

WORK THAT HELPS, HEALS AND IS FROM THE HEART
By Michael A. Schuler
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ANCIENT EASTERN WISDOM

"The Woodcarver" by Chuang Tzu

Khing, the master carver, made a bell stand of precious wood for the Prince of Lu.
When it was finished, all who saw it were astounded.
They said it must be the work of spirits.
The Prince of Lu asked the master carver, "What is your secret?"
Khing replied, "I am only a workman:
I have no secret. There is only this:
When I began to think about the work you commanded I guarded my spirit,
Did not expend it on trifles that were not to the point.
I fasted in order to set my heart at rest.
After three days fasting, I had forgotten gain and success.
After five days I had forgotten praise or criticism.
After seven days I had forgotten my body with all its limbs.
By this time, all thought of your Highness and of the court had faded away.
All that might distract me from the work had vanished.
I was collected in the single thought of the bell stand.
Then I went to the forest to see the trees in their own natural state.
When the right tree appeared before my eyes,
The bell stand also appeared in it, clearly, beyond doubt.
All I had to do was to put forth my hand and begin.
If I had not met this particular tree there would have been no bell stand at all.
What happened?
My own collected thought encountered the hidden potential in the wood;
From this live encounter came the work which you ascribe to the spirits."

OBSERVATIONS OF A CONTEMPORARY COMMENTATOR

from *Wesley the Owl* by Tracy O'Brien

(O'Brien is a former research assistant at the California Institute of Technology)

I had gone back up to the main building for some supplies and dropped by the lab of John, one of our postdocs. As was my habit, I leaned against the door of his small lab to chat. I never went all the way inside for fear of bumping into one of the crowded shelves and bringing their contents down on my head. His lab had thousands of black widow spiders living in petri dishes that had been made into little spider habitats, stacked high on shelves that went up to the ceiling. I hated to think what would happen in an earthquake.

John particularly doted on his "nursery" of egg sacks and newly hatched babies. Clucking and fussing over them like a mother hen, he would separate the babies using a glass tube. He gently sucked one baby spider into the tube, transported it to a new dish, then carefully blew it out into its new home. I always feared the little spider would run right up into his mouth, but it never happened.

John spent long hours sorting out all the babies when they hatched, more hours than he spent with people. He thought it was sooo adorable when they hunched up, right before they jumped. I finally conceded that, if you watched them long enough, you could see their tiny faces, which had an alien sort of "cuteness" to them...

At some point, I think maybe John lost perspective. He started taking the black widows home. Then he got to where he refused to allow any yard work whatsoever because it disturbed the wild spiders, so his yard became completely overgrown and covered in huge, thick active spider webs. Eventually he became a professor of biology at another prestigious university.

John was not married, although he was charming and gorgeous. What a waste. But I couldn't imagine dating a guy with this specialty. After all, how would you raise children in a house filled with black widow spiders...?"

So many interesting people...inhabited Cal Tech... For instance, one of my favorite professors spent his entire life studying the ovary of the Pacific surf perch. That was his passion. As he got ready to retire, I used to joke to him that he had spent his entire life studying the right ovary of the surf perch, and now he would be free to study the left ovary. When he did retire, he indeed moved to a house next to the ocean, set up a lab, and continued to study the ovary of the Surf Perch...

** REFLECTIONS **

During my undergraduate days I gave some serious thought to becoming a journalist. I took a class or two, worked on the campus newspaper and interviewed editors and reporters about their work. At the time, it struck me as a stimulating and taxing career - one requiring accuracy, punctuality, sustained energy, integrity, the ability to perform under pressure and to survive on very little income.

However, I never perceived journalism as a particularly hazardous line of work - at least not in the United States. That's not always been the case elsewhere, of course. Where there is no constitutionally protected tradition of free expression a free press one might well think twice about entering this field. For example, despite the demise of the communist regime seventeen years ago, reporters and editors in Russia are still expected to be propogandists rather than honest newsmen.

I mention this because October 7th marks the second anniversary of **Anna Politkovskaya's** death. An internationally acclaimed investigative reporter, **Politkovskaya** had written a succession of stories highly critical of the Putin government's cronyism and its crackdown on human rights. As a reward for her heroic efforts, she was killed outside her apartment. She was not the first Russian journalist to die in the line of duty, and **Politkovskaya** was hardly naive about the dangers she faced. But her craft meant so much that it was intolerable to be neutralized or co-opted or neutralized by the forces of corruption.

Unfortunately, the principle of freedom of the press isn't as secure in our own country as it once was. Some of you may have read political columnist **Amy Goodman's** description of what happened to her two weeks ago in **Saint Paul, Minnesota**. This is not a place one would confuse with Moscow or Mosul, but On Labor Day, she and several other clearly identified journalists were roughed up and arrested by riot police who had been ordered to break up a peaceful demonstration prior to the Republican National Convention. **Goodman** reports that when she tried to identify herself, a member of the Secret Service ripped her press credentials from her neck. Documentary film crews working outside the Excel Center were also harassed and detained during the Convention.

Though bruised and bloodied, Goodman and her colleagues were released from custody after a few hours. "That was our Labor Day," she wrote. "It's all in a day's work."

To face such hazards and endure such hardship in the exercise of one's professional practice requires an extraordinary level of commitment. The practical incentives of earning a livelihood or gaining social approbation are never enough to sustain such efforts; a deeper drive and loftier aspiration must be present. For journalists like **Amy Goodman** or **Anna Politkovskaya** there is an imperative in play. To be true to themselves they must be true to their occupation. "A human being attains perfection by the intensity of her devotion to her own proper task," the **Bhagavad Gita** tells us.

Working, that is to say, not for herself or for her own glory, but only for the good of the work to be done.

When one feels this way about their trade or profession we say that they are in touch with their "calling" or "vocation," which is qualitatively different from doing a job. The former is known by the courage and intensity it calls forth and by the agent's ardent desire to achieve self-transcendence through his or her work.

The journalist who is content merely to collect and deliver "the news" may be performing competently enough. But without some sense of "higher purpose" it's difficult to sustain a career that pays so poorly and demands so much. Practitioners like an **Amy Goodman** or the young **Carl Bernstein** have a higher vision. They see the connection between their own work as members of the Fourth Estate and the fate of our democratic institutions. They understand that solid, substantive reporting and commentary are society's best defense against repression and corruption.

Although these reflections have focused thus far on a single profession, it is clear to me that any form of work can qualify as a vocation and anyone can have a vocation. It is not really a matter of the task to be done but of the attitude one brings to it, the dedication with which one pursues it, the meaning one extracts from it.

If it is just a matter of putting in time, enduring the daily grind, conserving our energy and living for the weekend then the work we do won't matter much and it won't count for much. One job will be as good as any other and none will provide the spiritual and emotional sustenance many of us long for.

As workers, we know we have responded to a "call" when it provides us with a significant measure of intrinsic satisfaction - when we feel good about what we are doing

and don't have to be cajoled into putting forth our best effort. **John Schuster** remembers meeting a man named Rominelli at a seminar he was conducting. He told Schuster about his grandfather, who had come to the United States from Italy as an unskilled laborer. One day, this man found himself working beside his grandfather on a construction project, performing the most menial of tasks - - digging ditches. The teenager was shoveling half-heartedly and in a rather dispirited manner when his grandfather stopped and confronted him.

"Why are you not digging with energy, boy?" the old man asked in thickly inflected English.

"Grandpa," his grandson replied, "you know this is lousy work and I can't wait until it's over."

"Kid," the grandfather replied, "when you digging a ditch, you dig it with pride. That's no ordinary ditch; it's a Romanelli ditch!"

That, the man told **John Schuster**, was his first lesson in "vocation" and it may help us appreciate that even hard manual labor doesn't have to feel like drudgery if it is performed with pride and a clear sense of purpose. So much old-fashioned physical work has been displaced or lightened by machinery, but that hasn't necessarily made it more attractive or given it greater dignity. Farmer and essayist **Wendell Berry** maintains that work done either by hand or by machine will be miserable and unfulfilling "if it is economically desperate." The crucial issue, Berry writes, is not the physical demands of the work so much as:

In whose interest is it done?

In whose company is it done?

How well and to what result is it done?

Our civilization has been tremendously successful at replacing grunt work with a wide assortment of labor-saving devices, falsely assuming that this would make the work more rewarding, or at least less distasteful. But hand-labor done in the company of family and neighbors, that provides for our needs, and that serves a valid purpose is undoubtedly more pleasing than operating a deafening labor-saving machine in isolation from others and for unclear reasons.

The point is, this concept of vocation or "calling" shouldn't be restricted to those high status professions that require years of training - scientists like the ones at Cal Tech described earlier, master carvers, priests, prophets, politicians and physicians. When we believe that

our work serves not just to our own personal needs but fulfills some higher function, and when its integrity is our uppermost concern, we have discovered a vocation. The insurance peddler who feels "called" becomes an advisor to those seeking financial security, **John Schuster** writes. Similarly, a vocation turns:

...grocery store employees into health and nutrition suppliers, doctors into healers, secretaries into stewards, bureaucrats into civil servants, parents into co-creators of life.

Another thing: unlike a job or even a discreetly chosen career, a "call" may feel less like a choice than an imperative. As long as the feeling for it or the pull toward it lasts, it impresses us as something we simply have to do. Thus, **Frodo** knew that, despite all arguments to the contrary, the ring of power was his to carry to Mount Doom and that nothing should be allowed to deter him. Similarly, in his response to an aspiring young poet who had sought his advice, **Rainer Maria Rilke** wrote: "Nobody can counsel and help you, nobody."

Go into yourself. Search for the reason that bids you write: find out whether it is spreading out its roots in the deepest places of your heart...and ask yourself in the stillest hour of the night: Must I write? And if you meet this earnest question with a strong and simple "I must" then build your life according to this necessity.

Countless forces in society rise up to throw us off track and prevent us from heeding our calling. No matter what Joseph Campbell might have said about "following your bliss," the inner voice is too often overwhelmed and overruled by loud, insistent demands by family members, teachers and the media to be practical. Choose a line of work that is marketable, even if less than meaningful, they admonish. Security is more important than satisfaction; the opinion of others counts for more than your opinion of yourself.

And so we surrender, opting to stick with work that is easier, safer or more remunerative than that which our heart suggests that we do. But there is a price to be paid for such a refusal. For years, **Parker Palmer** tried to build a conventional career on a soft and unstable foundation. He'd made such an investment in education and

was so afraid of disappointing others that he'd lost touch with his real gifts. As his feelings of awkwardness and dis-ease increased, he began to suffer emotionally. "I am now convinced," **Parker Palmer** writes, "that some forms of depression...are induced by that long-ignored inner teacher trying desperately to get out."

How do we know when we have heard a "call," or found a true vocation? One sign is that our work delivers deep and genuine pleasure. Not continuously but reliably, for no line of work feels like fun and games all the time. There are always difficulties to surmount and doldrums to be endured. Nevertheless, unless it induces a positive affect, even important work will feel out of joint. As the Indian philosopher **Ananda Coomaraswamy** says,

It is a cruel error to pretend that pleasure and happiness can be had at leisure if they cannot be had at work... (Indeed), pleasure perfects the operation.

Second, work in a "calling" is generous - of benefit not only to us but to others as well. Indeed, part of its pleasure derives from its self-transcending quality; it comes from the knowledge that our efforts have contributed positively to the health, happiness or dignity of others. Recent research into the attitude of public employees toward their work seems to confirm this thesis. There appears to be a meaningful correlation between altruistic performance and workplace satisfaction, **Eric Sundquist**, a member of FUS, writes.

It is our hunch that public employees tend to be motivated and act as public-spirited "knights" as much as they are motivated and act...in obedience to their own economic interests.

Judy Wicks, founder and owner of the famous White Dog Café in Philadelphia, is not a government bureaucrat but she would undoubtedly agree. A pioneer in the movement to eat sustainably produced local food, Wicks has been serving her customers nutritious, attractive organic fare for several decades now. She keeps no secrets even from her competitors because she wants the world to eat and to grow better food. Accordingly, she spends a lot of time encouraging others to embrace sustainability. Wicks feels "called" to do this work, but she also says that it has everything to do with maximizing her own happiness. "Good work," **Scott Russell Sanders** writes,

offers knowledge and consolation, nourishment or shelter...instead of sops for our vanity... It leaves the world enriched and not diminished and motivates us to play our small part in sustaining the creation.

By way of contrast, consider a man by the name of George who was also an early convert to organic principles. He had been farming for forty years and accumulated a tremendous store of knowledge about sound agricultural practices. But when he was asked to share what he had learned with other interested farmers, he refused. "Why should I give away for free secrets it has taken me a lifetime to learn?" he asked. Shortly thereafter George died of a heart attack, taking his jealously guarded secrets with him to the grave. Although he certainly had carved out a successful career, it wasn't altruistic enough to be certified as a "calling."

Finally, such work needs to be prayerful. I use that word in a broad rather than narrow sense. On the one hand, it implies taking time every now and then to check in with ourselves, to probe the soul and re-assess the strength of our resolve and the worthiness of our ambitions. If you don't like prayer, call it discernment. It can take the form of journaling, candid conversation with an honest and caring friend or just sitting quietly with a set of meaningful questions until a measure of clarity has been achieved - any of these can be helpful. It's as simple as this, **Parker Palmer** says: "We need to learn as many ways as we can of 'talking to ourselves,'"

But work and prayer can be hooked together in a second way. "Give to the work the best that you have, without holding back, and the work will give you, in turn, the pleasure of exercising your full strength and knowledge and skill," **Scott Russell Sanders** writes. Look at a piece of genuine, hand-built Shaker furniture and you see embodied in it the belief that "work well done is itself an act of prayer." The same attitude informed the actions of Chuang Tzu's wood carver and it is what **Rainer Maria Rilke** tried to impress upon the young poet who sought his guidance. To be truly good, work must be performed attentively. The more attentive it is, the closer to prayer it becomes.

In my experience, there will always be something slightly mysterious about a "calling" - where it comes from, how it develops, how long it lasts, what it's meant to accomplish. Some, like that surf perch specialist's, consume a lifetime. The call of an elected official may

only last for a single term in office. **John Schuster** thinks it's possible for a person to be drawn to several different callings, which is why ongoing discernment is so important. But the bottom line is this: to hear and to heed a call is one of life's great gifts. May we all have the good fortune, at least once, to discover that gift.