

**Bearing Nourishing Fruit:
Finding and Following a Calling through
Liberal and Professional Education**

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Keynote Address to Communication Connection 2004
Center for Communication and Business
Pepperdine University
March 17, 2004

Everything I know about journalism I learned from *Sports Night*, which, though it paints a pretty flattering image, is in the end *fiction*. And I know even less about the academic study of communication. I had only one comm class in my entire education, a speech class in which I gave a speech using John Lennon's *Imagine* to argue that rock music is anti-God. As you can see I was a young man desperately in need of a good liberal arts education. I knew nothing about John Lennon, nothing about the song *Imagine*, nothing about rock music, and even less about God. But that, I am sorry to say, is the extent to which I have journeyed in the intellectual territory you call home. At best I am a stranger. More probably I am a complete ignoramus.

So I don't pretend that I can speak to you as members of a particular academic and professional guild—I don't know that guild. But fortunately I haven't been asked to. Instead what I will do is offer some thoughts on the relationship between vocation and education, which I believe have bearing on the relationship between professional and liberal education. I take it that's a relationship—the one between professional and liberal education—that is very much a part of life in a Communication Division at a liberal arts college.

First some thoughts on vocation, then we'll get to its relation to education. My favorite account of vocation comes from the Presbyterian minister and author, Frederick Buechner. He says, "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."

Here's what's nice about Buechner's definition. We usually get one of two versions of vocation. According to one it's the "vocation" in "vocational education," or voc/tech schools, schools we sometimes look down on as serving strictly utilitarian ends. We shouldn't, by the way. Not everyone has the luxury of pursuing work that is a calling, or of pursuing education that doesn't directly serve economic ends. For many, vocational training is a tremendous step forward. The move from poverty to bringing home a decent paycheck might be

far more significant than the move from working for a paycheck to working as a calling, and we should honor those who make that move and those who facilitate it.

Still, even if we are quite mistaken in denigrating vocational training, we would do well not to equate “vocation” with “job.” If we do, we lose track of a potentially helpful concept, and with it the possibility that our work might be more than a means to utilitarian ends. We need a concept for that possible state of affairs, and the best one I know of is vocation. Sometimes when we forget how to name a thing, we forget how to see it.

The other version of vocation we often get would have us ask: “What am I made for? What are my gifts? What are my passions?” This is all well and good, but it’s only half the story, and unless we round out the story, we are left with a rather self-absorbed understanding of vocation. One’s calling winds up being all about one’s *own* fulfillment. That can’t be right. The one who calls us is certainly concerned about our well being; of that I have little doubt. But what he calls us to is a life outside of ourselves.

Buechner’s definition, in contrast to this self-indulgent sense of vocation, takes us beyond ourselves. Our calling is not only to the place of our deep gladness; it is to the *junction* of our deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger.

To see just how radical this is, imagine someone in your career center responding to a student who doesn’t know what to major in or what career to pursue like this: “Well, South Africa is desperate for public health experts. Brazil needs people who know something about renewable energy. And, man, are there a lot of kids in the foster care system in this county. What do you think about being a social worker?” Imagine the response of a student hearing this: “Uh . . . I thought this was supposed to be about me.”

And in practice it is. We always start with the individual’s characteristics; we start them off with the Meyers-Briggs, or some other self-assessment tool to help them figure out who *they* are. Discovering a vocation is almost always understood as a process of *self*-discovery. And once we’ve done that, we look for pre-established niches in the world that we fit into.

But this might be getting it the wrong way around. At the very least we need to approach both sides simultaneously. The discovery of vocation is as much a discovery of the world around us as it is self-discovery.

And this is where vocation and education meet. At least it’s where vocation and *liberal* education meet. Education and vocation will meet again, and at that juncture it will be professional education.

What does liberal education have to do with one’s vocation? Well, if we accept Buechner’s view of vocation, everything. On this view, discovering one’s vocation requires two things—deep and searching self-knowledge, and broad understanding of the many facets of the social, natural, and even spiritual world and their complex interrelations—precisely the two things a liberal education is designed to provide.

Think for a moment of some of the standard elements of a liberal education in light of these two kinds of knowledge—think how much we come to understand ourselves through psychology, history, literature, philosophy, theology, sociology, biology. One of the greatest moments in my education came in a history class when I discovered that John Locke had invented things that I

simply took as given. In that moment I discovered myself to be historically situated. And I have never been the same.

And think how much we come to understand our world through economics, cultural anthropology, communication, chemistry, and again history, literature, sociology, biology, and theology. Every aspect of a liberal education is either disclosing ourselves to ourselves, or disclosing the world to us, or both. And this is just what needs to happen if we are to discover our own deep gladness and the world's deep hunger. In fact we might go so far as to say that the process of discovering a vocation, done thoroughly, and the process of becoming liberally educated are *one and the same*. There is no part of either that is not a part of the other.

Buechner's definition also reminds us that vocation is found in community. You can't know by yourself what the world's deep hungers are. At a minimum you have to encounter others who experience those hungers in order to discover them, and the really deep hungers grow out of needs too complex to understand without some guidance. You probably can't even know by yourself where your deep gladness is. We often have quite mistaken ideas about our own well being, and other's views about us, that we might at first be startled at, often prove true. Discovering the world's deep hunger and our own deep gladness are both best done in community.

This is another important way in which vocation and education meet. Educational institutions, at least traditionally, have been communities. They provide opportunities for collective reflection on the world's needs and for seeking the insight of others into our own deep gladness. For all of the important benefits in terms of access, one of the real costs of the move to commuter schools and now to distance learning is the loss of these communities. In contrast, one of the great virtues of the liberal arts college, relic that it is, is the fostering of such communities.

So far we have liberal education as, if not essential to the discovery of vocation, at least an outstanding context for its discovery. Is that all there is to the relationship between vocation and education? No.

For while a liberal education may equip us to discover a vocation, it does not by itself equip us to *pursue* that vocation. To pursue a vocation requires occupying *some*, perhaps several, particular social roles. Though such a role need not be a profession, the knowledge and skills needed to succeed in these roles are precisely what a professional education can provide.

There is a problem that persists in liberal education that is deeply rooted in its history, or at least the history of one of its major threads. Liberal education developed from the renaissance as a way to equip the gentleman to serve well in his position of social leadership. But the gentleman needed to do nothing to find himself in that position. It was his, or could be his if he so chose, by birth. Contemporary American society is fundamentally different. Who holds positions of social leadership? Who are our elected officials? Who serves on the boards of major corporations and non-profit organizations? Who are the trustees of Pepperdine University? With perhaps some notable exceptions, those serving in these roles are highly accomplished professionals.

The gentlemanly tradition, to which much of today's liberal education harkens back, will no doubt serve our students well in their positions as community leaders. We want people of good character, sound judgment, good

communication skills, perhaps even refined taste. But by itself an education that attempts to develop these traits in students will, in our day and age, probably fail to equip them to occupy those positions. We see this all the time at Westmont—graduates who have outstanding intellectual skills, who know a great deal about the world’s complex needs and care deeply about those needs, and who don’t have a clue about how to take on or function in a social role that contributes to meeting them.

These students need professional preparation. At the very least they need to learn to package the intellectual skills and the character traits they’ve developed in their liberal education in ways that reveal their practical value to employers. More likely they need to learn the specific skills that will enable them to express their broad understanding, their sharp critical faculties, their subtle interpretive skills, their moral judgment in particular roles and through particular tasks. The process of *identifying* the world’s deepest needs and one’s own deepest fulfillment requires a liberal education. The process of *meeting* those needs, and thereby experiencing that deep fulfillment requires a professional education.

Now, I might be making you mad. I am trading on a distinction between liberal and professional education that makes professional education out to be utilitarian, and liberal education out to be impractical. Defenders of either might be objecting. And rightly so. The line demarcating liberal and professional education is not so sharp

First of all, the gentlemanly tradition is not all there is to the history of liberal education. Running alongside that tradition, and in fact predating it, is a long tradition of liberal arts education *as* professional education. The colonial and antebellum colleges of North America are often taken as the archetype of the liberal arts college. And their primary purpose was to prepare young men for the clergy. The medieval university curriculum consisted of the seven liberal arts—a liberal arts education if ever there was one. Yet the point of that education was not personal enrichment, or learning for its own sake, or some other putatively lofty goal. It was to develop what at the time were specialized skills, skills highly valued on the job market—literacy and numeracy.

And this remains true. The skills developed in a liberal arts education are no longer sufficiently specialized to equip one for particular social roles, but they are nevertheless tremendously valuable in those roles. No matter what your profession, nothing beats the ability to write a good memo, to clearly articulate the strengths and weaknesses of a proposal in a committee meeting, to recognize the implications of statistical data. Literacy and numeracy continue to count for a tremendous amount. And with the job market in increasing flux, they will count for more and more. We’re told that today’s college graduate can anticipate at least 3 *career* changes over the course of their working life. That’s a context where success will require not just outstanding specialized skills, but outstanding *transferable* skills—just the kinds of skills that a liberal education is after.

So we should not conclude that liberal education is unrelated to professional preparation. And the same goes for professional education. Too often we think of professional education as education that prepares one for a job. That may be true, but it’s much too narrow, because “job” and “profession” are not synonymous.

We recently held our annual *Conversation on the Liberal Arts* up at Westmont on the theme "Vocation, Vocationism, and the Liberal Arts." There we had the chance to hear from, among others, William Sullivan of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. Sullivan was a co-author with Robert Bellah and others of the book *Habits of the Heart*, which some of you are probably familiar with. More recently he has been studying professional education, especially medical education, but also preparation for law and for the clergy. He offered an account of a profession that was much richer than any I had imagined, though it might be a commonplace to you.

On Sullivan's account, the professions "organize work so that workers can develop and express their individual powers through social practices that contribute to enterprises of social value. In this process, individuals are drawn into relationships of mutual responsibility with others practicing the same craft while they achieve recognition, in some of the central institutions of society, as worthy contributors to the larger common life."

Look at what's packed in there. Let's take it backwards. First, a professional is a "worthy contributor to the larger common life." The profession exists not for the sake of its members, but for the sake of the broader community. The professional may gain wealth, power and fame, but she or he is essentially a servant of society. Second, this service is made through "relationships of mutual responsibility with others." The professional's contributions to the community are performed *in* community, and only possible as a communal effort. Finally, through this service, professionals "develop and express their individual powers." Professions are contexts of personal growth and self-expression. This is just what Buechner says about a vocation. It is the meeting point between the world's needs and one's own fulfillment.

You can see that preparation for entering and succeeding in a profession, understood in this way, is going to take a lot more than specialized job skills. Sullivan speaks of "three apprenticeships" of professional education: "first, the cognitive or intellectual one; second, the skill-based apprenticeship of practice, but third, apprenticeship to the social roles and ethical responsibilities of the profession."

Understood this way we see that professional education integrates the theoretical and practical sides of a field in the first and second apprenticeships, and incorporates within itself crucial elements of a liberal education in the third. One does not understand the social roles and ethical responsibilities of one's profession, without a more comprehensive view, a view that places one's profession in a larger social and historical context. What is needed for this third apprenticeship is something like an advanced liberal education, where sociology, history, economics, philosophy, theology and the rest are revisited, yet now with an eye toward one's profession.

So liberal and professional education are not sharply demarcated. Liberal education is important to professional preparation, and professional education, done well, involves a stage that mirrors more general liberal education. But not only is each interwoven into the other, to the extent that they are distinct, they are also interdependent. And it is the concept of vocation that reveals this interdependence.

The discovery of vocation requires the deep self understanding and the broad understand of the world offered by a liberal education. The pursuit of vocation

requires the specialized knowledge and skills offered by a professional education. Liberal education needs professional education in order to bear fruit. Professional education needs liberal education in order to ensure that the fruit is nourishing both to the individual and to the society she or he serves.

Having said all this, I am left with a troubling question. The discovery of vocation, I have suggested, requires community. The pursuit of vocation requires community. Essential, then, to a concept of vocation that would connect it to education in the ways I've suggested is community. *Are there such communities?* With the stunning fluidity of the professional world, can we conceive a profession as a community? And with the mobility and consumer mindset of the broader society, can we think of that which the profession serves as a community?

Many have suggested that the kind of communities that I'm suggesting are crucial to finding and pursuing a vocation are evaporating in American society. You are no doubt familiar with Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone*, which argues that Americans have abandoned communal activities. In the sixties, he argues, everyone was a member of a bowling league. Today we still bowl, but we bowl alone.

I am slightly more optimistic about our communal lives. Perhaps we are less and less members of groups which by their nature are communities, though the small-group phenomenon sweeping through evangelical and even mainline protestant and Catholic churches might suggest otherwise. But we are at least parts of groups that have the potential to be communities.

Certainly parents are. I am a quite typical middle-class parent in that I run my kids all over the place to enrichment opportunities. They go to soccer, to jazz dance, to chorus, to art club, and on and on. I often approach these as things my kids do; I drop them at practice and pick them up, or my sitter does. But I could approach them quite differently. I could approach them as opportunities to join a community. Volunteer at the front desk of the dance studio and you get to know the other parents and find yourself working with them on the studio's productions. Help break down the field after a soccer game and you get to know the parents of the other kids on the team. In short, commit your efforts to the activities your kids are a part of and you'll have all the community you need.

And it's not just parents who have this opportunity. They're just a particularly obvious population since they've got their kids involved in everything under the sun (which by the way is a part of the problem—the more we're involved with, the less we can engage with). But all of us can find such communities pretty easily. A church need not be experienced as a community of commitment. You can go, and listen, and leave. But serve on a committee and you find yourself a member of a community of commitment. And of course a college is a paradigm case of a community of commitment. So I am optimistic about at least the possibility of community and therefore of the possibility of finding and pursuing one's vocation in a community.

Well, you know I'm from Westmont, a good evangelical school, and an evangelical can't have a sermon without closing with application. How does any of this change how we live? I have suggested that making the discovery and pursuit of vocation central to education can motivate liberal education for students and can shape their thinking about professional education. How do we actually accomplish this?

Let me tell you what I'm not going to suggest: I'm not going to suggest structural changes. Probably they would be helpful, but at the very least they're a pain—they involve messy politics. I'm not going to suggest new programs. They're expensive—you have to hire some administrator who needs a staff, who all need computers and money for photocopies and such. I'm not going to suggest curricular changes—some new courses that have to be taken, or some new standards for courses already offered, with new committees to oversee whether those standards are being met.

I'm going to suggest something very simple—that we talk to our students differently. And I'll suggest two things in this regard. First, when we are advising students about general education, about a major, and about a career, start with this question: "What do you think the world most needs?" Earlier I was unfairly targeting career counselors for getting things the wrong way around. But it's me every bit as much as it is them. As I have talked with undecided students about their majors, or soon-to-graduate students about their futures, I have never once said, "Well, where do you think the world is hurting?" I have never suggested to them that they approach their civ class, or their intro to soc class as a way to discover where the world needs them. If I do ever get past "What fits in your schedule?" at best I always start with *them*—"What are you good at? What do you enjoy?" And I suggest they approach their GE, if not as a checklist, as a way to explore their interests and abilities. I am not suggesting we drop questions about students' passions and abilities. I am simply suggesting that we foreground the other half of the vocational question—if only for the sake of surprise.

Second, we need to talk to our students about one another's courses appreciatively—to speak of our colleagues as partners in a shared task that is larger than each of our particular roles. This is sometimes difficult. For a long time, the central component of academics' self-understanding has been scholarship, and scholarship has often meant quite narrow specialization done largely solo. We often grow more and more intellectually isolated from one another. Worse still, we are sometimes downright skeptical other disciplines, and even about approaches within one's own discipline. I sometimes worry about the epistemological biases or methodological shortcomings of other disciplines, and I know others have these same worries about my discipline (not without reason I should add).

But passing these skepticisms on to my students does not serve them well. I have to find ways to both understand and appreciate what my colleagues study and teach. Only then can I help my students see their education as an opportunity to discover and prepare for that place where their deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.