruits of our calling to bear.

Seeds of Destiny

One unmistakable conclusion that Dick has drawn from a lifetime of coaching individuals about life and career design is this: *we all possess seeds of destiny*. Each of us has within us God-given natural gifts—unique potential for creative expression. From birth we have what we need to become all we can be. The challenge, of course, is to figure out how to make a living with our uniqueness; how to connect who we are with what we do.

But often we don’t have to look very far to find our life’s calling. We can simply start doing whatever we are already doing—driving a taxi, being a lawyer, raising a child, waiting on tables—with greater reverence for and attention to our natural gifts.

On a day-to-day basis, most jobs can’t fill the tall order of making the world a better place, but particular incidents at work can

have real meaning when we make valuable contributions, genuinely help someone in need, or come up with creative solutions to difficult problems. These transactions are meaningful because we do them with good will rather than simply to earn a paycheck. They are naturally rewarding and often occur effortlessly. Such moments put a whistle in our work. They fill purposeful lives—lives that are apt to be happier than lives that lack such moments.

The way we approach our work depends on our “big picture” of life. Unfortunately, many of us lose that perspective; we get so focused on the particulars at hand that we make decisions impulsively, losing touch with what is really important to us.

Michelle Stimpson
Marketing Coordinator



*Creating
Joy*

Michelle Stimpson, Marketing Coordinator at the Minneapolis-based Carlson Companies is committed to helping people reconnect with what really matters to them. Too often, she has seen the “business” of business crushing people’s spirits; in response, she has made it her special mission to help lift that heavy weight. She makes time on a daily basis to get to know the people she works with as *people*, not just co-workers. “I feel obligated to create a positive first impression with everyone who comes to work here—showing them how they fit into the big picture, why they’re important.”

Michelle’s parents must have known intuitively that their daughter’s calling was *creating joy*—her given middle name is Joy. Michelle’s joy has always been to build bridges between people. Even as a small child, she loved to listen to people’s stories, particularly stories about how they overcame obstacles. She recalls, “I’ve always loved to touch people’s lives, to be a friend who was there. My gift is to surround myself with positive energy and give it off to other people.”

Throughout her life, Michelle has chosen activities in which she could cheer people on and get them excited about things. As an intern at the Courage Center for the physically challenged, she researched patients’ stories and sent them to their hometown newspa-

pers. In college, she volunteered for the “welcome committee.” *Creating joy* has been the common theme for her; she has expressed this destiny in many variations along the way. Michelle carries a small card in her billfold to remind herself of her true priorities: family, joy, simplicity, peace, and love. She and her husband Bill work hard at living these values every day—and, as Michelle’s joy demonstrates, they are succeeding.

Michelle’s embedded destiny to create joy illustrates the depth of calling within us. Each of us is, you can say, like an acorn. Somehow, almost magically, the acorn knows how to grow up to be an oak tree. It doesn’t matter where you plant it, whether you put it in an oak forest, an orange grove, or even a junkyard, as long it gets the necessary sunlight and water, the acorn will develop into an oak tree. The acorn’s destiny to flourish as an oak is implanted within itself. Attempting to make the acorn grow into a pine tree, for instance, will be—at best—fruitless; more likely, it will destroy the tree altogether.

The same can be said for our own destinies. Like the acorn, each of us contains within us the power to realize the fullest expression of who we are. Naturally, we need a good environment in which to grow and thrive, but assuming we can cultivate that, we can grow our roots down and reach up to become tall and mighty in our own way.

Sadly, many of us spend our lives trying to grow our acorns into pine trees—or palms or sycamores or something even more exotic and unlikely. And this stunts our growth. Yet our destiny continues to seek fulfillment in becoming an oak tree. Small wonder so many of us grow up feeling rather gnarled and twisted. Small wonder so many of us end up making work or lifestyle choices that hinder our natural growth.

One of the most common messages many youngsters receive is that they should rein in their natural creative capacities. How many of us have heard “You can’t sing,” “You can’t draw,” or “You’re not a writer”? How many of us were told we were not good in one or all of the creative arts? And even those of us lucky enough to have had our creativity supported were likely to have been told that we could never make a living as a singer or artist or poet. Each time these

limitations were imposed upon us, most of us acted as if they were the truth. We accepted the limitations, imposed them upon ourselves, and thus the limitations became real.

The lesson is that when we are given strong positive messages about our creative abilities, we tend to bring them forth quite successfully. Those of us fortunate enough to have had parents or mentors who encouraged our creative expression often find ourselves using those very abilities in our work lives as adults. Dick, for instance, who now makes a good deal of his living by giving speeches, had programmed into him from a very young age this simple message: “You can speak.” He bought it.

Dick Leider
Founder, The Inventure Group



*Uncovering
Callings*

“When I was in my pre-teens,” says Dick, “my father strongly encouraged me to get up early every morning and look up a new word in the dictionary. At breakfast, I would share from memory my new word with him. I always picked ones that I thought would impress him—words like ‘ameliorate’ or ‘erudition.’ He believed that to be successful in any work or in life you needed to be able to express yourself clearly and articulately. For him, having the vocabulary to say precisely what you meant with a certain poetic flourish was a vital component of success. Encouraging me to learn a ‘word a day’ was how he impressed upon me the importance of this.

“His next push was for me to take elocution lessons. I dreaded this. My friends would be playing hockey at the corner playground on Saturday mornings while I sat with Miss Loker learning how to speak. Miss Loker was a dowdy gray-haired woman in her 70s who seemed plucked directly from the musty volumes of English literature that she carried with her for my lessons. Always perfectly put together and freshly coiffed, she showed up on Saturdays with poems to be memorized and lessons on pronunciation and inflection to be learned. I would avoid the work she gave me all week long and try to cram it all in Friday afternoon. Consequently, I dreaded her visits and the inevitable humiliation of having to stand before

her, in my own living room, reciting the week's lesson over and over and over.

"The true terror, though, was the recital, six months out, where she brought all her students together in an auditorium to recite a selected piece. For months, I came up with every conceivable excuse to avoid this event. Unfortunately, there was no way out. I ended up on stage before scores of expectant parents, reciting my piece under the stark glow of the theater lighting. Much to my surprise, though, I liked it. Hearing my voice reverberate through the hall and seeing the smiles and hearing the applause of the audience gave me a thrill I never forgot.

"As a sensitive and mostly introverted 13-year-old, elocution lessons did not help me get picked for hockey games on Saturday afternoons or be able to talk to girls at school. But they did teach me to be comfortable speaking in front of groups. In fact, after two years of lessons, I found within me a natural enjoyment for sharing stories in front of a live audience. I discovered that I had a gift for communicating my thoughts and feelings to groups of people.

"Today I make my living sharing stories and lessons learned with audiences of all sizes. Speaking in public is a part of my occupation that I truly enjoy. It brings forth the whistle in my work.

"I often wonder if my parents saw this natural inclination of mine for public speaking or whether they just felt it would be a good skill for me to acquire. In any case, they nurtured my gift for it, and in doing so, helped make it possible for me to make a living doing what I love to do."

Doing What You Love, Not What You Should

How many of us ended up where we are because someone—probably a parent or a teacher—"should'ed" us? Somewhere along the line, an adult or mentor of some sort told us that we *should* go into some line of work or some course of study "to make a good living" or because some other occupation "isn't practical," or so we can have "something to fall back on," if what we *really* love to do doesn't work out?

This is common with college students. An eighteen year-old freshman loads up his schedule with lots of math and sciences, even though what he really loves is theater. If he's lucky, about the time he's a junior, he realizes he's made a mistake and changes his major. If he's not, he ends up graduating and taking a job that makes him miserable.

Dave remembers a young woman who took an Intro to Philosophy course from him. "She was quite good at it. She had a natural knack for understanding the often abstruse arguments of the philosophers we were reading. She seemed to really enjoy the interplay of ideas in the classroom; she wrote great papers, and often came to my office hours to discuss philosophical questions. Given her enthusiasm for the material, I naturally assumed she was majoring in Philosophy. But no, she said, she was pre-med. "Well, then, you'd better watch out," I joked, "given your talent, if you're not careful, you're going to end up a philosophy major." She just laughed.

"After the class, I lost track of her and didn't see her again until about two years later, when we happened to meet by chance in the library. I asked her how her studies were going, what courses she was taking, and so on. She listed the classes she was enrolled in that quarter—they were all upper division philosophy courses!

"I thought you were pre-med," I said.

"I switched to philosophy," she told me.

"I kidded her about the comparative job prospects of a philosopher and a physician. 'Well, your parents must have been delighted about that!'

"She laughed, 'Yeah, I thought when they found out I changed, they were going to kill me.' Then she got serious. 'But I thought that if I didn't change, I might kill myself.'"

The message is this: we limit ourselves by doing what we think we *should do*. But by doing what we *love to do*, we expand our potential and increase the likelihood that the work we do will be consistent with our gifts. We maximize our chances for whistling while we work.

Nobody but you knows what your path should be. Maybe it means taking a job as a taxi driver. Perhaps it's the seminary or

teaching philosophy to children. Maybe expressing your calling means to form a collectively owned organic farm; maybe it is to run for mayor of your small town. Or perhaps you will heed your calling to become a chef, a poet, or an adoptive parent. There are thousands of callings and limitless ways to express them—and only we can name our calling and act upon it.

People who whistle while they work tend to have exercised choice in getting where they are. They tend to have—at some point or another—taken the proverbial “bull by the horns” and set a direction for their lives. They tend to have pursued that direction, using their intuition as a compass to navigate with. This isn’t to say they necessarily travel in a straight line—they may change course many times along the way—but the mere fact of choosing their life’s course enables them to pursue their dreams energetically. And the sense of power that comes from knowing that their direction is freely chosen provides them with the impetus to keep choosing throughout their lives.

It’s a useful exercise, therefore, to look back on our own lives and think about the twists and turns that led us to where we are today. What were the key decisions we made—or didn’t make—that resulted in our becoming the person we are, with the work we have, living in the place we do, with the people we know?

Parents at Work

Our parents’ attitudes toward work are the foundation upon which we build our own. The way Mom and Dad work—and talk and think about work—are the first images we have of the world of work and, therefore, have a deep and powerful influence on our own attitudes.

Growing up, we formed opinions about work by observing the behavior and listening to the words of our elders. Our parent or parent figures—the most important people in our lives—modeled for us the meaning of work. Our own relationship to work evolved from that starting point.

For some of us, Father was the parent who most clearly characterized the nature and meaning of work. For others, it was Mother, and for many, it was both. If our parents whistled while they

worked, and saw work as joy, we are more likely to seek enjoyment in our own work. If they saw their jobs as drudgery, as only a way to pay the bills, we are more likely to want to avoid it ourselves.

Of course, our beliefs and attitudes about work are complex and have their origins in many sources, but our basic pattern was formed by observing the work lives of our parent figures.

Dick observed his father and formed the foundation of his perspective on calling. “My father was a banker, an executive who worked for the same organization for 39 years. He worked hard—got up early in the morning six days a week to go to the office. He did so not simply to make a living, but because he believed that his efforts had a positive effect on individuals and the St. Paul, Minnesota community. This symbolic message, that work is a way to make a difference in people’s lives, is deeply programmed into me. The bright side of what my father modeled to me about work was his masterful ministry to people. When I went to his office and saw him relate to people or we walked together down the streets of St. Paul, it was obvious that he was very skillful and enjoyed what he was doing. He whistled while he worked. He created the aura of an artist when he worked, echoing the words of Suzuki, who wrote, “I am an artist at living and my work of art is my life. I learned from my father that through giving yourself away you find your true self.”

The Message We All Want to Hear

Our family, through parents and other significant elders, communicates a strong sense of limitations and possibilities as to what our work might be for each of us. We hear the message, “You’re not good at this; you ought to do that . . .” These limitations and possibilities are often the projections of our parents’ own fears and dreams.

Many of us were brought up to believe that we can’t possibly make a living doing what we enjoy. We have a choice: either we can enjoy what we do or we can eat!

Step back for a moment and ask yourself if this makes sense. Is it true? Are all the people you know who enjoy their work starving?

Growing up, most of us were told by well-meaning parents that work is not something to be enjoyed. “It’s not supposed to be fun; that’s why they call it work,” we were told. That early message made a powerful impression which was reinforced by seeing grown-ups drag themselves to their jobs, complaining all the way. Those of us lucky enough to have adult role models who whistled while they worked probably came to consider those people anomalies. Certainly, popular culture images—from Ralph Kramden to Archie Bunker to Homer Simpson—don’t represent most people as particularly joyful in their work.

Probably very few of us heard a message like this when we were young:

“Welcome, my child! You’ve been born into an exciting era with unlimited potential. We don’t know what your God-given gifts are, but we’re committed to helping you discover them. We could never see the world thorough your eyes because God designed you to be you and to live a life that is yours alone to live. You have gifts that will come to you so naturally that no one can teach you how to use them, not even us! Your gifts will give you untold joy and will be as easy for you as breathing. We will give you plenty of chances to explore what you really enjoy doing in order for your gifts to truly flourish. We’ll be proud of and celebrate whatever calling you choose for yourself, whatever it is that makes you happy.”

Nevertheless, many people *have* found a unique, life-inspiring calling. Few, if any, were given the kind of support illustrated in the above paragraph. They had to discover for themselves the work that made them whistle.

Our callings exist within us; they are inborn, a natural characteristic, like our hair color or whether we’re right- or left-handed. But until we heed our calling, we’re not living authentically; we’re adopting someone else’s model for who we should be. Perhaps it’s who our parents thought we should be; perhaps it’s a false image that we ourselves have opted for. In any case, that false image must be examined, re-evaluated, and, if necessary—discarded if we’re to whistle while we work.

Each of us has a unique and special calling. *What’s yours? What are you here to do that no one else in the world can do in the way you can? What is your special role to perform in life’s great drama?*

this material has been excerpted from

***Whistle While You Work:
Heeding Your Life's Calling***

by Richard J. Leider and David A. Shapiro

Published by Berrett-Koehler Publishers

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