

A Curricular Framework for Traversing into the Valley of Vocation

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Abstract

This article introduces a U-shaped curricular framework for people to traverse into the valley of vocation. In addition, I present three educational orientations related to life and work and discuss the relationship between one's work and the larger whole of life. The framework and the discussion are useful to support alternative education's aspiration to unfold the potential of the whole self over the whole of life, as well as my personal vision for people to become more fully who they uniquely already are to mend a specific ache in the everyday world.

Keywords: Vocational Discernment, Educational Orientations, Human Development, Theory U

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Alternative education aspires to unfold the potential of the whole self over the whole of life. This educational aspiration supports my personal vision: *people become more fully who they uniquely already are to mend a specific ache in the everyday world*. Realizing this vision commonly involves traversing into the valley of vocation. In what follows, I present three educational orientations related to life and work; discuss the relationship between one's work and the larger whole of life; and finally offer a U-shaped curricular framework to support a vision of vocation (Scharmer, 2016). All of this is in service of former American first lady Eleanor Roosevelt's observation that rather than more vacation, the world needs more vocation (Zur, 2010).

Educational Orientations

The systems, structures, and processes of education relate to life and work in various manners. The spectrum of these educational orientations shapes how students, themselves, orient to life and work. Drawing on a wide range of philosophical, organizational, and positive psychology literature (e.g., McGregor, 1960; Seligman, 2004; Wrzesniewski, et al., 1999;), I briefly introduce three philosophical orientations to describe how people relate to life and work:¹

Taking Jobs

In this job orientation, workers are essentially held hostage (i.e., occupied) by their often indiscriminately held *occupations*. Work is unreflectively viewed as a means-to-an-end and a concrete necessity in life. Life and work are strictly divided in terms of work and play. With this orientation, workers believe happiness, meaning, and fulfillment are located outside of work and

¹ It should be noted that the (un)wholesome effects of these educational orientations may not materialize until students engage in the workplace. These educational orientations are described more fully in Almond, D. (Oct. 2020). Education for Life-Work: Integrating Hand, Head, and Heart. *Philosophical Studies in Education*, 158-169.

inside of life. As such, workers receive income and benefits to support their personal lives outside of work. To demonstrate, while working in the oilsands of Northern Alberta, I often heard phrases, such as “days on and days off,” “another day, another dollar,” “working hard or hardly working?,” and “work hard, play harder.” This orientation clearly prefers jobs that do not interfere with personal lives and do not require a personal connection to the workforce.

Interestingly, the etymology of the word job points to *the torture of devouring a chunk of work*.

Picking Careers

In this career orientation, workers are no longer held hostage by occupation. Rather, workers experience the free will, agency, and distinction of “picking” (i.e., actively choosing and identifying with) their *professions*. Consequently, workers profess a faith in their career choice and often identify themselves in terms of the profession. With work that is personally and professionally satisfying, life and work become less divisive as workers pursue life/work balance. More process-oriented and personally connected to the workforce, workers self-improve and professionally develop in support of upward mobility, raises, promotions, and the associated social standing. This orientation is the dominant success narrative passively inherited by students at mainstream colleges and universities across North America. Interestingly, the etymology of the word career points to *a carriage trying to get to the end as fast as it can* (while also being engaged in mostly satisfying work).

Calling Vocations

In this calling orientation, workers listen for, and respond to, the intuitive guidance of a compelling life-force—a sense of self that originates not from the ego-logic of the everyday self, but from the eco-logic of a deeper, higher more generative self who is in relationship with the more encompassing whole of life. No longer held hostage by occupations or strongly identifying

with professions, workers courageously discern and wholly embrace their *vocations*. More akin to a meandering pilgrimage than a ladder of success, work is held in service of the larger ecology of life. Since work, itself, is purposeful, meaningful, and fulfilling, workers often nurture relationships and re-arrange working duties to further support this life-work integration. While the Taking Jobs orientation fragments life and work and the Picking Careers orientation balances life and work, the Calling Vocations orientation tends to weave together life and work. Notably, the etymology of the word vocation refers to listening for, and responding to, *voice*.

Whole of Life

Of the three orientations, Calling Vocations is most fully in relationship with the larger whole of life. Yet, often this whole of life is backgrounded to educational systems, structures, and processes that foreground ego-logical dimensions, such as safety, security, and status. In her positive adult development work, Terri O’Fallon (2015) portrays a plant seedling that has all the elements it needs to flourish (e.g., soil, water, etc.), but is held in a container with a lid on it. Allowing the seedling to become more fully who it uniquely already is requires removing the lid. By emphasizing exterior elements, such as safety, status, and security, at the expense of the interior, mainstream education often prematurely closes the lid on vocation and consequently limits students’ horizons to Taking Jobs and Picking Careers. The unwholesome effects of perpetuating the status quo point to a cultural shadow that limits Calling Vocations. Poet David Whyte (2001) contrasts the rich, living quality of nourishing vocational possibilities with the cultural shadow of prematurely closing the lid:

Through work, human beings earn for themselves and their families, make a difficult world habitable, and with imagination, create some meaning from what they do and how they do it. The human approach to work can be naïve, fatalistic, power-mad,

money-grubbing, unenthusiastic, cynical, detached, and obsessive. It can also be selflessly mature, revelatory and life giving; mature in its long-reaching effects, and life giving in the way it gives back to an individual or society as much as it has taken. Almost always it is both, a sky full of light and dark, with all the varied weather of an individual life blowing through it. (p. 3)

Whyte (2001), like many other poets, portrays work as a pilgrimage that endures over the whole of life. Enacting this sort of pilgrim's mindset can liberate people from educational orientations that evoke fatalistic, power-mad, and money-grubbing relationships with life and work. Whereas liberating structures that facilitate slowing down and stepping out of this mainstream malaise commonly rest outside the purview of conventional education, curricular frameworks to systematically remove the lid are within the wheelhouse of alternative education. In this sense, alternative education is wisely and well-situated to create the conditions for the emergence of what philosopher Plato called a divine spark (Rowland, 2018). In contrast to the anxieties, stresses, and strains commonly associated with mainstream education, this sort of emergent spark might be richly localized in alternative education settings that are grounded by generative love, inner spaciousness, and quiet reflection. Whether applied in homeschooling, free schooling, or alternative college programs, traversing into the valley of vocation requires deepening into the stillness and silence that underlies the noisiness of mainstream education.

Calling Vocations ultimately points to unfolding the potential of the whole self over the larger whole of life. It is about how people live and work in relationship with the whole of life. Related to this, minister Wayne Muller's (1997) book *How Then, Shall We Live?* is organized around four questions. I loosely draw on these questions to frame a few observations that are foundational for removing the lid and traversing into the valley of vocation.

Who am I?

How people address this question shapes subsequent action (Cope, 2012). For our purposes, let's recognize two dimensions of self: (1) the everyday self of personality, interests, and preferences and (2) the deeper, higher more generative self whose ground of being is in relationship with the larger whole of life.² More succinctly, developmental coach Martha Beck (2001) refers to these dimensions as the social and essential selves, respectively. The first dimension, which operates through an ego-logic, asks questions, such as "What do I need or want in life and work?" The second dimension, which operates through an eco-logic, flips the direction of the inquiry to ask: "What does life need or want of me? How will I respond to this calling through my work?" Educational activist Parker Palmer (2000) poignantly draws attention to these dimensions by asking: "Is the life I am living the same as the life that wants to live in me?" (p. 6). An affirmative response to Palmer's inquiry likely means that the ego-logical dimensions of personhood are in service to the eco-logical dimensions.

What do I love? What people offer care and attention to in the everyday world is an indication of their love (Muller, 1997). Like the self-identification question, this question also points to multiple dimensions of love: love as the everyday self and love as the deeper, higher, more generative self. Borrowing the language of social change scholar Adam Kahane (2009), let's name this as degenerative and generative love. While degenerative love tends to the ego-logical concerns of the everyday self, generative love points to the courage to unite fragments in relationship with the whole of life. This is to say that generative love reveals hidden connections, relationships, and wholeness. When applied to life and work, these eco-logical dimensions of

² Like the three philosophical orientations to describe how people relate to life and work, these dimensions of self are intended to reflect a spectrum more than dualisms.

generative love pivot on the courage to morph wounds into gifts, so that they might eventually mature to mend a specific ache in the everyday world. As portrayed by mythologist Joseph Campbell (1990), it is the wound that often sparks a transformative odyssey of generative love.

How shall I live, knowing I will die?

Embedded within generative love is a vital understanding that life and work as we know it continuously pass. Core to Calling Vocations is addressing a need in the everyday world through the essential constellation of love (e.g., passion), suffering (e.g., wound), and joy (e.g., pleasure). To illustrate this latter element, briefly consider the story of social change leader Martin Luther King's mentor Howard Thurman, who was once asked by a reporter what the world needs. His response: "Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive and go do it because what the world needs is people who have come alive" (Doblmeier, 2019). While this spark of aliveness is vitally important as a starting point, a passionate outpouring that does not also address a specific ache in the everyday misses the eco-logical mark. Vitally, theologian Frederick Buechner (1973) relays that vocation rests at the crossroads where one's deep gladness and the world's hunger overlap.

What is my gift to the family of the Earth?

Knowing the gifts that are yours to offer to the whole of life ensures that people are not simply indifferent volunteers. Depth psychologist Bill Plotkin explains: "The gift you carry for others is not an attempt to save the world but to fully belong to it. It's not possible to save the world by trying to save it. You need to find what is genuinely yours to offer the world before you can make it a better place (2003, p. 13)" Likewise, religious texts are ripe with insights for work that uses the whole of the self over the whole of life. The Hindu text *The Bhagavad Gita* asserts that it is better to do our work imperfectly than to master someone else's work (Easwaran, 2007).

The Buddhist text *The Dhammapada* suggests we are wise to locate our work, and then give ourselves to it with all of our hearts (Easwaran, 1986). Similarly, the Gospel of Thomas states that “(i)f you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you” (Cope, 2012, xviii).

Traversing into the Valley of Vocation

Calling Vocations involves traversing into the valley of vocation to discern an essential constellation of love (e.g., passion), suffering (e.g., wound), and joy (e.g., pleasure). Leadership scholar Otto Scharmer’s (2016) Theory U framework guides people to gradually descend from the ego-logical concerns of the everyday self into a U-shaped valley to access the longings of the deeper, higher, more generative self. At the bottom of the valley, people allow responses to emerge relating to the broad questions of “Who is the self? What is my work?”³

It is timely to stress that emergence flourishes by softening the intellectual edges of the everyday self. Theory U is anchored in an understanding that the essence of reality is an unbroken wholeness (Reams, 2011). Deepening into this more generative hidden wholeness necessitates a humility of mind and openness to enter into unknown horizons. This way of knowing is not merely an intellectual or mental process; rather, it is a deeply spiritual process (Reams). Homeschooling educators Miriam Mason Martineau and Stephen Martineau (2011) elaborate:

Rather than primarily looking at where you have come from and being informed by the past as to where you must go, we invite you to become still and present with an

³ Just as asking “Who is the self?” also necessitates discerning “Who is *not* the self?,” asking “What is my work?” also points to inquiring into “What is *not* my work?” This eco-logical inquiry of “Who” is distinct from the ego-logical inquiry of mainstream cultures that suggest people start with “Why.”

inner orientation to listening for what lies ahead. Allow yourself a moment to sense the unknown quality of this inquiry, with curiosity and alert receptivity (p. 227).

In descending into the bottom of the valley, people let go of their ego-logical concerns and empty personality-level identities into a state of beginner's mind. Traversing into this wise place of unknowing supports people to access what Jewish traditions refer to as the *still, small voice*. Similar to human development scholar Carol Gilligan's (1993) call for a feminine voice to be included in the prevailing cultural narrative, this different voice is receptive, contextual, and eco-logical in relationship with the larger whole of life. Like the traditions of indigenous vision quests that support walking quietly into the woods to catch a glimpse of one's precious wildness, listening in this different voice can open people to a homecoming of profound belonging. In this homecoming at the bottom of the valley, people can glean into the essence of who they really are as the foundation for their becoming (e.g., Who is the self?), while their vision for the world *mended* can also become the hallmark of their work (e.g., What is my work?). This is listening for, and responding to, Calling Vocations.

With the clear discernment of Calling Vocations, people can then ascend back up out of the valley into the world of the everyday self with a *bold* directionality—that is, a Being and Becoming Orienting Direction that is guided by the wisdom of the deeper, higher more generative self. Henry David Thoreau (1910) located this eco-logical niche in the stillness of silence of solitude in the woods surrounding Walden Pond. Jane Goodall (1999) followed the essential threads of meaning in her research with chimpanzees in the jungles of West Africa. For social change leaders Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, Harriet Tubman, and Mahatma Gandhi (Cope, 2012) to name a few, callings clearly emerged through the immediate life conditions that brought together a unique constellation of love, suffering, and joy.

Conclusion

The aspirations of alternative education nicely support Calling Vocations. In contrast to the everyday self, which aims to acquire what the ego-logic of the personality wants in life and work, the deeper, higher more generative self operates through an eco-logic that boldly supports Calling Vocations. This eco-logic listens for a still, small voice to offer guidance to questions, such as “What does life want of me? How will I respond to this calling through my work?” Rather than actively constructing a trajectory for life and work, this dimension of self is more receptive, contextual, and eco-logical in relationship with the whole of life. The U-shaped curricular framework introduced in this article offers a powerful map to traverse into the valley of vocation and support *people to become more fully who they uniquely already are to mend a specific ache in the everyday world.*

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