

## The Meaning of Vocation

Although the word “vocation” is often used to refer to a job or an occupation, it is derived from the Latin word *vocare*, which means “to call.” It originally referred to something a person was “called” to do. The true concept of vocation, though, does not have to adhere strictly to either usage; instead, one can view vocation as a *job*—though not necessarily a career—that someone is *called* to do. A sense of purpose is implied, as working towards nothing would be pointless, and in *The Noble Purpose: The Joy of Living a Meaningful Life*, William Damon claims that living with purpose “means finding something that you truly believe in, something so worth accomplishing that you dedicate yourself to it wholeheartedly, without qualm or self-interest” (p. 7).

Before one can begin to live with purpose, though, he or she must determine what his or her calling is and how to develop it. Damon explains that a calling is “both meaningful to the self and important to the world beyond the self” (p. 15) and encourages readers to view their jobs as callings. Though his focus is primarily on what he terms *noble purpose* rather than vocation itself, he does make a good point in explaining that one’s purpose (or vocation) does not necessarily have to center on work; it can also be a part of “any other activity or setting that the world has to offer” (p. 33). Damon also maintains that it is important for one’s vocation to complement his or her talents and interests: “We all must find the occupation that best suits our own talents, because that will always prove to be the best way to accomplish our ultimate goals” (p. 24).

Although finding one’s calling is not necessarily an easy task, life in America today has only further complicated the process. As described above, a person’s vocation entails improving the life of the individual and the people around him or her. However, two aspects of America’s current social and cultural attitudes make it more difficult for people to find and develop their

vocations: the “achievement culture” and the new models of individualism to which most people subscribe.

In recent years, young people in America have become increasingly concerned with achievement. David Brooks comments in “Stressed for Success?” that “there are a lot of smart, lively young people in this country.” If someone wants to be successful, he or she has to compete against countless others with as much talent and will to succeed. In “The Organization Kid,” Brooks states that “today's elite kids are likely to spend their afternoons and weekends shuttling from one skill-enhancing activity to the next. By the time they reach college, they take this sort of pace for granted, sometimes at a cost.” Anna Quindlen comments in “An Apology to The Graduates” that students’ college applications “look like the résumés for midlevel executives.” The caveat is that members of this generation have less time and inclination to search for what really matters to them. In “Straight A’s Can Hurt a College Education,” Sara Rimer mentions that colleges are having to ask students to “relax and enjoy their educations.” David Brooks makes an important point in reminding students that in adulthood, “the key to success will not be demonstrating teacher-pleasing competence across fields; it will be finding a few things you love, and then committing yourself passionately to them” (“Stressed for Success?”). One can only determine one’s vocation by taking the time to determine what matters most to him or her.

One may ask, “What about older Americans?” The other obstacle involves the kinds of individualism that predominate in American society. William Bellah explains in *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* that while America has always valued independence, the new types of American individualism that have developed are less outwardly focused than their precursors. Utilitarian individualism is the idea that individuals enter society solely in their own self-interest (p. 336) and expressive individualism, which developed as a

contrast to utilitarian individualism, claims that each person “has a unique core of feeling and intuition” that must be expressed “if individuality is to be realized” (p. 334). While the biblical and republican traditions, the precursors of utilitarian and expressive individualism, are still forms of individualism, they arose at a time in American life when citizens were still dependent upon those around them for their economic well-being, so respect and concern for others were necessary. In contrast, when utilitarian and expressive individualism developed, people were less dependent upon others, so they lack that outward concentration. While vocations do require some degree of self-interest, their primary purpose is to benefit others. The incompatibility of the American mindset with the core concept of a calling leads to trouble in discovering and realizing one’s vocation; when one has been raised to think of oneself first, the idea of making a life’s work out of helping others may seem foreign.

As far as my own vocation is concerned, I am not completely sure that I have found my calling, but at this point, I have a good idea of what it is. I plan to become a philosophy professor because this career will provide me with opportunities to benefit others while fulfilling my own goals and aspirations: I have always been interested in life’s “big questions,” so I would enjoy being able to ponder them for a living, and I was very good at tutoring my friends in high school, so I believe that I will be able to teach well. Becoming a professor would also fulfill my educational goals. As a child, I was awkward and unathletic, but I always did well in school, and even in sixth grade, I knew that I wanted to earn my doctorate so I could be a student for as long as possible. I am not sure what my familial aspirations are yet, so I do not know how my vocation will fit in with them, but I believe that whether I start a family or not, I will be satisfied with my life. In considering my own vocation, I have taken into account my talents, interests, and goals and how I can use them to benefit myself and others.