

# **My Work with a Purpose Journey**

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## **Introduction**

“Work with a purpose?” I wondered about this phrase as I pondered the Seminary e-newsletter article announcing the opportunity to participate in something called a “colloquy.” For the past several years I had hoped to find an opportunity to once again “work with a purpose,” and I had found the search arduous and exasperating. The purpose of my current job seemed clear: to “make enough money” to contribute to our household and pay for seminary. I thought this “colloquy” would be a nice opportunity—when I had “more time”—and I deleted that edition of the e-newsletter. After repeating this experience when spring semester rolled around, the word “colloquy” again caught my eye in the e-newsletter about eight months later. It was the start to the 2018-2019 school year, and though my job felt a bit more “purposeful,” this announcement again tugged at my heart as I read it. The colloquy was a chance to read four books and gather to discuss them with others pursuing graduate studies at Bethel. The books were centered around that catchy idea: “work with a purpose.” The strong emotions the idea of finding purposeful work had evoked in me prompted me to conclude that I could really benefit from reading books on this topic to discuss with others pursuing graduate education at Bethel, so I decided to apply. The excitement with which I received the offer to join this group was confirmation to me that God was giving me an opportunity to examine an idea whose roots went deep into my life’s journey toward vocation. As I opened the first book and began to read, the eyes of my soul opened wide with interest as I encountered the first author’s vision of purposeful work.

## **Work that Brings Joy**

Dr. Amy Sherman's book, *Kingdom Calling*, is where we began. Before the dedication and table of contents, she opens the book with a Bible verse: "May the favor of the Lord our God rest on us; establish the work of our hands for us—yes, establish the work of our hands" (Psalm 90:17). I was startled to see my grandfather's favorite verse on this page as I began my colloquy reading. This plea for the Lord to establish the work of our hands has always touched me because my grandpa had worked so hard unto the Lord all his life. Not only was he diligent and thorough at his profession as a mechanic specializing in farm implements, but also at volunteering his work to help those in need. My mom and her siblings often tell of how he insisted on stopping to help every time he spotted a car broken down on the edge of the road. It didn't matter to him that there were eight children waiting in the car with my grandmother; he desired to honor God at all times, and his tender heart was not able to pass by a stranded motorist when he knew his hands were able to mend the situation.

Having stopped to muse about my grandfather, I eagerly read the introduction of Sherman's book. She introduces the idea of work that can cause a city to rejoice. Citing a sermon and writing by Tim Keller based upon Proverbs 11:10, she introduces a group of people she calls "tsaddiqim"—the Hebrew word for righteous. She quotes Tim Keller:

"The righteous in the book of Proverbs are by definition those who are willing to disadvantage themselves for the community while the wicked are those who put their own economic, social, and personal needs ahead of the needs of the community" (Sherman, 16).

Since Proverbs 11:10 asserts, "When the righteous prosper, the city rejoices," Sherman describes how the prospering of the sort of people who share what they have will cause great joy in the surrounding community. This joy is powerful because it springs from the advance of Jesus' kingdom of light, topples injustice and brings peace to the oppressed and poor. This generosity of the "tsaddiqim" goes beyond merely giving to those in need, and instead provides opportunity for them to develop their potential for vocation, health, and economic wellbeing (Sherman, 17-18). However, Sherman goes on to lay out a problem which Michael Lindsay sets forth: many prospering Christians fail to meet the criteria of being "tsaddiqim;" they do not leverage their vocational power to promote the Kingdom of God. In fact, they likely have not heard the message that every Christian is called to join Jesus in bringing forth the kingdom of God by means of their everyday employment. This is the problem and challenge Sherman lays out and develops in this book (Sherman, 19-20). The solutions she proposes focused on mobilizing local churches to help members recognize the resources they do have which they can offer to bring rejoicing to those they touch. Her practical ideas for promoting God's kingdom inspired me to pray about what resources I have to offer even now as a member of my local church body.

### **Authentic Blessing in the Workplace**

After Sherman's book, we read Tom Nelson's *Work Matters*. Nelson addresses the need for Christians to see their work lives as their daily opportunity to serve God. He describes a mindset that has become entrenched in many Christian traditions, which he calls "the distortion of work dualism" (Nelson, 44). Within this distortion, Christians refer to "full-time Christian work" as that which only pastors or missionaries do. For "everyone else" however, the full-time work

they pursue is not, under this view, considered "Christian." Nelson goes on to explain that this mindset actually eats away at the sense of vocation for many Christians who have not chosen "full-time Christian work." They come to think of their life's work as having lesser spiritual value (Nelson, 44-45).

Nelson's description of this destructive thinking cut me to the core. Upon my conversion to Christianity at the impressionable age of 19, I was quickly swept up into this dualistic view. I decided to change my vocational goals radically, not only because of the teaching and tradition I received as a new Christian, but also as a result of my own new zeal to serve God. I left a huge secular university where I was excelling as a music performance major to transfer back to Minnesota and pursue a Biblical studies major at an excellent local Christian college. I was thoroughly convinced this was the right thing for my life and my calling. And I believe to an extent the Lord was calling me to focus on the scriptures and learning to teach and share them with others at this time. But as my career spanned out and I entered into children's ministry in a foreign country, I found myself often stretched and torn between my "full-time ministry" which occupied my days, and my "secular pursuits" of music making within the general community. I began to occupy roles within the ministry I was neither trained nor suited for professionally, and there I experienced an extreme increase in stress and frustration. I was perplexed as to why God would allow me to face such difficulties while I pursued my calling in a "ministry" setting. Meanwhile, as I went out to participate deeply in the local orchestral scene, I found myself a natural fit as my excellence as a French horn player brought me into many interesting and enriching situations. I loved interacting with people from varied backgrounds who shared a love for classical music and refined culture. Amazingly enough to me, I was able to interact with non-

Christians in ways that were often much more meaningful in the setting of the music scene than those occurring in my ministry setting. I truly felt the distress of this dualistic thinking, and this distress ultimately led to my departure from that ministry setting.

Reading Nelson's book challenged me as a prospective pastor. I see the need to combat "work dualism" thinking by encouraging those majority of people in the church who work "secular" jobs to see their work as important and potentially holy unto God. They can allow Jesus to make His kingdom known by the way in which they conduct themselves on the job, and often the testimony of their life at work can speak much louder about who Jesus is than a preacher or missionary can in a sermon or Bible study. Moreover, the effectiveness of their Christian witness will come primarily as they do their work with excellence and joy according to the gifts and talents they have been given by God.

### **God's Redemption of Work**

We next read Timothy Keller's book, *Every Good Endeavor*. In this work, Keller lays out the essential essence of work as a good aspect of God's creation, the distortion of work in our present fallen state, and the possibility for redemption of work through Christ. He makes an interesting point in his chapter entitled "Work as Cultivation," where he defines the work of subduing God's creation according to Genesis 1:28 as taking care of God's creation much like a caretaker would take care of someone else's property (Keller, 45). Furthermore, Keller explains that this subduing process consists of culture-building, the act of ordering a society within creation to allow flourishing of both creation and creatures (Keller, 47). As I pondered this definition of work, I became encouraged with all the ways God's goodness can be seen in many

modes of work. I see the importance of linking the provision of goods and services with God's gracious provision for his creation. I realize this will encourage Christians to see their vocations as important to the enriching work of subduing God's creation.

Understanding work as contributing to the flourishing of God's creation gives dignity and meaning even to mundane jobs that are not linked to their immediate results. Keller illustrates the seeming pointlessness of work by highlighting our present economy, which can separate a worker from the end-product of his labors. Due to ultra-specialized jobs that increase company efficiency, the meaning and purpose of daily job tasks can easily get lost (Keller, 99). Understanding this could help someone who is feeling stuck in a mundane job that pays the bills, especially if the end-product they are contributing toward provides goods or a service that promotes flourishing. As a pastor, I would like to help foster a sense of contribution to God's world in someone stuck in a miserable job; however, I would also want to help them find a way into a more fulfilling role that would allow them to flourish personally on the job.

Reading Keller's chapter entitled "A New Compass for Work" gave me some insight that I would like to use to help others, and myself, on the journey to finding purpose in the workday. Keller highlights the importance of wisdom in discerning a career direction or change. He sees the beginning of wisdom as one's relationship with God and suggests strategies such as studying the book of Proverbs and inviting the Holy Spirit to guide our thinking about choice in profession (Keller, 215-216). I came away from this reading with an increased desire to approach my vocation and calling with a spirit of wisdom and an understanding that God does desire to guide his people in professional choices.

## **Work's Earnings: Perspective on Money**

The final colloquy book, Brad Hewitt and James Moline's *Your New Money Mindset*, impacted me in a deep way as it spoke to the heart of my mindset on money. Hewitt and Moline include a research-based assessment with this book that is accessed free online. The assessment measures four continuums that describe aspects of our relationships with money: freedom, community, contentment, and calling (Hewitt and Moline, 49). Having taken the assessment, I read the subsequent chapters describing each continuum and came to a new level of insight into my relationship with money, and how it truly affects the way I prioritize my time.

Particularly illuminating to me was the chapter entitled "Longing for More," in which the shortfall of chasing after acquisitions was described in detail. Moline's experience working as a clinical psychologist has shown him that a drive to acquire material goods is often evidenced in things such as not having time for relationships or failing to keep commitments and promises (Hewitt and Moline, 147). I was surprised to see some of these symptoms in myself. It made sense, however, because I showed need to improve in the "contentment" continuum in my assessment. This chapter gave rise to a time of prayer for me, and I committed to re-align my heart to a place of greater contentment with what I have been given already. As I look forward to a vocation of pastoral work, I am often reminded of the reality that I am not going into this line of work in order to achieve a "pay raise." It will be crucial for me to continually cultivate a mindset of contentment and to actively practice generosity as a way of affirming that God truly will provide enough for everyone—including me—which is a mindset of those who live in contentment (Hewitt and Moline, 162). Only as I actively practice this mindset will I be able to

pursue the pastoral vocation to which God has called me, and to then encourage others to do the same.

## **Conclusion**

As I reflect on my new vision of purposeful work, my mind comes back around to my grandfather. As a lifelong mechanic, he continuously devoted his hands to the betterment of this world through fixing cars, tractors, and farm implements. Living in communities in which farming was a major source of livelihood, he provided the means for many to continue to yield a harvest from the ground, enabling the community to flourish. But this is "only" what was done on the clock. At home, he made sure that his hard-earned money was used to send each of his eight children to Christian school. He valued service to God and raising his children in Christian faith above all. And after retirement, all his children graduated and grown, he continued to volunteer his time at the local tractor and implement dealership, working alongside the mechanics to help the business run smoothly. In volunteering at his former workplace, he continued to serve his purpose beyond simply "making money." In his retirement he also sent me support money when I was serving overseas as missionary, showing that he believed in the work I was doing to share the love of Christ with children. I think God established the work of his hands, and I think he exemplified working with a purpose. I hope I can stay true to God's purpose for me as he did, and in doing so, encourage others to do the same.

## References

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