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*"Career versus
Vocation"*

*Finding
Meaning
in the
Second Half
of Life*

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**GOTHAM
BOOKS**

the dream, he was enjoying singing with other children and banging a set of drums. This play was interrupted by a phone call from his mother indicating that she had a problem and wanted him to come solve it for her. Once again, he was taken from the free field of play to serve his mother's demand.

Both of his parents are long deceased, yet they remain alive in his unconscious, and the unfinished business of the past persists. Is it not amazing that our psyche continues to bring these issues to the surface in order that we might continue to heal and to grow? Even in his sixth decade this man is still feeling the pull of the mother complex to take care of other people's problems, as he was forcibly enlisted in taking care of hers. He is still wishing to recover the childhood spontaneity and play, and to do so he was alerted by the dreams to the task of recovering more energy and insight from his father/mentor to guide him and to help compensate for the mother's psychic control.

How many of us will be capable of creating the soul-based family will be directly proportionate to how many of us have truly accepted responsibility for our own lives. Until we have assumed such a responsibility, we will lack the strength, and the consciousness, to support that process in others. Notice that the responsibility always comes back to us: we cannot ask of the other what we should do for ourselves. When we do what we need to do for our own enlargement, we serve others, and achieve the moral enlargement to support their development as well. Such relationship, whether the intimate marriage, or the effective family, is in service not to selfish agenda but to the Self, which is in turn in service to the soul. The ultimate test of the family is not whether it provides safety and predictability, but whether or to what degree each person can leave it, freely, and return, freely, as a larger person.

Chapter Seven

Career Versus Vocation

"I chose what I was told to choose:
They told me gently who I was . . .
I wait, and wonder what to learn . . .
O here, twice blind at being born."

David Wagoner, "The Hero with One Face"

HOW MANY TIMES have we asked the question: "What am I to do with my life?" So often the question is answered by the grim necessities of economic reality, or by the internalized voices of Mom, Dad, or culture. When I was a college professor, I heard student after student say, in so many words, "I want to study X, but Mom and Dad said that they would only help if I was a business major." When I suggested that they could find a way to pay for their own education, they resisted, and not because they were lazy, but because they feared the loss of parental approval. I always wondered if such parents really thought they were helping their children by enlisting them in their own security needs, and by ensuring that the children they professed to

love would be miserable in their work lives. Freud once noted that two requisites are necessary for sanity: work and love. Surely he meant the right work, just as much as the right love.

By midlife the limits of what intimate relationship can provide are typically evident, as are the evolving roles in the family. For many, next in line as a carrier of projected satisfaction is career. More of our conscious energy is directed toward our work than any other venue. Stand on Main Street on a Monday morning and observe what mobilizes such frenetic, purposeful energy—economics, the unquestioned deity who dominates our culture. While all of us have to find a way to support our material existence, our work also carries a larger invisible burden, the presumption that it will provide our lives with meaning and energize our spirits. Sometimes it does. By midlife, however, many find that their work drains rather than energizes them. They suffer vague discomfort, find themselves bored, wistful, longing for something else.

The sham we perpetrate when we insist on our young people preparing for a lifelong career means that we wish them to arrive at midlife about as unhappy with their lives as their parents. I strongly advocate the study of a liberal arts curriculum for all persons, because we can always learn the tools of a trade on the job, and in this era of constant change we may practice many trades before we're done. Making a living is the easy part, but far more critical is what liberates us from the limits of our family and cultural history. What values, what ways of critical thinking and discerning evaluation do we possess to enrich our lives? What understandings of history allow us to escape its binding repetitions? What personality development and differentiation will we carry with us through all the days of our journey? These rich, intrapsychic companions will seldom if ever be served by the constricted aims of careerism and vocational narrowing. The liberal arts, however, contribute to the liberating

art of a more considered, more thoughtful, more variegated sensibility, which in the end is necessary for more free choices.

As I reflect on those many troubled undergraduates, I have to wonder how those parents thought they were helping their children. As our paths crossed years later, almost none of those former students were in the field for which they'd prepared. Sometimes those parents wished their children to remain limited, though they would never openly confess as much, because they feared their child might acquire ideas alien to, which is to say larger than, the limited worlds of the parents. This is like the person threatened by new forms of art who says, "I know what I like." What he is really confessing is "I like what I know," or "I like what is familiar or comfortable to me." Friedrich Nietzsche once observed that the teacher is ill-served whose student does not surpass him. So our parenting is less effective if our children do not grow beyond us toward an enlarged vision of life's many possibilities for satisfaction of the soul.

Next in frequency to the minefield of intimate relationship, many persons enter therapy because they are facing a crisis of vocation. Perhaps they are unaware of that causal issue when they arrive, focusing on their emotional state rather than the source of it. So often the work of therapy, certainly not to be narrowed to career counseling, is to examine the forces that brought about the original choices, and to identify the affect-laden complexes that constrict a bold step and a change of life course.

Unexpectedly, I was led by a midlife depression to leave the world of academia for the world of the psychoanalyst. When I began therapy, I had no intention of such a career change, but in time, through therapy, I discovered that I had lost interest in much of the body of knowledge I had acquired and was more keenly focused on where it came from within us, what it activated for us, and

what meaning it could have in the conduct of a larger life. I found that I was more interested in the symbolic life than the intellectual life—the symbolic engaging the soul, while the intellect engaged only the mind. These questions, and these distinctions, were not being pursued in academia, I found, but they were in depth psychology. Similarly, I longed for deepened, sustained conversation with adults with greater life experience, and with the questions that perplexed them, as opposed to the agitations of the late adolescent in most college classes. Beneath the wonderful task of learning, and the richness of the first half of my life, something disturbing was coursing, and demanding that I go deeper than the work of the mind alone, valuable as that is, and address the larger issue of meaning. A former mentor, Stanley Romaine Hopper, had once said to me, as a blessing, “May God grant your soul no peace.” I came to accept as one benefit of that blessing the powers that moved me from a fine career to an even richer vocation.

Some of the most satisfying therapeutic work I have been privileged to conduct has focused on this powerful meeting point between work and vocation, career and *vocatus*. The Latin word is the source of our *vocation*, that is, our “calling,” that to which the soul summons us. Yes, we need to earn a living, support ourselves and those who depend on us, but there is another call to serve, a summons to serve spiritual enlargement. And that is our true vocation. I think back on those college students laboring away, often in good faith, believing that their elders had their best interests in mind, that it would all add up to something in time. Many times I met them later, or people much like them, in the therapy room. Having achieved various successes in their work, they were beginning to tumble to the fact that we are more than economic animals. They began to suffer the difference between what we do and who we are.

Men in particular are conditioned to think of themselves as synonymous with their work. This is why layoffs, downsizing, and retirement almost always produce a profound depression in men after the first shock of anxious reckoning. The typical male will approach retirement as an opportunity to play a lot of golf. He may do so, but he will also hit a depression. Nothing has prepared him for re-*visioning* himself as something more than what he does. “A man’s gotta do what a man’s gotta do,” we are told from childhood. Why? Because! Thus men cruise toward depression, a systemic loss of meaning, and an earlier death.

Women are usually far more emotionally differentiated—that is, they have a much keener awareness of their inner reality, have a range of friends who support their process of growth, and have already undertaken a wider range of personal exploration. Today’s woman remembers a grandmother who suffered the horror of gender discrimination and had few professional choices. Her mother was caught in a changing world, whipsawed between motherhood and unprecedented opportunities for career. Today’s younger woman sees models all around her, and is just as likely to define herself through her work as her grandmother did through homemaking. But at least she has a choice today. Many choose to do both, and most struggle heroically to balance the world of domestic and professional responsibilities. And often without an understanding, and supportive, spouse.

At the same time, in speaking to women’s groups, I have suggested that women look at men this way: if they took away their own network of intimate friends, those with whom they share their personal journey, removed their sense of instinctual guidance, concluded that they were almost wholly alone in the world, and understood that they would be defined only by standards of productivity external to them, they would then know the inner state of the

average man. They are horrified at this notion. Having confused the wielding of outer power roles with identity and freedom, women assume that men have a better life. Certainly, they seem to have more outer choices. But most women do not recognize that men have fewer inner choices. And it is with the inner choices that we most define our lives, as almost all women know.

Whatever the source of the conditioning of our gender expectations, both women and men have a dual task today. We are called to be in the modern world in a way that is both productive and nurturing, *and* we are called to monitor our inner lives, which is the secret source of the wisdom for better choices. Both genders face the twin tasks: *nurturance* and *empowerment*. Empowerment does not mean power over others; it means that we experience, and can draw upon, our own capacities to choose our values and our mode of being in the world. We cannot ask a relationship, or the external, sensual world, to meet our deepest needs or give us a sense of personal worth. We cannot ask that our work satisfy all these needs without our having faced the reality of the soul's agenda in the process. In the end, we are alone responsible for our choices and for the acquisition of nurturing and empowering experiences in our life.

What was not modeled in the family of origin, what was not made available in the popular culture, becomes a personal task for each of us in the second half of life. Breaking the tyranny of history is a heroic enterprise and a task that confronts each of us, no matter how oppressive the past. I think of one man who was a gifted teacher. The weight of his family's history, and economic competition, obliged him to study and practice law for a number of years. He came to me in a depression in which he had repeated dreams of drowning or of struggling underwater. These images suggested that he was being flooded by his own unconscious. He described

his daily life as spirit-draining, as if he were walking underwater all the time, even though he performed his work conscientiously. The burden of his summons was to discern over time how he had in fact left what he loved, in service to the expectations of parents and spouse, and grown miserable in turn. It took great courage for him to leave the more affluent world he had enjoyed to return to the far less lucrative field of teaching. He created his own charter school and flourished. His initial psychological task was to identify what sources had kept him from his vocation, chosen by the soul not by the parents, the culture, or the complexes he had internalized. His next task was to make the break, and carry the disapproval of family and spouse at this great economic change. One wonders how spouse and family could possibly believe that living with a depressed husband and son could be a virtue. If our work does not support our soul, then the soul will exact its butcher's bill elsewhere. Wherever the soul's agenda is not served, some pathology will surface in the arena of daily life.

We may choose careers, but we do not choose vocation. Vocation chooses us. *To choose what chooses us* is a freedom the by-product of which will be a sense of rightness and a harmony within, even if lived out in the world of conflict, absent validation, and at considerable personal cost.

Too often we remain in service to the agenda of the first half of life when the soul has already moved on to the agenda of the second. In the first half of life there is a place for ambition, for the driving powers of the ego, which compel us to overthrow our fears and to step into the world. As we have seen, the chief task of the first half of life is to build a sense of ego strength sufficient to engage relationship, social role expectations, and to support oneself. But we all fall into an overidentification with the ego and these

various roles. No matter how successfully one has played out those roles, no matter how worthy they may be, and often they are not, ego identifications alone will not suffice to satisfy the soul over the long run. Even Plato recognized the risk of this confusion when, twenty-six centuries ago, he placed these words in the mouth of Socrates in the dialogue called *Crito*:

Citizens of Athens, aren't you ashamed to care so much about making all the money you can and advancing your reputation and prestige, while for truth and wisdom and the improvement of your souls you have no thought or care?

As every depressed businessman or abandoned spouse or frustrated homemaker learns sooner or later, such investments as are imposed in the first half of life will ultimately betray one in the second, no matter how worthy their intent.

The ambitions of the first half of life are largely fueled by the charged images, that is complexes, one has obtained from one's family and one's culture, and often have very little to do with the support of one's personal destiny. While these powerful complexes may pull us out of dependency and into the world, they ultimately divert and distract consciousness from the care of the soul. Because of the grounding of these choices in complexes, with their origins in the disempowered past and their narrow frame of reference, lives are constricted and diminished rather than expanded. While we all must be weaned from the naive sleep of childhood, and the lethargy of dependence, the ego has a tendency to prefer security over development, and wind up with neither. What Paul Fussell has written of those in combat applies to the warfare of daily life:

*The mind is not so capable as it pretends of producing trustworthiness and knowledge, so easily is it threatened by fatigue, pride, laziness, and selfish inattention.**

Usually, only when the symptoms of that split between security and risk are sufficiently painful, when we can ignore or medicate them no more, and when the ego's fantasy of sovereignty has been humbled will we begin to open to other possibilities.

Sadly, the majority of humanity remains trapped in the ego's identifications with such complexes, suffering from but also encouraging the avoidance of life's large possibilities. If the ambitions of youth, many of which we are able to achieve, truly served the soul, then we would see a lot more happy people. We would not have to deal with so much divorce, so much substance abuse, or prescribe so many antidepressants if the ambitions of the first half of life worked for the second half. Nor would we have evolved a culture that depends on ever-escalating sensations and daily distractions from its deep unhappiness. As Jung has concluded, "We cannot live the afternoon of life according to the program of life's morning—for what was great in the morning will be little at evening, and what in morning was true will at evening have become a lie."[†]

Ambition that drives the ego so often focuses on material things that even its achievement leaves us with the weariness and ennui of overindulgence. Why did Dante put the gluttons in their own circle of Hell? One wonders. Surely we all have overeaten at some point. Perhaps he was intimating that such unfortunates projected the nourishment of the soul onto matter, even as our culture has, and

*Fussell, *The Boys' Crusade*, p. 126.

†Jung, *CW8*, para. 787.

could only be deceived and dissatisfied in the end. (Pardon the pun, but they did not understand real soul food.) The lustful are in pits of flame as they proffer their bodies to burning hungers. Or, as a warning to our material age, the materialists get more matter than they ever wanted as they perpetually push boulders of dead weight about. Clearly, we should beware of what we ask for, for what we achieve may well prove an imprisonment. (Thoreau noted a hundred and sixty years ago that we had grown imprisoned by the abstractions we created. His longest chapter in *Walden* is titled, and decries our growing enslavement to, "Economics.") Dante timelessly imaged the soul's betrayal with his compelling portraits of those who devote their lives to the material and end with dissatisfaction. When we understand the exiled Florentines' analysis of his epoch, and see its parallels to our own, we ruefully confess with Milton:

*Me miserable! Which way shall I fly
Infinite wrath, and infinite despair?
Which way I fly is Hell, myself am Hell.**

Or with Christopher Marlowe's Faustus: "Why this is hell, nor am I out of it."¹ Contrary to Sartre's bon mot, Hell is not other people; it is ourselves, constrained by the world we have constructed for ourselves, or allowed others to construct for us.

The sense of ennui, restlessness, sometimes even depression that comes from the achievement of one's ambitions, or the failure to achieve them, is the generally unwelcome invitation to disidentify with those goals. (Legend tells us that Alexander wept when he

reached the Ganges, for there was no further world to conquer. Apparently it had not occurred to him that there was also a world within of infinite scope and mystery.) Such an invitation requires a revolution in one's thinking, which will require no small amount of courage and sustained effort. "If I am not my roles, then who am I?" the ego will protest. Moreover, one will then be obliged to find a reference other than popular culture, for our culture will be of no help whatsoever.

In the second half of life the ego is periodically summoned to relinquish its identifications with the values of others, the values received and reinforced by the world around it. It will have to face potential loneliness in living the life that comes from within rather than acceding to the noisy clamor of the world, or the insistency of the old complexes. It will have to submit itself to that which is truly larger, sometimes intimidating, and always summoning us to grow up. It will need to live by verifications from within, not through acquiescence to the timidities of its time. And how scary is that, to each of us? No wonder the blandishments of popular culture are so available, so seductive. No wonder so few ever feel connected to the soul. No wonder we are so isolated and afraid of being who we are.

Yet, paradoxically, the very achievement of ego strength is the source of our hope for something better. We need to be strong enough to examine our lives and make risky changes. A person strong enough to face the futilities of most desires, the distractions of most cultural values, who can give up trying to be well adjusted to a neurotic culture, will find growth and greater purpose after all. The ego's highest task is to go beyond itself into service, service to what is really desired by the soul rather than the complex-ridden ego or the values of the culture. During the second half of life, the ego will be asked to accept the absurdities of existence, that death and extinction mock all expectations of aggrandizement, that vanity and self-delusion are the

*Milton, *Paradise Lost*, II, l. 73-75.

¹Marlowe, *The Tragical History of Dr. Faustus*, l. 76.

most seductive of comforts, and that the deep, infantile yearnings of childhood will forever go unsatisfied. How counterproductive our popular culture—with its fantasies of prolonged youthful appearance, continuous acquisition of objects with their planned obsolescence, and the incessant, restless search for magic: fads, rapid cures, quick fixes, new diversions from the task of soul.

The relinquishment of ego ambition, as fueled and defined by first-half-of-life complexes, will in the end be experienced as a newfound and hitherto unknown abundance. One will be freed from having to do whatever supposedly reinforced one's shaky identity, and then will be granted the liberty to do things because they are inherently worth doing. One engages in work because it is meaningful, and if it is not, one changes the work. If one has the strength to accept the necessary solitude of the journey, one can appreciate the gifts of friendship and relationship all the more for their precious moments in the face of transience and decay. One can experience the quiet joy of living in relationship to the soul simply because it works better than the alternative. This revisioned life feels better in the end, for such a person experiences his or her life as rich with meaning, and opening to a larger and larger mystery.

Vocation, even in the most humble of circumstances, is a summons to what is divine. Perhaps it is the divinity in us that wishes to be in accord with a larger divinity. Ultimately, our vocation is to become ourselves, in the thousand, thousand variants we are. How easily this invitation is confused with the ego's comforts and the ego's identifications with the charged complexes of our time. As all of the great world religions have long recognized, becoming ourselves actually requires repeated submissions of the ego. A good example of confusion in this area is how the word *personality* has been so debated. We talk of another person as having a good personality when we have no idea from the outside whether they are being true

to themselves or not. We think the achievement of personality is validated when we are liked by others, or when we are well adapted to the world around us, but what does the soul have to say about all this? Being well adjusted is a trivial goal when one factors in the soul. The soul has no interest in social adaptation as such. It has as its goal the fulfillment of ends transcendent to the ego. Given that we are each unique, eccentric, when it is not a posture, as so often in adolescence, it is what we are bound to become.

The achievement of personality as a vocation always demands surrender, submission to the larger. The necessary task of the ego is to transcend its own interests, to say "Not my will but Thine," and to cooperate. "Unless you die [that is, the ego agenda dies] you shall not live." Jesus becoming the Christ and Gautama becoming the Buddha are cultural images of individuation, each with its own ethnocentric spin, but each a compelling paradigm. Such paradigms are not to be strictly imitated, for such would be repeating someone else's journey, a journey already brought to fruition. But each serves as a challenge for succeeding generations. The word *Islam* means "submission" to the transcendent. And the Hindu scriptures remind us of the peril of living someone else's life, rather than our own:

*It is better to do your own duty
badly, than to perfectly do
another's: you are safe from harm
when you do what you should be doing.**

Familiar words, but we still need to revisit them, not once but over and over.

This service of the ego to the soul is precisely what Jung meant

* Bhagavad-Gita, III, 35.

by his idea of individuation. It is not ego aggrandizement; it is ego submission to the transcendent. Jung explains that this task is complex, life-long, and demanding:

*The development of personality means nothing less than the optimum development of the whole individual human being. It is impossible to foresee the endless variety of conditions that have to be fulfilled. A whole lifetime, in all its biological, social, and spiritual aspects, is needed. Personality is the supreme realization of the innate idiosyncrasy of a living being. It is an act of high courage facing in the face of life, the absolute affirmation of all that constitutes the individual, the most successful adaptation to the universal conditions of existence coupled with the greatest possible freedom for self-determination.**

How easily we are seduced into believing we are serving the soul when we are serving our own needs for ego reinforcement, comfort, security, and the approval of others. How easily we are seduced into rebellion against social norms in the belief that this is individuation, when it is merely self-indulgence masquerading as difference. In both cases, the seduction is so easily achieved because the ego wishes to serve itself and avoid service to the soul. What pulls us out of false rebellion or the easy torpor of the familiar is that the soul's protest has grown too painful to ignore. Then we are called to achieve our particular idiosyncrasies as our gift to the collective. In the end, the meaning of our life will be judged not by our peers or their collective expectations, but by our experience of it, and by whatever transcendent source brought us to it in the first place. As Jung notes,

*Jung, *The Development of Personality*, CW 17, para. 289.

*True personality is always a vocation and puts its trust in it as in God, despite its being, as the ordinary man would say, only a personal feeling. But vocation acts like a law of God from which there is no escape. The fact that many a man who goes his own way ends in ruin means nothing to one who has a vocation. He must obey his own law. . . . Anyone with a vocation hears the voice of the inner man: he is called.**

Who among us has ever heard such advice from our elders, our culture? We prize something called "success" yet grow the more miserable for having achieved it. If our life ends in ruin, from a collective societal standpoint but has fulfilled the calling intended by the gods, it has been a life well lived. The great religious leaders whom we venerate almost always suffered rejection and persecution, yet faithfully served their vocations, which is why we venerate them. The transient vacuities of our cultural icons—success, peace, happiness, and distraction—pale before the question of whether or not one experiences this life as meaningful. Moreover, the test of meaning is not a cognitive decision, so one should not suddenly quit this present life for any quixotic mission. Meaning is found, over the long haul, through the feeling of rightness within. No one can give that to us, although we may allow others to take it away from us.

Each of us has been enlisted in the fulfillment of our parent's wishes for us, in the proffered security of sanctioned cultural forms, gender roles, and such contemporary values as materialism, self-indulgence, and hedonism. And each of us has suffered, and continues to suffer, for so passively complying. When consciousness is strong enough to undertake the task of submission to and honest

*Jung, *The Development of Personality*, CW 17, para. 289, 300.

dialogue with the soul, then one will experience healing, and know the difference between job and calling, between career and vocation. We betray ourselves and our children when we do not make such a distinction. At such moments of surrender to the soul, we are in the presence of the divine, and in harmony with its intent. As R. M. Rilke expressed it through his literary persona nearly a century ago, "I am learning to see. I don't know why it is, but everything penetrates more deeply into me and does not stop at the place where until now it always used to finish. I have an inner self of which I was ignorant. Everything goes thither now. What happens there I do not know."* Such a person has repositioned the ego and is living in the latticework of eternity. Such a person has heard and is responding to the calling to become what the gods intended, the sacred *vocatus*.

Why, after all, are we here? One man who had been driven by his parents' ambitions came late in life to therapy in order "to learn how to be an ordinary person," that is, redeem himself from their complexes before he died. St. Augustine said we were here to love God and enjoy life. Kurt Vonnegut believes we are here to be the eyes and conscience of God. Jung, standing on the silent African veldt at dawn, watching the drifting rivers of animals moving in their timeless way, wrote that we are here to bring consciousness to brute being. Whatever theory speaks to the reader, surely we are called to become more fully what we are, in simple service to the richness of the universe of possibilities.

Chapter Eight

The New Myth Emerging from the Psychopathology of Everyday Life

"There was a time when the air was packed with spirits, like flies on an August day. Now I find that the air is empty. There is only man and his concerns."

Hilary Mantel, *Fludd*

AT THE TURN OF THE LAST CENTURY Freud published a book titled *Psychopathology of Everyday Life* wherein he noted that one does not have to visit a mental asylum in order to observe psychopathology; one can observe the machinations of the divided soul in the mechanics of ordinary life. In his book Freud detailed the implicit motives, walled off from consciousness, that interfere with the ego's choices and behaviors—producing slips, forgetfulness, and camouflaging of dangerous feelings through acceptable disguises. Freud, along with Jung and others, helped our age find a new vocabulary, observe meaningful motives in the confounding of consciousness, and, in short, helped us become psychological.

*Rilke, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Berggren*, pp. 14–15.