

# BEING CALLED

Scientific, Secular, and Sacred Perspectives

*David Bryce Yaden, Theo D. McCall, and J. Harold Ellens,  
Editors*

Introduction by Martin Seligman

Psychology, Religion, and Spirituality

J. Harold Ellens, Series Editor



An Imprint of ABC-CLIO, LLC  
Santa Barbara, California • Denver, Colorado

Copyright © 2015 by David Bryce Yaden, Theo D. McCall, and J. Harold Ellens

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, except for the inclusion of brief quotations in a review, without prior permission in writing from the publisher.

### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Being called : scientific, secular, and sacred perspectives / David Bryce Yaden, Theo D. McCall, and J. Harold Ellens, editors ; introduction by Martin Seligman.

pages cm. — (Psychology, religion, and spirituality)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4408-3912-2 (alk. paper) — ISBN 978-1-4408-3913-9 (eISBN)

1. Psychology and religion. 2. Insight. 3. Spirituality. I. Yaden, David Bryce, editor. II. McCall, Theo D., editor. III. Ellens, J. Harold, 1932- editor.

BF51.B45 2015

155.2'5—dc23

2015014369

ISBN: 978-1-4408-3912-2

EISBN: 978-1-4408-3913-9

19 18 17 16 15 1 2 3 4 5

This book is also available on the World Wide Web as an eBook.  
Visit [www.abc-clio.com](http://www.abc-clio.com) for details.


Praeger

An Imprint of ABC-CLIO, LLC

ABC-CLIO, LLC

130 Cremona Drive, P.O. Box 1911

Santa Barbara, California 93116-1911

This book is printed on acid-free paper   
Manufactured in the United States of America

## CHAPTER 1

# CALLINGS AND THE MEANING OF WORK

*Amy Wrzesniewski*

The notion of work as a calling has attracted urgent interest in recent years. Students strive to discover what their calling might be, adults wonder how to connect with a sense of calling in their work, and scholars of work study and write on the dynamics of having a calling. The emphasis in popular culture on finding a calling, discovering one's life purpose, or simply doing meaningful work is difficult to ignore. In this chapter, I consider why callings may have attracted such deep interest and what it means for our understanding of the meaning of work.

In secular research traditions, a calling is traditionally defined as a meaningful beckoning toward activities that are morally, socially, and personally significant (Baumeister, 1991; Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985; Wrzesniewski, Dekas, & Rosso, 2009). While a calling can be understood to be the center of one's life, secular researchers have largely treated callings as expressed specifically through the domain of work. Interestingly, callings are simply one of many orientations or experiences individuals can have of their work; however, callings have stolen center stage in popular and scholarly interest. While other orientations toward work emphasize the pursuit of work in service of other ends (e.g., economic gain, career advancement), callings alone capture the most positive and deeply meaningful manifestation of the connection between people and their work (Wrzesniewski, 2010; Wrzesniewski, McCauley, Rozin, & Schwartz, 1997).

Scholars of work have traditionally studied callings from a secular perspective, in which the sense of calling is defined by the experience of the domain of work, rather than by a call from beyond the self. This is a departure

from a sense of calling that is deeply rooted in Judeo-Christian tradition and theology, a departure that has generated debate among scholars of work (e.g., Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Rosso, Dekas, & Wrzesniewski, 2010). In the Judeo-Christian tradition, individuals are "called" by God to their unique vocations and are expected to carry out their work in service of God and others (Calvin, 1574). John Calvin and Martin Luther, both Protestant theologians, have shaped modern understanding of religious callings in their influential writings on the service to God that one performs by engaging dutifully in whatever work one does on earth. Importantly, the perspective advanced by Calvin and Luther put God at the center of a calling, both as its source and its target. Callings were given and revealed by God to people, and people toiled in their callings in service and honor of their God.

The religious roots of the notion of a calling have left an important legacy for scholars of work. The idea that a calling is something every person is born with and can discover through processes of discernment has persisted, even when the source and target of callings have largely lost their religious connection. German sociologist Max Weber famously claimed that Calvin's idea of a calling is partly responsible for modern capitalism. In part, Weber claimed that callings helped to generate a "Protestant work ethic" that drove a movement of individual pursuit for success. Despite modern critiques of Weber's interpretation of Calvin, his perspective on the development of Western society greatly influenced scholarship on, and understanding of, the topic of callings.

As callings have increasingly lost their religious associations in modern times, they have gained associations with the self. Rather than understanding a calling as coming from God, to be pursued in service of God (or others), callings have taken on a self-referential cast. Individuals are more likely to attempt to discern a calling by reflecting on what they find most enjoyable, care most about, or have the deepest interest in, all while figuring out a way to pursue that as their work. Less apparent in modern times is the hand or voice of a religious source of these cues. Indeed, most definitions of calling are now focused in general on the individual experience of work as deeply meaningful and engaging, intrinsically motivating, and having a positive impact on the wider world (Dik & Duffy, 2012; Dobrow & Tosti-Kharas, 2011; Elangovan, Pinder, & McLean, 2010; Wrzesniewski et al., 1997). Meaningful work itself is overwhelmingly described in a range of research studies as a function of work that allows the self to feel authentic, fully expressed, or competent (Rosso et al., 2010). This renders a calling as a pursuit with overwhelmingly individual overtones. While Greek philosophers, including Aristotle (1912), argued that authentic fulfillment could be had through the pursuit of personally meaningful and intrinsically motivating activities, in the modern era, this focus potentially leaves individuals with few referents other than the self for understanding the meaning of their work.

The increased emphasis on individual, work-related meanings of a calling may simply be reflective of shifts in the role of work in society. As individuals spend more time working (Schor, 1992) and are more likely to define themselves and be defined by others through their work (Casey, 1995), the domain of work necessarily becomes more relevant to and referential of the self. If work is how we are defined by others, and how we define the self, then work that is somehow meaningful to the self takes on increased urgency.

While modern, secular callings are largely defined by work that is experienced as a meaningful end in itself, as defined by the self, the roots of service to something larger persist. For example, some scholars define callings as deeply fulfilling work that an individual believes makes the world a better place (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997). Others describe callings as being strongly prosocial combined with a strong sense of clarity of purpose (Elangovan et al., 2010). Still others contend that callings are an ultimate form of career success that transcends a particular job, while not emphasizing the service to some greater good (Dobrow & Tosti-Kharas, 2011; Hall & Chandler, 2005). Though the definitions vary, most scholars writing about callings in a secular sense emphasize the ways in which the work creates a sense of meaning by uniting the self with something larger. Bunderson and Thompson (2009), in their influential work on callings among zookeepers, have reunited callings with a sense that they come from a sense of destiny, thus hearkening back to the roots of religious callings that are given from beyond. Specifically, they note that a "sense of a calling is that place within the occupational division of labor in society that one feels destined to fill by virtue of particular gifts, talents, and/or idiosyncratic life opportunities" (p. 37). This neoclassical view of modern callings puts a sense of duty and moral responsibility to serving the greater good (or a higher power) at the center of what it means to be called.

Despite the ways in which the definitions of a calling differ, most modern conceptions of a calling share an assumption that it is the work itself that determines the deep level of meaning taken from it. However, researchers emphasize that callings are not the product of a particular kind of work. As Wrzesniewski and colleagues (1997) have suggested, many different kinds of work can be seen as one's calling, with similar effects. Rather, it is the view of the work as being a meaningful end in itself that somehow contributes to the world more broadly that imbues work with a sense that it is a calling. Of course, the same work can be experienced by others as "just a job" in which the focus is on working to make an income (a job orientation), or as a site for advancement and increased prestige and power (a career orientation; Bellah et al., 1985). While those with job or career orientations engage in work as a means to a financial or career achievement end, respectively, those with callings engage in work as an end in itself (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997). In both traditional and modern understandings of calling, there is an explicit assumption that callings can be enacted in any type of work and are

not exclusively reserved for work defined by others as worthy. What differs is whether the self has defined the work as being a calling, or it has been defined by one's God.

## WHY CALLINGS MATTER

Understanding the nature and dynamics of callings matters for individuals and organizations for several reasons. First and perhaps foremost is evidence suggesting that 20 percent of the variance in individual well-being is explained by the experience of work (Campbell, Converse, & Rodgers, 1976). The impact of work on well-being is likely greater now, when more pressure is put on the domain of work as a source of meaning and identity in life (Casey, 1995). If callings can be experienced in any line of work, then understanding the antecedents to this optimal experience of work matters for the promotion of positive impact of work in life. Of course, work represents a range of meanings beyond callings, and can just as easily be experienced as a source of alienation, pain, and dissatisfaction. More broadly, then, understanding the meaning of work across the full spectrum of human experience is an urgent research undertaking simply because of the depth of the impact of work on life. Second, more than any other activity, work consumes individuals' waking hours (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997). Given the centrality and focus work receives for most adults as a result, it becomes imperative to understand framings and experiences of work that seem to transform their experiences of a central domain of life.

From early research that associated a calling orientation toward work with greater job and life satisfaction, as well as more engagement with work in general (e.g., Dobrow, 2013; Wrzesniewski et al., 1997), callings have attracted attention due to their strong associations with thriving in work and life. Research has established a positive relationship between seeing work as a calling and finding work to be more meaningful, greater effort made at work, and stronger motivation to remain in a job, even if it no longer was paid (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Wrzesniewski et al., 1997). This body of research tends to investigate the outcomes of having a calling orientation toward one's specific job or occupation. In addition to positive effects for the self, this research shows that a sense of work as a calling drives identification with and attachment to the organizations of which those with callings are a part (Cardador, Dane, & Pratt, 2011). Indeed, those with callings report lower absenteeism from work and put in more hours—regardless of the type of occupation in which one works (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997).

The good news on callings for individuals and organizations extends to the increased effort and passion that those with callings bring to their work (Novak, 1996; Vallerand et al., 2003). While evidence on the performance implications of callings is still sparse, claims that callings are associated with better work performance have been made (Hall & Chandler, 2005).

Thus, callings appear to be ideal for both individuals and organizations. They augur satisfaction and engagement for the individual, and attachment, effort, and results for organizations. More recently, researchers have begun to consider the idea that callings might represent too much of a good thing, and can tip into an unhealthy or overly rigid attachment to work (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009) or biases that may deafen those with callings to the career advice of others (Dobrow & Tosti-Kharas, 2012). Further evidence suggests that among young musicians, the strength of one's calling orientation is associated with biased overestimation of one's own musical ability relative to ability as rated by outside experts (Dobrow, 2010). This bias may come at the cost of objective career success, as the pursuit of a music career in the face of data that one is not as talented as one thinks could end in frustration and failure. Alternatively, given that callings are associated with greater engagement and effort, perhaps musicians with callings grow into their positive view of their own talents through diligence, practice, and dedication in the development of their gifts (e.g., Dweck, 1986). Further, the positive impact of parents' calling orientations on their adult children's sense of work as a calling suggests that elements of investment, dedication, and passion are part of what gets passed between generations (Dekas & Baker, 2014).

Duffy and Dik (2013) further summarize research that notes the possibility that callings come with a dark side (see also Cardador & Caza, 2012). The risks they note seem to accrue mostly to those who have a calling orientation to a particular kind of work, but lack the opportunity to pursue that work in their actual jobs (e.g., Berg, Grant, & Johnson, 2010). For those lucky enough to find work in their calling, arguments and evidence have been offered to suggest that a sense of calling can contribute to unhealthy levels of focus on work that is out of balance with other life interests (see Duffy, Douglass, Autin, Chapter 2). However, others suggest that those with callings are less likely to suffer from stress, depression, and conflict between the work and nonwork spheres of their lives (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Oates, Hall, & Anderson, 2005; Treadgold, 1999). Further research is needed to better understand, using longitudinal designs, whether callings buffer individuals from negative experience in work and life, or whether the increased focus on work makes them more vulnerable to setbacks and frustrations in the expression of their callings.

## WHERE NEXT? PROMISING DIRECTIONS FOR UNDERSTANDING CALLINGS

While the concept of a calling has been with us for centuries, social scientists are relatively new to the questions they pose for individuals and institutions. However, great promise abounds in the findings summarized above and the directions they suggest for further inquiry on how individuals come

to have, experience, and live out their callings in modern contexts. It is a sign of the healthy development of research on callings that the topic has engendered so many different perspectives on their definition, expression, and source (Wrzesniewski, 2010). Below, I summarize the most important avenues for future research on the nature of callings.

First, productive engagement in academic dialogue among researchers is needed to begin to come to an understanding of what defines a calling. Debate persists on whether callings are defined by the enjoyment one has in pursuing work that is a calling, or by the (sometimes) grim sense of duty and service that accompanies a calling. Eudaimonic perspectives on human experience suggest that the prosocial element that accompanies many scholars' definitions of calling may be responsible for their positive effects in work and life. Understanding the unique contributions of the enjoyment, fulfillment, and service that callings represent will be important in reaching better definitional clarity. Otherwise, this developing field of inquiry runs the risk of remaining an attractive but ultimately disorganized and contradictory literature.

Second, this definitional clarity will help scholars of callings to converge around an agreed-upon way to measure the presence and strength of calling orientations. Currently, multiple measures of a calling exist and compete in a literature that reflects conflicting definitions of the construct (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Dobrow & Tosti-Kharas, 2011; Wrzesniewski et al., 1997). Chief among the contrasts among these measures is the question of whether a calling is the product of following one's career destiny, sensing a deep amount of meaning and contribution in the work, experiencing enjoyment and flow in the work, or some combination of these. Until the definitional debates on callings come to some resolution, the construct measurement issues will remain.

Third, while the accumulated findings on the experience of work as a calling are promising for individuals and organizations, much of this work has been correlational. Dobrow Riza and Heller's (in press) longitudinal research on callings among teenage musicians transitioning to adulthood is an exception; however, larger-scale long-term studies of a variety of occupations are necessary to discern how callings emerge and unfold over time. At this point, many of the studies most commonly cited regarding callings suffer from the possibility that it is the most satisfied, committed, and identified individuals who come to feel their work is a calling, rather than the reverse. A broader question is whether this reversal of causality would be a problem; if callings develop out a highly positive and satisfying experience of work that individuals find meaningful, as opposed to a sense of fate to do a type of work that has not yet been pursued, this would be a rather key development in the literature. To that end, longitudinal data suggest that when MBA graduates



successfully pursue the work they most wanted to do, they are significantly more likely to experience that work as a calling years later (Wrzesniewski, Tosti-Kharas, Tschopp, & Landman, working paper).

Fourth, in both popular culture and in existing studies, a tension exists between whether callings are treated as defined entities that exist in the world for each individual, waiting to be discerned or discovered, or as orientations toward work that develop over time as individuals experience and make meaning of the jobs they hold. It is possible that cultural and religious narratives that suggest that callings are objective facts in hiding, to be found through deep reflection and analysis, shape the ways in which individuals come to experience their work. In contrast, a narrative that assumes no single "perfect" calling to a particular kind of work but rather advances the possibility that many kinds of work may bring deep meaning, fulfillment, and service of the greater good could shape different relationships to the experience of a calling. It is not hard to imagine the search and consecutive disappointments of individuals following the first model, who may expect that the "right" work for them will be meaningful, fulfilling, and joyful. It is perhaps more realistic to subscribe to a belief that there may be several possible "callings" that may be imperfect but still meaningful expressions of fulfillment and contribution. Just as there is a stark difference between individuals who expect that there is one perfect life mate in the world for them and those who believe that there are perhaps several possible good matches with whom a meaningful life could be built, individuals who subscribe to (or write about) callings along one or the other model may be talking, acting, and writing past each other.

Fifth, there is an opportunity to move beyond a treatment of callings as existing in relation to a particular job or occupation to instead consider the possibility that individuals could view the domain of work more broadly as a calling. Most research to date has assessed callings as they exist for the current jobs of research participants. It would shed helpful light to study the impact of seeing the life domain of work as a calling instead. Without this perspective, it becomes impossible to discern who among those who see their work as a job, a career, or something else are sensing a degree of mismatch between how they see their work and how they think of the domain of work in an ideal sense. Indeed, the mismatch is likely a source of dissatisfaction and disinvestment from work more generally.

Sixth, while scholars of positive psychology and positive organizational scholarship have sought to understand what it is that helps individuals, groups, and organizations to thrive, the dynamics and processes uncovered in both fields are best understood against a backdrop of the full range of human experience. Specifically, callings are but one orientation individuals can have toward their work. Early work canvassing a broad set of occupations

suggests that they comprise only one-third of the experiences individuals have of their work, with job and career orientations representing the rest (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997). Future work should concentrate on the broad swaths of the population who labor in work in that they see in terms rather different than the positive and enthusiastic cast supplied by callings.

## CONCLUSION

Areas of great promise abound in the future of callings research. Callings contain the seeds of what makes us fully human in our work, in our expression of self, of spiritual belief, of connection to humanity, or any combination of these. Building on the promising progress that has been made to better understand the antecedents and consequences of callings will be critical to this area of inquiry going forward in a productive way. The function of a calling in individual life, organizations, and society as a whole is only beginning to be understood. In this understanding lies great promise for helping to shape the relationship between individuals and their work so that those who yearn to experience a calling may know one.

## REFERENCES

- Aristotle (1912). *Politics*. London: J.M. Dent and Sons.
- Baumeister, R. F. (1991). Work, work, work, work. In *Meanings of life* (pp. 116–144). New York: The Guilford Press.
- Bellah, R. N., Madsen, R., Sullivan, W.M., Swidler, A., & Tipton, S.M. (1985). *Habits of the heart*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Berg, J.M., Grant, A. M., & Johnson, V. (2010). When callings are calling: Crafting work and leisure in pursuit of unanswered occupational callings. *Organization Science*, 21(5), 973–994.
- Bunderson, J.S., & Thompson, J.A. (2009). The call of the wild: Zookeepers, callings, and the dual edges of deeply meaningful work. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 54, 32–57.
- Calvin, J. (1574). *Sermons of M. John Calvin upon the Epistle of Saint Paul to the Galatians*. London: Lucas Harison and George Bishop.
- Campbell, A., Converse, P.E., & Rodgers, W.L. (1976). *The quality of American life*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Cardador, M. T., & Caza, B.B. (2012). Relational and identity perspectives on healthy versus unhealthy pursuit of callings. *Journal of Career Assessment*, 20, 338–353.
- Cardador, M. T., Dane, E., & Pratt, M. G. (2011). Linking calling orientations to organizational attachment via organizational instrumentality. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 79, 367–378.
- Casey, C. (1995). *Work, self, and society: After industrialism*. New York: Routledge.
- Dekas, K. H., & Baker, W.E. (2014). Adolescent socialization and the development of adult work orientations. *Research in the Sociology of Work*, 25, 51–84.

- Dik, B.J., & Duffy, R.D. (2012). *Make your job a calling: How the psychology of vocation can change your life at work*. West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Press.
- Dobrow, S.R. (2010). A siren song?: A longitudinal study of calling and ability (mis)perception in musicians' careers. Working paper.
- Dobrow, S.R. (2013). Dynamics of calling: A longitudinal study of musicians. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 34(4), 431–452.
- Dobrow, S.R., & Tosti-Kharas, J. (2011). Calling: The development of a scale measure. *Personnel Psychology*, 64, 1001–1049.
- Dobrow, S.R., & Tosti-Kharas, J. (2012). Listen to your heart? Calling and receptivity to career advice. *Journal of Career Assessment*, 20, 264–280.
- Dobrow Riza, S., & Heller, D. (in press). Follow your heart or your head? A longitudinal study of the facilitating role of calling and ability in the pursuit of a challenging career. *Journal of Applied Psychology*.
- Duffy, R.D., & Dik, B.J. (2013). Research on calling: What have we learned and where are we going? *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 83, 428–436.
- Dweck, C.S. (1986). Motivational processes affecting learning. *American Psychologist*, 41, 1040–1048.
- Elangovan, A.R., Pinder, C.C., & McLean, M. (2010). Callings and organizational behavior. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 76, 428–440.
- Hall, D.T., & Chandler, D.E. (2005). Psychological success: When the career is a calling. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 26, 155–176.
- Novak, M. (1996). *Business as a calling: Work and the examined life*. New York: The Free Press.
- Oates, K.L.M., Hall, M.E.L., & Anderson, T.L. (2005). Calling and conflict: A qualitative exploration of interrole conflict and the sanctification of work in Christian mothers in academia. *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 33, 210–223.
- Rosso, B.D., Dekas, K.H., & Wrzesniewski, A. (2010). On the meaning of work: A theoretical integration and review. *Research in Organizational Behavior*, 30, 91–127.
- Schor, J. (1992). *The overworked American: The unexpected decline in leisure*. New York: Basic Books.
- Treadgold, R. (1999). Transcendent vocations: Their relationship to stress, depression, and clarity of self-concept. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 39, 81–105.
- Vallerand, R.J., Blanchard, C., Mageau, G.A., Koestner, R., Ratelle, C., Leonard, M., . . . Marsolais, J. (2003). Les passions de l'ame: On obsessive and harmonious passion. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 85, 756–767.
- Wrzesniewski, A. (2010). Callings. In K.S. Cameron & G. Spreitzer (Eds.), *Handbook of positive organizational scholarship*. Cambridge: Oxford University Press.
- Wrzesniewski, A., Dekas, K., & Rosso, B. (2009). Callings. In S. Lopez & A. Beauchamp (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of positive psychology*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell.
- Wrzesniewski, A., McCauley, C., Rozin, P., & Schwartz, B. (1997). Jobs, careers, and callings: People's relations to their work. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 31, 21–33.
- Wrzesniewski, A., Tosti-Kharas, J., Tschopp, C., & Landman, J.T. If I could turn back time: The lived experience of occupational regret. Yale University, Working paper.