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The School of Life: A Job to Love

How to find a fulfilling career

The School of Life

1

Obstacles to Having Goals

i. The 'Vocation Myth'

The difficulty of defining a professional goal may be both serious and widespread, but it currently lacks the generous, extensive and careful consideration it deserves. In truth, we tend to see confusion about our career paths as a slightly embarrassing failing that reflects poorly on its sufferers. Confusion is readily taken as a sign of being a bit muddled and impractical, of being unreasonably picky or hard to please. We might regard it as a consequence of being spoilt ('you should be thankful for any job') or as a troubling symptom of a lack of commitment or general flightiness. We arrive at these rather harsh assessments because we're still under the spell of a big and often poisonous idea that can be termed the 'vocation myth'.

This myth originated around certain religious experiences, which, although rare, were regarded as hugely impressive and significant – and were accorded an inordinate degree of publicity in the history of the West. These were moments when an individual was summoned by God – sometimes speaking through an angel, at other points talking directly through the clouds – and directed to devote their life to an aspect of the divine cause.

One significant story concerned the philosopher St Augustine (354–430 CE), who, in midlife, changed jobs under divine instruction. He went from being a pagan professor of literature to being a Catholic bishop. It was a huge career change, but Augustine didn't have to work it out on his own. In 386 CE, he happened to be staying

in Milan and one day went out for a walk. He heard a child singing a lovely song he'd never heard before. The words of the chorus were 'pick it up, pick it up', which he understood as a command from God. He was to pick up a Bible and read the first passage he set his eyes on – and the very one he alighted upon told him to change his life and become the figure we know today as the great Catholic thinker and clergyman.

However tied to Catholic theology the story might seem, we have secularised such accounts without quite realising it. We too proceed as if at some point we might expect to hear a quasicelestial command directing us towards our life's purpose.

It started – as often happens – with artists. Up until the Renaissance, being an artist was simply a kind of job that some people had, almost always because it was something that their father or uncle was involved in. Being a painter or making statues wasn't regarded as radically different from making shoes or bridles for horses: it was just a useful skilled trade that any assiduous individual who went through the proper course of training could become good at with time. But then, borrowing from the religious stories, artists began to think of themselves as 'called' by fate to a particular line of work. Something within them was pulling them towards their art. Michelangelo (1475–1564) was the most extreme example of this attitude, believing that his soul required him to paint fresco ceilings and chip away at blocks of marble. He might at times have wished he could stop, but

to do so would have betrayed his vocation.

The notion of vocation features in the biographies of many of the world's most famous people. For example, we learn that the pioneering Polish scientist Marie Curie (1867–1934) knew from the age of 15 that her life depended on being able to undertake scientific research. She struggled determinedly against every difficulty in her path – she had no money and when she was a student she nearly froze to death one winter and frequently fainted from hunger. But eventually she triumphed and was awarded two Nobel prizes, the first in 1903 for her work on X-rays and the second in 1911 for the discovery of radium and polonium.

As a result of such cases, having a vocation has come to seem like a sure sign of being destined for great things. And, necessarily, to lack a vocation has come to seem not only a misfortune, but also a mark of inferiority. We end up not only panicked that we don't have a path in mind, but also dispirited that our ignorance is proof that any path we do end up on will necessarily be an insignificant one.

What is worse, 'finding one's vocation' has come to seem like a discovery of which we should all be capable in a brief span of time. And the way to discover such a vocation should be (thanks to religious and artistic forerunners) entirely passive: one should simply wait for a moment of revelation, for the modern equivalent of a clap of thunder or a divine voice, an inner urge or an instinct pushing us towards podiatry or supply-chain management.

A small but significant echo of this attitude can be traced in our habit of asking even very young children what they want to be when they grow up. There's a faint but revealing assumption that somewhere in the options being entertained by the child (footballer, zookeeper, space explorer, etc.), there will already be the first stumbling articulations of the crucial inner voice announcing the small person's true destiny. It appears not to strike us as peculiar to expect a 5-and-a-half-year-old to understand their identity in the adult labour market.

All this helps to explain the relative societal silence around the task of working out what to do. Well-meaning friends and family will often simply advise a confused person to wait: one day, something will strike them as just right.

Of course, contrary to what this unfortunate, oppressive notion of vocation suggests, it is entirely reasonable – even healthy – not to know what one's talents are or how to apply them. One's nature is so complex, one's abilities so tricky to define in detail, the needs of the world so elusive, that discovering the best fit between oneself and a job is a momentous, highly legitimate challenge that requires an immense amount of thought, exploration and wise assistance and might use up years of our attention. It's wholly reasonable not to know what work one should perform. And it is indeed often a great sign of maturity to realise that one doesn't know, rather than suffer any longer under the punishing assumption that one should.

ii. The Vagueness of Our Minds

Even when we accept that working out what to do is something we'll need to devote much attention to over many years, we come up against a further, and much more puzzling, problem: how difficult it is to know the nature of our own minds.

Our brains are fatefully badly equipped to interpret and understand themselves. We cannot sit down and simply enquire of ourselves directly what we might want to do with our working lives – in the way we might ask ourselves what we would favour eating. The 'we' retires, falls silent and fragments under examination. At best, our deeper minds let out staccato signals as to certain things that appeal to, or appal them. We might find ourselves saying: 'I want to do something creative' or 'I don't want to give up my life to a corporation'; 'I'd like to make a difference' or 'I want meaningful work'.

Such aspirations may be reasonable, but they are also foolhardy in their lack of definition. The prospect of having to build a career on their foundations can rightly induce panic; not having a robust plan swiftly puts us at the mercy of the plans of others. We're liable to blame ourselves and what seem like our exceptionally obtuse minds. But our incapacities are not unique. We're simply encountering – at an especially stressful moment – a basic problem of the human organ of thought. Our minds do not surrender answers to direct questions very easily. The same fractured replies would emerge if someone were

to demand that we tell them what love really is or what friendship constitutes. We might feel baffled and put upon. We most probably wouldn't be able to come up with remotely sensible analyses, despite one striking and central fact: we are bound to have a lot of ideas lurking somewhere about the constitution of love and friendship, for we have all lived through plenty of their examples.

We already possess an immense amount of relevant material for framing extensive and highly penetrating insights. We've had so many fleeting thoughts and sensations; we've known situations both good and bad that could feed into profound responses. Yet somehow our experiences are too easily blocked from coalescing into robust replies. The problem is that our ideas have too often been left scattered in our minds. We haven't been able to collect them, sift through them and see their connections and evolutions; we haven't had the time or encouragement to consider what each one is telling us and how they all stack up together. And yet, if we felt more intellectually dextrous and confident, we would all have the capacity to come up with perspectives of superlative value (the people we call great writers are in the end merely people who've known how to manipulate the butterfly nets required to catch their own flightiest, airiest, shyest thoughts).

There are so many things we already know without knowing that we know them – because we haven't been trained in the art of gathering and interpreting our experiences. What is a beautiful city like? What is an

ideal holiday? How does a good conversation flow? The questions may sound daunting, but we have answers to them already – for we all harbour, somewhere within our memories, recollections of well-being as we walked the streets of a capital, or felt our senses reopen in a new climate or registered our sympathies expanding at a table of friends. Our belief that we don't know is merely a symptom of tendencies to systematically underrate our own capacities.

With touching regularity, we dismiss the fact that we already contain within ourselves the power to address the grandest themes of existence.

Instead, from fear and habit, we turn away from inner exploration and reach for platitudes that we suspect won't do justice to our impressions, sensing that our real feelings are hiding somewhere in tangled preverbal form, yet hoping that our questioner might leave us and make someone else feel inadequate.

So there's ultimately nothing very special (and therefore nothing especially worrying) about our inability to give a direct or neat answer to an enquiry about what we might want to do with our working lives. It's merely one more example of our minds' unjustly weak and underconfident self-reflexive muscle.

Because our minds do not easily arrive at career plans, and yet the material for such plans is often in them, we should take the time to consciously collect relevant evidence, create a library for it, pore over it and analyse it, and so ensure that stray thoughts and

fleeting sensory impressions can one day be assembled into clear propositions. There may be a few complexities to doing so (we will address them in a minute), but the chief obstacle to getting started is the melancholy feeling that it would be peculiar and unnecessary even to do so. A search to understand our working characters has to begin with a basic acknowledgement of the natural vagueness and intellectual squeamishness of our minds – without our falling prey to a sense that our furtive mental inclinations are shameful or indicative of any sort of individual weakness.

When addressing the question of what we might do in our work, we should have the confidence to believe that large portions of a sound answer are already going to be inside us. But the best way to proceed is not to try to head for a conclusion too quickly, because the data that can contribute to a reply usually hasn't been correctly studied or tagged within us; it doesn't know its own nature or its potential to guide us and has to be disentangled from cobwebs of error and forgetfulness. We must patiently trust that we have already picked up a great deal of information and experience relevant to determining what kind of work we should do, but that it has arrived in guises we won't automatically recognise or understand. Insofar as it is there, the information may just be encoded in those superlative indicators of career aptitude: distinctive feelings of pleasure, enthusiasm or distaste in relation to many rather minor tasks and challenges – that can appear to be wholly disconnected

from anything resembling a fee-paying job.

Paradoxically, it's not our direct past thoughts about work that are typically most useful in guiding us to new, more fulfilling, work. Our search is for work we can love, not work we have done – and so we need to get to know a lot about what we love and why before we move too quickly to the formulation of a career plan. We might begin by zeroing in on that storehouse of incidental career insights: childhood. When during these long years did we feel particular tremors of excitement? We should let our minds relax and surrender the smallest, most incidental, details.

Perhaps it was lovely lying on the bedroom floor in the old house (we must have been 8), cutting out pieces of paper from a coloured pad and arranging alternating strips. Sometimes you used to particularly like just drawing straight lines across a blank piece of paper. Perhaps there was a jumper you especially responded to – it had yellow circles on the front; or you really liked running round some gorse bushes in the garden of a hotel you sometimes stayed at when you were little; or it was very special when your bedroom was extremely tidy. It was awful (maybe) at school when you had to do a joint project and your designated collaborator wouldn't accept your ideas about the size and shape of the presentation document, or about the order of the slides. Or you hated the way some people always kept their hair carefully brushed, or you loved the time you chatted with a friend about a fantasy desert island.

In such memories, we pick up on key incidents in the history of our intimate feelings. Something – we might not know exactly what – struck us as lovely or distressing. These very modest fragments hint at major tendencies in our nature that are liable to be still active within us, but not at an operative level. We will have to proceed slowly. It might take many months of careful reflection to uncover and define some of the central ingredients of our characters that can eventually function as important guides to a good working life.

It's not only the past that we need to investigate. We should also start to collect and analyse our sensations in the present. Because the mind is so prone to wiping out its own nascent autobiography every few hours, we should keep a notebook handy so we can trap a feeling and return to it later, attempting to make connections with other experiences we have registered. We should proceed with some of the patience of an ornithologist lying in the heather waiting for a sighting of a rare migrating bird.

The people who have perhaps most adroitly pioneered a careful method of data collection have been writers. Almost all of these types have kept notebooks, not because of how much they felt (constant sensations are universal), but because of how valuable they understood their apparently minor thoughts might be – and how aware they were of the cost of our brains' amnesiac tendencies.

The great French novelist Honoré de Balzac (1799–1850) was an inveterate notebook scribe. He was

fascinated by human character, particularly by how the way people move and the expressions they exhibit give away key things about their personalities. With this theme in view, he became a constant observer of the mannerisms of people he saw in the streets of Paris or met at dinners and in offices. His notebooks tell us:

> *'Her movements are not equally distributed over her whole person; she advances in a single block at each step like the statue.'*

> *'He walks like a despot: a menacing suggestion of security and strength in his slightest movements.'*

> *'A brusque movement betrays a vice.'*

> *'The way this woman saunters around, she can flaunt it all while revealing nothing.'*

But Balzac didn't stop there. These moments of experience couldn't really honour their role until he worked out where they would be useful. In his case, this meant finding them a place in one of his stories. Although this concern might seem localised, he was stumbling upon a task that is really for everyone. We too need to trap and analyse our sensations, assembling from a thousand diverse hints the material that will form not so much a work of fiction but something far more important: the fabric of our own future working lives.

Exercise

The idea of finding one's vocation suggests that we should, by now, know what job is right for us. Yet a more promising starting point is to acknowledge that we do not know at all.

The challenge is to get back in touch with our authentic desires. Oddly, these are often to be found in a time when we largely had no thought of work: childhood. Childhood is a good place to start because we pursued things then without many of the elements that later inhibit or distort interests. As children, we had no thought of status, money or even whether we were any good at what we were doing. It can be valuable therefore to investigate childhood moments of enjoyment.

Step 1
Remember three things you enjoyed doing as a child.

- Describe the physical places where you used to play.
- What was it like to be in your room on a rainy day, or in the garden or yard?
- What would you do there?

Step 2
Write a few lines describing each of the three activities. For example, 'I used to go downstairs and build a fort out of Lego. I sat in the middle of the floor, and I would

arrange all the pieces in order before I started'. Or: 'I used to pretend I was running an airline; I would transport food from the kitchen to my bedroom, and line up my soft toy animals to make announcements, as the captain'.

Step 3
Imagine you are explaining to someone else why you loved doing this thing. Close your eyes and remember doing the activity. Describe the best moments.

What I particularly enjoyed was:
- when the houses were all lined up
- when the animals had been fed
- when we fell in the pool
- when I could instruct the passengers.

Now look behind these particular moments, to identify the underlying enjoyments of which these are one instance.

I enjoyed this because:
- creating a little orderly world is satisfying
- it's fun when you've made an animal happy
- I felt safe being with my friends
- I liked feeling I was in charge.

Step 4
Further elaborate your answers into descriptions of your inclinations:

- I'm someone who likes … when there is order.
- I'm someone who likes … making others happy.
- I'm someone who likes … getting along with a team.
- I'm someone who likes … when I'm in charge.

As children, we don't analyse our enjoyments, but it is often only as children that we get an intense, direct sense of our pleasures. Then we enter the desert of adolescence, when playfulness tends to become subordinated to the search for social success – and, eventually, to fitting into the economy. We arrive in adulthood with the thought of what might truly please us very far down our list of priorities.

This process above, which we should repeat for other childhood memories, helps us to get more specific about what we were enjoying when we were free to play as we liked. In this way we can build up a picture of what brings us joy, and therefore what work might satisfy us. A satisfying job will, in subtle, indirect but key ways, almost inevitably carry echoes of pleasures already known from childhood.

So far we've been collecting feelings. But there is a next step. We need to connect and generalise outwards from these feelings – while keeping in mind that their implications are almost always indirect. For example, the pleasure of reading a magazine shouldn't be taken

to imply that we must try to work for a magazine. Our satisfactions deserve to be examined more closely in order to accurately reveal the real range of options before us. When they are attended to properly, the sensations around magazine reading typically contain hints of interests in careers that extend far beyond consumer publishing. It might be that we are drawn to something about the paper stock, or the pictures of interiors, or the tone in the problem pages, or an atmosphere of dynamism in the message from the editor that promises to compensate for a gap in our own background. These pleasures might have occurred while reading a magazine, but they are not necessarily especially tied to magazines. Our initial analysis may pass too swiftly over the real import of our sensations and can lead us in dangerously false directions. Although the information relevant for guiding us just happened to manifest itself in the back issues of *Bella* or *Better Homes and Gardens*, in fact, properly sifted, our feelings might prompt us towards a career that has nothing at all to do with magazines: we may be more suited to a stationery firm, a psychotherapy practice or an industrial design studio.

This is partly why we should be careful not to think with ourselves or others about specific jobs and instead focus on qualities within jobs. We should not rush to conclusions like 'graphic designer' or 'teacher' but rather stick for as long as possible with the pleasures that jobs contain, captured by words such as order, leadership, meaning, calm, team spirit.

At this point we need to invoke the idea of an inner dialogue. As we proceed, one side of the mind must generously, but insistently, question the other. The observer self should ask the everyday feeling self: 'So you found this nice. What was it really about the experience that pleased you? It wasn't everything; it was something more specific. Could you go into greater detail?' And the feeling self can say: 'I don't know, I'm not sure. It was just sweet'. And the observing self can come back: 'Give it another go. It's fine that you are unsure; we'll circle around for another approach. Remember, that other time, there was something similar but not exactly the same. What if we compare them?' And gradually the initial hints yield up parts of the information they contain about what really makes us happy or upset – and hence edge us a little way further towards understanding who we can and ideally should be around work.

It isn't only pleasurable sensations that hold out clues for the future. Envy too is a vital, if more unexpected, guide. Shame is a natural response to feelings of envy. However, to feel embarrassed by our envious moments risks encouraging us to repress them – and therefore, to lose out on deriving some hugely important lessons from them. While envy is uncomfortable, squaring up to the emotion is an indispensable requirement for determining a career path; envy is a call to action that should be heeded, containing garbled messages sent by confused but important parts of our personalities about what we should do with the rest of our lives. Without regular

envious attacks, we couldn't know what we wanted to be. Instead of trying to repress our envy, we should make every effort to study it. Each person we envy possesses a piece of the jigsaw puzzle depicting our possible future. There is a portrait of a 'true self' waiting to be assembled out of the envious hints we receive when we turn the pages of a newspaper or hear updates on the radio about the career moves of old schoolmates. Rather than run from the emotion, we should calmly ask one essential and redemptive question of all those we envy: 'What could I learn about here?'

Even when we do attend to our envy, we generally remain extremely poor students of envy's wisdom. We start to envy certain individuals in their entirety, when, if we took a moment to analyse their lives, we would realise that it was only a small part of what they had done that really resonated with us, and that this should guide our own next steps. It might not be the whole of the restaurant entrepreneur's life we want, but just their skill at building up institutions. We might not truly want to be a potter, but we might need in our working lives more of the playfulness apparent in the work of one example we know. What we're in danger of forgetting is that the qualities we admire don't just belong to one specific, attractive life. They can be pursued in lesser, weaker (but still real) doses in countless other places, opening up the possibility of creating more manageable and more realistic versions of the lives we desire.

Exercise

We don't often think of envy as productive. But every envious moment we have offers us a chance to learn about what it is we are drawn to, deep down. By investigating our envy in more detail, we can identify what it is we feel we lack and, with this in mind, reflect on what we should aim for.

Step 1
Think of a person you envy. Make a list of things about them that are admirable.

For instance:
- talks confidently, successful, thinks of her own ideas, wealthy
- listens really well, gets to talk to fascinating people, intelligent, loved by many
- orderly mind, always deliberate, has a secure position
- works hard, takes lots of risks, unafraid of being demanding (around money), ethical.

Now ask yourself what in particular draws you to this person. Is it everything on your list, or do one or two things stand out in making you feel envy and longing?

Step 2
Once you have narrowed down the specific things you envy, ask yourself how you might bring these things into your life. Can you imagine not being this person, but nevertheless having these things you admire (wealth, risk-taking, an orderly mind)? It may be that you have to have them, at least at first, to a lesser degree. But think about what your life would be like with these things added. Then consider the first practical steps you could take to attain them.

We must learn to tease out insights concealed in apparently tiny moments of satisfaction and distress scattered across our lives. Once we see how vague our minds really are – and how naturally tricky it is for us to piece together the answers to complex but highly important questions about our futures – we can gain a new perspective. We start to appreciate that our career analysis is going to take time, that it has many stages, that the reach for an immediate answer can backfire – and that it is a strangely magnificent, delicate and noble task to work out what one should most justly do with one's brief time on Earth.

Exercise

Sometimes our thoughts about the kind of work we might like to do are very general.

We might come up with things like these:

- I'd like to do something creative
- A bit of travel could be good
- I want to make some money
- It would be great to go into consulting, but I worry it might be boring
- Maybe working for a magazine for a while would be fun
- Politics? Or is that crazy?
- I'm worried about being bossed about
- I'm interested in the civil rights movement
- There's a radio presenter I really like …

Step 1

Make your own list, no holds barred. Allow yourself to be confused, digressive and fanciful.

Step 2

Notice but don't be panicked by how vague the list is. We need not be embarrassed by how strange the origins of our career decisions can be. It's totally okay that our first ideas come in fragments and seem scattered and out of focus.

Step 3

Behind each of the items on your list are what we can term points of excitement – experiences that gave rise to these ideas. There may be particular images or scenes that come to mind when you think about each thing. For instance, when you think of going into 'politics', you see yourself giving a speech – an image connected to a news story you once saw about Parliament.

For each item on your list, identify the key experiences behind it, or the images in your mind. Some points of excitement may sound quite odd: small, even fetishistic. But stick with it.

Examples:

- I went to the Matisse show and saw a film of him cutting stuff out
- It's so cool what Bill and Melinda did with the mosquito nets in Uganda
- I read about a mansion with a resident chef and thought how great that life would be
- So many kids in my country don't have anyone to look after them
- This documentary on *Vogue*, the people looked so cool: so far from my parents

- I loved being in The Hague and seeing a development of great brick houses
- Travelling around with a glamorous team, car waiting at the airport, advising CEOs.

Step 4

One common mental leap we make is to mislabel our interests. We draw some big conclusions from often very slim foundations.

- You might tell the world that you want a job in consulting, but the truth is that you are excited by the idea of meals being paid for, and having a car waiting to pick you up at the airport. The real interest is mislabelled.

- You say to others, and yourself, that you want a job at a magazine, but your real interest is more specific and idiosyncratic: you are excited by the glamour you happened to see in a documentary about a fashion title, but that actually exists in many more places than just a magazine.

Compare the list you made in Step 3 to the list you made in Step 1. See the conclusions you have drawn from the initial experiences and acts of imagination. Look for any mislabellings.

Step 5

A common omission we make is not to analyse the original excitement or stimulus. We fail to articulate precisely what it is we are interested in.

- You dream of a career as a radio presenter (similar to your hero), but what is the excitement really about? Actually, what you love is conversation and the search for wisdom to live well – which needn't have anything to do with radio.

- You feel that so many kids aren't cared for – you were particularly moved and agitated by a documentary you saw on this. When you probe what this feeling is really about, you realise that you care about people getting the right help to have good relationships – a concern that could be taken up in many fields of work.

Go through your list of underlying experiences and images and describe in more detail what they are really about for you. Why were you moved or excited in this way? Articulate more accurately what you care about in each case.

Conclusion

When we get to know our interests better, one thing that can happen is that our first ideas about what we might like to do start to get revised – and sometimes drop away. Equally, the task of analysing our experiences and mental