

## **Vocation: What's Calling**

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Sue Roberts

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Sheridan

My earliest understanding of the word vocation shows my Catholic upbringing. We were, as Catholics, always tasked to “pray for the vocations”. What this meant in the 1970s and 80s, was to pray more people would answer their special spiritual call to serve Christ and become priests and nuns. I was probably 10 or 11 before I realized that vocation was not a Catholic-specific word or thing, such as diocese, the Hail Mary, and the Pope. Oh OK, my doctor has a vocation. My mother was a teacher before she raised a family, that too, was a vocation. My Dad was an accountant; all that tax code was certainly a vocation. And then I heard the term vocational education. It was mostly ag and shop classes in the small tin building behind the high school. I understood it then, tradespeople, business people, and ranchers also had a vocation. So, it was pretty much your job when you grew up.

How old were you when you first remember being asked, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” Probably about 4 or 5 years old. Adults ask it to hear wild childlike dreams and answers like: a pro football player, a cowboy, a ballerina, a fireman, a painter, and these days a YouTuber, or a computer game developer. Too bad there aren't more STEM answers! We're expected to become more practical and focused as we get older. The prevalent societal attitude we absorb is that we have to choose just ONE THING and then do it your entire adult life. As we hit high school we begin to feel inadequate when we have many interests, or worse yet, struggle to find interests that can turn into careers. Who are we? What will we do? We also understand in our culture that there are “good” and “bad” career choices. Being a porn star, a crime boss, or a drug dealer are definitely considered bad choices. Being a minister, a teacher, or a doctor are regarded as good choices, a real vocation.

As we wrestle with who we are and what is calling us in our futures, it produces anxiety and stress that can be almost paralyzing, and for some is too much to cope with.

Emphasis is on getting excellent grades to get into the right college. Parental expectations can intensify pressures. You have to have the right friends so that you don't make mistakes or head down pathways that will follow us or have detrimental effects. Heaven forbid you get addicted to drugs and get waylaid about making real life choices and serious plans for the future. Particularly as a young woman, the fear of pregnancy looms to threaten your path to the future. There is a generally accepted "prescribed course" to get your future in order and become a productive and successful adult member of society. The pressure to decide one right vocation is high. The truth is, the "prescribed course" is complete and utter fallacy. Life happens. Parents die, people get ill, money is made and lost, children are conceived and born. Money is important to get places in both secondary education and vocational training programs. Monetary survival can disrupt your dreams and your vocational path. One of my favorite quotes is by John Steinbeck, "The best laid plans of mice and men sometimes go awry." At times over the past few years of my life, it has been a mantra. Another truth is that people are neurologically different. We all have different gifts to use. Some people have many serious interests and many talents, for these people, choosing only a single career path can be destructive. According to author Emily Wapnick, there are two basic types of people. These are the multipotentialites and the specialists. Some people want to be a baby doctor from early childhood and do just that. Some people are interested in many things and many creative pursuits, as well. For multipotentialites, being forced to choose one thing may squash the traits that are most useful to them and us. Among these traits are the ability to synthesize seemingly unrelated ideas and fields. These are the innovators." Multis" also have the strength of adaptability. Adaptability is being identified as one of the most important traits for success in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Employers tend to like adaptable people, as the trend in businesses is to do more with less. Many job ads today want people who can "think outside the box" to solve problems and create innovative solutions. While we specialists can do these things, it is much harder and rarer for us to think this way. Neither is the right or wrong way to function or to be successful. Perhaps the wisest course of deciding a vocation is to fit your career path to your personal neurological style. Studies have shown for decades that the average American adult changes jobs at least 3 times in a lifetime. "If you don't know what to do with the rest of your life, you're not a failure" says Angela Duckworth. She is a professor of Psychology at U of Pennsylvania and the author of "Grit". She has studied what makes people resilient, focused, and determined to reach a life goal. Some of us are grittier than others, it is just normal human variation.

OK, many of us have passed the vocational decision point, and even a whole career path. Some of us are completely happy with our career choices. Some of us have regrets. Some vocational choices forced culturally upon us have caused boredom and burnout. As in my case, the future of medicine has changed tremendously when technology was added and big corporations got involved to make large profits. The service ethic has disappeared altogether from or is no longer rewarded in many vocations. I'm just going to take a minute to talk about the saying that if you find what you truly love to do and pursue it in your career, you'll never work a day in your life. I dislike this saying. Maybe some lucky people find this to be true. When people tell me this, I cringe. I just have found aspects of my jobs so tedious that it almost overwhelmed the joy and optimism that made me choose my vocation in the first place. I liked science and I wanted to help people. That's why I chose Medicine. I have had conversations with other people who reflect that this is true for them too, while others find almost nothing they do at work tedious. My hope for future workers in times of changing economies,( like the growth of "independent contractor" status, rather than employee status of workers) is that people can select what serves them best. Millennials will have to be creative to get achieve professionally and earn a living that provides the stability of traditional employee benefits.

As we get past our major working days in life, and into retirement and beyond, there is still vocational navigation to do. What do I do with my life now? Many people choose to focus on creative or hobby pursuits they truly love, but could not fulfill while working to support themselves. It is arguable that this second (or third or fourth) time is for some people, their true vocation in life. Many look forward to focusing on family, grandchildren, or even more time with pets. Others will love to travel the country or the world. Some people with demanding and consuming vocations find they are bored and haven't taken time to develop other interests during their working years. I know plenty of doctors who retire and come back to work part-time within a year of retirement. I have always shaken my head at that choice. Some among us don't get the luxury of retirement and will have to earn income, out of necessity. Climate change and technology will impact everyone's choice of vocation in all phases of life. I hope we can all find our "What now?"

I will close with some quotes about work and vocation.

The meaning of life lies in love and work.- Sigmund Freud

We must make the choices that enable us to fulfill the deepest capacities of our real selves. -- -Thomas Merton

Touching the life of just a single person is a powerful legacy to leave behind.-Emily Esfahani Smith