

# Introduction

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was in Penn Station in New York City on the Friday afternoon following 9/11. Always busy at the end of the week, the place was overwhelmingly so, since the government had shut down all the local airports for security reasons. Vast numbers of people were desperate to get out of the city, and Penn Station was one of the few ways out.

One of the desperate ones was a businessman who had just missed his train to DC only to discover that he had no chance of another seat until Sunday evening. Suitcase on wheels swerving behind him, he plowed furiously through the crowd screaming obscenities at a woman (presumably his wife) who seemed to be the reason for his misfortune.

As he was carrying on, something very different caught my ear. At first I could not identify it, but gradually I recognized it as applause. It began at the far end of the terminal and steadily grew until it filled the station. It was deep and sustained: not the raucous “hooting” variety of applause that erupts in Madison Square Garden when the New York Rangers score, but rather something the likes of which I had never heard in a public place. Mystified, I searched for its source, and when I discovered it, I understood. A company of firefighters was making its way through the terminal, presumably to the subway, to continue its trek to ground zero. I joined in the applause and wept as they passed by.

By summer 2002, record numbers of firefighters and police were retiring from their respective departments in New York City. I wonder whether one of the reasons is this: the immense social value attached to firefighting and police work because of 9/11 is not sustainable over time. In other words, many in these professions are beginning to experience a crisis of meaning now that the intense work is over and they are back to business as usual.

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*Business as Usual*

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“Business as usual” can be pretty dull, and we all face it much of the time. This is true whether we are changing diapers, doing research, preparing another lesson, trying to resolve another personnel spat at work, wrestling with another set of math problems for school, lingering “on call” at the fire station, or preparing another report for a client. Regardless of how we fill our hours, whether we get paid for what we do or volunteer, whether our work is recognized as “legitimate”

by mainstream culture or not, we all struggle at times with the meaning of it all.

What adds to the dullness of “business as usual” is a widespread loss of meaning in modern culture. Professor Allan Bloom’s 1987 portrait of students still applies:

The souls of young people are in a condition like that of the first men in the state of nature—spiritually unclad, unconnected, isolated, with no inherited or unconditional connection with anything or anyone. They can be anything they want to be, but they have no particular reason to want to be anything in particular. Not only are they free to decide their place, but they are also free to decide whether they will believe in God or be atheists, or leave their options open by being agnostic; whether they will be straight or gay, or, again, keep their options open; whether they will marry and whether they will stay married; whether they will have children—and so on endlessly. There is no necessity, no morality, no social pressure, no sacrifice to be made that militates going in or turning away from any of these directions, and there are desires pointing toward each, with mutually contradictory arguments to buttress them.<sup>1</sup>

We enjoy unbridled freedom and seemingly unlimited options, but they exist in a social milieu that has no coherent “story.” We are free to be ourselves, but we are fuzzy about who we are and how we fit in with what is going on around us. We lack vision, in other words, and because we lack vision we lack the passion we need to cut our way through the inevitable setbacks and frequent dullness in whatever we have set out to

1. Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), 87.

do. In the absence of a story that connects us to what is going on around us (and to other people), life grows lonely and its purpose often shrinks down to the hollow and even frantic pursuit of whatever pays the biggest dividends (emotionally, spiritually, or materially).

This book addresses our quest for meaning. It is a book about what people of an earlier age described as “calling”—about finding our place in the scheme of things. In the pages ahead we will address a number of related questions: How do we discover our calling? Should we expect our working lives to correspond to our callings, or is calling something deeper? If calling is deeper than work, does that make work essentially meaningless? If calling is deeper than work, does it make work little more than a means to something else? Do we, for example, study for no other reason than to get good grades; do we work hard at our jobs for no other reason than to get a promotion or more pay?

How are we to interpret the dreariness and frustration that so often beset our work? Are certain types of work inherently more valuable, or more spiritual, than others? Who determines the significance of our life work: Is firefighting significant only when Penn Station applauds firefighters? Is a career as a concert pianist worthwhile only if our parents and friends say it is? Or are we, and we alone, the ones who determine the value of our lives' direction? Should we abandon that path whenever our sense of purpose or satisfaction in that path begins to wane?

It won't be long before you discover that I am writing from a faith perspective. Please don't let that put you off if you are coming from a different place. I think you will see that crucial parts of what I have to say will resonate with your own life

experience. And I hope you will find that the less familiar things also resonate—in a different way. A fresh understanding of your deepest experience can open up unsuspected opportunities for growth. You may even find yourself giving the Christian faith another (or first) look. One of the reasons I am a believer is that Christian faith “fits” life as it really is. Perhaps you will discover this yourself.

*Four Big Ideas: Switchbacks on a Mountain Trail*

We will address the questions surrounding life purpose in the context of four great ideas:

- Human life comes with built-in purpose.
- Something goes wrong with how we express our purpose.
- What gets ugly and destructive can be remade beautiful and right.
- What we do matters, because we are going somewhere.

If pursuing my life purpose is like trekking up a tall mountain, then these four ideas are like switchbacks along the way. A spectacular vision awaits me at the top, but I won't get there without following a trail that at times seems to double back on itself. Sometimes, for example, the great news that my life has a built-in purpose (idea one) may seem to be contradicted by the distressing news that something is terribly wrong with my efforts to express that purpose (idea two).

Let me put these realities together into one rather sinuous sentence. “Your life is not random . . . *but* it's not ‘OK just the

way it is' . . . *yet* you aren't hopelessly stuck . . . *and* what you do counts for much more than any of those momentary gains coming from instant gratification or ego gratification." These four ideas aren't contradictory or even paradoxical. They are switchbacks, like the turnings in a good story, a real-life story that is going somewhere. A clear-minded understanding of your life purpose (one that is both realistic and hopeful) has to take all four of these things into account.<sup>2</sup>

Here are the technical words for describing these four big ideas: creation, fall, redemption, and consummation. Chapter 1 paves the way for our discussion by making the case for a cosmos in which the notion of calling (and the Caller that it presupposes) makes sense. Chapter 2 defines calling as we will be using the term. Chapters 3 through 20 open up something of the meaning of the four "big ideas." The book concludes with a brief chapter offering some practical advice on next steps. The appendix tells the stories of a number of folks in my New York congregation, stories that will help illustrate how the "big ideas" work themselves out in real life.

At the end of each chapter you will find a series of questions or exercises. Their purpose is to help you internalize and apply the material in the chapter. You will find them useful for either individual reflection or group discussion.

2. I am indebted to David Powlison for the switchback metaphor and much of the language in the previous two paragraphs.