THE FIRST PART of this question focuses on the “what do I want from life” aspect of our careers. Whether we call it a purpose or a passion, in essence it refers to the extent to which we feel inspired by the work we do. If we are immersed in the kind of work we like to do, we feel energized to take on new challenges, lose ourselves in our work and gain a deep sense of fulfillment when we achieve our goals. Our experience is accompanied by a quiet excitement that underscores an awareness that we are doing what we do not because we have to, but because we want to. The prerequisite for accurately answering this part of the question rests in a real understanding of ourselves—our values, traits, strengths, instincts, limitations and aspirations.

The second part of this question gets at the “what does life want from me” aspect of our careers. Our place in the world of work is shaped not just by our own interests but also by the requests, demands and opportunities that the world unfurls at our doorstep. While the tasks we are called to do, or the responsibility that we feel obligated to take on, may not necessarily be how we imagined our work lives would unfold, we may find it difficult to shake off the feeling that it is the right thing to do and that it would erase the inner disquiet that often colours a purely self-oriented path in life. It behooves us to heed this external call to action for it is only likely to grow louder if we ignore it. The prerequisite for accurately answering this part of the question rests in a real understanding of ourselves—our values, traits, strengths, instincts, limitations and aspirations.

The third part of this question focuses on the “what are the boundaries of my possibilities” aspect of our careers. Each one of us is a unique bundle of possibilities and the extent to which these can be stretched is limited only by our imagination and tempered by our courage to dare. More often than not, our perceived limits are either plastic (they can be broken) or elastic (they can be stretched)—and we won’t know until we test them. We need to be especially wary of a subconscious slippage into accepting our current capabilities and possibilities as confirmation of our complete potential, and allowing self-fulfilling prophecy to make it a permanent reality. To accept the status quo in our careers as our final destination would be a shame, for there is no telling how much we could grow and achieve in our work lives. The prerequisite for accurately answering this part of the question rests in a constant willingness to reinvent ourselves—to reimagine, reframe and relocate the boundaries of our possibilities.

So what does it mean to be at the intersection of these three lines of reflection about our careers? Doing what we like to do will fuel our drive; doing what we should do will strengthen our resolve; and doing what we could do will elevate our contributions. The combined result will be a richly textured work life that is inspired, meaningful, challenging and deeply rewarding. Arriving at this intersection may not be easy, but the closer we get to it the better off we will be. So pause a bit every year amid the mad dash of daily work life to ask “am I closer this year (compared to last year) to the intersection of what I would like to do, should do, and could do?”

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Do you have a question for a Gustavson professor that you’d like to see featured in a future issue of Business Class? Email it to bizedit@uvic.ca for consideration.