

The book cover features a vibrant red background. In the upper right corner, there are several thin, white, concentric circular lines. The central focus is a collage of faces, rendered in a halftone or dot-matrix style. The collage is divided into four quadrants: the top-left is orange, the top-right is yellow, the bottom-left is blue, and the bottom-right is yellow. The faces are partially obscured by these colored blocks. The title 'Answering Your Call' is written in a large, white, sans-serif font across the top half of the collage. Below the collage, a white horizontal band contains the subtitle 'A Guide for Living Your Deepest Purpose' in a bold, black, sans-serif font. At the bottom right of the collage, the author's name 'John P. Schuster' is printed in a white, sans-serif font.

# Answering Your Call

**A Guide for Living Your Deepest Purpose**

**John P. Schuster**

An Excerpt From

***Answering Your Call:  
A Guide for Living Your Deepest Purpose***

by John P. Schuster

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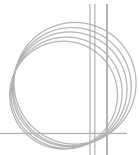
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# Introduction

## *You Are Called*



WHAT IS IT IN THE END THAT INDUCES A MAN TO GO  
HIS OWN WAY AND TO RISE OUT OF UNCONSCIOUS  
IDENTITY WITH THE MASS AS OUT OF A SWATHING MIST?

IT IS WHAT IS COMMONLY CALLED *VOCATION*: AN IRRATIONAL  
FACTOR THAT DESTINES A MAN TO EMANCIPATE HIMSELF FROM  
THE HERD AND FROM ITS WELL-WORN PATHS. . . . ANYONE WITH  
A VOCATION HEARS THE VOICE OF THE INNER MAN: HE IS CALLED.

Carl Jung

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THE RESOUNDING MESSAGE from the great religions for millennia, and from psychology more recently, is the same: humans aren't happy consuming and pursuing creature comforts, although many of us give it a good try. Only by discovering, and then somehow creatively deploying, our unique combination of gifts, can we ever feel the deep satisfaction of a life well lived.

I agree that human creativity and lasting value is possible only when individuals determine to address some problem, advance some knowledge, or serve a cause or humanity in some fashion. When they do this they are answering a call to do something that matters. They have purpose and are out to make a difference. They choose significance over success.

The flip side of doing something that matters is doing something that doesn't. It is sitting on our duffs and doing whatever we feel like and having no intention of adding value. Yes, there is a time for resting and vegging out. The world only gets better, however, if a good number of us decide to add value.

So there is good news here.

For various reasons, a large number of humans seem wired to serve and build and solve in order to feel that their lives count. This creates a happy alignment between what the world needs and what many individuals feel compelled to do. Answering a call affects individual states of well-being and has a lot to do with the state of the world.

If you don't agree with the ideas up to this point, if you don't think there is really any such thing as a call, then you are likely not to benefit from this book. If you agree with the notion that calls are central to our existence and well-being and you'd like to explore this phenomenon more completely, then you've come to the right place.



## DIFFICULTIES OF THE CALL

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For all the agreement on the importance of calls, we see little guidance on how to answer them as they come in their many forms throughout our lives. This book is meant to further the discussion on what calls are and how people can work with them.

In preparation for this book, I sent a series of questions to people who I consider are living authentic lives of adding value. I did not ask them ahead of time if they related to the idea of being called in their lives, but the many who responded obviously did. You'll meet some of them in the book, and learn about the joys and challenges of their personal experience. They will pop up to support a theory with a lived experience or to articulate a key concept in a way that adds dimensions and textures to the principles.

Many of the people who wrote down their thoughts for this book, and many hundreds more whom I've worked with over years of consulting and coaching, report on the difficulties of managing their lives within this sense of being called.

These are some of the key questions they ask of themselves:

- Am I really hearing the call or is it something else, like wishful thinking, that's at work?
- If I am responding to the call, why do I still have times of doubt?
- Why does it seem to take so long to discover your call?

- Is it possible to have more than one calling in a lifetime, or even operating at the same time, pulling you in different directions?
- How do I best handle those who seem to want to squelch my desire to live a called life?
- What do I do if I am the one doing the squelching?

A modern novelist, Doris Lessing, found an imaginative way to describe the difficulties of perceiving a call in her book *Briefing for a Descent into Hell*.<sup>1</sup> In this novel, the “briefing” is what God gives us before our birth into our bodies, our soul’s descent into flesh. But after our births we remember the briefing only dimly, because taking on a body weakens the ability of the spirit to remember who we are and what we are here for. So the nagging sense of having forgotten something important, the longing without cause, the calls that haunt us like whispers from a little too far away, come from our remembering parts and fragments of the briefing. The calling is not forgotten entirely, but it is muted and fuzzy, like a distant radio station whose signal is filled with static.

There are stories—and you may have heard some personally—of people who have a clear sense of a call since they were young. They focus on the pursuit of a dream, and rising above or with circumstances, achieve notable success by making the dream happen.

This book, however, is more about the many of us who don’t make the headlines with our stellar achievements. We have a sense of purpose much of the time, but we achieve less notable results than the stars in the field who have obvious outstanding gifts. Although a call is sometimes clear, it can often feel like a dimly remembered dream that won’t become clear, no matter how much we think about it.



## MULTIPLE CALLS

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Some would assert that the call is a figment of an overworked imagination. Since you can’t touch or weigh a call, for these thinkers such things must not exist. We will address these thinkers simply—we will ignore them. As you read this, you may or may not be at a time in your



life when the sense of calling is operative. But at some time, and perhaps several times, you have likely had that experience, or if *you* haven't, you have watched others living deeply on purpose who have. That is enough proof for us.

So we start from the premise that there is such a thing, and we spend our time exploring the forms that calls take, why it is difficult to live them, and how we may go about the thinking and decisions and tasks that go into doing that well.

We make a common mistake when we think of *a* call, the big kahuna of calls, the call of all calls, that will provide direction and meaning for a lifetime. Again, this may happen for some. But more likely for most of us, our callings will take many shapes, some quite different from others we have lived previously. A calling “to do the most good in the world I can” is a good one, but when you live in Akron, Ohio, and you are in your twenties starting your career as a reporter, this calling looks a lot different than it does twenty years later when you are a journalism professor at Yale.

Paul Anderson, a coach and consultant in the Bay Area, confirms that the “one true big call frame” was not helpful to him. “It is only in recent years . . . that I came to believe in my calling. What hindered me was my initial belief that a calling was like Paul on the road to Damascus—flashy—and that we are called to a specific job.”

Having *a* calling may mean having a lifelong, somewhat specific purpose that draws you into roles in a clear progression. Colin Powell goes from soldier to colonel to general to Secretary of State. Good for him and others like him. But such a clean script, an obviously progressive set of steps, is not for all of us by any means. More of us go from starting a career in sales, for example, to becoming a devoted parent when raising our kids takes precedence over everything, to becoming a leader in our church while we work at the local chamber of commerce. Our roles combine and have equal weight—parenting for twenty-five years is as important, or more important, than the business career we build and like or even love for the most part.

Our roles, as spouse, as businessperson, are the “way we show up in the world,” as developmentalist Frederic Hudson puts it, and each role can have its own deep purpose, depending both on how we view it and how much of ourselves we pour into it.<sup>2</sup> Although each may constitute

a calling worthy of such involvement, they can both operate at the same time, generate the same passion simultaneously. Being called to becoming a loving devoted parent coincides with serving customers in a way that delights them and enlivens their spirit.

So I am of the school, and this book has the point of view, that you can have several callings in a lifetime, that you need to balance and combine them, respond to them in a creative fashion, renew them and rediscover them with growing sets of roles and skills. And yes, there may be a constant thread through the callings in your life, but you may also have disjointed chapters and blind alleys that leave you stumped as to their commonality. Calls can work like that too.



## SOURCES OF THE CALL

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What the source of these callings is could be a very lengthy discussion—too lengthy and too philosophical for our purposes. But a few angles on the question may be helpful.

Many would put it very simply: the call is God talking to you.

The theology and belief system of these people is such that no further interpretation is needed. When you are trying to discern what decision to make, you are trying to hear what God has in store for you. Prayer is the process we use for our dialogue with the divine, and if we pray sincerely and develop discernment we can align our wills with the will of God.

I will use a theological position occasionally in this book, but not predominantly. Although this God-position holds great meaning for me and many others, including those who responded to my questions for this book, other ways of talking about callings are also useful.

Those who are less theologically and more psychologically inclined would say that the call is your higher self sending you a message about what you should be doing. This explanation rests on the belief that humans have a variety of drives and urges, and the one that should be in charge of our most important decisions is our highest will, our self, a seat of wisdom and guidance that constitutes the most advanced part of our psyche. We have a built-in psychological drive to grow to our

fullest potential and extend and expand our faculties for living. This drive takes on a voice and we must heed this voice of self to make anything meaningful out of our lives.

Those who are biologically rooted in their thinking offer a third explanation: our brain cells need stimulation or they shrivel up under the routine of life. So the call and its urges and voices are sets of neurons stretching themselves out for new stimulation, the kind that comes from new challenges. As we learn to feed our brains, we can, if we work at it, take on lifelong learning habits that keep our brains and our lives growing. Our neurology drives us to grow into the next set of projects to accomplish and knowledge to master. If our brain stem takes care of our safety need and our limbic system or midbrain is the source of our emotions, then the will to move ahead in life is located elsewhere.

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**Our frontal lobes in particular are the culprits responsible for the calling urge. It is the part of our brain where we will ourselves to the next level, where we envision a better world that we can help make come about.**

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Jonas Salk spoke of the parts of our brain that drove evolution and growth versus the parts devoted to survival and competition. He urged us to heed the former so we could create lives of service.

A fourth angle on the sources of calls is sociological: the call is the part of society and your upbringing that you have coded into your own internal messages saying, *“Yoo hoo! Wake up and get on with your life.”* From this perspective, the call is the collection of social messages from parents and teachers and others we have looked up to that we have incorporated into our own values and made our own. According to this explanation, our conscience and a set of guidelines coming from it are the sources of our calling.

The call is all of the above, depending on how you want to look at it, and which disciplines speak most powerfully for you. But even with these explanations and the many more that are possible, something mysterious and unexplained is at work when we hear calls in our lives. And that is just fine with most of us—we accept the experience of being called without having to know exactly why it happens. Most likely, upon

examination, it happens for a variety of reasons. In my own experience, I have attributed the sense of a fairly constant calling to all four of the sources: theological, psychological, biological, and sociological. Depending on my thinking at the time, one or two may be more dominant than the others.

I appreciate both the science side of the call—there is no doubt that hormones and neurotransmitters have a role—and the spiritual or poetic side of being called to dedicate significant parts of our lives in ways we can't fully explain.

When I use the language of answering the call, truths are discussed in ways that those of us who are comfortable with poetry and metaphor and spiritual language will have a feeling for. There is an element of mystery involved in having a calling. We can't point to it like a coffee cup. So it belongs in the realm of human truth not dependent on science.



## HOW TO READ THIS BOOK

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The eight chapters of this book are grouped into three parts that represent a logical sequence for answering your call, building as you proceed. The first section of the book discusses the most basic questions for answering your call; the later sections take on important refinements and action steps once you are on your way.

Each chapter begins with questions that we all have about answering our calls. The questions pose the problems and challenges we face, either in hearing the calls as they make themselves known or in responding to the calls once we hear them.

Part 1, “Getting Started with a Calling,” contains the first three chapters, which clarify the concepts and get us moving in a positive direction for making our calls real.

Chapter 1, “What Is a Call?” defines what calls are and describes how they function. It also covers how we respond to calls, if we want to, and what kind of time dimension is at work when our busy lives are too crammed with activity to sense the calls we encounter.

Chapter 2, “Common Calls,” provides guidance on the most common calls at work in people's lives and how to recognize them. Some

calls are quite intellectual, whereas others come more from the heart. This chapter looks at how to think about calls so we can respond with intelligence, putting our natural talents to work at the life tasks we have already assumed.

Chapter 3, “Mightily Believe You Have a Calling,” covers the most fundamental aspect of a called life: the belief that you have one. It starts with the question, How do I sense my calling in a world that does not help me discover it? The shallowness of the world causes considerable doubt and confusion for those who wish to heed their calls. This chapter provides one guarantee: it is absolutely certain that you will never answer your call if you don’t mightily believe, in spite of all the evidence to the contrary, that you have one to begin with.

Part II, “Breathing Depth into Common Calls,” begins with the biggest challenge to the calling process: sabotage in its many forms. It then moves on to forms of support for a calling, even the most demanding call of all, that of the provocateurs.

Chapter 4, “Endure the Saboteurs,” describes a basic experience for persons who dare to act on their calling. Once you mightily believe in your calling, you will attract naysayers and negative people who want you to give up your calling because, in their opinion, you don’t have what it takes to answer it and it is so silly in the first place. This chapter, using stories from literature and real life, explores how the negative ones work, how we invite them into our lives, and how to endure them and even grow because of them.

Chapter 5, “Pass On the Evocateur’s Gift,” discusses the nature of the support we receive from those who affirm our calling. The chapter looks at and describes this fundamental form of support in the process of being called. The challenge is, of course, that once you begin a called life for yourself, you are bound to help others on their quest.

Chapter 6, “Provoke the Stifling,” explores a difficult life call that most of us will have to respond to during some periods and episodes in our lives. To accept a provocateur’s calling we need special clarity and support and humor, lest we take the call too seriously. This chapter uses an historical example.

Part III, “Keeping Focus for the Long Term,” does just that. This final section of the book contains two important chapters on how to do

righteous battle with the ego and keep the deeper causes of life in mind as we go on throughout the decades.

Chapter 7, “Go Gently Against the Ego,” examines the challenges of false messages and self-deception that can derail anyone on a mission. It provides principles, models, tips, and stories on how to go about addressing those challenges.

Chapter 8, “Work the Veil,” concludes the book with insights offered from the people I interviewed. They had many thoughts to share. It prevails upon all wanting to live from a set and sequence of callings to learn that the veil between what is real and what is possible is indeed a thin one.

There are ample stories and quotes in the book to make the theory and models real and concrete. The stories come from people I know, those I interviewed, my own life, history, and literature.<sup>3</sup> They are meant to activate your imagination so you can think about stories and applications of your own.

You will also find questions and application exercises at the end of the chapters, again to support and challenge you as you muster up your will and energy, discernment and self-knowledge to answer your call. The book is designed to be informing, inspiring, and practical. I distinctly hope it is so. You can make it very practical by using the questions at the end of the chapters to think through your life and your decisions.

No one person will encounter all of the challenges described in this book, but most people will encounter many, along with others not mentioned.

Pursuing a life purpose has its periods of ease and grace, interspersed with difficulties, challenges, and hard work. Mentors and coaches, ideas and support from others, and most importantly, your own best thinking and highest intention can keep the journey from becoming a grind or an impossibility. You can fill your journey with meaning, embrace the chores that come with a calling, and with some good fortune and discipline, experience considerable joy.

## PART I

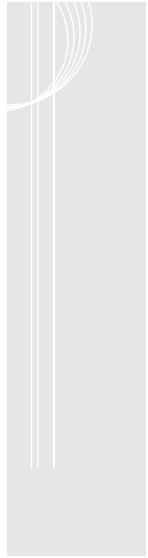
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# Getting Started with a Calling

Since a called life is never a finished product, in significant ways we are always at the beginning and renewing stages of answering our calls. In this first part of the book we start with basic notions: what calls are and do (chapter 1), how we can recognize the types of calls that creep or crash into our lives (chapter 2), and how calls don't show up in our lives if we let the world, rather than our will, guide our decisions (chapter 3).

When I talk about basic notions I mean fundamental and foundational, not simple or remedial. There is nothing remedial about answering calls. It is all graduate-level work.

If you understand calls, recognize them when they show up, and believe you have received one or many over the course of your lifetime—especially when it doesn't feel like it—you will set the foundation for a called life.



# What Is a Call?

# I

THINK OF THE WORLD YOU CARRY WITHIN YOU. . . .  
BE ATTENTIVE TO THAT WHICH RISES UP IN YOU AND SET  
IT ABOVE EVERYTHING THAT YOU OBSERVE ABOUT YOU.  
WHAT GOES ON IN YOUR INNERMOST BEING IS WORTHY OF YOUR  
WHOLE LOVE; YOU MUST SOMEHOW KEEP WORKING AT IT.

Rainer Maria Rilke  
*Letters to a Young Poet*

**CALLS CREATE SPECIFIC** and lasting effects, and they reveal themselves in many different ways. Before we explore their consequences or revelations, however, let's put the first question first: What is a call?

If we can address this question well we will have a beginning. The other questions asked in this opening chapter also belong near the beginning:

- What do calls do?
- What does it mean to respond to a call?
- When do calls happen?

## Working Definitions

Calls are invitations from life to serve, to activate your will toward a cause worthy of you and the human family. They are purposes with a voice, visions turned into inner commands. Calls draw you into the specifics of a purpose and a vision.



A call is the impulse to move ahead in a meaningful way. It is a mind-body push into the future.

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**A call is passion, desire, and choice, all rolled into one.**

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A call is part intellectual and part emotional; your human will, moving you in one direction and not in a thousand other possible ones.

A call is sometimes heard as an inner voice, sometimes seen as an image or mental picture, sometimes felt as a self-administered kick in the butt. It urges you to go past the surface level and do something that has lasting value. It may be the message to stop working on the significant efforts that you are helping others with and instead to work on the significant efforts that are more uniquely yours.

Calls are the source of the lasting creativity in our lives.

Does this answer the question of what a call is? Of course not.

No one knows for sure what calls are. That is the best part about them. Calls remain in the realm of the mysterious. The experience of calls—or callings, or vocations, as some refer to them—has attracted its share of efforts at definition, including by me. (Vocations tend to be viewed as lifelong, career-type efforts. We’ll use “call” more broadly than “vocation,” but won’t avoid the term.) If you know of anyone who has a precise or scientific definition, or a poetic or religious one, and you like it, use it. But don’t pretend you know completely what a call is, any more than you can summarize what love is. It is useful with mysterious, complex life phenomena like calls not to confine the discussion to what they are, but also to ask what they do.

And calls do many things.

They provide soul-mandates, orders to live the large part of our lives, to attach ourselves to a cause that pulls us out of the limits of our personal history.

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**Calls command that you attach yourself to something infinite and lasting so you can escape the life you thought you deserved and replace it with the life you were meant for.**

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Calls create dissatisfaction with the successes in life that our egos wish so much to attain: money, security, status, even the little pleasures beautiful in themselves and banal when inflated to the level of reasons for living.

Calls pull us out of the psychic wounds and inhibitors we inherited. The wounds and limits come from parents who lovingly raised us for the most part, but messed up doing their best, and from the culture that negated the whole of us and instead made us partial people who would fit its purposes.

Calls create the urge to do something significant, providing the inner drive that informs us it is time to get on with it. They provide the sense of being drawn to contribute, to use our wisdom and gifts in ways that benefit others, that enhance life.

Calls draw us to the depth level of whatever roles we may already have. They turn insurance policy peddlers into advisers of needed financial security, grocery store employees into health and nutrition suppliers, doctors into healers, secretaries into stewards, businesspeople into entrepreneurs, bureaucrats into civil servants, writers into dream weavers, parents into co-creators of life.

With all these positive effects, you might think that people would spend the great bulk of their lives trying to respond to their calls. But most of us don't.

There are two significant reasons why we don't respond passionately and constantly to our calls. First, we don't always know how to do so; even when we know that calls exist and what they do we are a long way from having the wisdom to live them well. Second, we focus on other concerns and ignore or sidestep the depth level of our lives. We get distracted from the deep work and play out our lives on their surface, with considerable encouragement from our culture for diversion and avoidance.

For all the importance of calls, it is not often easy to figure out how to live in accordance with them. The process of staying aligned with a call can be a strenuous, even exhausting, struggle. The times in our lives when we are obviously in harmony with our call and flowing with it grandly are matched by times of dissonance, feeling out of sync, and grinding it out.



## RESPONDING TO THE CALL

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So what is answering a call all about?

As before, mystery takes over here, but it is worth attempting to explain, again as much by describing what a response requires of us as by what it is.

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**Answering your call is declaring yes to the invitation to live from your essence over and over again.**

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Answering a call is rising out of bed in the morning one more day to get the kids off to school, to go to the workplace, and to attend to the multiple stations in our lives so we can bring whatever it is we believe in into the world.

Answering a call takes refinement and discernment. Starting the response with “I want to do good” is a help, but not much of one. As Lily Tomlin says in her one-woman play *The Search for Intelligent Life in the Universe*: “When I was young I always wanted to be somebody. Now I know I should have been more specific.”<sup>1</sup>

The specifics of how to answer a call show up in the themes of our lives and the energy we expend on them. For example, caring relationships. The community. Achievement and excellence. Spiritual growth. Service to those in need.

It also shows up in the roles we choose: Executive. Teacher. Parent. Board member. Craftsman. Artist.

When the roles support the life themes, we are in great shape and on the way to answering our calling. When they don’t, we have some work to do.

Creating this alignment between what you are called to do and what you are really doing is crucial to the work of responding to calls. Like a colleague of mine, you may need to transform your work. This friend has a degree in dentistry. Not long ago, he ended a successful twenty-year career to move on to new work. He now devotes most of his time to working for his neighborhood association. If he had stayed with

dentistry any longer, by his accounting, he was not going to be true to himself.

But the alignment we need to make may not be about change on the outside of our lives. It may be more about change on the inside. Most of this book is about the inner work of responding to the calls we find or the ones that find us.

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**Answering a call takes persistence, discipline, and stamina. After the initial yes, we answer the call by creating sets and subsets of long-term and short-term strategies, goals, and tactics.**

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The goals aren't the calling itself, however; they are only a best guess about what to get done to respond to the calling. Each goal takes more yeses, more affirmations and acts of will as we persist in our response to the calls we sense. And when working toward a goal stops working—and it often does—we have to open up our minds and hearts and listen again. Persistence needs its polar opposite: openness and willingness to stop the current plan and go in a new direction.

Responding to a call is easier at some times in a person's life than at others, but no matter how successful one particular stage, responding is never in lockstep to a set of instructions that show up in an email from God@aol.com.

Steve Sheppard is the CEO of Foldcraft, a member-owned furniture maker in southern Minnesota with 250 employees—or members, as they call themselves. It is a company that has been creating a strong culture of empowered and enlivened workers for over three decades, a social experiment of the highest order where free enterprise, callings, and adding value in the world go hand in hand.

With the success of Foldcraft, however—and it's being featured as exemplary by many—Steve still has questions about his response:

*There are times when I feel I have not answered the call very well. I still feel responsibility for making people feel happy at work, although intellectually I know that I cannot achieve this. I hurt when someone*

*leaves our organization under unpleasant circumstances. Or when our organization isn't as responsive to a new initiative or idea as I anticipated. . . .*

*I question the propriety of this "call" [to be CEO of the company] constantly.*

Calls are neither constantly clear nor easy once we heed them.

The Danish philosopher Kierkegaard said that “we all come to life with sealed orders”—an apt metaphor for the internal searches we conduct just trying to find the envelope for different chapters of our lives.<sup>2</sup> You know you left it somewhere: In the rolltop desk, in the back panel of my briefcase maybe. It could be stuck with the family photos I never have time to put in the albums. I don't know where it is, but I swear I saw it once. It's gotta be here somewhere!

There are stories, of course—and you may know some personally—of people who have had a clear sense of a calling since their youth. Their focused response is to pursue a dream, and rising above or with circumstances, they achieve notable success by making the dream happen.

This book, however, is not primarily about such people. It is more about the many of us who don't have extraordinary minds or talents that point us in one obvious direction, who don't make the headlines with our stellar accomplishments or ever know what it is like to achieve the notable results of the gifted. Although our calls and responses to them are sometimes clear, they are often found way back in Kierkegaard's envelope.

Still, living a called life is not all mystery and drudgery by any means. Responding to a call can be a relief after a long search and considerable confusion. It can often feel joyous.

David Quammen, ecologist, essayist, and author of many books, including *The Song of the Dodo*, the beautiful, compelling scientific and historical look at the loss of species on the planet, sent me an email when I asked about his calling.<sup>3</sup> (He was also a high school buddy and a college friend who has become one of my life anchors, in great part because he has lived his passion. He does have an extraordinary mind, by the way, but I said the book would be *mostly* for those of us with a little less horsepower.)

Here is what Dave said about being called to writing:

*Some writers, so they say, loathe writing but love having written. What they mean is, it's bloody hard scary work. It is. However, I love it. Love it love it. When I'm spending a week doing research, reading journal papers, reviewing notes, making phone calls, I'm interested in the effort . . . but well, I get tired, nod off, wonder whether it's time yet to stop for lunch. When I'm actually engaged in the writing of an essay, a feature, or a book, however . . . the time flies by. I sit down at the computer with a cup of coffee at 8 A.M., blink once, become mesmerized, blink again, and it's 6 P.M., the coffee is half-drunk, my shirt is drenched with sweat, and maybe, maybe, I have three pages of workable, fixable first draft. This is ecstasy. This is life.*

As Dave illustrates as only a writer could, the work of responding to a call can be ecstatic, even around and through the parts of life, like research, that take considerable hunkering down.

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**If calls can be clarifying, they can also be terrifying.  
Calls take you beyond the confines of what you thought you knew  
to regions of high risk and the unknown.**

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I live in Kansas City, where no long-term resident can escape the lore about Harry Truman, nor would anyone want to. Truman's life was filled with great examples of feeling a call. When asked in his retirement which political job he had wanted the most, he answered simply: none. He had never wanted any of the jobs he had ended up serving in, including the most daunting of them all, President. Imagine Truman's fear in 1945 when FDR died a few months into his presidency, during which time the two had spent a total of ninety minutes together. Not exactly a great preparation for the momentous decisions ahead.

Truman often said that there were many others more qualified than he to do the job of the presidency. "But it is my job to do and I am

going to do it,” he would say, with a sense of the inevitability of a call.

From twentieth-century literature and J.R.R. Tolkien we observe another supreme example of responding to a call: when Frodo, with no credentials, the never-been-out-of-the-neighborhood regular-guy hobbit from the outskirts of Middle Earth, decides to bear the ring he has innocently inherited on the jaunting journey to its destruction. Surrounded by other creatures with more skill and intelligence and knowledge of the world, he sees the task fall to him and he claims it.

Like Harry Truman and the hobbit Frodo, we are sometimes burdened with the tasks set before us, called to work we would not have chosen.

I know a man closely related to my daughter-in-law—we’ll call him Carl—who was looking forward to the recreation-filled days of retirement in his later fifties after years of flying around the world in his job as scientist for a global manufacturing firm. Then, shortly after he retired, his ever-active wife, Clare, came down with a strange disease that affected her like an intense stroke, and she lost some of her speaking skills and mobility. Carl inherited a new job, a tiring one of almost constant care and vigilance. As a devoted husband, he was called to serve his wife, and he did so, allowing the two of them to continue to enjoy long trips in their mobile home and their life as retirees and grandparents of six.

No one near him has heard a word of complaint from Carl.

Kierkegaard had a phrase for the soul-dread we experience when the calls we’d rather not face become crystal clear. He described responding to these calls as an encounter with “fear and trembling,” a phrase for which he is well-known in philosophical circles. If we say yes in response to these calls we overcome the fear and trembling, or at least we get used to them.

From joy to dread, responding to calls provides a large sweep of feelings and reactions.

Not responding to calls also brings feelings and consequences, like boredom and anxiety. We can run from our calls and not respond to them, but I recommend you not waste your precious life in call-avoidance. You’ll have to find another book to help you avoid your calls, or better yet, just turn on the television or consume for as long as you can stand it.

The all-time classic on avoiding calls is a poem that conjures up the anxiety and persistent dread that accompany doing so. It comes from Francis Thompson, the nineteenth-century British poet, whose “Hound of Heaven” personifies the call not just with a voice but with feet of persistent, steady pursuit.<sup>4</sup>

I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;  
 I fled Him, down the arches of the years;  
 I fled Him down the labyrinthine ways  
 Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears  
 I hid from Him, and under running laughter.  
     Up vistaed hopes I sped;  
     And shot, precipitated,  
 Adown Titanic glooms of chasmed fears,  
 From those strong Feet that followed, followed after.  
     But with unhurrying chase,  
     And unperturbed pace,  
 Deliberate speed, majestic instancy,  
     They beat—and a Voice beat  
     More instant than the Feet—  
 “All things betray thee, who betrayest Me.”

Thus Thompson warns us not to betray our calls lest we pursue a life of futile fleeing, empty laughter, and hopes that turn to gloom.

Responding to a call is a choice that leaves you no choice. As with all mysteries of life, we are in a paradox here. Responding to your call means accepting the burden that sets you free. Calls have a way of choosing you, as they did Frodo and Harry Truman. We can say yes or delay the answer as long as possible, but we begin to live more fully when we answer in the affirmative, even if we don’t understand what is going on.

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**Not to listen to your call is a self-inflicted spiritual crime of omission.**

**Not to allow others to act on theirs is a victim-inflicted  
 spiritual crime of commission.**

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Calls are serious business. Responding to them is how we make something worthwhile out of our lives.



## CALLS AND THE TIMES OF OUR LIVES

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The Greeks made a distinction between two kinds of time. Ordinary cook-the-meal, drive-to-work, review-the-email time they deemed *chronos* (hence, *chronological*). Meaning-steeped, whack-on-the-side-of-the-head, “Wow, this-is-awesome” time, they called *kairos*—a time for the spirit, making it a timeless time.

When the world experiences kairotic time our culture acquires mythic moments, symbolic dimensions in our collective psyche that structure the way we think about ourselves and the world. The year 1776 was a historical one chronologically, but from a kairotic point of view it was the beginning of democracy in the United States and the world. The moment when Neil Armstrong set foot on the moon in 1969 created space-age, planetary humanity on the blue marble spinning in the universe. These moments of *kairos* develop the symbols that take a permanent place in our consciousness and embody new sets of ideas, icons, and identity.

At the personal level, kairotic time often happens in predictable places: births, weddings, graduations—all the sizeable life passages we experience. But depth-time is more often unpredictable, and any and all moments when life’s eternal energy pours into the ordinary events of our lives are spirit-loaded, timeless time. I remember the first time I saw a gray dolphin darting under the bow of our little catamaran beneath the glistening ocean surface in Florida—for a few seconds time stopped, and we were one with the forces of life.

Many parts of us live in chronological time. But the self, the deep inner guide, lives in kairotic time. Callings come from the kairotic dimension, popping through life in occasionally predictable but often surprising ways at unforeseeable moments. The chronology of our lives spin out from our decisions and make up the years, but our callings hit us at unexpected moments when our depths need to voice a new direction or outline another possibility not seen in the routine of the daily chronology.

Because calls come to us from this different time, we need to be quiet enough long enough often enough to heed them. This is why the literature on calls spells out the need to be quiet and listen. Being constantly busy with the chronos of daily duties gives us no time to sense the charged dimension of time that surrounds us.

When you feel you have to take a new direction in your work, when you feel the gentle nudge from your gut to pick up the phone and reconnect with an old friend, when you decide to give up an old hobby so you can be more in touch with your kids—these are how the soul-urgings of calls make themselves known. The mind may flood with an image, the chest may heave in disgust at the thought of doing something one more time, a dream may bring its message in clear or murky symbols, a prayer may provide an answer to a tough question.

Kairotic time percolates or blasts, seeps or explodes into the chronology of our lives whenever it does—and we find ourselves being called.

## The Nature of Calls

Calls may be mysterious, but we can learn what they are and what impact they have by observing our actions, our thoughts, and the reasons we feel compelled to serve in some way.

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**In our nature at a deep and abiding level there is the drive to do the things that matter, and at the same time, not always to know how, and to avoid the work that calls point to for us all.**

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Our responses to the calls we discern can be difficult and take much effort both to design and to execute. Our responses to calls constitute the essence of our lives as we move ahead on a path of meaning that only we can choose. Whether clarifying or terrifying, responding to a call is freely accepting the duty we sense to will lasting value into the situations we encounter. Confronting the fear of accepting a call is the best way to move into the joys that a call brings.

Calls break through the routines of time and bequeath us spirit-laced time, rich in the soul dimensions that only they can bring to the everyday roles we choose and the ordinary chapters of living a life.

In the next chapter, we look at the most common calls and provide some methods for reviewing the calls you may encounter in your everyday existence.



## EXERCISE: THINKING ABOUT THE NATURE OF CALLS

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- How do your calls show up: as feelings, images, thoughts, voices?
- Do you have any models for those living a called life in your family or close friends? If not, can you find some? How? If so, what about calls did you learn from these people?
- Do any of your current roles naturally lend themselves to a sense of calling? Which ones?
- When have you felt the power of *kairos* break through your ordinary awareness? Is there any pattern to these times?
- Are you avoiding a call currently and is it making you miserable, like the Hound of Heaven? Have you ever avoided a call in the past?

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