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Pedagogical Ecologies to Facilitate Higher Education for Genuinely Meaningful Work

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Higher education that intentionally fosters genuinely meaningful work remains on the periphery of mainstream educational systems. Despite the life-giving impacts of educational practices that support meaningful work, there are few indications that conventional higher education systems offer much attention to this important perspective (Bates-Gallup, 2019; Damon, 2008; Palmer, 2000). Noting that educational explorations of these possibilities are commonly limited to graduation ceremonies, human developmentalist William Damon asks: “How can we expect that young people will find meaning in what they are doing if we so rarely draw their attention to the personal meaning and purpose of what we work at in our daily lives?” (p. xvi). Long before the Great Resignation of the 2020s, Damon (2008) portrayed a prevailing sense of emptiness—or *meaninglessness*—as the most pressing problem facing these students. In what follows, I introduce several pedagogical ecologies intended to increasingly support college students to engage in genuinely meaningful work post-graduation.

Relating with Life and Work

How college students and graduates orient their lives in relationship with work matters. In an age of fulfillment commonly marked by longings for meaning more than money (Krznicaric, 2012), many college graduates are motivated by purpose over paycheck (Bates-Gallup, 2019; Clydesdale, 2015; Gallup, 2016; Seligman, 2004). Whereas a full 80% of college students desire meaningful work post-graduation, only about half of these students fulfill this aspiration (Bates-Gallup, 2019). This *purpose gap* is especially problematic since the well-being of graduates engaged in meaningful work is around 10 times more than graduates who are not engaged in meaningful work (Bates-Gallup, 2019). These consequences are too severe for colleges to ignore and are especially timely amidst the Great Resignation (Lowry, 2021). With college graduates overwhelmingly desiring alignment between personal purpose and workplace mission, many of these new employees are disappointed by workplace cultures, disengaged at work, and underemployed (Burning Glass; 2019; Gallup 2016). All of this suggests that purpose and meaning represent core competencies for 21st century work (Pink, 2011).

Higher education that develops purpose and meaning appears vital for genuinely meaningful work post-graduation. Whereas the everyday language of purpose is quite common on mainstream college campuses, the application of this buzzword appears to often reflect a neoliberal perspective on fulfillment. To demonstrate, I have observed that a common fulfillment-related educational marketing message is some version of “find your purpose.” In fact, this is the precise marketer-crafted slogan that attracted me to graduate studies at a specific university. In addition to what I experienced as a disappointing overpromise, this type of slogan portrays purpose as an object that is lurking somewhere out-there waiting to be found like a treasure in the night. Damon (2008) offers a robust description of purpose as a stable, generalized intention to accomplish something meaningful to oneself and beneficial for the world. Broadly reflective of what existential psychiatrist Viktor Frankl (1985) termed *ultimate meaning* and what purpose coach Wendy May (2019) calls *regenerative purpose*, Damon (2008) further describes purpose as an internalized, ultimate concern, and an orienting life goal that helps to shape life decisions. Consequently, purpose:

... shifts the basic emphasis of life from one of meeting needs, dealing with fears, and seeking happiness to following a path that leads to the greatest possible fulfillment, success, and meaning in life. Knowing your purpose satisfies a deep need that lives in everyone: the need for meaning, to have positive impact, to have your presence and life felt by others. (Kelley, 2009, p. xix)

Closely related, meaningful work arises when college graduates perceive authentic connections between their work and broader transcendent life purposes that extend beyond the self (Bailey & Maden, 2016). In an educational context, this connectivity between purpose and meaningful work is nicely expressed through the metaphor of wayfinding (Project Wayfinder Education, 2018; Wayfinding College, 2022). This metaphor, which derives from the Native Hawaiian tradition of orienting oneself in relation to natural worlds, illuminates the inherently purposeful direction associated with the Aristotelian notion of *telos* (Bartlett & Collins, 2011). More like a guiding compass than a map with specific directions to a pre-determined destination (Lovegrove, 2021), this directionality might encompass listening to the wise guidance of an inner teacher (Palmer, 2000), honoring a God-given calling, (Winfrey, 2020), identifying a North Star (Beck, 2001), embracing a Unique Self (Gafni, 2012), and starting with why (Sinek, 2009).

Whatever this inherently purposeful directionality is called, the divine spark of this phenomenon fosters a responsibility to embrace its calling—a calling that summons students to connect with, rather than differentiate from the whole (Izzo, 2017). In different cultural contexts, the longing to connect with larger wholes and orient life from this hidden inner genius is offered different names. For instance, the ancient Greek philosophical term *daemon* is portrayed as the dimension of selfhood that operates through higher laws and contains the meaning of life (Pressfield, 2018). As philosopher Ken Wilber (2020) illustrates, “Daemon. Daemon. Daemon. Without it, I felt like I had no compass, no direction, no way to find my path, my fate” (p. 149). Similarly, the ancient Indian term *dharma* is another powerful way of relating with and drawing out this inner genius. Spiritual writer Stephen Cope (2012) explains:

The yogic tradition is very, very interested in the idea of an inner possibility harbored within every soul. Yogis insist that every single human being has a unique vocation. They call this dharma... Yogis believe that our greatest responsibility in life is to this inner possibility—this dharma—and they believe that every human being’s duty is to utterly, fully, and completely embody his own idiosyncratic dharma. (p. xxi)

These examples point to a richness and depth of vocational possibility that is largely absent in mainstream educational systems. Not only is this type of language, along with associated perspectives and practices foreign across most college campuses, but so too is the life-giving receptivity that supports students to listen for the callings that poignantly open paths of genuinely meaningful work. By actively fostering campus environments that privilege intellectual development and material status over listening for the callings that most directly invoke genuinely meaningful work, it appears that many colleges ultimately offer lip-service to investigating what students are here to do in the world. In this way, considering several pedagogical ecologies may be useful for colleges to systematically integrate life-giving language, perspectives, and practices into their pedagogy.

Pedagogical Ecologies

At the outset, it is important to note that the core of the term *ecology* refers to relationships. Pedagogical ecologies form a spectrum that describes how college students orient their lives in relationship with work post-graduation. On one end of the spectrum, graduates consider work as *taking from life*. Consequently, purpose and meaning are perceived to be held outside of “work” and inside of “life.” On the other end of the spectrum, work is related in terms of *giving to life*. Given that “life” and “work” are in more intimate relationship on this life-giving end of the spectrum, graduates are offered more direct access to genuinely meaningful work.

Drawing on well-established research (e.g., Dewey, 1916; Network for Vocation in Undergraduate Education, n.d.; Seligman, 2004; Wrzesniewski, et al., 1997, etc.), I now briefly introduce these three pedagogical ecologies: *taking jobs*, *picking careers*, and *calling vocations* (Almond, 2022). With the strong majority of colleges obsessed with ensuring graduates are prepared for taking jobs and picking careers, it is only a small minority of students who are nourished to listen for calling vocations. Briefly, when students are prepared for taking jobs, their concerns are mostly concrete—that is, graduates consider work as an economic necessity for life, relate with work as an occupation that holds life hostage, and are primarily interested in a paycheck (Almond, 2022). With this ecology, “life” and “work” compete against each other as expressed in phrases, such as “days on and days off” and “another day, another dollar” (Almond, 2022). When students are oriented towards picking careers, they commonly engage more subtle concerns relating to social standing, benefits, and advancing on a well-defined track within an established profession. With work that is personally and professionally satisfying, “life” and “work” are commonly balanced, as reflected in the phrase “work-life balance” (Almond, 2022).

In stark contrast to the active, lock-step nature of jobs and careers, calling vocations involves firstly listening in a receptive voice—a still, small voice of calm and a different voice (Gilligan, 1993)—that understands “... (b)efore I can tell my life what I want to do with it, I must listen to my life telling me who I am” (Palmer, 2000, p. 4). Less oriented towards prematurely searching for a job and planning for a career, this ecology is firstly receptive to listen for the responses to life-giving inquiries, such as “Is the life I am living the same as the life that wants to live through me?” (Adapted from Palmer, 2000) and “What work uses the whole of me?” (Adapted from Cope, 2012). Educational activist Parker Palmer (2000) describes the compelling strength of calling vocations as “... something I can’t not do, for reasons I’m unable to explain to anyone else and don’t fully understand myself but that are nonetheless compelling” (p. 4). Theologian Frederick Buechner (1973) relays that calling vocations rest at the crossroads where one’s deep gladness and the world’s hunger overlap.

Examples of the Pedagogical Ecologies

The pedagogical ecologies are perennial across classic literatures. Poet Robert Frost, whose life was dedicated to purposefully becoming more fully who he uniquely was (Cope, 2012), nicely illustrates the pedagogical spectrum in *Two Tramps in Mud Time*. Like contemporary writers interested in purpose and meaning, Frost portrays *calling vocations* to be personally meaningful and beneficial to societies (Raymond, 2016). In this 1930’s era poem, a man who is chopping wood firstly for love is contrasted with two lumberjacks who are crudely working for need alone. Reflecting Frost’s lifework, the poem concludes triumphantly with the calling vocations’ wood chopper declaring that he lives to “... unite my avocation and my vocation as my two eyes make one in sight. Only where love and

need are one, and the work is play for mortal stakes, is the deed ever really done, for heaven and the future's sakes.”

Similar to Frost's classic poem, the ancient English parable of the bricklayers further demonstrates how the subjective meaning associated with work varies considerably. In this parable, three bricklayers are preparing to work at a church site. When asked what each man was doing, the first bricklayer said “I'm working hard laying bricks to feed my family.” The second bricklayer responded that “I'm building a wall.” The third bricklayer exclaimed with a gleam in his eye that “I'm building a great cathedral to The Almighty” (Baker, 2019; Duckworth, 2016). In addition to illustrating the spectrum from working firstly for need to working firstly for love, each bricklayer also identified his work using very different terms: a bricklayer, a builder, and a Cathedral builder. These identifications transcend and include what came earlier as each subjective meaning encompasses larger and larger wholes—in this case, from concrete function (i.e., bricklayer), to subtle identification (i.e., builder), to self-transcendent meaning (i.e., Cathedral builder).

Another example of how interior dimensions shape the way in which college graduates relate with genuinely meaningful work comes from poet Kahlil Gibran's near-century old classic, *The Prophet*. The exquisite passage on work begins with the guidance that “You work so that you may keep pace with the earth and the soul of the earth” (Gibran, 1923, p. 30). Gibran then portrays the social tendency to avoid work as stepping out of the rhythm that “marches in majesty and proud submission towards the infinite” (p. 30). Displacing the view of work as a curse and misfortune (i.e., working for need alone), Gibran portrays a relationship with work that is whole-hearted, unifying, and joyful (i.e., working firstly for love). In brilliantly illustrating how work is giving to life, Gibran concludes that “work is love made visible” (p. 34).

Concluding Reflections

These brief examples show how on the taking end of the spectrum, work is portrayed as a heavy burden that takes from life. In contrast, the giving end of the spectrum portrays work as a sacred responsibility that gives to life. Ultimately, this distinction reflects the survival dance and sacred dance described by indigenous elder Harvey Swift Deer (Plotkin, 2001). While the survival dance is what college graduates are paid to do, the sacred dance is the genuinely meaningful work that calls these same graduates into who they might become to mend a specific ache in the world.

Although I recognize that broader social, cultural, and institutional forces, such as everyday life pressures, privilege, and social capital, may actively work against enmeshing the sacred dance of calling vocations into college campuses, I also assert that the introspective receptivity of calling vocations represents an often-overlooked pedagogical perspective in higher education landscapes dominated by an often-utilitarian ethos. This is to say that mainstream colleges already excel with educating students to participate in the survival dance but do little to nourish students to delve into wisdom questions, such as the Zen koan that inquires: “Where does one step off of a 100-foot pole?”¹ Importantly, educational administrator Tim Clydesdale (2015) points out that:

¹ A koan is an unanswerable question repeated until the thinking mind gives up to reveal the silence of unknowing. Wisdom scholar Roger Walsh differentiates these unanswerable wisdom questions from the answerable knowledge questions.

To call on purpose is not to ask colleges and universities to go beyond their core mission; it is to ask that they *intentionally* and *systematically* implement their already existing pledge—to produce purposeful, globally engaged citizens and to do so with broader inclusivity than they may have ever done so before. (p. xviii)

In an age of fulfillment, mainstream colleges would be wise to integrate these sorts of life-giving language, perspectives, and practices intentionally and systematically into their pedagogy. In support of this aspiration, I offer a practical recommendation to integrate the calling vocations ecology into both college campuses and individual classrooms:

- 1) *College Campuses*—Drawing on evidence from the 88 college campuses that participated in the Lilly Endowment Inc.'s \$225 million grant for the Theological Exploration of Vocation initiative, Clydesdale (2015) highlighted the value of campus-based purpose exploration and vocational discernment programs that include coursework, cocurricular activities, service learning, and internships. Presumably, the richness of this type of programming offers students direct engagement with practitioners of calling vocations. By implementing this campus-based recommendation, colleges can explicitly integrate the emerging language, perspectives, and practices of calling vocations alongside the prevailing language, perspectives, and practices of taking jobs and picking careers.
- 2) *Individual Classrooms*—In the classroom, educators might differentiate teaching practices by using the metaphor of a conveyor belt to scaffold students into the next pedagogical ecology. For example, a student who is narrowly viewing his education as a means to get a job can be nourished by both honoring the student's starting point and also including the language, perspectives, and practices of picking careers. Similarly, another student whose mindset is focused on success, status, and career advancement can be supported by also introducing the language, perspectives, and practices of calling vocations. In support of this recommendation, I close with Palmer's (2000) powerful reflection on calling vocations:

Vocation does not come from willfulness. I must listen to my life and try to understand what it is truly about—quite apart from what I would like it to be about—or my life will never represent anything real in the world, no matter how earnest my intentions. (p. 4)

Dr. Devon Almond's lifework involves supporting adult learners to become more wholly who they uniquely already are to mend a specific ache in their communities. He has worked with various geographically remote and rural colleges and universities across North America—spanning from the Yukon to Hawaii. Devon lives with his wife and daughter in a log cabin in the woods near Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

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