

Uncover Your Calling



# WORK Reimagined

Richard J. Leider  
David A. Shapiro

LifeReimagined.org

AARP Real Possibilities



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# **WORK**

Reimagined

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Richard J. Leider

David A. Shapiro

*Foreword by*

*Jo Ann Jenkins, CEO, AARP*



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## Work Reimagined

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## DEDICATION

*To all those who have uncovered their calling  
to find a living worth living.*

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## FOREWORD

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When Richard Leider asked me to write the foreword to this important new book, *Work Reimagined: Uncovering Your Calling*, it immediately struck me how his request perfectly illustrates a number of the ways in which our world is radically changing.

As the Chief Executive Officer of AARP, an organization of nearly thirty-eight million people 50-plus, I see firsthand how rapidly and dramatically the world of work is changing. It is no longer what it once was, even as recently as a decade ago. More and more of our members want to keep working past traditional retirement age because they want to continue to contribute to society and find meaning in their own lives, and work does that for them.

But, that is having a disruptive influence on the workplace because it goes against old norms and stereotypes. As individuals, and in our organizations, we need to get to the point where we are no longer defined by the old expectations of what we should do or should not do at a certain age, and that means we need to reimagine our lives so we can be open to joy and fulfillment throughout our days. After all, it is not really about aging; it is about living.

AARP's Life Reimagined initiative is all about helping people to realize that we can choose our path forward at any step in our life's journey. And as a means to that, it enables each of us to connect to a powerful social movement that cuts across traditional distinctions, including age, as we explore together how the future will look for us all.

As someone who has been involved for over a quarter century in the leadership of organizations deeply committed to work that improves the quality of people's lives, I realize how closely people's sense of meaning and fulfillment is tied to their work. I have had the great good fortune of consistently doing work that is closely aligned with my own internal sense of calling. I know how vital it is to be engaged in projects that allow us to express our gifts, in support of causes we are passionate about, with people who share our values and aspirations. That is why I am so excited about this book and so pleased to welcome it as a connected piece in our overall Life Reimagined efforts.

In seeking to discover new life possibilities, it is critical that we develop a clearer sense of the kind of work that gives meaning and purpose to our lives. It does not matter whether we are just graduating college or coming to the end of a lifetime of service to an organization or cause; the same powerful impulse to express who we are through what we do remains alive at every point in our lives.

In this book, you will be led through a journey of self-discovery to help you clarify your own gifts, passions, and values in order to reimagine your work and find meaning and fulfillment. Ultimately, you will uncover that powerful sense of calling that gives our lives meaning no matter where we are on life's journey.

I invite you to experience *Work Reimagined: Uncover Your Calling* as a means to live with a greater sense of purpose, meaning, and joy at every age.

*Jo Ann Jenkins*  
CEO, AARP

## PREFACE

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# Reimagined Lives

Time flies. You get up in the morning, do your thing all day long, and go to bed at night.

Then you wake one day to find that more than two decades have passed—in barely a blink of an eye. Rip Van Winkle himself would be mightily impressed.

The changes that have taken place over the last twenty years or so are staggering: technology that did not even exist in the final part of the twentieth century has come and gone; grey hairs that were only emerging then have achieved dominance and turned white. The external world and its internal counterpart are radically different from then to now as the river of time flows on incessantly.

It is the end of work as we know it. Age-old models of working have broken down in the space of two decades; career paths look nothing like they did in the days before phones got smart.

And yet, there are perennial concerns that have remained steadfast. Questions like “What was I born to do?” and “What is my calling?” continue to intrigue us. The ongoing search for answers and the processes by which we explore are as vital and consuming as ever.

As coauthors and friends, we embarked on a journey together more than twenty years ago. Our first book, *Repacking Your Bags: Lighten Your Load for the Good Life*, represented the initial step in that journey. The central message of *Repacking* was that each of us needs to develop his or her own vision of the “good life”—which we defined as “living in the place you belong, with people you love, doing the right work, on purpose”—and having done so, must then “repack our bags” so that the only burdens we carry are those that really assist us in getting where we want to be.

What we did not fully realize at the time was how much “repacking” would become a vital life skill—not only for us individually, but for us in the broader world of work and relationships as well.

By examining our own lives and asking ourselves the question that started it all in *Repacking*: “Does all this make me happy?” we discovered, individually and together, that many of the choices we had made around place, work, relationships, and purpose were indeed contributing to our overall sense of well-being. But some of them needed to be reimagined and repacked. As a result, we have both made a number of significant changes in our lives—some external and others of a more introspective kind.

Richard reconceptualized his vision of both his executive coaching practice and his work as a partner in *Inventure—The Purpose Company* so that he could focus more on writing and speaking. His deepening understanding of his own sense of purpose and direction has led him to write and collaborate on numerous books and articles, most recently, his coauthorship with Alan Webber of the AARP-supported book *Life Reimagined*.

Dave gave up his career as a corporate consultant to earn a graduate degree in philosophy. For more than a decade now he has been a full-time college teacher, while continuing to pursue his passion for doing philosophy with elementary and middle school students, work that resulted in the publication of his most recent book, *Plato Was Wrong! Footnotes on Doing Philosophy with Young People*.

In the more than twenty years since *Repacking* came out, we have each done a good deal of repacking ourselves. We have both moved several times; Richard remarried and has become fully initiated into the rites of grandparenthood; Dave became a father and has managed to pay off his student loans just in time for his daughter to start accruing hers. Our lives have continued to unfold and to present us with new opportunities for shaping our own visions of the good life.

Through it all, we have carried on the discussion that led to *Repacking*. We have remained deeply intrigued by what it means to live a good life and what people really need to be happy. Our conversations on these issues have ranged far and wide; we have talked with each other, with colleagues and clients, with young children and older adults. To our initial surprise, the one component of the good life that has consistently come to the fore has been work. While we have seen that relationships, place, and purpose are essential to people's overall sense of satisfaction, we have rediscovered the degree to which people's feelings that they are—or are not—doing what they were “meant to do” impacts their overall life fulfillment.

This reality, coupled with what we have learned by interviewing many people who *are* doing what they were meant to, led us in 2001, to write our second book together, *Whistle*

*While You Work: Heeding Your Life's Calling.* Whereas *Repacking* was centered on an examination of all four components we considered necessary to the good life, *Whistle* focused on the *challenge of discovering meaningful work.*

And now, drawing upon that work and informed by another decade and a half of questioning and reflection, we have come to this book, *Work Reimagined: Uncover Your Calling.* The central notion we explore here is the deep hunger people feel to find meaningful work, work that allows us to express our gifts, and connects us to something larger than ourselves in purposeful ways—in short, the phenomenon of “calling.”

Uncovering our calling is what we have found best enables people to experience fulfillment in all phases of their lives. What may be most surprising is that if we can fully embrace our calling and consistently bring it to all that we do, then really for all intents and purposes, we never have to work again—at least insofar as we commonly identify work as something that is a chore, or which we only do to get paid. When we operate from a powerful sense of what we are called to do, then we are not, as the saying goes, simply making a living, we are making a life.

Writing this book together has been another incredible opportunity to express our callings. Each of us, in conducting interviews, facilitating seminars, teaching classes, having discussions, and putting our thoughts on paper has had the great good fortune of using our gifts and expressing our passions in service to something we value deeply. It has been a joyous experience even when—perhaps *especially when*—we were working the hardest. We offer this book as a token of our gratitude for being able to experience the power of calling in our own lives.



In order to live the life we imagine, we must continually re-imagine it. In order to do work that makes such a life possible, we must regularly rediscover and reimagine our calling. Our ongoing conversations about calling have enriched our lives immeasurably and offer every promise of continuing to do so. We welcome you to participate in these conversations yourself and to experience the joy and fulfillment that follows from doing what you are called to do.

*Richard J. Leider*

Minneapolis, Minnesota

*David A. Shapiro*

Seattle, Washington

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## INTRODUCTION

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# The End of Work As We Know It

### Never Work Again

Uncover your calling and you will never have to work again.

By way of illustration, Richard tells the following story:

*I settle in to the taxi, hoping to get a bit of work done before my upcoming meeting. As the driver begins pulling away from the curb, I open my briefcase and take out a folder. Even as I try to settle in to my papers, I can see from the cabbie's face in the rearview mirror that he wants to talk.*

*"So, whattayou in town for?" he asks.*

*"I'm giving a speech. A presentation to some businesspeople," I say, hoping to make it sound uninteresting so the driver will leave me alone.*

*He doesn't take the hint. "Oh yeah? What's it about?"*

*I'm not interested in giving the speech twice, so I offer the Reader's Digest abridged version. "Hearing and heeding your life's calling—doing the work you were born to do."*

*My cabbie scoffs. "That's a good one. You gotta section on how to make a million bucks while you sleep, too?"*

## 2 Work Reimagined

Now he's hooked me. "You sound skeptical."

"Hey look, what am I supposed to say? Your life's 'calling?' C'mon, I drive a cab here. What's that got to do with a calling?"

I close my folder and catch the driver's eyes in the rearview. "You weren't born to drive a taxi?"

He just laughs.

"But you like your work well enough?"

He shrugs. "I guess it has its moments."

"I'm interested. What are those moments?"

"You mean besides quittin' time?"

I lean forward and put my hand on the back of the seat. "I'm serious. What is it about this job—besides the money—that you find satisfying? What is it that gets you out of bed in the morning?"

He smirks like he's going to say something sarcastic but then stops. Gradually, his face softens. He laughs a little and says, "Well, there's this old lady."

I stay silent and he continues. "A couple times a week, I get a call to pick her up and take her to the grocery store. She just buys a few items. I help her carry them into her apartment, maybe unload them for her in her kitchen, sometimes she asks me to stay for a cup of coffee. It's no big deal, really; I'm not even sure she knows my name. But I'm her guy. Whenever she calls for a taxi, I'm the guy that goes."

I wonder why. "Does she tip well?" I ask.

"Not really. Nothing special, anyway. But there's something about helping her that, I dunno, just makes me feel good. I guess I feel like I'm making a difference in somebody's life, like somebody needs me. I like to help out."

"There's your calling right there," I say.

"What?" The smirk returns. "Unloading groceries?"

*“You said you like to help out. That is a pretty clear expression of calling. ‘Giving care to people in need’ is how I would probably put it.”*

*A smile spreads across his face. “Well, I’ll be damned. I guess that’s right. Most of the time, I’m just a driver, but when I get that chance to help somebody—as long as they’re not some kinda jerk or something—that’s when I feel good about this job. So, whattayou know? I got a calling.”*

*He falls silent for the rest of the short trip. But I can see his face in the rearview mirror and even when we hit the midtown traffic, he’s still smiling.*

Each of us, no matter what we do, has a calling. Of course, some jobs fit more naturally with our calling, but every working situation provides us with some opportunities for fulfilling the urge to give our gifts away. Satisfaction on the job—and ultimately, in life—will, in part, depend on how well we take advantage of those meaningful moments. What this requires, though, is that we learn to uncover our calling. And in the contemporary world of work, this is no luxury; uncovering our calling is now, more than ever before, an essential life skill.

### **Do You Have a Job, a Career, or a Calling?**

Did Richard’s taxi driver see his work as a job? A career? Or a calling? It makes all the difference—especially these days, given new and emerging realities affecting us all.

Once upon a time—let us say the first three-quarters of the previous century—it was not uncommon for people, like the taxi driver, to have the same job their entire lives. A person

could expect to work for the same company, in more or less the same capacity, throughout their entire working life.

Later, but still back in the day—let us say the last couple decades of that same end-of-the-millennium century—many, if not most, people had just one career. While particular working situations and companies might come and go, it was typical for someone to be employed in the same capacity in all of them.

Nowadays, though, neither of these is the norm. Hardly anyone works at the same job their entire life—and pretty much no one really expects to. Likewise, even careers are no longer stable. More and more people radically change the direction their working lives take over time. You hear stories every day of doctors giving up their practices to become restaurateurs, computer scientists reinventing themselves as organic farmers, teachers leaving the profession to become tour guides; visit any community college or evening degree program and you will see countless examples of people pursuing very different career dreams than those they started out with.

Moreover, an increasing number of people are doing this simultaneously. The phenomenon of the “slash career,” where individuals combine two very different fields of work as part of their identity, continues to rise. No longer is someone merely a lawyer, for example; they are a “lawyer/actress,” or an “advertising executive/gluten-free baker,” or, as profiled in a featured *New York Times* article, “forensic psychologist/DJ.”

The question arises then, as to what can be the consistent thread among these various careers. What draws a person from one field of endeavor to something entirely different? How do we find ourselves? How do we bring the same level

of passion and commitment to and derive the same level of satisfaction and meaning from what inevitably seem like unconnected ways of moving through the world?

The answer can be found through an important distinction in how people view their relation to their work as a job, a career, or a calling. People tend to see their work in one of these three ways, and the satisfaction they derive from that work correlates closely.

### **The Job-Career-Calling Distinction**

The distinctions are these: People who have jobs are mainly focused on gaining the material benefits from work. They do not expect to receive any other type of reward from it. The work is not an end in itself, but instead is a means that allows individuals to acquire the resources needed to enjoy their time away from the job. The major life commitments of jobholders are not expressed through their work.

In contrast, people who see what they do as a career have a deeper personal investment in their work and mark their achievements not only through monetary gain, but through advancement within their field. This advancement often brings higher status, increased power, and higher self-esteem.

Finally, people with callings find that their work is inseparable from their lives. A person with a calling works not only for financial gain or career advancement, but also for the fulfillment that doing the work brings to them. The word “calling” was originally used in a religious context where people were understood to be “called” by God to do morally and socially significant work. While the modern sense of “calling” may

have lost its religious connection, work that people feel called to do is usually seen as intrinsically valuable—an end in itself.

The Job–Career–Calling distinction is not necessarily dependent upon the kind of work a person does. Within any occupation, one could conceivably find individuals with all three kinds of relations to their work. Although one might expect to find a higher number of callings among those in certain types of work, for example, doctors, teachers, or social service professionals, it is an essential truth that anyone can view their work as a calling. All it takes is that they use their gifts doing something they are passionate about in an environment consistent with their values.

Uncovering our calling, therefore, is key to navigating the changes we will inevitably experience in work. To figure out what we are really called to do in the world is the best means we have of connecting the various aspects of our work lives over time, no matter what our job or career happens to be at the moment.

## **Taking the Work out of Work**

And here is the really good news: when we uncover our calling, we *never have to work again*. That is right. When we choose to do what we are called to do—and we can—then we are always doing what we want to.

And this is not just for people who have “glamorous” jobs with fancy titles and big salaries. A sense of calling enables us to successfully reimagine our work, no matter what we do, as the following story illustrates.

John Novachis never worked a day in his life.

A men’s retailer, John was the force behind his small gem of a men’s shop in Edina, Minnesota. He hand-selected every



piece in his store, every one of which embodied his eccentric and colorful sense of style.

Although he was an icon in the world of men's clothing, his real work was with people; he did what he did for his customers. While handling the fabric of garments, he simultaneously wove himself into the fabric of people's lives. Whether or not you bought anything, John always made you feel like the most important person in the world, regardless of what you did or how much you had to spend.

John was no saint to be sure. He was a profane, outspoken, stereotypically Dionysian Greek, a true Zorba, with a sense of style rivaled only by his sense of humor. He frequently greeted customers entering his store with a robust, "Good f#@&ing afternoon!"

Anyone who knew John would tell you he was one of the happiest and most positive people they had ever met. His philosophy of life was his own version of the "80/20 Rule." He often told Richard, "If you can be happy 80 percent of the time and deal with the crap the other 20 percent, you've got happiness mastered." John himself was at something like 95/5 most days.

John dressed celebrities, athletes, executives, doctors, and men from all walks of life, although you never heard him drop a name. Typically, when referring to someone, well-known or not, he'd proclaim, "I hate that guy!" meaning, of course, "that guy" was someone he was particularly fond of. Everyone was "babe" to John and you could not help but feel honored by and smile at the moniker.

John's calling was "bringing joy" to people's lives, which he also did to the community in which his shop was located. He was named "Merchant of Distinction" by the local business

association and there is now a bronze plaque on the building that houses his store, honoring his many contributions.

John was a person who brought all that he was to all that he did—and in doing so, he never had to work a single day in his life.

It is all about uncovering our calling. John designed the life he lived by organizing it around the work he loved to do. This enabled him—as it can for each of us—to commit energetically to activities that lead to fulfillment, and which, from the inside, do not feel like work at all. This is work reimagined at its essence: a reimagining that takes the work out of work!

## **The Economy of You!**

It is the end of work as we know it.

Gone are the days when having a job simply meant “doing your job.” No longer can anyone anywhere expect the future of work to be the same as it was in the past. Innovation, which used to be innovative, is now the norm. Staying ahead of the game is what it takes simply to be part of the game.

The last twenty years or so have brought radical revolutions in the way people work. Whereas, for example, two decades ago, telecommuting was relatively novel, today whole industries have sprung up in which customers, suppliers, and producers, are distributed all over the world, connected only by the internet and satellites.

A recent study reveals that one in three members of the American workforce—and a higher percentage of younger workers—are so-called contingent workers, freelancers, temps, seasonal, and part-time employees. That is more than sixty million people, and the numbers are only expected to rise.

This boom marks a striking new stage in a deeper transformation, not just in America, but also around the world. In the twenty-first-century economy, people consistently move among many jobs, organizations, and even careers. Staying put is the anomaly; change is what people call the “new normal,” but given how weird things are getting, might better be characterized as the “new abnormal.” And that makes reimagining a critical life skill for us all.

More than ever before, people will have to master reimagining to survive in the working world and will have to continue learning to stay up-to-date. They will have to take increased responsibility for educating and re-educating themselves. Individuals will have to learn to “sell” themselves through social networking, and if they are really savvy, turn themselves into “brands.” Everyone will feel the pressure to market their most important asset—themselves—and to create and manage what is often referred to as “the economy of you.”

## **Work 1.0: Having a Good Job**

The idea that “having a good job” means being an employee of a particular company is a legacy of an era that is ending. The huge companies created by the Industrial Revolution brought armies of workers together, often under a single roof. In its early days, that was a step down for many independent artisans, but a step up for most common day laborers.

These companies, typically combined with the efforts of labor unions, introduced a new stability and security into work. A huge class of white-collar workers found secure positions managing these growing organizations. For much of

the twentieth century, working meant a full-time job, which included fringe benefits and a retirement plan. It also meant having a clearly defined job description. Lifelong employment was the expectation, even the “right” of many workers.

But all that has changed. Downsizing, restructuring, new technologies, globalization, automation, robotics, and so on and so on have radically altered the workplace. Nothing looks like it did in the textbooks we studied from. At no other time in human history have so many people had to flip their fundamental assumptions about making a living—to, in essence, reimagine their work lives.

## **Work 2.0: Having a Calling**

How does having a clear sense of calling support working in today’s disruptive work world? We answer this question by pointing to a couple of life skills that are essential today: self-awareness and adaptability.

People with a high degree of self-awareness are good at identifying their gifts, passions, and values. They have an accurate sense of their strengths and weaknesses. They can change their self-perception by examining their experiences and getting feedback from others.

Adaptability refers to peoples’ capacity to self-regulate—to adjust to the needs of whatever situation they find themselves facing. People with a high degree of adaptability not only have the ability to change, they are motivated to do so. They can sense when they need to update their skills and knowledge and are generally eager to do so.

A clear sense of calling brings with it a heightened sense self-awareness and greater adaptability—along with a continual seeking of ways to better align one's gifts with needs in the world. By cultivating a calling, we are automatically developing a reimagining approach to work that will prove critical to surviving and thriving in the increasingly contingent work world. Those who have identified their calling and who approach their work through that lens will be those with the self-awareness and adaptability to embrace the future of work however it happens to unfold.

## **The Call for Imagination**

The truth is that in today's economy, it is far riskier to abandon your calling than to uncover it.

With the secure job a thing of the past, the only lasting security for any of us lies in our ability to find or create work. We need to continuously reimagine what we do for a living or we risk having life simply pass us by.

The constantly evolving economy rewards people who exhibit qualities like initiative, adaptability, and innovativeness. And who is more likely to embody these qualities than people who believe in and love what they do? Reimagining one's work lies at the root of this.

In today's world of work, those who pursue their calling have a positive edge. They have a powerful source of self-motivation to grow and to take the risks necessary to succeed. On the other hand, those who rely on existing structures to look out for them will soon be left behind.

The riskiest course of action is to wait until a crisis forces us to change. Intentionally reimagining our work, by contrast, enables us to adapt on our own terms. Instead of being limited by circumstances, we are constrained only by what we believe is possible. And the broader the scope of our dreams, the broader will be the range of possibilities before us.

It takes a great deal of imagination and resourcefulness to uncover and heed our calling. But it is imagination that turns color into art, words into poetry, and notes into music. Similarly, it is imagination that turns jobs and careers into callings. As we gather information, open new doors, and explore emerging fields of interest, we feed our imaginations with the essentials we need to uncover our life's work. And as we act, we gain confidence in the work we do, and just as importantly, clarity about why we do it.

One prediction we can be quite sure of: the future of work will be even more different from today than today is from yesterday. Those who are able to continually reimagine themselves for the new realities, while being true to their deepest sense of calling, will be the ones most likely to succeed on their own terms. Historically, fortune has favored the bold; now, more than ever, it will favor the bold reimaginers.

### **Why Is Reimagining So Vital Today?**

Admittedly, some people, especially self-employed people like John Novachis, may have better odds than others of engaging with work through the principle of calling. We are all constrained, in one way or another, by factors such as gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and geography. Economic hardship, in particular, can lead to decreased opportunities for reimagining work.

To be clear, though, all legitimate areas of work provide the possibility of dignity and meaning. There is no type of job that is inherently “better” than some other type. That said, it is an unavoidable reality that people start at different points and the likelihood of reimagining one’s work is greater in some situations than others.

But that is only part of the story. The flip side is that for people whose situations are more constrained, calling is even more vital. Paradoxically, having a calling may be most vital for those faced with unemployment or underemployment.

The transition from secure jobs to a more contingent-oriented work world has been evolving steadily over the past half-century, and an adaptive approach to this new reality is now an essential life skill for all of us.

We call this adaptive mindset “work reimagined.” When people reimagine, they gain a sense of clarity and confidence by uncovering their calling.

## **What Is Calling?**

We define “calling” as the inner urge to give our gifts away.

We heed our calling when we offer our gifts in service to something we are passionate about in an environment that is consistent with our core values.

Richard has been researching, writing, and speaking about calling for decades—so long, in fact, that when he first began communicating about the concept, he often employed the metaphor of the telephone! The telephone? How archaic is that?

Surprisingly, however, even in this day when the word “telephone” evokes a time of people smoking cigarettes in

their offices and taking three martini lunches, the metaphor still has legs. This is primarily because the evolution of the “telephone” over the last few decades illustrates, in no small way, the manner in which our shared understanding of calling has morphed, as well.

It used to be that the place one would receive calls—telephone calls—was fixed. You had to be there when it rang, and if you were not, you missed it. Those of us of a “certain age” probably remember waiting around impatiently for the phone to ring with news about a job or a word from that special someone.

This is akin to how we used to understand calling as well. It seemed to us that the time and place for hearing one’s calling was very specific and the call was something we received or did not receive, depending on circumstances. The possibility of missing out on our calling was very real; if we were not fortunate enough to be open to it at the right time, we might be out of luck.

But think of how “telephone” calls have changed over time. These days, with mobile access, satellite connections, texting, tweeting, and so on, we are always in touch. The potential for connection is always there. No one ever has to wait around to be contacted; we can receive the literal call any time, any place.

The same goes for calling in the metaphorical sense. As we now understand calling, we recognize an ongoing, omnipresent, and ubiquitous potential to receive it. At any age or stage in our lives we have the ability to uncover our calling. Our calling is available to us in myriad forms, and our ability to access those forms is virtually limitless. Moreover, the ease of connection provides much more flexibility when it comes



to access. We can reimagine our calling and explore it much more freely, in real time, rather than having to dedicate a specific time and place to do so.

That said, there are still a number of principles associated with calling that are as relevant now as they were when phones had rotary dials. These four guiding principles have stood the test of time and help illuminate the timeless nature of the basics of calling:

### 1) **Calling 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 gifts that enable us to fulfill specific purposes on earth. No one fully understands all that is “hardwired” 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. Answering our calling requires an effort on our part. Yet, it 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 believe we have a calling—when we have heard the call and can answer it—our full potential for meaningful work can be realized.

## 2) Calling 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. Yet we become aware of it by consistent threads that run through our lives: those things we remain passionate about, the work that we continue to believe needs doing in the world. Uncovering our calling is a process that has stages to it, 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* that pay the bills, to *careers* that help us grow, to *callings* that give us meaning. All three—job, career, and calling—are related, but at different levels and stages, and the common thread that ties them together is the revelation of our calling, if we listen for it.

## 3) Calling Is Personal

There are as many callings in the world as there are people on the planet. This is not to say that other people might do the same things that we do or that they cannot 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 *whom we are willing to be* in our work. Uncovering our calling involves an intentional choice to be authentic—to uncover in the here and now our true nature. Our calling is like our signature or thumbprint,

uniquely ours. Uncovering 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) Calling Is Connection**

Uncovering 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 is paradoxical but true: we are more likely to receive the meaning and fulfillment we seek when we enable others to achieve the meaning and fulfillment they seek, as well. When what we do is grounded in a sense of calling, we experience a meaning in our work. As a result, we are even more willing and able to connect with others. Calling is thus the connection to 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 uncovered and the ways in which we can bring a heightened sense of purpose into our daily lives and work, but the basic idea is quite basic—as we hope to show in the following chapters.

#### **◆ Chapter 1: Reimagining Work—What Do You Do?**

In Chapter 1, we explore the question that lies at the root of calling: “What Do You Do?” Here is an opportunity to begin reimagining work in light of it as an expression of who you really are, as opposed to who you think you ought to be. The roots of calling reveal themselves to us at a very

young age, In this chapter, you will have the opportunity to reflect upon choices that you have made—and perhaps have not made—to develop a deeper understanding of what you are drawn to, good at, and inspired by.

- ◆ **Chapter 2: Reimagining Calling—Should You Quit Your Day Job?**

Here is where we set a context for reimagining, framed by the *Reimagining Checkup*, a reflective practice to help you consider how to really reimagine your work in terms of calling. You may discover that fulfillment is not always about doing something different, but rather, doing what you do differently.

- ◆ **Chapter 3: Reimagining Gifts—How Do You Do It?**

Chapter 3 introduces the Calling Card concept and revolves around an exploration of your gifts: what am I naturally good at, to what does my hand naturally turn? Each of us has talents and abilities we feel in our bones that we need to use to feel whole. This chapter helps you discover the *how* of work, by helping you identify your gifts in order to be able to apply them fully to work that really matters.

- ◆ **Chapter 4: Reimagining Passions—Why Do You Do It?**

Chapter 4 explores the element of inspiration and purpose. We are motivated in our work by what we care most deeply about, by those causes that move us, by the people

whose needs we are drawn most strongly to serve. In this chapter, you will continue the journey to reimagine work by developing a clearer vision of *why* you work, understood in terms of who the recipients of your efforts really are and are meant to be.

- ◆ **Chapter 5: Reimagining Values**  
**—Where Do You Do It?**

Chapter 5 investigates the *where* of work by providing ways for you to gain insight into your deepest values and how such commitments foster connections to a working environment that fits. Here will be the opportunity to explore new models of work that provide freedom and autonomy at different phases in your life and career. This will also be a place to investigate and expand upon the importance of what one might call “tribe” in one’s work—the vital need to feel a part of a group of people that is moving through the world in ways that are consistent with what we care most about as a group.

- ◆ **Chapter 6: Reimagining Legacy**  
**—Have You Played Your Music?**

This final chapter explores, in depth, the meaning of success and what a good life really entails. It is really about taking control of our work lives so as to provide ourselves with more autonomy and freedom, even within the context of having too much to do and too little time to do it. The hope is that you come out of this chapter feeling a sense of energy and uplift about your current work and real hope about their relationship to it in the future.

Through these chapters, we intend to provide a process for you to uncover your unique calling. Ultimately, calling is about connecting who we are with what we do.

With this in mind, we welcome you to embark on a journey to reimagine your work as we wonder together about a question that we have heard and wondered about throughout our lives: *What Do You Do?*

## CHAPTER 1

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# Reimagining Work— What Do You Do?

### The First Question

How soon after you first meet someone do you ask the question? How quickly do others ask you when you first meet: *What do you do?*

It may be the most common question we ask of others and which others ask of us.

It is certainly one of the most important questions we can ask of ourselves: *What do I do? What do I really do? What is my real work?*

Recently, Richard was on a plane trip where he sat next to a businessperson who annoyed passengers as they settled in by talking loudly enough on his mobile phone for everyone to hear. As soon as the plane hit cruising altitude, he asked Richard the standard question: “What do you do?”

Hoping to keep the conversation relatively short, Richard answered quickly, “I’m an author,” and turned his attention to his laptop by way of illustration.

“I knew it!” exclaimed the man, “I knew you were somebody! Someday I’d like to write a book myself! That is what I’d like to do!”

At a fundamental level, we all need to feel like “somebody,” to do something that gives our life meaning and purpose, some reason to get up in the morning. Work is central to our well-being; what we spend our time doing each day ultimately determines how fulfilled we are. It is not surprising, therefore, that the quest to find fulfilling work is one of the dominant aspirations of people everywhere, at all ages and phases of life.

Nearly all of us spend the majority of our waking lives doing something that we consider “work.” Even those who are unemployed, retired, or between jobs have some form of occupation that engages them, be it looking for a job, doing volunteer service, or simply taking care of things around the house.

When people first meet, they almost inevitably ask each other, “What do you do?” If we can answer that question with something we find fulfilling, we are likely to be fulfilled in other areas of our lives, as well. The inevitable question that then arises is, How can we find work that we find fulfilling? The answer to that lies in uncovering our calling. And when we are able to do that, we come to better understand not only what we are meant to do, but even more fundamentally, we develop a better sense of who we really are.

## **What Do You Want To Be When You Grow Up?**

When we were kids, we imagined what work would be like when we grew up. When parents and teachers asked us what we wanted to be, we usually had a ready answer. “A doctor. A firefighter. An explorer.” We envisioned a life of excitement and challenge on the job—a life in which we would employ our best-loved talents on projects we were passionate about.



For many of us, though, it has not 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 do not provide us with the whistle in our work. Even worse, we have forgotten what we wanted to be when we grew up.

So maybe it is time to ask ourselves again:

*What do I want to be when I grow up?*

With that in mind, perhaps it is time to take a lesson from a group of sixth-graders Dave worked with in a Seattle middle school. To a student, 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 we are still asking:

*What do I want to be when I grow up?*

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

*We are 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 determines a fictional relationship they are in, one establishes a fictional job or jobs, and 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” made up 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” as an unemployed single parent of four 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 fairness 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 is not all. It also gives us a chance to explore what it feels like to be dealt a life we did not choose. This, more than anything else, is what energizes our discussion. The kids are adamant about the injustice of having to live with choices they did not 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 eleven-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 is 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 eleven- and twelve-year-olds could imagine doing for the rest of their lives. I am 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 am enjoying immensely talking to them about what they plan to do, how they plan to do it, and what are the philosophical implications of their choices—and their freedom to make those choices. I wonder how they manage to have such optimism and clarity about their lives at this point. I also wonder 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?*

*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 have 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 are conducting; I am 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. It occurs to me that in all the other jobs I have ever had, this is the common theme that has given me satisfaction. At some level, “creating dialogue” is what has consistently been key.*

*And I realize that after many years, I’ve finally become what I always wanted to be when I grew up. It has taken me half a century to find 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—many of us have some sense of what we love to do—and what we do not. Of course, we cannot put a job title on it at that point; loving to draw does not translate into being an art director for an eleven-year-old. 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 kids will grow up and go into have not even been invented yet, it is obvious that we cannot expect too much specificity in career choice at such a young age.

Still, the essential roots are 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 toward 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 dream. 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 reimagining 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—perhaps to even before we were born. Calling is an expression of our essence; it is our embedded destiny. The seed of this destiny lies within us, and seeks, one way or another, to fulfill itself in the world. So the question we need to ask ourselves is whether we are doing all we can to bring the fruits of our calling to bear.

## **Seeds of Destiny**

One unmistakable conclusion that Richard 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 innate 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.

Often, we do not 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 awareness and expression of our natural gifts.

On a day-to-day basis, we always have the choice to bring more of ourselves—our gifts—to what we do. These choices are meaningful because we do them with a feeling of purpose 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 hand we were dealt that we make decisions impulsively, losing touch with what is really important to us. Ironically, if we can find a moment or means to widen our focus to that longer view, we may discover that what we are looking for is already within sight.

## **Acorns and Elocution**

A sense of calling lies deep within us all. Each of us is, you could say, like an acorn. Somehow, almost magically, the acorn knows how to grow up to be an oak tree. It does not 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 young people 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 natural 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. Richard, for instance, who now makes a good deal of his living by giving speeches had programmed into him from a very young age the simple message “You can speak.” He bought it.

“When I was a preteen,” says Richard, “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 seventies 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 coifed, 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 on 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 their 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, 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 thirteen-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 much of my living sharing stories and lessons learned with audiences of all sizes. Speaking in public is a part of my work 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, a 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 does not work out?

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

Dave remembers a young woman who took an Introduction to Philosophy course from him. “She was quite good at it. She had a natural knack for understanding the often quite difficult 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 did not 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*, we expand our potential and increase the likelihood that the work that 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 is to go to the seminary or teach philosophy to children. Maybe expressing your calling means to form a collectively owned organic farm, or 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 teacher. There are thousands of callings and limitless ways to express them—and only we can name our calling and act upon it.

People who are fulfilled in their work tend to have exercised choice in getting where they are. They usually 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 is not 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 purposefully pursue their dreams. And the sense of power that comes from knowing that their direction is freely chosen provides them with the impetus to continue choosing throughout their lives.

It is 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 choices we made—or did not 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?

## **The Role of Role Models**

The attitudes toward work of the adults who influenced us as children form the foundation upon which we build our own perspective. The way that our parents and other influential grownups worked—and talked and thought about work—are the first images we had of the working world, and, therefore, have a deep and powerful influence on our own attitudes.

Growing up, we generally 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 to us the meaning of work. Our own relationship to work evolved from that starting point.

For some of us, Dad was the parent who most clearly characterized the nature and meaning of work. For others, it was Mom, and for many, it was both—or some other significant person in our lives. If our role model—whoever they were—whistled while they worked, 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.

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

Richard, for instance, 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 thirty-nine 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 following the inner urge to give your gifts away you find your true self.

For those of us not so lucky to have role models like Richard, however, the good news is that we are not trapped by the past. If we can recognize the source of our attitudes towards work, we are in a position to change them. Just because we grew up in a household, for instance, where the influential adults saw work as a necessary evil, does not mean we are condemned to share that perspective. We can challenge what we were taught as children and form our own more positive relationship with work. It starts with interrogating the messages we received and then revising them to be more consistent with work that is meaningful and fulfilling.

Consider how many of us were brought up to believe that we could not possibly make a living doing what we enjoy. We have a choice: either we can enjoy what we do or we can eat!

But 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, lots of us were told by well-meaning adults that work is not something to be enjoyed. “It’s not supposed to be fun; that is why they call it work.” Messages like that made a powerful impression, which was reinforced by seeing grownups drag themselves off to their jobs, complaining all the way.

Imagine, by contrast, that we all 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 innate gifts are, but we’re committed to helping you discover them. We could never see the world thorough your eyes because you were born 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.”*

How much easier it would be for people to uncover their unique, life-inspiring calling!

So why not try it out? Why not imagine that you have been told all along that you are here for a purpose and that a key aspect of this is to discover what your purpose really is? It is not

so hard to accept this as a starting point—and ultimately, it is far easier on us than believing the alternative.

Take it as a given, at least experimentally: Our callings exist within us; they are inborn, a natural characteristic, like our hair color or whether we are right- or left-handed. But until we uncover our calling, we are not living authentically; we are adopting someone else's model for who we should be. Perhaps it is who our parents thought we should be; perhaps it is a false image that we ourselves have opted for. In any case, that false image must be examined, reevaluated, and reimagined if we are to live lives of meaning and purpose.

Each of us has a unique and special calling. *What is yours? What is your special role to perform in life's great drama?*

## Connecting Who You Are With What You Do

Calling is proactive. It seeks expression in the world.

Historically, calling has been about the spiritual life. Preachers, evangelists, missionaries, and clergy people speak about being “called” to do God’s work. “Calling” in this sense was deeply rooted in a theological tradition and typically excludes the vast majority of people who are not similarly called.

But there is a more inclusive, secular sense of calling, a sense to be found in the word “vocation.” Vocation comes from the Latin *vocare*, meaning “to summon.” Here we are referring to the inner urge, or summoning, we have to share our uniqueness with others. In this sense, everyone has a calling, not just those involved in the religious world. Each of us has something—or perhaps several things—that we are, it seems, quite literally called upon to give. We feel a strong pull

in a certain direction and our lives seem incomplete unless that direction is pursued.

In this way, calling is *active*. It is a summons to play our part. Calling is a present moment notion; it is alive in our lives all the time. The pull of calling tugs on us during our entire lifetime.

Although calling runs through our whole lives, we are not called once for life. It is something we do every day. Calling breaks down into daily choices. Responding to our calling, we ask ourselves again and again: “How can I consistently bring who I am to what I am doing?”

We have the potential to bring our calling to life every single day. And we do so by expressing our gifts, passions, and values in a manner that is consistent with the impact we want to have.

People who have discovered their calling and choose to bring it to their work tend to be phenomenally energized about what they do. They have an almost childlike passion for their projects and a great sense of gratitude for their good fortune. They have answered the eternal question we face everyday: “Why do I get up in the morning?” And they have answered it by aligning who they are with what they do.

### **“It’s for You”**

Inside each of us right now is a call waiting to be answered. It has been with us for all of our lives. The call was placed the moment we were born; it has been ringing in the background every day we have lived.

Taking that call—hearing and heeding our calling—is not the easiest path through life, but it is a path of fulfillment. It is a path of satisfaction quite different from the traditional world



of jobs and careers most of us grew up with. If we are going to find fulfillment in our work, we will do so by approaching it as a calling. And if we feel unfulfilled, it is clear that we have yet to make that approach.

Some people discover a sense of calling in fairly dramatic ways: through sensing an inner voice, in a vision, from a dream, as a result of a near-death experience, a shamanic journey, or meditative insight. For others, the call comes more subtly: through an inner knowing, a felt sense that “it fits,” or an overall perception of “rightness.” Sometimes calling is revealed by a process of elimination, through the turns and dead ends of life. In some instances, a teacher’s influence is central; sometimes it is a book or a lecture or the example of others. Some people report gaining insight about their calling through religious revelation or while traveling to new places. In many instances, our callings come once we are removed from the setting of our everyday routines—when we have the opportunity to listen inwardly to what authentically moves us.

Unlocking one’s calling requires an inward journey. Each one of us has unique potential—distinct, innate gifts—with which to serve the world. These gifts provide us with a source of identity in the world, but until we connect who we are with what we do, that source remains untapped.

Some people are lucky enough to easily hear their calling and naturally find work that allows them to express it fully. But what about the rest of us who listen for our calling but do not hear a thing? Or hear conflicting things? What if I’m in a job that pays well, but brings me little joy? Or a job that pays poorly and provides a sense of fulfillment? What good is a calling if I am trapped in a dead-end job?

All of us go through periods when our work feels dead and lifeless. All of us have dreamed of winning the lottery and never having to work again. Similarly, most of us also have had some opportunities to feel the joy that follows from doing work that is an expression of our deepest nature. Yet when it comes to reimagining our work, most of us have the cards stacked against us. Naming our calling—and more importantly, getting *paid* for living it—seems as unlikely as winning the lottery.

Nevertheless, right here, right now, there are ways to re-imagine work. The challenge is to find and create those aspects of your work that express your calling—even if the work as a whole leaves something to be desired.

Uncovering our calling does not mean that we should immediately quit our day jobs. It does, however, require us to work the process of connecting who we are with what we do.

Ultimately, the realization of our calling can occur anywhere. No special circumstances are necessary; what matters is a willingness to recognize the call when it occurs, even if our intuition seems to be guiding us in an unexpected direction.

Uncovering our life's calling means thriving, not just surviving. It means that we refuse to accept less than full engagement of our talents. It means not settling for a relationship with our work that lacks passion.

## **The Story of Your Story**

The way we process the events in our lives through language makes a huge difference. The same incident, described in two different ways, becomes two different incidents.

Think about the story you tell yourself about a day at work. To the question, “What do you do?” you may answer in any number of ways: “Making a living,” “Contributing to the success of my organization,” “Just putting in time,” “Supporting my family.” All of these may be equally true depending on the story you are telling. But what is critical to notice is that your description of what is happening will contribute to that description’s accuracy. The story we tell ourselves makes that story come true.

What this means is that we can effect real change in our personal and professional lives by changing the stories we tell ourselves. We can understand ourselves better by better understanding our personal narratives. By rewriting the stories we tell ourselves about who we are and what we do, we can reimagine our lives in ways that make it possible to write in more happiness, success, and fulfillment.

An effective first step in this rewriting process is to retrace our steps. How did we get where we are? What choices did we make or not make? How did events transpire such that we are doing what we are doing today? Did we choose our work or did it choose us?

Dave’s story illustrates what we mean.

“I can’t say I ever made a conscious decision to become a writer,” he admits. “Writing was just something I’d always done. From the time I was about eleven, I kept a journal; I always liked corresponding by mail with friends; and in school, I was that weird kid who actually enjoyed English composition class. But it never really occurred to me that I could make a living writing, that doing what came so naturally could actually be a career choice. So, for the first part of my life, I considered

writing more of an avocation than a vocation; I wrote for fun, without any real prospect of making money off of it.

“In my early twenties, more or less on a lark, I wrote a few pages of jokes for a stand-up comedian who was appearing at a club near my apartment in Los Angeles. Much to my surprise, he liked some of them, and eventually *paid me* for a few. It wasn’t much, but it gave me a taste of earning money for doing what I liked best.

“So it was basically an accident that I started writing for a living and even more of a fluke that I ever got a full-time job doing it.”

“It was through the writing of *Repacking Your Bags* with Richard that the disconnect around my calling emerged for me. I realized that while I loved writing and that while putting words together represented the primary manner in which I sought to make a difference in the world, a writer wasn’t actually what I wanted to be when I grew up. Writing was part of it—a big part—but it was really just a means to an end that, for me, was really about promoting understanding. I came to see that what I was consistently drawn to wasn’t actually the words, it was what those words could do. And when I had the experience of helping people to understand things that helped them understand themselves better, this is when I really came alive. Oddly enough, this “a-ha” led me to, among other things, graduate school, a career in academia, and the work I currently do exploring philosophy with college and pre-college students. More importantly, it led me to finally becoming what I wanted to be when I grew up.”

“Looking back over my life—retracing my path—enables me to see the steps and missteps that led me to where I am

today. It gives me insight into the manner in which I made choices—or let them be made for me—and helps me consider ways I might have chosen differently, or better. Above all, it is clear to me from looking back that I made a lot of mistakes. I often took jobs that didn't suit me. Time and again I found myself involved in projects that were a poor match for my skills and interests. A lot of time and energy was wasted; a lot of sleep was lost.

"I often wonder what would have happened had I been clearer about what I was looking for from the start. It is easy to imagine the struggles I would have avoided had I not spent so much time spinning my wheels. I might have arrived where I am today with many fewer difficulties and far more satisfaction. It has all worked out in a way, but it could have happened with a lot less confusion and effort."

Of course, some measure of confusion and extra effort is inevitable. Life is unpredictable; none of us really knows where we are going to end up until we get there. But having a process helps—and the one that follows in subsequent chapters works, if you work the process.

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