

Edward Howard Griggs

Self- Culture Through Vocation



Edited By Alan J Finch

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INTRODUCTION

We want to spend our time doing something worthwhile. The typical jobs in which we find ourselves seem to be full of the mundane and the uninteresting. We lurch from one weekend to the next; from finishing one holiday to booking another. And often lack of enjoyment can show itself in shabby work.

And we feel trapped. The need to earn to meet our living costs means we have little time to get ourselves free.

There is no simple solution to this. The magic formulas just seem to work for others. But there are those who have reflected and written helpfully on these issues - not with glib advice, but with deep thoughtful correctives. And they wrote from the height of the industrial age when work was more mundane, the hours were longer, and pay was worse.

One classic, published about 100 years ago, is 'Self-Culture through the Vocation', by Edward Howard Griggs. Griggs was a professor and writer. He was one of the most popular lecturers of his day. The New York Times said of his writing that 'he has an easy, flowing

style, rich in imagery, full of allusions to history, literature and art'.

As you read this book you will know you are sitting at the feet of a scholar with quotes from Plato and Aristotle as well as popular writers from his own day. You will admire the writing as a work of art. You will enjoy reading and want to reflect and reread.

But above all Griggs helps us to look at our work in a new way. He points us to the need for a 'liberal cultivation of the mind and heart'. This is what he means by 'Self-Culture'. Work, no matter how mundane, done in the right way is part of a cultured life.

And work is a calling, a vocation. We must render a service to others. Work must be reconnected to vocation.

Griggs does not just deal with the 'higher aspects' of work, but raises the day to day problems; the mother who stands washing the dishes knowing that within a few hours the whole process will have to be repeated; the job which consists in the mechanical repetitive task. How enticing is a chapter entitled 'Dead Work'?

The book reaches a real climax in the final chapter 'Work: a way of life', but don't cheat. Prepare yourself for it by savouring all that comes before.

Perhaps to finish, a quote (many could have been selected) which gives a taste of the book:

'The best work, however, comes neither from the commercial nor the professional spirit, but only from viewing our vocation as an opportunity and a mission, as a way of life for ourselves and others.'

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THE VOCATION: OUR PROBLEM

There is today a nation wide awakening to the need of vocational education.

We have come to see that if education is to equip adequately for a happy and helpful life, it must prepare every individual to take hold somewhere, in work that is worth while, and make an effective contribution.

There is no more pathetic spectacle than the cultivated ne'er-do-well — the man of fine appreciation and liberalized spirit, who is unable to do any one thing effectively; and so drifts through life, his refined sensibilities perpetually tortured by economic failure. Education fails if it does not do everything possible to avoid such tragedy.

On the other hand, education that makes the individual a mere cog-wheel in a productive machine, fails no less sadly. When a man becomes either a head or a hand, in the long run he does neither good head work nor good hand work. There must be a whole human being at work to get permanently good results in any field of action. It is possible to "kill the goose that lays the golden egg" of economic prosperity; and the goose that lays the golden egg is manhood, womanhood and especially childhood, exploited for the sake of immediate commercial results.

Such exploitation is the true race suicide; and that nation will win and retain leadership, even in the economic struggle of the nations of the earth, that keeps its men, women and children human beings, first, and cogwheels in a productive machine, afterwards, if at all.

Thus not only do we fail of cultivation for life, but the very aim of vocational education itself is defeated, unless behind the training for specific action there is the liberal cultivation of the mind and heart.

Such life education comes only in limited degree through the schools. By far the larger part of it comes in life itself through the two great primary channels of action and experience — the work that we do and the relations we sustain in love and friendship to other lives.

When Goethe wishes to portray the whole development of a typical personality in Faust, he divides the work into two parts: the first dealing with the little world of personal relationships and introspective study, the second, with the larger world of action, in art, war, science, productive labour and philanthropy.

Thus the problem of life-culture through the work itself is, though little recognized, even more important than that of the education equipping for the work.

By far the larger part of our work, moreover, lies in our vocation — in what we choose, or are driven to undertake, as our business in life. This is true for rich and poor alike. Even if one's work is not paid for in money or reputation, still what one regards as the life-call is the main line of action. The problem of the vocation is, therefore, constantly before all human beings, through the whole of life.

Is it not strange that this problem is so little considered in ethical philosophy? I know but one great work focussing on the problem of self-culture through the vocation, and that is a novel — Goethe's 'Wilhelm Meister'. One reason for this neglect is doubtless in the fact that the ethical philosopher, only too often, has turned his back upon the real world of living problems, retired into his study, and worked out his scheme of duties apart, for human nature as he imagines it. The result is an admirably logical theory, but often singularly inapplicable to life as we know it in experience.

This attitude of the ethical thinker explains in part the relative neglect of all the concrete problems of life; but there is a further reason for the wide failure in the past to deal with the one before us.

The vocation is our problem, as it has concerned no previous epoch of man's existence. One need go back but a little way in history to find small respect for good, honest work. In classical antiquity only two vocations were revered for themselves — war and statesmanship — the vocation of killing men and that of governing or, more often, misgoverning them. A Plato or a Phidias, it is true, gained recognition, but because of the height of personal genius, not for the vocation's sake; while all the foundation work, on which civilization must ever rest — the tilling of the fields.

Simple artisan labour — was done by slaves or by those but little removed from the condition of slavery. Thus Aristotle says: "It is impossible to live the life of a mechanic or labourer and at the same time devote oneself to the practice of virtue." ¹

More completely he expresses the same view: "In a state in which the polity is perfect and the citizens are just men ... the citizens ought not to lead a mechanical or commercial life; for such a life is ignoble and opposed to virtue. Nor again must the persons who are to be our citizens be husbandmen, as leisure which is impossible in an agricultural life is equally essential to the culture of virtue and to political action." ²

The whole purport of Aristotle's argument is that, of course, you cannot have culture without slavery. If

there are to be cultivated men at the top, then there must of necessity be slaves at the bottom, to do the work which, in the Greek view, it would be degrading for self-respecting free citizens to perform.

Similarly Plato says in the Laws: "He who in any way shares in the illiberality of retail trades may be indicted for dishonouring his race by any one who likes . . . and if he appears to throw dirt upon his father's house by an unworthy occupation, let him be imprisoned for a year and abstain from that sort of thing."³

The Middle Age added a third vocation — that of the clergy — to the two respected in antiquity. War, statesmanship and the priesthood: these were the three callings respected in the Middle Age; there was no fourth. The schoolmaster had no recognition; the physician was the barber, and there was as much respect, or lack of respect, for one as for the other; while still all the basic work of civilization was done by those tied as serfs to the soil or but little above that plane.

Indeed, the main growth in respect for work has come subsequent to the French and American revolutions. It is not too much to say that there has been more progress in respect for honest work during the last hundred years than in all the preceding centuries of human history. There are, it is true, honest vocations still not generally respected, and it is worth noting that

just in these it is most difficult to get good work done; but the progress has been amazing.

It has been argued that the dress of the leisure class in all ages has been chosen because it indicated that the wearer did no useful work, and therefore was an aristocrat.⁴ Perhaps "Twere to consider too curiously, to consider so" but how impossible it would be to do field labour or the ordinary work of the household in evening dress, or, worse, the knightly armour of the Middle Age. Even to-day a Chinaman of higher rank lets certain fingernails grow as long as bird claws, thus proving he has not worked with his hands and hence is an aristocrat.

Thus everywhere in the older society those who were free from the severer pressure of the struggle of life were respected because of that fact. It is true they made their contribution often a significant one; but it was given somewhat patronizingly from above, through noblesse oblige the obligation of nobility. To-day increasingly we recognize that it is a primary obligation on every human being to pay his own way, to leave the world as well off as he finds it. Not that the contribution must be made in forms gives rewards with money and reputation, but in some form it must be made, if the man or woman is to be even honest.

This changed view shows how the whole problem has been transformed, through the coming up into the free

struggle of life of an unnumbered multitude who yesterday lived only that someone else might live. Today they are living for themselves, and, let us hope, in some measure for humanity. Thus, while the world is richer than in any past time, the tension of the struggle of life is more severe than in any period of history. The great ends of life, therefore, as never before, must be attained in and through the struggle of life, or we shall fail to reach them.

The beautiful culture of the few in the old Greek world was in part made possible by a saner view of life than ours - but largely it rested on the terrible foundation of human slavery. We have, therefore, a double problem: first, to reform the view of life so that we may come to prize more justly its real ends as against its adventitious interests; second, to substitute machinery for human slavery, using discovery and invention, not to increase tasteless luxury, but to free man and give leisure to all. Not until these ends are achieved, may we hope for a cultivation of the multitude comparable to that of the few in classic antiquity.

In the past, culture was always the badge of a segregated class. Even Goethe in the very 'Wilhelm Meister' cited as focussing on the problem of culture through vocation, held that culture is of course impossible for the ordinary citizen as it is the heritage of the nobility. The argument is, it is true, made by a dramatic character; but that it is Goethe's own view is

attested by his action, in choosing to be an attaché of the Weimar court rather than an independent citizen in his native town, Frankfort.

It was a beautiful culture the old society achieved in its aristocratic class. We have still among us surviving examples of the gentleman and lady of the old regime. How charming they are, carrying the beauty and fragrance of an old-time, walled-in garden, protected from the storms of the world outside. Behaviour echoing their lovely courtesy appears, even in our commercial age. It is still possible to see a gentleman remove his hat when a lady enters an elevator in one of our vast office buildings. Occasionally one witnesses a man give his seat to an older woman, even in an elevated train on that bridge of pandemonium (of all the devils) connecting New York and Brooklyn, and, still more rarely, one does see a woman remember to thank a gentleman for such a courtesy, even to-day. The experiences are so unusual, however, that when they come to us we are apt to remember them for weeks afterwards, as quite out of the ordinary routine of existence, lending a rare beauty to life.

Indeed, we may even be glad the old time gallantry is passing, if we can substitute for it something a great deal larger and better. After all, the fine courtesy of the old society toward a little group of protected ladies was accompanied by a very different attitude toward the mass of women caught in the economic struggle of life.

Not the chivalry of nobility, but the culture of humanity is the need.

There is, it is true, a protected class in our society, but its members are continually changing. You can guarantee to your children your fortune, if you have one, but not to your grandchildren. When the brain power and moral energy that built up the fortune disappear from the family stock, how quickly the fortune takes wings and flies away. The constant change in the members of the protected group prevents the permanent segregation of an aristocratic class; and while social snobbery may, in consequence, seem more coarse and blatant, it really tends to disappear. If those who display it do not pass fast enough, it is always possible for the people to rise and hasten their exit, as was done with such memorable success in the French Revolution.

Thus less than at any time in the past is culture represented today by a segregated group above and apart. We cannot separate the ends of the spirit from the routine business of life as was done so often in the past. It is impossible to wait until the serious work of life is finished, and then hope to gain culture. We must somehow find it through the action and experience of life, all along the way, or we shall fail of it altogether. Thus the problem of culture through the vocation is our problem as it has been that of no other age.

ACTION VERSUS DREAMS

Since the vocation is a way of life, is it not a pity that it is currently regarded merely as an opportunity of making a living? It is that, and we have seen how imperative is the duty that each human being should give to the social whole at least as much as he receives from it. That, however, is merely paying running expenses in the vocation of life; and any business man will acknowledge that to carry on an undertaking for many years and succeed only in paying running expenses is failure. The test of the business is in what is earned beyond that, and so is it with life.

Thus the true meaning of the vocation is as an open pathway to the great aims of life — culture and service ; and only when it is so regarded does it take its rightful place in our lives.

Like all other phases of the art of life, the vocation can never be reduced to science. It is always a problem of the artistic adjustment of two factors, each of which is constantly changing.

The whole sum of subjective capacities, differing every day, must somehow be adjusted to the whole sum of objective needs and demands of the world, also ever changing. Is it any wonder the problem is difficult? That is not the worst of it: action is inexorable limitation,

compared to the ideal inspiring it. While we dream, we might do anything; when we act, out of the infinity of possibilities, we affirm one poor, insignificant fraction.

That explains many of the paradoxes of life, as, for instance, why our babies are so interesting to us. The parent looks into the eyes of his two-years-old child and dreams of all the possibilities inherent in that little atom of humanity. That child might think Plato's thought, write Shakespeare's Hamlet, or live with the moral sublimity of St. Francis of Assisi. Why not?

" I am the owner of the sphere,
Of the seven stars and the solar year,
Of Caesar's hand and Plato's brain,
Of Lord Christ's heart and Shakespeare's strain."

Emerson is right: all these potentialities are in the humblest of us: give us time enough and opportunity enough, and we can develop limitlessly in any direction. Each is a unit part, not a mechanical part, of humanity — a sort of germ-cell containing the possibilities of the whole. We may not be able to think Plato's thought today, but we may take one step forward in the intellectual life: give us eternity, and the point will be reached when we may think Plato's thought. One may be far below the moral sublimity of St. Francis now; but one may climb a little with each step: if the number of possible steps is endless, no mountain summit of life is unattainable.

Infinite time and opportunity, however, are just what never are given in this world, whatever be the truth for worlds to come. We must live this chapter; we have to plan for time as well as eternity. If we spend all the seventy years, more or less — usually less — granted to us here, merely in laying a foundation, we have no temple of life. If we lay a narrow foundation, and build each story out, wider and wider, as the structure grows, it falls to the ground and we have no temple of life. We must somehow both lay the foundation and erect the superstructure — see to it that we get something done, before the curtain falls on the brief chapter we call life.

Thus what the parent forgets, as he looks into the eyes of his little child, is that out of the endless wealth of potentialities, gathered up in this fresh incarnation of humanity, at best only a poor little fragment will be realized in the brief span of life given us in this world. That is one reason genius seldom survives the cradle.

Emerson quotes from Thoreau's manuscripts: "The youth gets together his materials to build a bridge to the moon, or, perchance, a palace or temple on the earth and, at length the middle-aged man concludes to build a woodshed with them."⁵

That is just about the relation of the world of action to that of dreams; but this, after all, is the important point: it is better to build one honest woodshed that will keep the fuel for the fires of life dry, than it is to go

on dreaming forever of impossible castles in Spain; and the wonder is that when you have built the woodshed you own the castle. The ideal is vain and illusory just so long as you dwell in the world of dreams; the whole ideal becomes real when, through your struggle, a mere fragment of it is realized.

In one of the passages of supreme life-wisdom in 'Wilhelm Meister', Goethe says:

'Life lies before us, as a huge quarry lies before the architect: he deserves not the name of architect, except when, out of this fortuitous mass, he can combine, with the greatest economy, and fitness, and durability, some form, the pattern of which originated in his spirit. All things without us, nay I may add, all things on us, are mere elements: but deep within us lies the creative force, which out of these can produce what they were meant to be; and which leaves us neither sleep nor rest, till in one way or another, without us or on us, that same have been produced.'" ⁶

Thus each of us is artist, the world is our mountain of marble, and we own it all. We may choose one block, cast it aside, choose another and another, each more wonderfully veined: the mountain is ours. This, however, is the significant point: unless we do decide upon a single block, and work at it so long and faithfully that in the end we have chipped off all the superfluous marble and released the statue (Michael Angelo

believed God placed in every block) it means nothing that we own the mountain. Rather, we do own the mountain when we have achieved the single statue, and only then.

In every vocation the meaning of the work is less in the thing done than in the growth of the man through the doing. It is so in every field of science. Why, in algebra and geometry, does the wise teacher insist upon the constant solution of original problems? Because the aim is, not that the student should take so many steps, memorize so many rules, but that he should develop the power to deal with fresh problems: the growth of his mind, not the acquisition of mental material, is the deeper aim. So today everywhere we insist that the natural sciences must be taught by laboratory and field methods.

Such methods are laborious and slow: a student may learn more facts and laws in a week's work with a well written text-book, than he can acquire in a whole term of laboratory and field work. Why require the slower method? Because a little of the power to look Nature in the face and see one fact at first hand, is worth more than memorizing the best *'Sixteen Weeks in Zoology'* anyone ever compiled.

As with science, so in art. Indeed, the fine arts furnish the best of symbols of what is possible in the vocation. Art is the freest vocation on earth. The artist is less

bound by the influence of public opinion, the restrictions of society, than the worker in any other field.

Further, if the artist is master of the technique of his art, he can express through it his loftiest dream, as is possible in no other way of life. When we work with human beings, even in the plastic period of childhood, we find them resistant, not wholly responsive to our touch; but one who works in form and colour on canvas or wall, who chisels the plastic beauty of marble statues, who wakens the harmony of music or moulds the melody and imagery of poetry, can embody perfectly his highest ideal.

Though art has this high power, why should we continue creating it ever anew? If a student devotes his life to the task, he cannot master the pictures already painted, nor read through more than one alcove in the dust-covered library containing the books of the past. Why paint fresh pictures to hang in new galleries, carve statues to crowd other marble halls, continue the writing of books world without end? Then, too, art seems dead, compared to the living world of nature and humanity. The loveliest landscape-painting fixes but one mood of the infinitely varied and changing beauty of Nature, the noblest portrait, but one of the myriad expressions that fleet across the face. The novel or drama gives a single chapter, cold and crystallized, from

the infinite-changing, innumerable-leaved volume of life. Why toil at the art? Emerson said:

"Converse with a mind that is grandly simple, and literature looks like word-catching. The simplest utterances are worthiest to be written, yet they are so cheap and so things of course, that in the infinite riches of the soul it is like gathering a few pebbles off the ground, or bottling a little air in a phial, when the whole earth and the whole atmosphere are ours."⁷

Since we have the ocean of mind, why pick up the pebbles of literature and preserve them in the cabinet of the past?

There is an answer to the question: every work of art is a sort of shell, through which the human spirit has grown. When Michael Angelo paints the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, it is not only he who has grown in power to see and to create: for all who can see and respond, the drama of humanity is unrolled across the ceiling, while the colours and figures last. When Shakespeare achieves a Hamlet, or Goethe a Faust, it is not merely two more books to add to the myriad of the past: each is an open door to the appreciation of the infinite mystery of man. Art is a way of life for the artist, for his world and for the afterworld.

DEAD WORK

It may be said that while it is true the vocation of art is a way of life, few of us are called to that high path, and to us the lesson does not apply. The answer is simple: there is no honest vocation that cannot be made to some extent a fine art. That is, in every honest vocation, each day, growth is possible, if the work is loyally done; and that, we have seen, is the meaning of art. Indeed, the one supreme fine art is the art of living, and the particular vocation gets its meaning as a phase of that highest art.

In most vocations, it is true, there is so much dull routine work that we can discover little growth in the action of the single day. To go to the shop and sell a spool of thread and a paper of pins, to make the physician's daily round, prescribing for those who are ill and the larger number who think they are, to work over the lawyer's brief for some petty quarrel, to write sermons for congregations that will not listen and that demand the sermon shorter every week — it all seems such a blind mill-wheel grind that one sees little progress in the day.

This is especially true of much of the work women have been called to do, as in the care of children. The mother dresses her child up and sends him out to play; he gets dirty and comes in. She dresses him again and sends

him out; he gets dirty and comes in; and so on until night comes or the clothes give out and her patience is at an end. She seems merely to be going around and around in a blind routine.

A still better illustration is the task of washing dishes. Getting dinner is not so bad — that is an anticipatory task, looking forward to a joy that is coming; but when one has eaten dinner, and the smell of the dirty dishes offends one, to have to wash and wipe them and put them away, in the assurance that within five hours the same dishes must be taken down and dirtied over again — that does seem the final symbol of sheer dead work.

It is, nevertheless, just such work, done cheerfully and loyally, to a high purpose, through the succession of days, that builds into the human spirit the noblest elements of culture.

What then do we mean by "culture" — some esoteric knowledge or remote adornment of life?

Surely not. Its foundation elements are: loyalty to the task in hand, the trained will that does not yield to obstacles, cheerful courage in meeting the exigencies that come, serenity maintained amid the petty distractions of life, holding the vision of the ideal across the sand wastes and through the valley of the shadows: these are the basic elements of culture, and they are

built into the spirit of a man or a woman by the loyal doing of dead work through the succession of days.

Suppose you are in trouble, and need counsel on some complex question of life: to whom do you go — to the most learned man of your acquaintance?

Well, sometimes, and occasionally, rightly; but more often you go to some out of the way person — a wife and mother who has lived through a lifetime of cheerful, devoted service. You state your problem and get the answer.

Whence comes it? Not from book learning, but from the insight bred of earnest living, of loyally fulfilling the routine work of life, always with a high aim, through the succession of days and years.

To see true, one must be true. An utterly false man would get nothing of the light of God's truth but the shadow it casts. Knowledge and wisdom are not upon the same plane.

Knowledge is of fact; wisdom, of truth. One may know much, and not be wise at all; while, on the contrary, one may be quite without learning, and yet be deeply wise.

Knowledge is a root from which the flower of wisdom may or may not blossom; but only when the root is planted in the soil of sincerity may the flower bloom.

That is why persons who "always ring true" are found almost as often among those who have little conventional education as among the learned. Only with the discipline of long-continued, earnest work, can knowledge and refinement cooperate in developing wisdom.

Then, too, there is an almost universal optical illusion with reference to work: each of us is fully conscious of the dead work in his own calling, because he must fulfil it; with the tasks of others, he sees only the finished product. Thus each is inclined to exaggerate the dead work in his own vocation and to envy the apparently easier and happier tasks of others.

You sit down in an audience room, and some master at the piano sweeps you out on to the bosom of the sea of emotion, playing with you at his will. The evening of melody is over; there is the moment of awed silence and then the storm of applause; you go home exclaiming, "What genius!" O yes, it is genius: some one has defined genius as the capacity for hard work.

Genius is more than that — much more; but no exaggerated talent would take a man far, without the capacity for hard work; and what you forget, as you

listen to the finished art of the master genius, is the days and nights of consecrated toil, foregoing, not only dissipation, but even innocent pleasures others take as their natural right, that the artist might master and keep the mastery of the technique of his art.

The thing that seems to be done most easily costs most in the doing and has been paid for, invariably, out of the life. It is when men work with most exhausting intensity, on the basis of a life-time of training, that they work with most apparent ease. This world is no lottery, where you take a chance ticket and run your risk of winning or losing a prize, but serious business, where nothing worth while comes any other way than through dead, hard work carried through the days and years. One never truly possesses anything one has not earned by hard effort.

To possess money, you must have earned money, or you do not know its worth, nor how to spend it aright.

To possess knowledge, you must have earned knowledge; and the brilliant student, who slides through college on his wits, coaching up just before examination and winning fairly good grades, loses in the slower race of life beside even the ungifted plodder, who has taken faithfully every hard step of the road.

It is said of Euclid, formulator of the earliest of the sciences, geometry, that on one occasion he was called

in to teach a certain king of Egypt his new science. He began as we begin, with definition, axiom and proposition — we have not improved appreciably upon his text-book; and the king grew restless and indignant: "Must a Pharaoh learn like a common slave?"

Euclid, with that pride in knowing one thing well, that everyone ought to have who knows one science thoroughly to the end, responded: "There is no royal road to geometry!"

We can universalize the statement: there is no royal road to anything on earth — perhaps in heaven either — worth having, except the one broad, open highway, with no toll-gates upon it, of dead, hard, consistent work through the days and years. Spinoza said — it is the last word in his Ethic:

"All noble things are as difficult as they are rare;"
and we may add, they are rare because they are difficult.

SHAM AND SINCERITY

While the cheerful performance of routine work is indispensable to all great achievement, and, done to a high purpose, develops fine qualities of the spirit, we must frankly admit that there may be too much dead work in a life.

Then the result is to benumb the spirit and dwarf the faculties. One must be capable of intense concentration to achieve anything worth while, but one must know when to remove the pressure.

Ceaseless effort is mediocrity; evaded effort is self-deception; rightly balanced effort is the key to genius.

To drive oneself with relentless will; then to let go and respond with open, carefree mind and heart — these together are great living; either alone means hopeless deterioration.

When the vision of the ideal is lost, the evil consequences of unbalanced routine work follow with multiplied rapidity.

The more mechanical the action, the graver is the danger of digging the ruts of the calling so deep that one loses all vision out from them.

With the invention and refining of ever more complicated machinery, supplanting the trained artisan by the unskilled manipulator of the single lever of a vast machine, this danger has multiplied with ominous celerity in the industrial world. Hence the necessity for shortening the hours of such labour and balancing the mechanical work by other liberalizing forms of activity.

There is a compensating advantage, however, in the most mechanical form of labour (rightly limited in hours) in the very fact that the action tends so quickly to become automatic. This leaves the mind free for thought, if there is mental resource. Such resource is a mark of the highest cultivation.

Thus, paradoxical as it now seems, in an ideal social adjustment only highly cultivated persons would perform mechanical phases of industrial activity.

If mechanical work has the limitations cited, it is what we call the higher vocations that involve just the gravest dangers, for in these we are subject to all sorts of pressures and bonds from social forces, and immediate worldly success often results from pretence and deceit.

Thoreau understood that. He found he could not preach, in a conventional pulpit, and be honest, because he would have to say what would please his congregation. He could not teach school, because his

behaviour and teaching would have to fit the views of his patrons. He said:

"I have thoroughly tried school-keeping, and found that my expenses were in proportion, or rather out of proportion, to my income, for I was obliged to dress and train, not to say think and believe, accordingly, and I lost my time into the bargain. As I did not teach for the good of my fellow-men, but simply for a livelihood, this was a failure."⁸

So he earned his living by a simple form of mechanical labour, lived on a few cents a day, and taught what he believed, without payment. That is one solution, but not attractive to many.

"The public is the greatest of sophists," said Plato; and for a time the premium does seem to be placed on appearance rather than reality.

Take so high a calling as that of a minister, the physician of the spirit: expected to be a moral model in the community (which none of us is worthy to be), preaching largely to women, with little opportunity for frank comradeship with the men of his congregation, pushed by the world's demand on to a pedestal apart — the danger is that he will come to dwell on how he appears rather than what he is, which is the high road to hypocrisy.

Thus the minister, who remains entirely sincere, with no touch of pretence or affectation, is a saint of the spirit and should be honoured as such.

For a time it aids the physician to assume an air of mysterious omniscience, whimsically illustrated in Latin prescriptions. It is further to his advantage that many persons should be ill, as long a time as possible. You see the temptation. The Chinese, with their usual contradiction of Western civilization, seem alone to have solved the problem. With them, we are told, the physician receives a salary while every member of the family is entirely well. One case of illness stops the pay till the patient is cured. That is one way!

It is to the lawyer's interest that persons should quarrel, and that reconciliation should be long and difficult. The more the law is filled with intricate complexities and absurd technicalities, the greater is the need for the professional lawyer and the larger his fees. Further, the system that pays him to give his mind to the task of making seem true, what often he does not believe true, involves grave strain on his own mental integrity. There are examples where great lawyers have refused to undertake the defence of any accused person in whose innocence they did not sincerely believe, but the young practitioner in criminal law will tell you it is quite impossible to follow that rule and win a career.

What vocation is higher than that of the teacher, concerned with building the human spirit in children and young people? How often, with all the high opportunities of the calling, one finds the teacher acquiring all the unfortunate "ear-marks" of the vocation: the assertive manner, high-pitched voice, didactic assurance in expressing narrow opinions — characteristics springing from dealing habitually with immature minds and exercising authority over them.

James Mill pointed out that magazine literature must succeed in the week or month in which it is published, and therefore the easiest way to success is to catch and express just the whim on the surface of public opinion.

The temptation so to cater is strong on writer, editor and publisher alike. Further, responding to some vulgar interest of the moment assures commercial success to drama, novel or article. In consequence we have the current mass of prurient stuff exploiting the sex instinct in unworthy fashion.

So, in all fields, the world bribes its leaders to be their worst selves. I know public teachers and ministers who admit frankly that they overstate, holding that it is the only way to make ideas prevail. The temptation to this vice is strong upon every leader, but what is its result?

At the moment, the audience responds with applause, but at home, afterwards, those who think are apt to say, "Why, that is not true."

Thus the transient effect is obtained at the expense of alienating the very persons who should be won to the cause, while the speaker's own mind is vitiated.

Similarly dangerous is the lure of the epigram. A narrow half-truth can be phrased with glittering brilliancy; whole truths are quiet and balanced.

Thus the speaker and writer is constantly tempted to sacrifice truth to epigrammatic cleverness, and sane vision to brilliant effect. One might mention widely popular, even great, names among those caught in this trap that menaces every rambler in the forest of thought.

I recall a modern educator (James L. Hughes) remarking that he had never heard an audience applaud a greatly original thought. The statement is perhaps extreme; but when you hear such a thought expressed, your inclination is not to make a noise; rather it is to ask, "Is that true?" meeting the challenge of the original thought with your own active mind.

On the other hand, there is a trick of making almost any audience applaud. The speaker does not need to think at all, for thinking is hard work, and every audience is

glad to be relieved of it. No, it is necessary only to use frequently, in an unctuous voice, those catch-words of conventional morality — home, country and mother — and almost any audience will applaud. Those who have not been thinking, suddenly hear these phrases, and know that it is time to applaud. All those who have been living evil lives make the most noise, because they want to cover their trail by getting into the front rank of those applauding conventional morality. The few who are really thinking may sit silently disgusted, but they do not come next time, so then the whole audience applauds.

This goes on for a considerable time, and then people awaken. "Why," they say, "this is clap-trap and sham; kick the charlatan out!" Now it is right that the charlatan should be so punished, but the world that has bribed him to be his worst self has not earned the right to administer the kick.

There is, of course, another side to all this. If humanity is ever ready to respond to clap-trap and sham, to pretence and the sensational appeal, so it is always ready to respond to the most high, to the noblest truth voiced in the simplest form.

The highest appeals to the lowest: were this not true, there would be no hope for democracy. It takes genius, however, to grasp and express quite simply the heart of humanity; and genius is rare.

Thus every vocation has its own dangers, and these are great just in proportion to the opportunity for culture and service. The larger the opportunity, the easier the fall.

The only safeguard is everlasting effort and utter sincerity. One must keep constantly before one that the way of appearances is the way of death; the way of reality is the way of life. One must cling to this unflinching as the basic principle of all action, even when the faith is blind and the material rewards seem to be given to pretence and sham.

Indeed, the fundamental attitude of the doer always determines the value of the thing done. The work is worth just the measure of manhood and womanhood expressed in it — never more, and, we may be thankful, never less.

VOCATION AND AVOCATION

Even when one succeeds in avoiding the dangers of the specific calling, in any vocation one may discover, after a time, that one has used up much of the opportunity for culture and, sometimes, even for service.

Routine repetition teaches, but not what original achievement taught. If one needs heroic ability for dead work, to make the vocation a way of life one needs, as well, capacity for constant readjustment and the grasping of fresh opportunity. When one has achieved supremely, it is time to do something else. Success may tempt one to travel the same rutworn road again, where failure challenges one to make a fresh start.

When one discovers that the best lessons have been learned in a certain field of work and the main contribution given, what then is to be done?

More often than, in this country especially, we are apt to believe possible, one may change one's work. We are so anxious to get settled early in life that we are apt to think the first friendship we form is our life comradeship.

Sometimes it is, much more often it distinctly is not. So we imagine the first significant work we find is our life call.

Sometimes it is; more often it is but a stepping-stone in the path. Thus if we were willing to estimate life in terms higher than money and reputation, more often than usually seems possible we might pass from one opportunity to another.

Thoreau, you remember, set out in youth to make a composition pencil superior to the imported graphite one.

After some experiments and labour, he succeeded, and his friends thought that now his success in life was assured and his path settled. To their surprise and chagrin he refused ever to make another. "Why should I? I have learned that lesson. Why should I repeat myself?"

Unpractical, even foolish, but sublimely foolish; and Thoreau's choice may serve as a whimsical illustration of that spirit of ever pushing onward which is the sound attitude in the vocation.

Often, however, we may not follow freely the choice and need of our own spirit. We have accepted responsibilities, and must loyally fulfil them.

The way to a larger opportunity is never meanly sneaking out from under the little duty of to-day, but

climbing bravely through it and off the top; and then the better chance usually comes.

Thus often one must, for duty's sake, continue in a field of work quite inadequate for the fullest culture and service.

Even then there is something we may do: we may cultivate an avocation in the margin of life. It is true, the words "vocation" and "avocation" are currently used synonymously.

That is a pity: to waste two words on one idea when both are needed for distinct conceptions.

A man's vocation is his business in life; his avocation is his business aside from his business in life. The one is the main line of action; the other, the thing he does in addition, because he chooses it.

For instance, we think of William Cullen Bryant as a poet — the earliest of our distinctively artistic American poets. We forget that William Cullen Bryant paid running expenses in the business of his life by working year after year at his desk in New York as journalist, and that the poetry, by which he always will be remembered, was achieved in the margin of life that most persons waste.

So John Stuart Mill is to us a great democrat, leader of the woman's movement, radical thinker, writer of texts in logic and political economy that remain among the best we have. Again we forget that Mill paid running expenses in the business of his life by working for thirty-five years, from the age of seventeen to that of fifty-two, six days in the week, eleven months in the year, at his desk in the office of the East India Company in London, drafting telegrams and letters for the government of the native states of India; and all the great work by which the world will remember him was done in the margin of time most persons waste and some deliberately try to kill. "Killing time" — murdering opportunity.

I recall, in the letters of Matthew Arnold, published some years ago, several passages in which Arnold expresses his regret that he cannot write poetry and criticism as he would, because of the dissipating effect of his duties as Inspector of Schools.

It comes over one with a shock of surprise that Matthew Arnold — poet, essayist, leader in advanced thinking in his generation — earned his living by the exhausting labour of inspecting schools and reporting upon them to the British government, and that his literary work represents an avocation, pursued in such leisure as he could command.

Now it is a pity that England should have kept John Stuart Mill for thirty-five years in the office of the East India Company, and that she should have held Matthew Arnold for the same period of time to the wearisome task of School Inspector. The right attitude for Mill and Arnold, however, was not to do as so many young persons who like to think they have the artistic temperament are apt to do — to sit down and bewail the world's failure to appreciate their greatness, to complain that some rich man does not send them to Europe, that they must remain "mute, inglorious Miltons" — not to do that; but to go earnestly to work and earn their living in some honest vocation, and do the other thing also, as an avocation.

With this combination of activities, the culture through the vocation is multiplied.

Read the two brief but pregnant pages in which John Stuart Mill tells of the education that came to him from his thirty-five years' work for the East India Company — how he learned statesmanship, to make ideas prevail, to adjust his own convictions to the minds of others, to get the best possible when he could not attain all he desired — and you realize that if nine out of ten of our college professors and writers in sociology and political economy were forced to take ten years of Mill's drudgery, we should have far saner teaching and much wiser books in the fields mentioned.

Blessed, therefore, is the man or woman with a hobby, with some big, strong, intellectual or artistic interest aside from the main line of work. In the arithmetic of the spirit two things may be less than one.

If your life is very much over-burdened with routine work, then add another task, and the strain of the whole is less than that of the part.

This cannot be shown in a sum upon the blackboard, but it is easy to prove in life. Every student ought to know that if he has just so many hours to work, and will subtract one hour a day and spend it in healthy play or vigorous physical action; he has more time left for his studies.

Every over-worked mother should know that if, from the time she has to give to the ceaseless demand of her children, she will regularly take a half-hour each day apart for herself, refusing to let the children break in upon her unless in a matter of great seriousness, she has more time left for her children — I mean, of course, she has more to give in the time that remains.

Thus in the main path of life it is true that two tasks are often done more easily than one, and the cultivation of some strong interest as an avocation, not only achieves the direct result there, but sends one back to the vocation refreshed, inspired, and so better equipped to attain the great ends of life.

WORK: A WAY OF LIFE

Not only culture and service may be achieved through earnest work, but sanity as well.

Pessimism and despair are the children of idleness and dissipation — not immediately, to be sure; since they are contagious diseases, and pass from mind to mind, as physically contagious diseases pass from body to body.

As we consider dirt and unclean living the originating causes of smallpox and diphtheria, so idleness and dissipation are the originating causes of pessimism and despair.

It is interesting to note that there is hardly a great pessimist, in all the ages, who, at any time in his life, had to earn his living by the work of his own hands.

Such work brings one so close to the hard, beneficent laws of nature, that one does not doubt the sanity of the universe at the heart. The only way to keep faith with one's ideals is endlessly to struggle to realize them.

When the middle-aged man says : "O, yes, I used to believe in ideals, I started out with them, but I found they would not work in the business of life, and so I

abandoned them; " he may not know it, but his confession is his own condemnation.

Had he struggled consistently to realize his ideals, he would not have lost his faith in them. They would have changed, it is true — the man's ideals differ from those of the boy, but they would have been the natural children of the latter. No one who is loyal to the ideal, in all the conduct of life, ever loses faith in the essential soundness of the universe at the heart.

Thus everyone needs a vocation — rich or poor, cultivated or ignorant, man or woman, in the home or out of it—each of us must find a vocation and fulfil loyally our work in it, to achieve and keep the sane, affirmative wisdom that is the basis of all noble living.

Whether the work is in vocation or avocation, the spirit and attitude of the doer determines the worth of the thing done. There are, in fact, three widely different ways in which we may regard our work.

First, it may be viewed in the purely commercial spirit, merely as a business. The work is done honestly; we are justly paid for it, and the account is squared. Good work is done that way, but never the best work.

Higher than the commercial, is the professional spirit, which looks upon the vocation as a profession, up to the standard of which one must live. There is a

conscious demand for more of this *esprit de corps* — spirit of the calling — in certain higher vocations to-day.

Surely there should be as much of it among ministers and teachers, as among physicians and lawyers. The ethics of the calling holds men to better work than results from the merely commercial spirit.

The scientist, for instance, feels that because he is a scientist he is obligated to do his research and write his monograph.

Sometimes, it is true, he has nothing to say, and monographs do get printed that would better not have seen the light; nevertheless the professional spirit results in much good work accomplished.

The best work, however, comes neither from the commercial nor the professional spirit, but only from viewing our vocation as an opportunity and a mission, as a way of life for ourselves and others.

It is this attitude alone, consistently and reverently held, that will enable us to go forward in the vocation, being and not seeming, and so avoiding the dangers that menace in proportion as the calling is high.

Those who have made the great sacrifices and fulfilled the loftiest missions have never done the work primarily for money or fame. Their service was given

freely, out of the heart of life, and even when the result to them was martyrdom, they paid gladly the price.

Fires of martyrdom may illuminate, even as sunlight: they realized that the main thing is, not the source of the light, but that men should see. With this vision, they suffered cheerfully for life's sake.

Though called to less steep and heroic paths, it is the same high attitude that gives meaning to our work.

Only when it is done for life's sake — for culture, service and wisdom — is it supremely worth while.

The humblest work, moreover, done in that spirit, can carry the loftiest ideal. It was said that a cup of cold water might be so given as to express the whole gospel of human brotherhood; and it may be.

Let one look back over one's life, and one will find that the high-water marks of memory are the little — not unremembered — acts of kindness and of love, those have done for us who loved us — actions so slight that one might hesitate to tell them over to one's intimate friend, lest he misunderstand — the gift of a flower, the little courtesies that made the day sweet; yet these are the actions that give fragrance to the memories of the years.

Thus it is not the size of the deed, but the ideal it carries, that determines its worth. Epictetus said, "Let us be willing to do all things to Zeus" — let us be willing to do all things to God — to our own highest ideal; and then the humblest action is transfigured with the spirit it carries.

Emerson said, "Let the great soul Incarnated in some woman's form, poor and sad and single, in some Dolly or Joan, go out to service and sweep chambers and scour floors, and its effulgent daybeams cannot be muffled or hid, but to sweep and scour will instantly appear supreme and beautiful actions, the top and radiance of human life, and all people will get mops and brooms"⁹

The trouble is, about the time we have recovered our broom from its dust-covered corner, the great soul, as Emerson indicates, is doing something else, and then sweeping is apt to seem to us very unlovely work.

Vocations are then "higher" and "lower" only as they express more or less of the ideal and consecration of the spirit, and any honest vocation may express it all.

Shoes into which a man has sewn character are worth wearing; they will keep the water out.

A house into which a man has built character is good to live in; it will be weather tight.

Books into which a man has written character are worth reading; they will contain sound thought.

Indeed, there are persons who, for vanity's and reputation's sake, are vainly dawdling in some supposedly "higher" vocation, who would better be doing honestly some simple form of hand labour, that could truly express their character and so be a way of life and service.

Thus, always, the worth of the work, to the doer of it and to the world he serves, is determined by the ideal it carries and the spirit in which it is done.

Whatever the life-call may be, it is therefore indispensable that we reverence our work, to make of it a way of life. He who looks down upon his calling is sure to awaken some day to find that the work has slipped out of his reach to a plane he can no longer attain.

Any honest vocation is worth all the consecration and effort one can summon.

It is an optical illusion that makes the task at hand seem commonplace, the far-off, significant. The mountains near-by appear rocks and stubble-fields; in the distance they are clothed with blue beauty, majestically outlined against the sky.

Similarly, we see about us the prosaic detail of life, while in far-off times great deeds and lives appear splendidly outlined against the grey horizon of the past.

So we are apt to think that if we had but been born in some distant time and place, we too would have lived heroically to the great causes then challenging men. How gladly would we have died at Thermopylae, fought at Bunker Hill, shared the prison of Socrates or stood with Bruno at the stake! Illusion — sheer illusion of time and place!

Life has always been commonplace to commonplace people; it has been sublime only when men have lived sublimely.

Every great cause that ever challenged the support of men demands our service today.

The only Holy Land is the ground under our feet; the one Golden Age is the better time we may help bring in; the Kingdom of Heaven is here when we live it from within.

To recognize this moment as the supreme opportunity, to reverence the little task at hand as the highest call, is the one way to make of the vocation a path to the achievement, in ever growing measure, of culture, service, sanity, and wisdom.

Suggested Reading

Drive

By Daniel H. Pink

Pink gives us a good analysis of satisfying work. What is it that causes us to work harder and better? He comes up with the elements: that we have control over what we do (Autonomy), that we get better at what we do (Mastery) and that we are do something that is worthwhile (Purpose).

If you are an employer this will provoke you to rethink how you can get more from your employees. If you are an employee or self employed it may help you to improve your performance.

Who should read it?

Those who want to understand what motivates people in the work they do.

Lynchpin

By Seth Godin

Lynchpin is not a typical book. It seems at first a random collection of challenges and lessons, all well illustrated. And all of these reinforce one message – you must become a ‘Lynchpin’ in your company, that is someone who is indispensable.

You will be challenged. You will see yourself in the stories. You will also learn a whole new vocabulary – ‘resistance’, ‘lizard brain’, ‘shipping’. Read the book to find out more.

Who should read it?

Those who want to make progress in their company.

The Element

By Ken Robinson

This book is full of good insights. We are all different. Each person has different interests, abilities, passions. We are creative, but in different ways. Knowing this, and finding work that corresponds to us will lead to greater productivity.

Modern education takes little account of this, and treats all children the same. This fails many children. Those who do not fit the institution get labelled.

Robinson deals with the issue for which there is no easy answer – how do we find what we are really interested in or good at. He gives some helpful insights and good examples drawn from interviews he conducted for the purpose of writing the book.

Who should read it?

Those who want help to find their 'vocation' or what they are especially gifted to do.

Outliers

By Malcolm Gladwell

Gladwell set out to analyse success. Are there any common traits in those who are seen as being outstanding in their field? His answer is drawn more from anecdotes more than scientific analysis. But that makes an interesting book.

Some answers are in reach for most of us – many hours of hard work (10,000 for mastery), some are out of our control – like being born at the right time (Steve Jobs and Bill Gates both born at the same time. Neither would have had the same success if born 10 years earlier).

Gladwell closes with the need to change our education system. A recurring theme in many of the books.

Who should read it?

Those who want reflect on what has the characteristics of those who have been significantly successful in different fields.

Churchill

By Paul Johnson

A biography to finish with. We can learn from the example of others, and Paul Johnson intended to hold Churchill up as a good example. He said in an interview that he purposely kept it short to encourage young people to read it (just over 150 pages).

In the Epilogue, Johnson sets out the lessons we should learn from Churchill's life: aim high, work hard, overcome setbacks, avoid meanness and be joyful.

Add to this that Johnson is the most readable historian around today.

Who should read it?

Those are inspired by the outstanding examples of others.

Notes

¹ Aristotle 'Politics' Book III, Chapter 5

[http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Politics_\(Aristotle\)/Book_3](http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Politics_(Aristotle)/Book_3)

² Aristotle 'Politics' Book III, Chapter 9

[http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Politics_\(Aristotle\)/Book_3](http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Politics_(Aristotle)/Book_3)

³ Plato 'Laws' Book XI

[http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Laws_\(Plato\)/Book_XI](http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Laws_(Plato)/Book_XI)

⁴ Thorstein Veblen 'The Theory of the Leisure Class' Chapter 7

<http://bit.ly/ghmlpu>

⁵ Emerson 'Lectures and Biographical Sketches' Page 371

<http://www.archive.org/stream/lecturesandbiogr00emeriala#page/371/mode/2up>

⁶ J.W. von Goethe 'Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship'. Book VI

<http://www.bartleby.com/314/600.html>

⁷ Emerson 'Essays and Lectures' Page 397

<http://bit.ly/hArl0f>

⁸ Thoreau 'Waldon' Page 76

<http://bit.ly/i8pmF2>

⁹ Emerson 'Essays: Spiritual Laws' Page 45

<http://bit.ly/gQ0TVt>