Counseling Psychology as a Pathway for Living a Calling

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Like many counseling psychologists, I talk about Frank Parsons from time to time. I mention his status as the “father of vocational guidance.” I describe his mission in establishing the Vocation Bureau of Boston back in 1908, which was to help provide more options for poor and working class immigrants. And I offer up the famous quote from his skinny, posthumously-published book *Choosing a Vocation*, the quote that lays out the basis of person-environment fit theory. The idea that “a wise choice of a vocation” involves understanding one’s uniqueness, exploring opportunities, and making a match builds on the psychology of individual differences and focuses on human strengths, thereby placing the model squarely in counseling psychology’s wheelhouse.

I’ve found that for most people, this is as far as it goes in terms of familiarity with Parsons. Granted, the available history is sparse, but those who have done some digging[[1]](#endnote-1) have found a fascinating personal story revealing remarkable irony. Consider:

* Parsons graduated at age 18 with an engineering degree from Cornell. He took a job on the

engineering staff at a railroad company. The company went under, and Parsons was let go.

* Unable to find another engineering job, Parsons worked as a steel mill laborer. He hated it.
* Within a year, he left the steel mill for a public school teaching job near Boston.
* Admired for his debating skills, Parsons decided to study law. However, he prepared so hard

for the bar exam (which he passed) that he developed health problems, culminating in “some

kind of general breakdown.”

* On medical advice, he “lived in the open” for three years in New Mexico.
* At age 30, he returned to Boston to practice law.
* After 10 years as an attorney, moonlighting as a law school lecturer, he ran for mayor of

Boston. He finished with less than 1% of the vote.

* From there he moved to Manhattan, Kansas, to teach economics and social sciences at what is

now Kansas State University. Three years later, he was fired.

It was after that firing in Kansas that Parsons finally persuaded a philanthropist in Boston to fund the Vocation Bureau. However, the summer after the Bureau opened he got very sick, and a few months after that, he died from a kidney infection. This, friends, is our father of “vocational guidance.” His own career path was a convoluted pattern of trials and errors—and his experience as a career counselor amounted to a grand total of about six months!

I love this story in part because I can relate to it. My own journey is hardly Parsons-esque, but it is similarly laden with irony.[[2]](#endnote-2) As an undergraduate at Calvin College, I had a heart for helping people, I liked to write, and I was a good student, but I was chronically undecided. My problem was I was interested in all kinds of things, and the thought of choosing one career path, when it meant *not* choosing several others that were really appealing to me, left me nearly paralyzed. Furthermore, as a person of faith, I was primed to approach career decision-making as part of a broader process of discerning God’s will for my life. I wanted to discern my calling. Yet after months of praying over the matter, I hadn’t yet experienced the burning-bush-type sign that I expected. Finally, I made an appointment for career counseling. Part of the discussion with my counselor, the late Bob Reed, went something like this:

Bob: We can look at your test results, but think about my job for a minute. I get to be creative and help people all day long. What do you think about what I do?

Me: I’ve been considering it.

Bob: Do you have a good GPA?

Me: I’ve been doing pretty well.

Bob: Why not get your PhD in counseling psychology?

After this I walked back to my dorm room, called my parents, and told them I had decided what to do with my career. Clearly, this isn’t a strategy many of us would recommend a counselor use with clients. But it didn’t come out of the blue, either—Bob knew me, and knew that I had spent plenty of time investigating psychology in general and counseling psychology in particular. This was not an uninformed choice; I simply needed a nudge to pursue it, one brimming with assurance and a vote of confidence. And anyway, part of the appeal of counseling psychology was its enormous breadth. Counseling psychologists teach, do research, work in private practice, consult with organizations, work in hospitals, etc. It was a perfect choice, because it effectively delayed the decision of what I should be when I grew up.

Somehow I landed as a graduate student at the University of Minnesota. Jo-Ida Hansen saw something in me. I’m still not sure what, but she invested in me, created opportunities for me, encouraged me to capitalize on them, and modeled what it meant to be a productive, competent, and passionate professional. The “Minnesota point of view,” with its focus on individual differences, precise definitions, rigorous measurement, and practical application, offered an extremely valuable perspective that I could apply to new challenges. It also fit seamlessly with the Reformed Christian worldview that was (and is) core to my identity. When I started to work with clients at Minnesota’s career assessment clinic, I encountered many expressions of wanting to find meaning in work. Many clients used the word “calling” as they explored these concerns. Like the stereotypic wounded healer, I found myself reasonably successful at helping most of these clients forge a path that mattered to them, while still struggling with a sense of direction myself. I read a lot of philosophical and theological writing on meaningful work and a sense of calling, and I noticed that very little research had tackled such topics within psychology. Before long, my own calling started to crystallize. I found myself asking: If I didn’t use my training to explore this topic further, who will? As it turns out, plenty of others would, but nevertheless I felt that heading down this path was a way I could contribute something of value.

At the time I started trying to apply my Minnesota point of view to the notion that work can be pursued as a calling, there were a total of eight empirical studies on the topic within the social sciences. Less than a decade later, that number has increased tenfold. What have we learned? Lots. For example:

* A sense of calling is surprisingly prevalent. Across many samples of students and employees, anywhere from one-third to two-thirds indicate that the concept is relevant to how they view their work.
* A sense of calling is associated with positive career development outcomes. People with a calling are more confident that they can make good decisions about their careers, more committed to their jobs and organizations, more intrinsically motivated and engaged, and more satisfied with their jobs.
* A sense of calling is associated with general well-being, too. People with callings (compared to other people) are happier, more satisfied with life, cope more effectively with challenges, and express a stronger sense of meaning and purpose in their lives.
* It’s not about having it, it’s about living it. People who feel that they have a calling are happiest, most committed, and experience the most benefit when they are working in a job in which they feel they are able to express their calling and live it out.
* A sense of calling has some drawbacks, too. People willingly make tough sacrifices to pursue their callings, and sometimes trade some types of satisfaction and well-being (e.g., material wealth and comfort) for others (e.g., a sense of contribution). A sense of calling can also sometimes make people vulnerable to problems like workaholism, burnout, poor work-family balance, and exploitation by unscrupulous employers.

There is much more to be learned and applied, but so far, it has been a tremendous blessing to use counseling psychology as a pathway through which I have pursued my calling. In the end, all of this counts only if it inspires people to find and create ways to use their gifts to help redeem what is broken in the world and make it better. As this occurs, it is and will be due to shared efforts in a community of support. In my case, I was blessed to obtain a position at Colorado State University, where I have worked with world-class students, tireless colleagues, and administrators who have expected success, but also provided the support needed to make it possible. I have benefitted from partnerships with extremely bright and freakishly productive collaborators, people like Ryan Duffy at Florida, and CSU colleagues like Michael Steger and Kurt Kraiger. Like-minded Society for Vocational Psychology colleagues have also provided critical modeling and support. I maintain a lifeline with Jo-Ida, from whose mentorship I continue to benefit. And key allies from graduate school, most notably Andy Tix and Laura Pendergrass, remain a constant source of encouragement to me. Most important and endearing of all, though, is my family, including my parents, Jack and Sandra Dik, and my beloved wife Amy and our four sons, Eli, Silas, Abram, and Jasper. Fellow Status in APA and SCP is a humbling honor for which I am so grateful, but their love and support will always matter most.

1. Blocher, D. H. (2000). *The evolution of counseling psychology*. New York: Springer, 2000.

   Pope, M. & Sveinsdottir, M. (2006). Frank, we hardly knew ye: The very personal side of Frank Parsons. *Journal of Counseling and Development, 83*, 105-115. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Portions of what follow are drawn from Dik, B. J. (2010). On being called to counseling. In J. Koch, M. Trotter, S. Sanger, & T. Skovholt (Eds.), *Voices from the field: Defining moments in counselor development* (pp. 34-37). New York: Routledge. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)