The Meaning of Work

How to find the path to a career that matches your highest goals.

BY BRAD BUIE, BA ’99

True calling: Prof. A.R. “Elongo” Elangovan says the key to a fulfilling job lies in knowing the “one value that is the essence of who you are.”
“When it hits you, you know it in your bones. It shapes every decision you make.”

Those who view their work as a calling are operating on another quantum level entirely. External validation and rewards don’t figure so largely in their motivation. Instead, the passion that drives them comes from the fulfillment of the work and a sense that their efforts are making the world a better place. Emotionally, they feel “in the zone,” fully integrated, almost mystically as though they are living out their destiny.

The concept of callings dates centuries back in the Judeo-Christian tradition. To have a calling, or to be called, originally meant one was divinely inspired to live “a life of Christ.” It had no connection with what one did in one’s daily work. Only later did callings become linked to occupation. Now when we say you have a calling, we usually mean you have a gift or sense of purpose driving you towards a particular profession.

But there is one other category of interpretation that is critical, Elangovan says. In this category, a calling is both secular and unconnected to occupation. A calling can be understood as a unique principle or a value (such as protecting the environment or ending discrimination).

“Having it as a principle frees people up,” he says. “They no longer beat themselves up for not fitting any of the prescribed professions. For the first time they can be true to themselves.”

When people inevitably ask Elangovan how to discover their calling, he says it first requires the presence of four conditions: an urge to find meaning in life, attentiveness, willingness to experiment with new paths, and a growing understanding of the self.

However, even if you meet all these conditions, it may not be enough. He further recommends two methods of “focused navel gazing.”

The first method, the “three lists approach,” is the one he normally introduces to younger students who tend to have less life experience. He has them make separate lists for all the things they’re good at, all the things they’re interested in, and all the things that will earn the rewards they’re after (great salary, travel, flexible schedule or other benefits). Whatever activity appears on all three lists offers a clue to an individual’s calling and the possible occupations in which it may be realized.

The second and more difficult method he calls the “highest goal approach.” You ask yourself what was the most meaningful thing you did in the last few weeks or month. You then ask why it was meaningful for you. Elangovan warns that you may spend a long time, perhaps years, pondering this. If you keep questioning, eventually you will arrive at one value that is the essence of who you are. Pursuing your calling then becomes a matter of seeking an occupation that allows you to live that value.

“Test it,” Elangovan challenges, “It works.” He confesses it took him two years using the highest goal approach to discover what makes him feel most fulfilled. “When it hits you, you know it in your bones,” he says. “It shapes every decision you make.”

He’s refined his own calling to a principle: “ensuring the dignity of those around me.” Teaching and research, he says, readily provide the opportunities to enact this. And although he would be the first to tell you that pursuing a calling does not necessarily guarantee you’ll be good at it, Elangovan consistently garners high praise from MBA students and alumni, and recently received a 3M National Teaching Fellowship, Canada’s highest honour for instructors in higher education. To see him in action in the classroom — for example, parsing out the nuances of a concept with a silky turn of phrase and conductor-like tweaking of the air — really is to witness a man fulfilled.

But is he just one of a fortunate, small minority for whom living the life and earning a livelihood converges? What about those of us who have for whatever reason made a trade-off between the two and have chosen a profession that affords a good quality of life but that is relatively barren of meaning?

If we aren’t willing to switch to another kind of work, then he advises us to reframe the work we do. “Shine a light on this trade-off,” Elangovan says. “If you’ve put your ladder up against the wrong wall, then try looking at the wall differently.” Seeing through this “calling lens,” we can determine what aspects of our work could fire us up.

“Many men go fishing all their lives without realizing it is not fish they are after,” says Elangovan, quoting Henry David Thoreau. “Better to start exploring this question now rather than wonder about what could have been.”

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Professor A. R. “Elango” Elangovan of UVic’s Gustavson School of Business has been researching this question. “My goal is to help people realize what they are really after sooner rather than later in their working lives,” he says. He and his colleagues have identified three basic orientations toward work: “We approach it as either a job, a career, or a calling.”

Those with a job orientation look on their work as a bit of a slog, performed for a paycheck, narrowly bound by contract and job description.

The career oriented are motivated by the challenges of their work, the sense of achievement, and various rewards: not only a good salary but also prestige, recognition and a clear set of rungs up the ladder.

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