YOUR FUTURE IS "CALLING:"

VOCATIONAL WORK'S IMPACT ON INDIVIDUAL PASSION AND COMMUNITY CONNECTION IN AMERICAN CAPITALISM

by

Jessica Myers

HONORS CAPSTONE

Submitted to Texas State University
in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for
graduation in the Honors College
May 2023

Supervisor:

Robert Price

Second Reader:

Myric Polhemus

ABSTRACT

In America, the idea of pursuing one's *calling* has evolved from *vocational* Christian communitarian origins to today's individualized, secularized life-task. Determining and pursuing one's calling is encouraged by American society in all stages of life, as children are funneled into college majors and corporate marketers encourage passionate work as a primary source of meaning. In fact, the crumbling of community institutions leaves work as one of the *only* outlets for meaning in America. However, due to the nature of working for pay and our lacking social safety net, workers here are placed in tension between earning a subsistence wage and the pursuit of passionate, fulfilling work. This construction fails to create a workforce that finds meaning in their work; while job satisfaction is surprisingly high, measures of job engagement and passion are vastly lower. This thesis is a literature review that explores historical writing, scholarly research, personal narratives, and news reports to characterize this tension and determine not only whether calling pursuit in America's particular kind of labor system benefits the pursuer, but also whether it facilitates community connection as the vocation once did. Through this research, I find that pursuing a calling benefits the worker through increased job satisfaction and decreased burnout, but these benefits are mitigated by workaholism and exploitation. As meaning is created in connection, this analysis also finds that calling pursuit can aid individuals to craft a deeply meaningful role with coworkers, clients, and their broader community, but the disproportionate ability to pursue one's calling may contribute to the deepening of American inequality and class conflict.

Key words: calling, vocation, passionate work, work engagement, American labor system, American economy, community, meaning, fulfillment

DEDICATION & ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to my family for all of their support throughout my undergraduate tenure. Thanks, Dad, for the thought-provoking conversations and encouragement. Mom, thank you for the deep love and care. And thank you, Spence, for our Sunday sushi dinners. I appreciate you letting me talk your ear off.

Thank you to Garrett for being my greatest cheerleader. Your dedication to the work you do was a major inspiration for this project, and I am so proud of you for it, always. I love you more.

Thank you to Dr. Price, for keeping me on track and in the right direction. It may be hard to believe, but this thesis would have been double the length without his input. My writing has improved tremendously, thanks in no small part to him.

Thank you to Dr. Haas, who also helped me with the writing and staying-on-track bit. I appreciate your approach to curiosity and knowledge, and I thank you for the academic, professional, and personal encouragement.

Finally, thanks to Myric. I am extremely grateful that he dedicated many hours of his time both virtually and in-person to discuss this topic, even over holiday breaks. I am reassured that there are some like him in his kind of corporate position.

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I. INTRODUCTION

In some sense, this thesis is selfish. I do not have a very good idea of what my calling is. I have interests—some very passionate, even. But I have not discovered (or "explored into," a particular phrase that I will later discuss) the spark in my soul that shouts, "Yes, this is what I should be doing with my life! I can wake up every day inspired by this task, knowing it is what I am meant to do."

This thesis centers on the concept of the *calling*, otherwise called the vocation, life-task, or work summons. Explored herein are descriptions, statistics, and stories of the pursuit of calling, from our religious history to today, and what they can collectively tell us about our societal yearning for fulfillment through work. Through this project, I will explore not just the individual benefits and drawbacks from pursuing one's calling, but also whether, in attainment of one's calling in America's highly individualized, secularized, and hierarchical labor structure, one may actually form strong connections with clients, coworkers, and their broader community. I will also determine some manners by which the American economic system could contribute to the fact that many of us do "bowl alone" now, as Robert D. Putnam writes, and how that may relate to social connection at work. I hope that by engaging with these concepts and folding them into my own process of self-discovery, I may be impassioned at least in part.

Myriad definitions for the modern *calling* have been produced in research and literature. Depending on your perspective, the term could refer to a certain physiological view of work, the contents of the work itself, a certain place in the occupational division of labor, or a deep external pull to pursue a certain career path (Dobrow and Tosti-Kharas 2011:1004). Berg, Grant, and Johnson, in line with Wrzesniewski, define a calling as "an occupation that an individual (1)

feels drawn to pursue, (2) expects to be intrinsically enjoyable and meaningful, and (3) sees as a central part of his or her identity" (2010:973). The calling is also described by researchers Dik and Duffy as a predisposition toward a line of particularly pro-social work, which one pursues to fulfill their own life purpose (Dobrow and Tosti-Kharas 2011:1004). One might expect this variety in definitions, considering the amorphous nature of the calling as it is understood today. Such attempts to define the calling are restricted by both inherent and societally-imposed barriers, like the inaccuracy of our self-perception, our limited time, access, and resources to explore all potential avenues of fulfilling work, and the limitations of human language, which may prevent us from adequately communicating such a feeling. Funnily enough, those who are pursuing their callings often describe the pull they feel toward the work as "indescribable."

Another reason why the term calling has varied definitions is its history involving a transformation from the Christian *vocation* to the secular, individualist *calling* of today. Hearing or reading the word *calling* may invoke ideals of the soul, or perhaps divinely inspired purpose. Indeed, the *vocation* of America's past was centered around the goal of discovering and aligning one's labor pursuits with the job that God's plan intended for them. In the sixteenth century, Protestant reformer Martin Luther popularized the view that one's job is a major life role through which one could contribute to a properly functioning community. Now, America finds itself in a modern era where companies encourage workers to "pursue their passion" because if they "do what they love, then it will never feel like work." In this way, the calling phenomenon has shifted meanings from a communitarian orientation toward God's plan towards a lauded avenue for achieving self-actualization and individually-defined purpose.

Fordham University business administration professor Shoshana R. Dobrow and Jennifer Tosti-Kharas at San Francisco State University's College of Business are two researchers in the

sphere of calling studies who recognize the growing interest in finding passionate work. They sought to reach a cohesive definition of the term *calling*, which I believe they accomplished. According to them, a calling is “a consuming, meaningful passion people experience toward a domain” (2011:1001). This definition places the calling in opposition to two other general orientations toward work, the job and career. According to these researchers, those with a calling orientation associate work with neither extrinsic rewards, like a job orientation might, nor the feelings of power and accomplishment, as with a career orientation. Rather, called individuals view work as moral duty (2011:1004). Those with a strong calling feel as though they are “destined to do this type of work and could not imagine doing anything else;” they are deeply passionate and “feel their involvement in the calling domain is meaningful [to] themselves, their families, and/or society” (2011:1004-1005). While directed at an objective external subject, the work role, the term *calling* refers specifically to the called individual’s internal psychology, the way they view work as a fulfilling component of their central identity. Also of note, Dobrow and Tosti-Kharas do not limit the consuming passion’s direction to a “job,” or “work,” or even a “role,” but to a “domain.” *Domain* broadens the kind of labor that can be done in a calling beyond the strict bounds of paid work; it separates the idea of the calling from the position of a worker in capitalism, who must trade their labor for a wage in their defined workplace role. Volunteering, part-time roles, and even transferable skill verbs such as “teaching” and “managing” could theoretically be included as meaningful and fulfilling domains.

It is human nature to want a life of deep fulfillment and personal meaning that is elevated beyond surface-level, everyday happinesses. As far back as the Greeks, humans recognized the difference between this *hedonic* happiness, characterized by pleasure, enjoyment, comfort, and momentary absence of distress, and *eudaimonic* happiness, the kind that elicits growth, meaning,

authenticity, and pursuit of excellence over the long term (Huta and Waterman 2014). According to Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan, who wrote the introduction to the *Journal of Happiness Studies*'s special issue on hedonia, eudaimonia, and well-being, the foundation of eudaimonia as a guiding moral philosophy can be traced back to Aristotle, who saw virtue, autonomy, and the realization of one's potential as the highest human goods (2008:4). Another student of Socrates' philosophies, Aristippus, is credited with forming the hedonic movement and uplifting the pursuit of pleasure as a philosophical goal. Influences of hedonism can today be found in some aspects of utilitarianism: for example, the goal of classical utilitarianism is usually taught to be minimizing pain and maximizing happiness or pleasure for the most people (Bennett 2018).

Research has shown that while the benefits from hedonic happiness may be overwhelmingly positive, they are also incredibly fleeting. In fact, Harvard happiness professor Arthur C. Brooks calls this concept the "hedonic treadmill" in his *Atlantic* piece "How to Want Less." This term refers to the brain's natural drive toward emotional homeostasis, and it explains our inability to feel satisfied in the long term even if we experience a huge momentary success, like when we get a promotion, beat a personal best in a race, or even win the lottery (Brooks "How to Want Less" 2022). While the recognition, accomplishment, and reward are enjoyable, we also tend to return to a neutral equilibrium, or identify a new, higher ambition fairly quickly. I have certainly experienced this hedonic cycle on and off literal treadmills as a former high school cross country runner. It was routine during my season to experience the excitement of reaching a personal best time in a race, only to have a faster goal pace set for the next morning's workout.

In contrast to hedonia, Brooks and other happiness scholars find that *eudaimonic* happiness can create longer-lasting positive feelings because it is rooted in meaning and

fulfillment, which are more sustaining. They also find that eudaimonia is primarily fostered through human connection. Dr. Robert Waldinger and Dr. Marc Schulz, professors of psychiatry and clinical adult psychology at the Harvard Medical School, are the two academics arguably most well versed in measuring long-term human happiness. In "the longest in-depth longitudinal study on human life ever done," Harvard's Study of Adult Development has followed 724 Boston residents and Harvard undergrads as well as their spouses and children since 1938. Waldinger and Schulz, who refer to themselves as Bob and Marc in the *Atlantic* article based on their book *The Good Life: Lessons from the World's Longest Scientific Study of Happiness,* have taken the reins on this project. Of all outcomes, Bob and Marc identify one "simple and profound conclusion: Good relationships lead to health and happiness" (Waldinger and Schulz 2023). Whether through faith, family, friendship, or work, which Brooks calls the "four institutions of meaning," connection with others is scientifically and anecdotally imperative ("America is Pursuing Happiness" 2022).

According to Dobrow and Tosti-Kharas's definition of a calling (a "consuming, meaningful passion people experience toward a domain") it is natural to seek self-fulfillment, or *personalized* meaning, in a called job. In fact, people have been documented experiencing a yearn for more personally meaningful work not just in under- or unemployment, but also in extreme overemployment. In his book *Bullshit Jobs,* sociologist David Graeber gives us a taxonomy of the "bullshit jobs" he notices in our workforce. It spans from those that just check boxes, to the duct-tapers that cover up the problems that should not exist, to the purely decorative (where Graeber places today's front-desk secretaries), to the telemarketers and PR specialists who find their own roles at best useless and at worst objectionable. Graeber weaves a critical

image of the disconnect between compensation and meaning in America with narratives like Tom's:

> "I work for a very large American-owned postproduction company based in London, [and] a growing percentage of our customers are advertising agencies [for whom] we use visual effects trickery to make it seem like [their] products actually work…I get paid £100,000 a year to do this…I consider a worthwhile job to be one that fulfills a preexisting need, or creates a product or service that people hadn't thought of, that somehow enhances and improves their lives…My job is a combination of manufacturing demand and then exaggerating the usefulness of the products sold to fix it" (2018:37-38).

Tom's story supports a later claim Graeber makes in the book that there is an "inverse relationship between the social value of work and the amount of money one is likely to be paid for it" (2018:207). In one of his latter chapters, Graeber cites a 2017 paper by U.S. economists Benjamin B. Lockwood, Charles G. Nathanson, and E. Glen Weyl that calculates dollar-per-dollar social costs and benefits of certain high-paid sectors. They found that researchers contribute $9 overall social value for every $1 they are paid; on the other hand, lawyers, advertisers, managers, and the entire financial sector impart a net negative drain on social value, despite being paid extremely well (2018:210). This is recognized by the workers themselves, who are sometimes "baffled" by their own dissatisfaction with their "ridiculously sweet deal." Graeber attributes this to the workers' experience of falseness and purposelessness in their role (2018:75). Even when the financial benefit of work is far above average, the worker is left miserable without some aspect of personalized meaning.

However, because labor is so ubiquitous in our lives, and membership and social investment in community institutions are declining overall (as I will discuss), Americans' only nonfamilial outlet for *connective* meaning is also through work. The self-labeled bullshit jobholders like Tom are acknowledging this vital aspect of work when they point out how their role fails to enhance or improve others' lives. Thus, alongside understanding the individual benefits and drawbacks from pursuing a calling, particularly in the American labor system, our aim is to determine whether the system aids or obstructs a calling-pursuer in facilitating meaningful connection through their personally meaningful labor. For the purposes of this project, I will categorize connections into:

1. Coworkers: those who are managing you or working alongside you.
2. Clients: those who you benefit through your services or while in your role.
3. Community: those to whom you feel more broadly connected in doing your work.

In Brooks' (2022) article about connection through meaning, "America is Pursuing Happiness in All the Wrong Places," he states, "Faith, family, friendship, and work–the institutions of meaning–all have one thing in common. They are all outward-facing expressions of love and solidarity with others." Whether with one's work friends and managers, those one is teaching or defending or caring for or enacting any other job role for, or even those your work touches through expressions of culture or deep emotion, these connections are what create meaning in the work aspect of our lives.

II. THE UBIQUITY OF WORK AND ITS FIRST CAUSE: SUBSISTENCE

And this work aspect is quite a large chunk: Americans spend about one-third, or 90,000 hours, of our lives at work, according to Jessica Pryce-Jones in her book *Happiness at Work* (Goudreau 2010). I was partly inspired to write about callings because of labor's ubiquity in American life. The Bureau of Labor Statistics at the U.S. Department of Labor keeps a survey on American time use which found that even with pandemic office closures in 2020, full-time workers still spent an average of 8.14 hours per weekday doing work activities that year (U.S. Dept. of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics). Per 2019 data, adding the time it takes to commute to work would increase this statistic to 9.06 hours per day. Those who must take public transportation to work, such as a city transit bus, see an additional one-way 46.6 minute commute (U.S. Dept. of Commerce, Census Bureau). The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, which conducts global studies on worker hours, found that U.S. workers spend more time in the office than almost any other developed nation at an average of 1,791 hours per year. This amount is only surpassed by Chile, Mexico, Greece, Korea, and Costa Rica, and it exceeds the time spent in the office in other industrialized nations like Germany, the UK, France, and Japan by hundreds of hours as of very recent data (Miller 2023).

This trend of time spent at work in America is also prevalent in our watercooler conversations (naturally), social media feeds, entertainment such as television, movies, and songs, and the myriad anecdotes we read in think pieces published in major newspapers. Writer Derek Thompson frequently publishes articles in the *Atlantic* about American labor and economic productivity with headlines like "Why White-Collar Workers Spend All Day at the Office," for example (2019). Anecdotally, many have recognized the stark difference between the work-as-means-to-end philosophy of the Italians, French, and other European nations in

comparison to the hustling American approach to work (European Business Review 2021). (In fact, this particularly American notion of hard effort and wealth creation as ends in themselves is associated with the history of the calling, as Max Weber traces in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. I discuss this in a later section.)

Part of the reason why Americans are so consumed by work is that on some level, they have to be. In our capitalist economy, we exchange currency for goods and services at a certain price, whether they are useful, purely for enjoyment, or even necessary to live, thus making the currency itself necessary to obtain. However, our socioeconomy also dictates that currency can only be earned in exchange for labor. We do not have a compensatory system detached from work, such as a universal basic income, which might decouple work from our survival. Thus, work we must.

However, Americans spend a higher amount of time at work relative to other nations that also have this kind of currency-for-work system, such as Germany and the United Kingdom (World Population Review 2023). This discrepancy is partially explained by our relative lack of social safety net. The United States is unique as a developed country in that corporations here are not federally mandated to provide as much support for our citizens in circumstances that may warrant them, like a bout of unemployment, a born disability, or having a child. As Samantha Valente writes for the New Labor Forum in June of 2019, “In keeping with its tendency to rely on the private sector to ameliorate hardships, the U.S. government spends below average on unemployment insurance, disability insurance, and worker compensation.” She also finds that seniors in the United States, those defined as at least 65 years old, continue to work past their expected retirement age at higher rates than other comparable nations (Valente 2019). Additionally, the US is the only OECD nation not to offer mandated paid leave to new mothers,

while in France, mothers are entitled to at least 16 weeks for their first child (McHugh 2020). Our lack of social safety net is certainly not helping to alleviate the fact that we have disproportionate economic inequality relative to other countries. For example, America has the highest overall and child poverty rate as compared to other developed OECD nations, falling below only Costa Rica as of 2019 (Confronting Poverty 2023).

This level of poverty is indicative of the particular kind of inequality that America's wealth system generates. Thomas Piketty, French author on global economic inequality, is most well known for his influential book *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, which theorizes that inequality rises when the rate of return on capital is greater than the economic growth of a nation. Piketty (2014) illustrates the difference between the accumulation of personal capital through returns from labor, like an income, versus from already-existing wealth, like investments and owned assets that can accrue value without labor. He argues that America has vastly disproportionate wealth inequality relative to the rest of the world due to a discrepancy between these two ways of wealth-building. In simple terms, it is much easier to build your wealth when you can receive dividends from large investments, take out a business loan from a bank to jump-start your business, or share some of your home equity instead of spending time and effort working for a wage. According to the 2022 World Inequality Report, which Piketty took part in coordinating, the entire bottom 50% of Americans in the economic distribution owned only 2% of America's wealth assets. The top 10% owns 76% of all wealth, and the top one percent almost a third (Chancel et al. 2021:3). No other developed country compares in this level of inequality.

The difficulty that lower-income individuals face in building wealth in America is a consequence of multiple factors. First, regressive tax policies place a larger proportional burden on those who depend on income to earn and create wealth. For example, the estate and

inheritance taxes levied by the U.S. government on someone's wealth following their death and before it passes to inheritors have drastically fallen in revenue. The Wharton School of Business reported that the number of estates liable for the tax dropped from 52,000 in 2001 to just 1,300 in 2021, reducing tax revenues from $23.5 billion to $9.3 billion in those two decades (Ricco and Osorio 2022). Additionally, Piketty found that the amount of inheritance wealth in America is so large that if one were to divide all inherited wealth by the number of Americans who turned 25 years old, the average inheritance would come down to $250,000 to $300,000 per person (Klein 2022). However, we know that far from every American receives this amount—instead, it is concentrated amongst those who have reaped the rewards of capital assets.

On the other hand, the Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy finds that a heavy reliance on *sales* taxes by the majority of states contributes to an effectively regressive tax system and further inequality. Because of our federalist division of powers in America, each state has its own unique tax code. For example, Texas is one of the most regressively taxed states in the nation, due in no small part to its lack of personal income tax. According to the Institute's 2018 state-by-state distributional analysis *Who Pays?*, low-income families are taxed at an effective rate of 13 percent here, while high-income families are only effectively taxed 3 percent of income-related wealth, largely through sales and excise charges. As ITEP observes, sales taxes are deemed more regressive because poorer taxpayers spend a larger percentage of their income and buy less-quality goods more frequently than their richer counterparts (*Who Pays?* 2018). These taxes do return value to the contributor when they are re-allocated toward societally beneficial infrastructure projects. However, at the individual level, they illustrate the outsized pressures that lower-income individuals feel because they must exercise labor for an income.

The effects of rapidly rising cost-of-living and inflation compound these pressures on a significant portion of America's lower income distribution. Most have likely heard the statistic that a significant portion of Americans (up to two-thirds, by some estimates) could not afford to pay a $400 emergency bill (Hawkins 2023; Nayar 2022). Further, financial servicer LendingClub found in November 2022 that 63% of families were living paycheck-to-paycheck (Dickler 2022). In fact, real wages are declining. According to both government and think-tank analyses, productivity has increased up to 120% more than relative hourly compensation for non-management workers since the middle of the 20th century (Galloway 2022).

This financial peril spiked during the pandemic. In August of last year, inflation reached a historic 9.1% and gas costs rose to $160 more per month year over year, according to LendingClub's financial health officer Anuj Nayar (2022). Narrowing to certain sectors can illustrate a starker picture. The Federal Housing Finance Agency's data on housing prices, for example, shows they grew 12.2% year over year in September 2022, after an increase of 17% year over year the quarter before. Prices reached an all-time high of 18.5% growth year over year in September 2021, during the height of COVID-19 pressures (CEIC 2022). On a positive note, the labor market has recovered inordinately quickly and successfully from the pandemic when compared to the 2008 crisis, as Zachary D. Carter writes in "The Economy Is Good, Actually" for the *Atlantic*. Even still, he notes that after the Great Recession "the country never recovered all of the manufacturing jobs it lost," and most of those left over were paying "poverty wages" (Carter 2022). In total, costs are growing to severely outpace incomes with increasingly unequal impact on different sectors.

In fact, a study in the *Review of Economic Studies* found that America experiences not just gaping wealth inequality, but globally disproportionate *unfair inequality*, the factors of

which further dampen wealth-building. Conducted by Paul Hufe, Ravi Kanbur, and Andreas Peichl (2022), the study builds on Piketty's work by contending with inequality through the lens of fairness. They define "fairness" as a judgment of two factors:

1. whether or not someone fell into poverty based on causes beyond their individual control–in which case, they should not be held responsible for these disadvantages, because they had no individual choice in them;
2. or when the extremity of inequality, such as "hunger, homelessness, violence, or insecurity," is so deep such that it feels outsized compared to the poor individual choice made (2022:3346).

After analyzing inequality in America, the authors find that "the underlying relative share of unfair inequality has increased from 15.2% to 18.9%" from 1980 to 2014, especially in demographics with lower socio-economic backgrounds. In fact, the authors write that overall unfairness in the US traces what they call "the intergenerational transmission of disadvantages," a trend largely driven by low distribution of opportunity across those with different parental education and occupations (Hufe et al. 2022:3347, 3373). This compounds the macro generational wealth gaps between whiter, richer and Blacker, poorer Americans founded in unequal legal and statutory systems, segregated housing, and other racist practices (Richards 2010). This gaping unfair inequality is then built ever larger over time by the impacts of economic inequality factors mentioned above, such as tax policy and inflation. Thus, though Americans do not choose which families they are born into, these unfair inequalities make certain groups in America more likely to need to work for subsistence reasons.

While our social safety net is lacking relative to other countries, we do have public assistance programs in the United States to partially alleviate these pressures. There are those based on automatic eligibility due to age or another factor, such as Social Security and veterans' benefits, as well as those that individuals are eligible for when they fulfill means-tested low-income criteria. However, in order to receive the benefits from these programs, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program or unemployment benefits in Texas, individuals must be actively searching for labor. This might include proving as often as every week that one is "able to and available for work and actively seeking work" ("Texas Unemployment Benefits"). Yet one is simultaneously disincentivized from seeking work, since they will be kicked off certain welfare supplements after finding work and starting to make above the poverty line, which would make them ineligible for those supplemental services. This Catch-22 leaves them stuck in a kind of poverty limbo. There are also immense bureaucratic obstacles to pursuing and successfully receiving governmental benefits. Annie Lowrey (2021) dubs this the "time tax–a levy of paperwork, aggravation, and mental effort imposed on citizens in exchange for benefits that putatively exist to help them."

Additionally, most Americans have been required to have healthcare since the individual mandate to have insurance was implemented through the Affordable Care Act. But the United States is the only country that does not provide automatic or compulsory health insurance to the entire population (Valente 2019). Healthcare has been inextricably linked to the workplace in America since the 1940s, when the federal government prevented companies from raising wages during World War II due to already existing inflation. Those companies resorted to health benefits as an alternative to entice workers, which unions then moved to support (Institute of Medicine Staff 1993). Public healthcare provided by Medicaid and Medicare are tied to

requirements like poverty and age, and these programs are subject to the same difficulties with achievement and implementation that are associated with general welfare. This leads to adverse outcomes such as long wait times and low-quality care (Lowrey 2021). Remember the Obamacare website crash, anyone?

The idea of a calling is inextricably tied to the fulfillment of a worker—and, in our particular style of American capitalism, worker means “human,” since according to its operations you either are, should be, or are unable to work. For the vast majority of the population, who do not hold enough in assets to subsist on wealth from investment, this system sturdily links compensation to labor through dependence on an income. When the American dollar is required not only for household goods, but also the house itself, then work is vital to achieve basic life subsistence. And when the dollar is spread thinner due to a regressive tax system, inflationary pressures, global economic crises, and other factors, basic life subsistence becomes harder.

In all, there are more Americans who must work for subsistence reasons as compared to workers of similar economic stature in other developed nations. In total, this results in an American poverty rate of 11.6%, a decrease due to government stimulus during the pandemic but still accounting for more than one in ten of our citizens (Lee 2023). However, this rate could also be rephrased as, “88.4% of Americans are *not in poverty*.” Why, then, do so many of them still continue to work to such an extent as compared to other countries?

III. THE SECOND CAUSE OF WORK UBIQUITY: A CULTURE OF "WORKISM"

I was also inspired to write about callings because of a fundamental tension I noticed in the universality of work. While we are driven to work for subsistence in the above ways, something more subliminal is also affecting our American workforce: we are encouraged to work for *passion*, from childhood development to adulthood, by the very institutions and culture surrounding us. Consider these frequent conversation openers:

"Nice to meet you. What do you do for work?"

"Hey, how's it going. So what's your major?"

"Aw—well, that's quite nice. So what do you want to be when you grow up?"

Whether framed as a kid's dream to be an astronaut or veterinarian, the college student's go-to icebreaker question, or the very next thing an adult asks about a stranger after their first name, societal messaging throughout one's life indicates to them that labor should be viewed as an aspiration and the core of their identity. From kindergarten age, our society seeks to funnel children toward the job best suited for them, or one which they might be most passionate toward. Then, in early and later adulthood, work is subtly encouraged as a facet of identity whose value we should center in the pursuit of a happy and fulfilled life. Further, it is where we have been driven to pour almost all of our personal- and community-oriented meaning and accomplishment. In other words, work is also ubiquitous because we have been told to mold our identities around it throughout our lives.

Calling scholars recognize how an accelerated marketing culture has made work the ultimate expression of adulthood passion. "In recent years," write organizational studies scholars

Justin M. Berg, Adam M. Grant, and Victoria Johnson, our media has "extolled the virtues of having a calling, and often go a step further in stressing the dire importance of finding one's true calling" (2010:974). Even more than a decade ago, Berg and colleagues saw that the largest job search companies of the time were launching advertisement campaigns pressing the viewer to "follow your heart" and "find your calling" (2010:975). I myself heard an ad like this within the last year. It was sneakily embedded within the *New York Times Daily* podcast episode I was listening to, encouraging listeners to check out another podcast from the *New York Times*'s show network. LinkedIn blogwriter and *Hello Monday* podcast host Jessi Hempel interrupted my program to inform me, "My goal is for listeners to feel empowered by our show to make the changes in their own lives that will make them more productive, and more satisfied, and fulfilled in our careers" ("One Elite High" 2022). Thanks, Jessi.

At this moment I feel it is important to note that many have already recognized this societal pattern and question how steadfast we should hold it. Erin A. Cech, author of *The Trouble With Passion,* reports in the *Atlantic* that during the past three decades, many have turned to the "passion principle–the prioritization of fulfilling work even at the expense of job security or a decent salary." In fact, "more than 75 percent of college-educated workers believe that passion is an important factor in career decision-making." 67 percent adhere to the passion principle over "job stability, high wages, and work-life balance" (Cech 2021). Fulfillment, facilitated through the ability to pursue one's individual passion through work, is clearly important to both the existent workforce and college aged future-workers alike. But this perspective is skewed, according to Cech. These calls to "follow your dreams" from outside sources, she says, are hiding a presupposition that everyone has a reliable financial safety net or social network to fall back onto if pursuing a passion ends up being unsustainable. "When

working-class college graduates pursue their passion," she finds that "they are about twice as likely as wealthier passion seekers to later end up in unstable, low-paid work far outside that passion" (Cech 2021). Structural obstacles to finding fulfillment through labor–the kinds of pressures we discussed earlier that keep many bound to subsistence work, for example–make the passion principle unachievable for some.

However, many of those in the working population have taken the work-as-passion principle fully to heart. They pursue their careers with an almost religious fervor that responds to many names–the hustle culture, "grindset" (a portmanteau of grind and mindset), girlbossing, et cetera. The impulse then trickles down to those aspiring for a higher rung on the ladder by appealing to their American meritocratic sense that hard work gleans great rewards. At the same time, this impulse portends itself to be the provider of all the technical, innovative solutions that our future requires. *Atlantic* writer Derek Thompson calls this impulse *workism*, and it is most often exhibited by the high-earning tech industry. He defines the term as "the belief that work is not only necessary to economic production, but also the centerpiece of one's identity and life's purpose; and the belief that any policy to promote human welfare must *always* encourage more work" (Thompson "Workism Is Making" 2019).

I am reminded of effective altruism, the hallmark philosophy of disgraced cryptocurrency investor and entrepreneur Sam Bankman-Fried, which asserts that the best way to accomplish the most good for the most people is to make the most money, then funnel it towards those with the most need. A *Planet Money* explainer further describes it as "the idea that by using data and by thinking strategically, you can give better and help improve the lives of more living beings" (Childs et al. 2023). This is a laudable goal, certainly. But in order to take intentional steps to accomplish it, one sort of has to actually believe in it–which SBF did not. Effective altruism

reflects the same kind of life- and work-governing philosophy that leads the workist, who believes work to be his greatest opportunity to improve humanity while fulfilling his own sense of personal and communal meaning.

Indeed, the time spent in office by workists has vastly ballooned from 1980 to 2005. During this two-and-a-half-decade period, the highest-earning, most educated men in America grew to have the longest average workweek, reducing their leisure hours more than poor men in the U.S. and richer men in other countries. As Thompson notes in his *Atlantic* piece “Workism Is Making Americans Miserable,” this is an extreme inversion of historical expectations. Economist John Meynard Keynes, for example, commented in 1930 that he anticipated his grandchildren would only work 15-hour weeks. Productivity probably rose to match those 15 hours, Thompson writes, but something shifted culturally to keep those workers in the office. He contends that the logic here may not be economic at all, but rather emotional and spiritual. These best-educated high-earners “feel most themselves” in the office, choosing it “for the same reason that devout Christians attend church on Sundays:” because their identities are intertwined with their role as a worker (Thompson “Workism Is Making” 2019).

Indeed, the societal and familial pressures to find meaning in work prevail through this ethos. Thompson notes that “95 percent of teens said ‘having a job or career they enjoy’ would be ‘extremely or very important’ to them as an adult,” even beating other ambitions like having a family and regularly practicing kindness (“Workism Is Making” 2019). It is clear from these and above statistics that the inculcation of our aspiration for work is broadly and deeply felt not only by the tech industry workouts, but also in other sectors. While the workists worry less about their subsistence, however, other working populations must prioritize it, even as it conflicts with their aspirations.

One place that serves as a strong example of the subsistence-versus-passion nexus is the university, which has overtaken the postsecondary education market. College is the quintessential institution where Americans seek to balance building a steady financial foundation with a degree that aligns with their skills and passions. In a piece for the *Atlantic,* Xochitl Gonzalez argues that college is seen as the only answer by parents to "stave off a life of abject poverty and failure." High schoolers are noticing, with 86% of them citing that they feel pressure from either their guardians or society to attend (Gonzalez 2022). On the other hand, despite increasing federal support, vocational training (known as "career and technical education" in higher ed) has seen a seven percent decline in overall participation from 1992 to 2013 according to data collected by the National Center for Education Statistics and the Institute of Education Sciences (Liu and Burns 2020:4). Somewhat counterintuitively to the name *vocational* school, we view trade-preparing institutions and vocational roles such as technicians, manufacturers, welders, plumbers, electricians, mechanics, construction workers, and other blue-collar labor as less capable of providing growth and personal fulfillment, despite being nonetheless vital for the functioning of our society. That is, if we even view them at all, given that they are usually not the main characters of our favorite T.V. shows and movies, unless their job serves as a major plot point. Technical school is not the path parents think to push their kids down when they aspire for them to climb the socioeconomic ladder. Fundamentally, college thus serves as an aspirational bridge from subsistence-based to passion-based labor where one can derive personal meaning. In any case, with rising conversations about the merits of trade school and financial pressures, as well as the looming automation of retail and white-collar jobs, some lower-income Americans are turning to vocational options.

The gig economy and side-hustle culture also serve as an interesting illustration of the subsistence-workism tension. These pursuits serve different roles for different pursuers: they supplement wages for some when their regular job isn't enough to subsist, but they can also allow others to pursue passionate work when their day job is the necessary moneymaker. For example, a LendingTree survey from early November 2022 found that 7% of respondents either did food delivery or ridesharing from Uber, Lyft, DoorDash, or another service. Work of this kind was segregated by gender: women did user-generated content and other kinds of online freelancing, like writing, editing, doing surveys, blogging, or social media influencing. Men reported picking up part-time or handyman work on websites like TaskRabbit, day trading, and reselling on e-commerce sites like Etsy and eBay (Davis 2022). InsuriRanks also conducted a survey of just over 1,000 full-time and part-time workers 2022, finding that 93% of those surveyed had at least one side hustle. The most common was taking online surveys, and 63% of respondents claimed the reason was that they needed extra cash and for something to do, at 63% of respondents. 44%--almost half–reported their top reason for using a side hustle was because they needed to use a side hustle to make ends meet or cover bills; 28% claimed inflation was why they took a side gig ("Side Hustles" 2022). While these surveys occurred during a unique time, as 14% of the LendingTree surveyors reported they'd only started their side gig because they lost their job from the pandemic, the rising cost of living and the need to supplement expenses like college tuition (63% of Gen Zers say have a side hustle, for example) almost ensure that ridesharing apps and "side hustles" will continue to be an extra resource for subsisters (Davis 2022; "Side Hustles" 2022).

On the other hand, our culture also encourages workers to transform the activities that fulfill them, like the hobbies they might pursue outside of their day job, into "side hustles." This

is a phenomenon that seems more geared toward those with less focus on subsistence, but still require or desire multiple income streams. While 90% of the InsuriRanks respondents enjoyed their side hustle, 32% say the *top* reason they took up their side hustle was because they genuinely enjoyed it, and an entire *49%* claimed they would quit their full-time job if they made enough money with their side hustle. This is an important connection that could mean, among other things, that people have turned their passionate hobbies into side hustles for additional income in a world where passion is supposed to be commodified ("Side Hustles" 2022).

Other working populations like the administrative sector could be included here as examples of the opposite phenomenon, where subsistence is the main goal of their work, but their passion to help others makes that particular work more purposeful. For example, our identity formation around work seeps even into those positions less "elevated" than the workist tech professionals toiling to save our future. Yet, those positions can allow workers to fall just as easily into a passion for serving the community. Alessandra Davy-Falconi (2022), a self-described administrative person, writes in the *Atlantic* about her accidental falling into the identity trap:

> "Originally, I intended this path as a way to pay my bills, but I have watched my job become inseparable from myself. I organize my life into an infinite number of Gmail folders, write poetry at work and compose stories at home about assistants who steal routing numbers…Ten thousand hours of applying yourself to a task is supposed to convert you into a professional. But we don't attach this axiom to all professions, especially not for work that society undervalues…Although administrative work is considered one rung up from the labor of scanning bar codes or wiping tiny noses, it uses

> the same set of skills and shares the same problem: You're paid somewhat more, but always as little as possible."

Yet, she continues:

> "[D]espite my low worth on paper, I use every skill I've ever developed in my kitchen-sink roles: how to handle the sensitivities of important people; how to read reactions to communication styles; how to move through this world without losing the trail of bureaucratic breadcrumbs. I apply the invaluable practice of writing and editing to routine interactions in our ever more disembodied world, where your only sense of other beings is their clipped clauses and phrases in email and Slack" (Davy-Falconi 2022).

Along this same vein, our *Bullshit Jobs* author David Graeber also writes quite a bit on the "caring class," another sector of subsistence-focused work that may find connection through their role. Those who hear "caring classes" may immediately associate the term with women's work, since women stereotypically maintain the skills of tending to others: explaining, reassuring, anticipating wants or needs, and monitoring and maintaining objects and people alike. But in his *Guardian* article on the caring class, he (2014) writes that *working*-class individuals do a far greater proportion of this kind of work than "hammering, carving, hoisting, or harvesting things," as is the common misconception of the male-dominated field. For example, as Englishman Graeber writes, the ticket takers at the tube station "don't in fact spend most of their time taking tickets: they spend most of their time explaining things, fixing things, finding lost children, and taking care of the old, sick, and confused." As the child of a working-class family, he continues, he knows first-hand that working-class individuals get their pride from taking care of their community: "[Is] this not what life is basically about? Human beings

are projects of mutual creation. Most of the work we do is on each other. The working classes just do a disproportionate share. They are the caring classes, and always have been" (Graeber 2014). Later we will talk about those of the caring class that are integrated into the capitalist system well by acclimating into a meaningful work role via their communal service. In these places, subsistence and community connection may find happy agreement.

IV. THE PROBLEMS WITH WORK UBIQUITY: LACK OF INDIVIDUAL MEANING AND COMMUNITY CONNECTION

For many workers, however, this subsistence-versus-workism tension creates a problematic construct in our workplace. While job *satisfaction* polling might indicate that Americans are content with their jobs, extremely low job *engagement* tells us a different story, one that may give us important insight into meaning in American life. According to a study from Deloitte in June 2017, while over two-thirds of the subject group were “optimistic about the future of their companies,” 68 percent of the workforce remained unengaged. Incredibly, a measly 13 percent reported being passionate about their jobs (“Deloitte Study” 2017). Similar job satisfaction polling from the Pew Research Center in 2016 indicates that almost eighty percent of American workers were generally satisfied with their jobs. In a random sample of over 57,000 participants in 2021, however, Gallup found that engagement at work was dropping from already low rates. Just over one-third of employees were actively engaged at their work, meaning “involved in and enthusiastic about their workplace,” and 16 percent were actively disengaged. This means that approximately half of the pool viewed their jobs with marked apathy and detachment, neither enthusiastic nor hateful of their work (Harter 2022).

Derek Thompson cites these and similar numbers to make this juxtaposition clear. In every year of the General Social Survey, which has been conducted annually in America since the 1970s, more than eighty percent of respondents reported that they were very or moderately satisfied at work. Of these numbers, Thompson (2022) writes, “let me stress: *I* think most jobs suck…*I* am shocked by these survey results.” And indeed, other studies, such as one entitled “Are You Happy While You Work?” conducted by British social researcher Alex Bryson and happiness economics researcher George MacKerron, found that work led to a greater reduction

in momentary happiness than any other activity, except for being sick in bed (Bryson and MacKerron 2017). (The feeling you may get from taking a relaxed holiday away from work might anecdotally corroborate this, at least as far as hedonic happiness goes.) The crux of Thompson's confusion, and an important distinction that will carry the justification of this paper, is that these numbers might speak to our labor structure's apparent success at helping workers achieve self-described job *satisfaction,* but it does not bode well for our labor system's ability to *fulfill* workers.

I want to form a parallel between this satisfaction-and-fulfillment juxtaposition to the difference between hedonic and eudaimonic happiness we noted earlier. Currently, work in America is not providing the meaning that we seek relative to the amount of time we spend doing or thinking about it (in other words, how ubiquitous it is). Both rich and subsistence-driven Americans alike began to see this fact as the pandemic revealed the precarious and unfulfilling nature of their work. For Thompson (2023), who wrote a follow-up piece this past January, it seemed that Americans' adherence to the idea of workism was faltering. "Since 2019," he wrote, "rich Americans have worked less. And less, and less." But that less, and less, and less is only 1.5 hours less per week, and the rich are still working longer hours overall. In his article, he also notes that workism has embedded itself deeper than could be clawed back in just a few years. It seems to him that Americans "strongly prefer resume virtues" like wit, devotion, and ambition to "eulogy values" like kindness, honesty, and faithfulness for ourselves and our children (Thompson 2023). In all I have discussed, namely the inculcation of "resume virtues" from our parents and society, it seems as though the subsistence-versus-passion tension will not so easily leave the identities of the less financially secure.

The Great Resignation and “quiet quitting,” on the other hand, have had a more sweeping impact across the rest of the labor market. Pew found that the nation’s “quit rate” reached its highest rate in two decades in November of 2021. More than half of workers who quit cited that their “pay was too low,” there were “no opportunities for advancement,” and/or that they “felt disrespected at work” (Parker and Horowitz 2022). Yet the unemployment rate has bounced back from the pandemic’s debilitating effects. The labor force participation rate for workers 25 to 54 years old about a year ago was higher than during the Obama administration (Thompson 2022). Again, low pay and disrespect–the inability to subsist on dignified work–is the outsized reason why people were quitting their jobs. In order to retain workers during the pandemic, then, large companies such as Amazon, Costco, Target, Chipotle, Walgreens, Walmart, CVS, and Starbucks either raised their wages to $15 per hour or made a commitment to doing so in the near future (Smith and Bailie 2021).

While some of them have addressed the subsistence half of the equation through wage increases, employers also recognize that a lack of passion and engagement at work has negatively impacted the morale of the workforce–and, as Cech points out in her *Atlantic* piece, the company’s bottom line. A dissatisfied, disinterested, and disengaged workforce will be less productive, and the output that they do produce will be of lesser quality, creativity, and investment. Disengagement and disloyalty in the workforce also lead to drastically higher employee turnover, which inevitably incurs re-training costs (“How Does Burnout” 2022). Thus, employers have been coaxed to enact what may certainly be called unique solutions. Much has been made of the meditation or stress-relief room, for example. When the trend peaked around the end of 2018 to early 2019, huge firms like Google, Yahoo, Nike, AOL, Deutsche Bank, HBO, General Mills, and Salesforce all had them in their corporate office space (Garvey 2018).

Companies are also offering mental health days and counseling benefits, endorsing therapeutic apps, and even taking a shot at putting their bottom line in jeopardy by attempting a four-day workweek (Greenwood and Anas 2021). In fact, a recently concluded pilot program in which 3,000 employees participated found that a four-day workweek was so beneficial, 15 percent of them declared that no amount of salary increase would convince them to go back to a five-day week (Timsit 2023).

But the pandemic only exacerbated stress and burnout. Forbes reported in a 2022 survey that there was an almost twenty percent increase in mental health symptom reports in just two years, and 84% of respondents stated that the workplace itself contributed to that declining mental health (Hunkins 2022). Thus, corporations have also been pushed to consider *community* meaning as a prospect for longer-term worker happiness. As Lindsay Ellis wrote for the *Wall Street Journal* in early 2022, Arthur C. Brooks's own class for Harvard's MBA program called "Leadership and Happiness" aims to teach students "how to cultivate their teams' happiness, along with their own," because "happiness is key to being an effective leader." Classes at Stanford's graduate business school centered around "self-awareness for improving communication and relationships" (Ellis 2022). Harvard Business Review contributors Robin Abrahams and Boris Groysberg even recommended that managers acknowledge to their workers that they are having a difficult time. They recommend to "make it meaningful: meaning matters more than happiness, especially when it comes to surviving in difficult circumstances," they say. To do this, they assert, a leader should "encourage team members to engage in meaningful activities inside and outside of work," such as "foster[ing] on-the-job friendships and chances to connect" (Abrahams and Groysberg 2022).

Companies may have been pushed into viewing the workplace as a vector for community meaning due to our returning culprit: the ubiquity of labor. Because work is ubiquitous and meaning is created through connection, as both happiness scholars and work-advice-givers have acknowledged, we also need to consider that people are pressured to turn job sites into communal meaning spaces because of declines in interpersonal relationships and community institutions. Attendance at *third places,* a term used to define the spaces beyond work and the home like churches, community or recreation centers, and even polling booths, has nearly been eliminated. Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone* lays out the decline in membership rates of nearly all third place societal institutions that have served as social fabric for so much of our country's history. From civic engagement, to participation in local clubs and organizations, to the trending inward retreat of church community, to even the workplace itself with unionization rate declines, Putnam (2020) has observed drops as high as fifty percent in community connections within the last few decades of the twentieth century (41, 61, 77, 82).

The loss of these institutions both causes and compounds the loss of close companionship in America. According to a comparison of 1990 and 2021 surveys on friendship published by NYU professor Scott Galloway, men went from 40% having more than 10 friends to only 15%; women went from 28% to 11% (Galloway 2022:89). Further, in 2021, an entire 15% of men and 10% of women claimed to have zero close friends, a decrease made more drastic by the COVID-19 lockdown (Cost 2021). But loneliness had been on the rise even before the pandemic, according to a survey by Cigna. More than three in five of over 10,000 adult workers surveyed between July and August 2019 met the scale criteria for loneliness, a nearly 13% rise from when the survey was first conducted in 2018 (Renken 2020).

Interestingly, the Cigna study also found that 73% of very heavy social media users were considered lonely, as compared to 52% of light users. Gen Z–those 18 to 22 when surveyed, and the generation most connected on the Internet and through social media–had the highest average generational loneliness score of approximately 50 out of 80, or 62.5% (Renken 2020). The World Economic Forum also reported in August 2022 that almost half of US teenagers aged 13-17 are "almost constantly" online, with Black and Hispanic teenagers using technology disproportionate to their white counterparts (Ellerbeck 2022). In fact, Putnam finds that the usurpation of our leisure time by the individually tailored and privately pursued technology we use is the primary driver of our growing social isolation. "Nothing else in the twentieth century so rapidly and profoundly affected our leisure," he writes (2020:221). "The single most important consequence of the television revolution has been to bring us home" and pull us away from third places (2020:223). Because work is so ubiquitous in the way that work hours are stretched for those who must subsist, when workers do have free time, they may be too tired to spend it doing things out in the community, if those outlets are even available.

Even though employers have tried initiative after initiative to encourage meaning at work, including the idea of bringing community into the workplace, their attempts do not cloud the fact that there remains a broad lack of social connection there. For some workers, the primary goal of work is to make a wage and go straight home; they have no passion for their inherent role. Subsisting is a clock in, clock out ordeal, eliminating the prospect of significant on-the-job community. According to a study by BetterUp Labs on connections at the workplace in July of 2022, while more than half of the cohort would "even trade some compensation for more meaningful relationships with colleagues," they found that: over 60% did not socialize with their coworkers outside of work; over half cited coworkers as a reason why they did not look forward

to work; almost two-fifths did not trust their coworkers; 44% did not have a true friend at work; and almost a quarter did not even have a single friend or acquaintance at work (Perna 2022). Overall, Cigna's study found that 32% of men and 25% of women felt alienated at the workplace (Renken 2020). According to Peter Pestillo, who Putnam cites in *Bowling Alone,* even the community aspects of labor like industry associations and unions have seen declining membership rates. "'The young worker thinks primarily of himself,'" Pestillo says. "'We are experiencing the cult of the individual, and labor is taking a beating preaching the comfort of coalition'" (Putnam 2020:82). This feeling of isolation from work may be especially strong if you feel as though your role is a "bullshit job," as more than a third of Britons indicated for a YouGov poll, or if you reject the workist culture and passion principles (Graeber 2020:xxiii). It is the former group, who feel they are not reaching meaning at the place where they expend the most physical, mental, and social energy, that we are getting at here.

Americans are told, all growing up, that they should seek to do work they enjoy and love. Yet the American economic construction, due both to America's particular labor system and the social culture it presents to the rising worker, do not support this goal. Instead, many are forced to subsist. Due to intergenerational transmissions of disadvantages, severe cost-of-living spikes, and other pressures, America's unfair inequality is highly disproportionate relative to other developed nations, subjecting more Americans to an impossible situation in which they cannot break this tension between the need to subsist and their societally imposed desire for happiness and fulfillment through their job. Many of those workers will be left feeling stretched ever thinner by the values imposed on them in a workist society, forever striving to breach this "subsistence gap." Participation in community institutions has rapidly declined, and technology usurps the leisure time workers could otherwise spend in those institutions or with their friends.

Thus, another avenue of experiencing fulfillment and meaning through connection has dissipated.

Going forward in the latter third of this project, I will analyze not just the individual benefits and drawbacks from calling pursuit but also whether, in successfully achieving work in one's calling in a highly individualized and secularized capitalist economy, one actually regains some connection through the relationships and impacts they make. However, in order to examine the state of calling pursuit in American capitalism today, I must first examine from where the concept originated and how it has embedded itself in the basic foundations of contemporary American capitalism. But first, I will reach back even further, as while the *vocation* originates from the Protestant Reformation, the idea of intrinsically passionate work predates Abrahamic religion.

V. PRE-CHRISTIAN RELIGIOUS HISTORY OF VOCATIONAL LABOR

In order to understand how the *calling* has embedded itself in the basic foundations of contemporary American capitalism, and how it has persisted through secularization of the workplace, I will first explore its historical beginnings.

The concept of the *calling* is deeply rooted in religious and spiritual ideology. Far before the relatively recent Christian-specific ideologies on which the American calling is based, there existed non-Abrahamic spiritual notions of how one should choose their life-work. Generally, this determination was made by spiritually aligning oneself with the external force guiding one's path in life. For example, one branch of Buddhism's Eightfold Path, the "right livelihood" or samma ajiva, relates to the calling concept by advocating that one should work to support oneself without harming others. *The Heart of Buddha's Teaching* states that "to practice Right Livelihood, you have to find a way to earn your living without transgressing your ideals of love and compassion. The way you support yourself can be an expression of your deepest self…our vocation can nourish our understanding and compassion" (O'Brien 2017).

The Art of Happiness at Work, written by the Tibetan Buddhist leader His Holiness Daiai Lama alongside psychiatrist and writer Howard C. Cutler, conforms to the job-career-calling construction of work's purpose and refers to the calling as the most important way to understand work. As relayed by book reviewers Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat, the spiritual leader says that "self-understanding is critical to finding ultimate happiness at work" (Brussat). Buddhist priest Mark Unno, who comes from 400 years of ordained priests before him, sympathizes with this idea of compassionate calling and further differentiates Buddhism from typical Christian vocation concepts in that the Buddhist calling "doesn't come from a transcendent source," but

rather from its "emphasis on the interdependence of everything" (Millis 2016). In this way, early Buddhist teachings can be described as implicatory for informing the bounds of how a calling might be morally enacted. However, they are not particularly instructive on calling identification and characteristics.

Stoicism, on the other hand, is one classical pre-Abrahamic spirituality that forwarded an explanation for callings. Firstly, it argues for the existence of an all-pervading, divine universal principle called the "logos." One of the most well-known Stoic texts, *Meditations*, contains the personal musings and philosophic internal discussions of Marcus Aurelius, Roman Emperor from AD 161 to 180. In his translation's introduction to the text, Gregory Hays writes on the "logos," a foundational aspect of Stoic thought that might mirror the Vedas of Hinduism or the Holy Spirit and Godly will of Christianity. It operates in vastly different ways depending on the application–"a semantic range so broad" that it is "almost untranslatable," as he explains. In his conception, it could act as the basic characteristic of rational thought (whether that be the ability to reason, or the application of that reason to a conversation or train of thought, for instance), or, on the cosmic level, the rational characteristics that govern the universe as a whole, like the immutability of cause-and-effect relationships, or the laws of physics (Aurelius 2002:xx). Hays notes that early Stoics believed the logos also existed as a combination of physical substance and a "pneuma," the "life-force" behind the animation of that substance. Marcus Aurelius refers to these components as "cause and material," which flow through even lifeless objects, like stone and water, propelling them with a metaphysical drive (Aurelius 2002:xxi). Applied to humans, the logos can be understood as the driving force behind our non-tangible characteristics, including our ability to rationally think, innate desires, and "soul" or "conscience." It is

important to note that in this construction, the logos does not interfere with the potential existence of divine, primordial *beings* that might further impart cause on the universe.

Marcus Aurelius most directly addresses the calling concept in Book Six of *Meditations* by framing it in terms of inherent personal purpose ordained by the gods and/or the logos. He opens the internal discussion by posing a question and methodically eliminating potential answers, then reaches his ultimate conclusion regarding how we should seek fulfillment, as such:

> "16. What is it in ourselves that we should prize?
>
> Not just transpiration (even plants do that).
>
> Or respiration (even beasts and wild animals breathe).
>
> Or being struck by passing thoughts.
>
> Or jerked like a puppet by your own impulses.
>
> Or moving in herds.
>
> Or eating, and relieving yourself afterwards.
>
> Then what is to be prized?
>
> An audience clapping? No. No more than the clacking of their tongues. Which is all public praise amounts to—a clacking of tongues.
>
> So we throw out other people's recognition. What's left for us to prize?

> I think it's this: to do (and not do) what we were designed for. That's the goal of all trades, all arts, and what each of them aims at: that the thing they create should do what it is designed to do. The nurseryman who cares for the vines, the horse trainer, the dog breeder—this is what they aim at. And teaching and education—what else are they trying to accomplish?...
>
> And if you can't stop prizing a lot of other things? Then you'll never be free—free, independent, imperturbable. Because you'll always be envious and jealous, afraid that people might come and take it all away from you…[To] respect your own mind—to prize it—will leave you satisfied with your own self, well integrated into your community and in tune with the gods as well—embracing what they allot you, and what they ordain" (Aurelius 2002:72-73).

Marcus Aurelius's conception of human fulfillment is based on alignment with one's inherent design. In this way, the Stoic view on *calling*, not only as an end to itself but also as a metaphor for general human conduct, is a notable precursor to the similar Christian philosophy that God creates a unique life-task for individuals to locate within themselves and complete. In fact, this is the proto-classical era on which the neoclassical perspective on calling is based, which I will identify in a later section about present day callings. However, any reference to the employment and compensation of one's design through a system of labor, like that of American capitalism, is markedly absent in this description of calling. For Aurelius's sake, the rational logos acts, creates, and influences irrespective of any human socioeconomic construction. It's also vital to note that Aurelius closes this thought with the idea that the goal of calling pursuit is not only self-satisfaction and living in alignment with divine design, but also integration and connection with one's community. In the next section, then, it will be important to highlight a

timeline of how this kind of divinely-inspired calling becomes entrenched in an economic system that devalues human identity and fulfillment through community. For this, I will turn to early Protestant thinkers in the realm of community, work, and purpose, Martin Luther and John Calvin.

VI. COMMUNITARIANISM TO INDIVIDUALISM IN EARLY AMERICAN CHRISTIANITY: LUTHER AND CALVIN

The idea of a *vocation* or *calling* for early Christian thinkers was inspired by the philosophies of Martin Luther, the German Protestant reformer most famous for nailing his 95 Theses to the door of All-Saint's Church in Wittenberg, Germany in 1517. One of the goals of his Theses was to condemn the Roman Catholic Church's implementation of "indulgences." In this practice, the church would accept prayer, good acts, and (especially) payment to absolve a sinner of the "temporal punishment" for what sin they had committed–ie, the time they should spend in Purgatory. Of Luther's criticisms against the Church's practice of indulgences, he most emphasized that the church should be encouraging authentic moral character and behavior, rather than focusing on the payment of an indulgence. He also condemns the Church's assumption of Godly authority when it administers indulgences in many of his Theses, including numbers 28, 30, and 32: "It is certain that when money clinks in the money chest, greed and avarice can be increased; but when the church intercedes, the result is in the hands of God alone…No one is sure of the integrity of his own contrition, much less of having received plenary remission…Those who believe that they can be certain of their salvation because they have indulgence letters will be eternally damned, together with their teachers." Luther also warns in Theses 41 through 43 that "papal indulgences must be preached with caution, lest people erroneously think that they are preferable to other good works of love" or "works of mercy," and "Christians [should] be taught that he who gives to the poor or lends to the needy does a better deed than he who buys indulgences" (KDG Wittenberg 1997). According to Luther, only God could identify the genuine nature of the individual and their perspective on past grievances, much less determine whether they had adequately atoned. "Because love grows by works of

love," he contends in Theses 44, "man thereby becomes better. Man does not, however, become better by means of indulgences but is merely freed from penalties" (KDG Wittenberg 1997).

Luther contributed greatly to the steps toward today's view of community-oriented calling labor through encouraging a separation in the Catholic Church from non-community-oriented ways of providing oneself and one's services to God. The Church had consolidated power in not only demanding the fruits of one's labor and creating a currency of indulgences, but also in mandating the specific kinds of work that one could do to pay their penance. This work could fall outside both one's calling and one's genuine connection to community. In "Luther's Doctrine of Good Works" published in 1917, W. J. McGlothlin effectively summarizes what Luther identified as faulty in the practice of indulgences:

> "The kinds of 'good works' were multitudinous. They were mainly certain obligations imposed by the church and were destitute of any element of service to mankind. They consisted of prayers, pilgrimages, the founding of churches and altars, fasting, alms-giving, etc. To be of value they must have the sanction and authority of the church. The ordinary affairs of life and the ordinary services of philanthropy, dictated by the impulse of a Christian heart, were regarded as of minor importance and scarcely to be classified as good works" (532).

It is particularly interesting to me that McGlothin highlights the importance of the "impulse of a Christian heart"–in other words, an innate desire to do good toward a community-oriented and philanthropic end. However, the church barred one's ability to choose their preferred job, role, or act for accomplishing an indulgence. Luther advised that the narrow definition of good works should be expanded to include "practically all the actions of life," even

if they may not monetarily benefit the church. According to McGlothlin, Luther "insisted that the good works which are recognized as such are good only when they serve some good purpose." He believed that holy days should be replaced with more days of work, because holy day activities were "'usually worse than those of the work days, with lounging, stuffing and drinking, gambling and other wicked deeds'" (McGlothlin 1917:532). Luther thus contended that pairing a focus on work with a choice of work that is both personally fulfilling and community oriented (rather than a day of indulgence, in both the Catholic Church's meaning of the word and the colloquial sense) leads to meaningful impact, whether on one's own soul or others.

This philosophy of community contribution flows very naturally into another of Martin Luther's beliefs: that one's vocation is divinely determined and part of a larger, interconnected purpose. One of Luther's basic philosophical and religious assumptions was that God's characteristics of omnipotence and omniscience logically necessitated that He directly influences individuals' actions and broader life trajectories. He believed that "the world is God's good creation, not only in terms of its original coming into being but especially in terms of God's ongoing creative work in upholding and directing all that is and in constantly doing new things," as Marc Kolden (1983) writes for the *Journal of Lutheran Ethics*. To be in line with this philosophy, part of God's plan must naturally be that each person on Earth is tasked with a certain portion of keeping the plan functioning properly. Yet, given that they have free will, they must choose to do so. In this way, actively pursuing one's calling is simply fulfillment of God's already existent plan.

Luther believed the most relevant verse to the vocation concept and its applicability towards one's behavior on Earth is 1 Corinthians 7:20, which states: "Everyone should remain in the state in which he was called." Luther, in following the traditional view, at first took this verse

to mean that the only way to truly pursue God's calling was to cast off all earthly desires to live in full spirituality. In fact, Luther followed this mandate early in life by becoming a monk. However, he came to realize that what seemed to be a "cloak of piety, giving the appearance of service to God" was actually an attempt to "make himself right with God through his own efforts." According to Glenn Obenberger (2012), a pastor in Tacoma, Washington writing for the Evangelical Lutheran Synod, he "joined his fellow monks as beggars in their vows of poverty, taking from neighbors so that they could confine themselves behind walls, giving attention to personal spiritual quests through prayers and devotions. Their vows of celibacy were taken even against natural desires to be married in order to serve self" (Obenberger 2012).

After leaving the monastery, Luther's idea of the calling transformed to that of "doing works for one's neighbor," as Kolden (1983) writes. "The call," Luther then claims, "comes from Christ, but it locates one in a calling in the creation doing works for one's neighbor." This idea would become mainstream, taking one step to reorient the idea of the *calling* toward all occupations as we see today. Luther believed that one is called to the fulfillment and flourishing of one's relationships, such as with their spouse, children, and the Church, not only through independent action outside the traditional workplace, but also within it. "God is milking the cows through the vocation of the milkmaid," he claimed (Doriani 2016).

Luther thought that contributing to one's community through fulfilling their determined work role was a reflection of *predestination*. Generally, predestination is the idea that God has *pre*viously decided whether one is *destined* to go to a certain place–in particular, Heaven or Hell–before they had even lived out their life and made decisions on Earth. In Luther's vein of predestination philosophy, dubbed *single predestination,* he argued that eternal damnation was the result of a person's chosen sin, not because God had determined them to be reprobate.

Scholars like systematic theologian Brian G. Mattson at the University of Aberdeen (1997) find that Luther attempted to retain God's omnibenevolence with the single predestinationist belief that "the sinner is the author of his own sin, not God."

A fellow Protestant reformer to Luther, John Calvin, also emphasized the concept of predestination and its connection to vocation in his writing. Unlike Luther, however, Calvin endorsed the idea of *double* predestination, whereby God decided those who were ordained *and* those who were damned. In fact, Calvin made the case for the importance of this concept to the church so successfully that they incorporated the idea of predestination into their catechisms, the summary principles used to describe Christian beliefs. For example, all English Bibles printed with the government's permission after 1574 contained the idea of predestination (Rotenberg 1975:55). While a polarizing and controversial figure, Calvin nevertheless established a legacy through the idea of predestination, particularly double predestination, before he died 14 years after the break from the Roman Catholic Church (Rotenberg 1975:56).

Calvinists take the approach that God's predestination of some people for Heaven inherently dis-predestines others, no matter their faith or actions on Earth. Thus, Calvin seemed to Biblically translate God's omnipotence and omniscience into a philosophy that delegitimized any expressions of good work. Rather, according to Calvin, an individual could indicate their predestination status to others through whether they were pursuing their calling and achieving success in their labor (Rotenberg 1975:56). In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism,* Weber will emphasize this latter version of predestination as he argues that callings are not only the earthly markers for one's eternal fate, but also the catalyst for the transformation of our American economic society into an "iron cage" of hyper-efficiency, industrial growth, and obsessive wealth-building.

VII. WEBER, THE CALLING, AND MODERN AMERICAN CAPITALISM

How does our modern American economic system–in all of its secular, materialist, individualist glory–come from a system that was so based on adhering to God's societal vision through fulfilling one's calling?

The steps from Luther to Calvin's visions of predestination form the crux of Weber's argument in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* that the calling is actually the origin story of our modern American capitalism. According to University of North Texas sociologist Milan Zafirovski (2018), Weber theorized that Calvin's definition of double predestination came to provide an incentive for collecting material wealth. This is because amassed wealth and success could serve as an obviously visible indicator that one is destined for Heaven, not Hell, since financial success was perceived as Godly favor. Over time, then, people put more emphasis on amassing capital and displaying hard work as a sign of predestination. Once that fervor was set into motion, and as America secularized and industrialized from the 19th into the 20th century, the focus on profit maximization, efficiency, and hard work prevailed, casting aside the religiously-central idea of *vocation*. An "iron cage" thus now encloses every American into this wealth-obsessive economic system, whether they consent to its terms or not (2018:566). This sentiment most obviously remains in the prosperity gospel, which *Vox*'s Tara Isabella Burton (2017) defines as "a group of ideas–popular among charismatic preachers in the evangelical tradition–that equate Chrsitian faith with material, and particularly financial, success." A 2006 *Times* poll found that almost an entire third of American Christians believed that "if you give your money to God[,] God will bless you with more money;" more than 60% agreed that "God wants people to be prosperous" (Burton 2017).

From where I stand, these questions of whether single or double predestination is the most correct Biblical interpretation or whether Weber's diagnosis of our economy's transformation is accurate are extremely difficult to answer, and many more educated and thoughtful on the subject than I have tried. Instead, I will address the more concretely discernible facts. The notion of the *vocation* as it originated from Luther was not based on one's internal desires and passions, but rather one's labor as a contribution to society. Both that era and the modern day of *calling* seem to be aimed toward fulfillment in their respective cultures–self-determined fulfillment now, and fulfillment by alignment with God's plan in Luther's time. Clearly, something has shifted to change our understanding of the vernacular. By 1881, for example, Lysander Salmon Richards was writing *Vocophy; the New Profession,* subtitled *A System Enabling a Person to Name the Calling or Vocation One is Best Suited to Follow*. Richards' piece, a hefty 110 pages, claims to systematize the pursuit of calling. "As only one life is given to live on earth," he writes, it is imperative to create "a system whereby every person desirous of learning what occupation is best suited for him" through "consulting acknowledged authorities, or through his own study and investigations" (1881:19).

One might say that the calling shifted from passion combined with divine conviction to passion *as if* it were a divine conviction. Jane Dawson (2005) at St. Francis Xavier University calls this the calling's "bifurcation of meanings." *Vocation* carries "deep religious roots and associations," but the trends of industrialization, secularization, and "entrepreneurial spirit of the 18th and 19th centuries" transformed work from community contribution into a primary space of individualized "human expression and fulfillment" (Dawson 2005:222-224). Modern day systems innovations like global industrialization and the Internet separate some workers from the end product they are contributing to, since they may be shipped entirely across the world or

housed entirely online. Further, these systems create the managerial and logistics roles that blur the lines of "tangible productive capacity." (Bullshit jobs come to mind as an example.) In this way, schisms have grown between the individual worker and the imbued meaning in their work, as well as material productivity and wealth creation. Callings were originally meant to serve as a function of fitting workers into preordained slots. However, according to Weber's thesis, some individuals were deemed more "worthy" of earning that wealth, perhaps because certain jobs are more "productive" in a measurable capacity, or because of additional factors such as one's family and geography of origin, identitarian privilege, unfair inequality, or systemic issues previously discussed. In this way, it does not necessarily matter whether Weber's theory about how our American economy came to be is true. Because of America's particular social support infrastructure (or lack thereof), a regressive federal tax structure, high rate of return on capital, lower union rates and worker protections, little to no restrictions on inherited wealth, and other pressures, these wealth gaps are entrenched and expanded over generations, whether the "spirit of capitalism" prevails or not, and whether that "spirit" is borne of Weber's calling-work-turned-wealth-creation hypothesis or not.

While Christians that fall under Weber's Protestant ethicism depend on an extrinsic source of fulfillment from their labor by connecting it to fulfillment of their role in God's plan, modern Americans view the human drive for fulfillment as individually known and to be individually achieved. It is an inward-driven, intrinsic facet of potential enjoyment, alongside what hobbies and other non-work activities like spending time with friends and family might accomplish. Taking a look at different systems in which happiness is fulfilled other ways, whether that be a mitigative retinkering of the labor structure, safety net, and culture of work while keeping the American capitalist system intact, or readjusting our economy entirely to

promote more democratic ownership and diminish the all-heralded profit motive's omnipresence in our lives, or altogether casting labor aside as a source of happiness in one's life, all might therefore be avenues to explore. For now, I will transition to looking at the characteristics of the modern *calling* into which the *vocation* has transformed.

VIII. CHARACTERIZING CALLING PURSUIT IN THE PRESENT

Penny Wrenn, a 44-year-old woman from Pennsylvania, had an identity crisis during the pandemic. According to her interview with Jane Clayson and Serena McMahon, hosts of the radio show *Here & Now,* she was suddenly unable to find work after being laid off from her job in journalism and taking some time to care for her now late father. Not only did she lack a job title, but soon she succumbed to a void of personal identity. "[I feel] like 'a walking dead person,'" she lamented. "My profession has determined my identity for more years than I can count" (Clayson and McMahon 2021). If she were to settle for a job outside the field, thereby sacrificing her comfort, expertise in her role, and the stability of her personal identity for a paycheck, she feared she'd find herself in a similar void of personal unfulfillment and unhappiness. In other words, she was faced with a high-stakes dilemma: whether or not to leave her calling.

The construction I have thus far outlined–that Americans form a deep tie between their identity and their work, where personal and communal meaning are increasingly funneled, and which is pitted against their need to work for pay–is played out at the individual level in a variety of ways. From journalist and content creator Penny Wrenn's predicament, to the lack of meaning in Tom's very well-paid marketing job, to the workists who may find meaning by pouring their effort and identity into ostensibly human welfare-serving projects, it is clear from this variation that this project needs to differentiate what kinds of jobs create what kinds of meaning, and how the nature of these roles may serve to benefit or inhibit that pursuit.

In order to create more structure around the understanding of this deeply subjective topic, organizational behaviorists have crafted useful qualitative metrics and categorizations of the

calling. This includes the work of Bloom, Colbert, and Nielsen in *Administrative Science Quarterly*, which attempts to identify how calling-pursuant individuals come to discover their calling in the first place. They created a framework of two different ways by which identities are discovered, constructed, and achieved in the professional world based on the residual dual meanings of the calling, the historical divinely-inspired *vocation* and the modern day self-fulfillment version of *calling*. They explain the framework as such:

> "Under the neoclassical view, the calling is experienced as arising outside of the individual's choice, through a divine summons or one's basic nature…[They are] 'assumed to be unique to the person', and so each person is thought to have only one calling, which does not change…[They are] experienced as a moral duty, so personal responsibility to enact that moral duty is prominent, and personal fulfillment is a lesser concern. Indeed, one must be willing to sacrifice oneself to fully live out the call.
>
> "In contrast to the neoclassical calling, the modern view suggests that callings arise from inside oneself and are highly self-directed. Here, personal agency plays a major role in entering a calling—individuals must look deeply within themselves to identify their most prized values. [This] may lie in choosing a meaningful profession, crafting a work role, or changing to a more meaningful work role from time to time. Callings are not unitary and static, and therefore professionals may find or create callings in several different kinds of roles over the course of their work life" (Bloom et al. 2021:299-300).

Those who contemporaneously adhere to the understanding of a calling from a Christian perspective may still associate their role in the neoclassical category, viewing it as a moral duty to fulfill God's plan like Luther did. In essence, a neoclassically called worker might think, "If a

calling is not mine to forge but rather something I must discover, the consequences of missing my calling are dire." But "if callings result from self-direction and personal agency," as the modern view suggests, then "it opens up possibilities for me to find a calling in several kinds of work, and I can at least find something close to a calling even as I continue to seek" a better calling fit "or new ways to create it in the work I have" (Bloom et al. 2021:300). This dual understanding of calling orientation is foundational for categorizing workers' approaches to incorporating calling into identity.

Additionally, because of the way our labor system is structured, a calling must be funneled into a tangible work role, even if it would be better described as an abstract domain. Thus, identification of the way that called individuals actualize their life-work in the economy today is a vital second step to consider. Bloom and colleagues utilized a study on 236 participants in caring professions to create a framework that parallels the dual categories of neoclassical and modern callings: discernment and exploration.

Discerners "journeyed toward their identity, which was their one true calling" (Bloom et al. 2021:298). Some examples of the milestone experiences or activities that were pivotal for discerners include "gaining true self-knowledge, introspection, comparing oneself to exemplars, and receiving wise guidance" (2021:308). The finalization of this journey was a singular moment–a "burst" or "revelation"–in which they achieved clarity of their true calling. In contrast, explorers adhered more closely to the modern perspective on calling. They "actively searched for work they loved," disregarding the role of "destiny" (2021:298). Bloom and colleagues describe this path as "a quest propelled by some sense that something important was missing in their work." Through trial and error, navigating work experiences with a dash of luck,

explorers were successful in gradually choosing a job they loved from the current options (2021:308).

In this way, discerners may be the more stereotypically envisioned calling-pursuer that discovers the passion that had been there all along, whether derived from divine inspiration or a "spark in the soul." But the workist who nestles his own passions of business-building, innovating, or problem-solving in the domain of being a technology entrepreneur or small business owner could thereby be considered an explorer, thus also fitting just as deservedly into the definition of passionate called work. In fact, through this definition, it seems as though anyone who finds passion in the implementation of a broadly transferable skill into a certain domain can fit into the explorer category. This is especially the case when reconsidering the notion I raised in the first few pages of this project that the determination of a calling is not a binary one, nor is it based on the role itself, but rather the psychological orientation toward the domain. The genuine passion one can find in managing, administrating, teaching, or practicing another transferable skill is thus correctly categorized as a calling.

Yet, I argue, the limited dichotomy of discerners and explorers does not encapsulate the full range of passionate, called work we find in the labor force today. Both of these categories take for granted the idea that an individual has the financial and temporal freedom to change job positions, whether to better reflect the role they discerned to be their true calling, or to explore into the correct role that reflects their transferable internal passion. It is continuously important to consider the motivation of subsistence when choosing work. But callings and subsistence can intersect in a third category: the *acclimator*. The acclimators are those people who began doing work out of necessity, serving a role that may be seen as monotonous, non-passionate, or even "dirty," but grow to find passion or fulfillment through it. Individuals who accept their role and

find meaning as such did so neither by knowing it was intrinsically what they were “meant to do,” nor with the explicit intention of exploring into it, but rather by acceding to the aspects of the role that provided the greatest fulfillment–in other words, they *acclimated* to the domain and discovered a passion in it that they were not originally seeking. When viewed again through the lens that callings exist on a spectrum, acclimators fall somewhere near (but not entirely at) the called end.

In their article in *The Counseling Psychologist* called “Calling and Vocation at Work: Definitions and Prospects for Research and Practice,” vocational psychologists Ryan D. Duffy and Bryan J. Dik highlight the importance of acknowledging this third approach to callings. As they (and I) see it, determining one’s calling is “an ongoing process of evaluating the purpose and meaningfulness of activities within a job and their contribution to the common good or welfare of others” (Dik and Duffy 2009:429). On its face, the acclimator’s position may not seem like that of a calling-pursuant individual. They are not like the musician, nor the teacher, nor even the zookeeper, who researchers have observed as intrinsically discerning or successfully exploring into their calling. The acclimator’s role may either seem too undesirable or too unpassionate to be the specific target of a calling. Yet acclimators can serve as prime examples of evolving communal meaning, even as they pursue work for mere economic subsistence ends. As Dik and Duffy point out, people “who may not have pursued their ideal career but who may nevertheless craft or reframe [it] in a way that transforms their work into a calling” can be adequately represented under our calling definition too (2009:429).

Calling scholars have also attempted to quantify just how intrinsically “pulled” people feel toward their calling domains. One manner is through the development and use of calling scales. As opposed to qualitative categorization, this approach measures the depth of a person’s

calling alignment in a numerical range, thus allowing for one-to-one comparisons. There have been earlier attempts to create a calling survey, like Diane E. Dreher, Katherine A. Holloway, and Erin Schoenfelder's "vocation identity questionnaire" given to 86 faculty and staff at a private California university around 2007 (Dreher et al. 2007). But I will look to the scholars who helped create our calling definition, Dobrow and Tosti-Kharas, as they are the duo who have done the most substantive testing and verification of this quantitative approach. According to their article in *Personnel Psychology,* "Calling: The Development of a Scale Measure," this approach was borne of the recognition that previous attempts to identify and measure the calling have not always been reliable or generalizable across all domains. This is a naturally difficult task, given the extremely subjective nature of calling alignment.

Dobrow and Tosti-Kharas nonetheless accepted the task, modifying previous empirical research to create a 12-item questionnaire. The questions they utilized are below, edited for clarity (2011:1048-1049). The verbs and nouns associated with the domain could be swapped out with any called domain, such as being a manager, treating animals, washing dishes, or doing art.

1. I am passionate about playing the piano.
2. I enjoy playing the piano more than anything else.
3. Playing the piano gives me immense personal satisfaction.
4. I would sacrifice anything to be a piano player.
5. The first thing I often think about when I describe myself to others is that I'm a piano player.
6. I would continue being a piano player even in the face of severe obstacles.
7. I know that being a piano player–either professionally or as an amateur–will always be part of my life.

8. I feel a sense of destiny about being a piano player–either amateur or professional.
9. Music is always in my mind in some way.
10. Even when not playing the piano, I often think about music.
11. My existence would be much less meaningful without my involvement in playing the piano.
12. Playing the piano is a deeply moving and gratifying experience for me.

Dobrow and Tost-Kharas asked 1,500 individuals in the domains of music, art, general business, and management to respond to each question on a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 being "strongly disagree," 4 being "neutral," and 7 being "strongly agree." The authors replicated this survey six weeks apart with some of the sample group and tested it against other questions used by the aforementioned empirical research, such as whether the respondent had strong work engagement or job involvement, which are two metrics conceptually similar to the calling. Through this process of longitudinally and horizontally checking their results, culminating in a total of 2,278 survey responses, their scale proved to be both reliable and valid as a way to determine whether someone had found a strong calling that maintained over time (Dobrow and Tosti-Kharas 2011:1001, 1018, 1039).

This quantitative research is groundbreaking because it introduces ideas of strength and continuity to the nature of the calling. First, it contributes empirical evidence to the notion that callings can be defined on a scale of least to most passionate, rather than a binary "have" or "have-not," as I have introduced. Additionally, from what Dobrow and Tosti-Kharas observed in the six-week longitudinal component of their study, they found that the calling does not always maintain throughout one's life, but rather can *change* over time. In other words, callings are not trait-like, but rather state-like (Dobrow and Tosti-Kharas 2011:1041).

Olga Khazan writes about the negative impact of believing that one's interests are fixed in this trait-like manner. Khazan (2018) cites a *Psychological Science* study by Stanford professors Carol Dweck and Greg Walton which finds that if someone self-identifies as having a "fixed theory of interests," then they prime themselves to be less interested in or give up too easily on things that they have predetermined to be outside their passions (2018). In this way, while those who self-define as neoclassically called can find certainty in their role, they may also be limiting themselves from exploring into other passions that lie on their calling scale.

Another group of quantitative-based researchers, Italian organizational psychologists Anna Dalla Rosa and Michelangelo Vianello, created the Unified Multidimensional Calling Scale (or UMCS) in 2018. It purports to synthesize and measure calling by highlighting the common ground between the neoclassical and modern versions in seven calling "subcomponents:" pervasiveness, passion, transcendent summons, identity, purposefulness, sacrifice, and prosocial orientation (Dalla Rosa and Vianello 2020). In particular, the tenets of identity, purpose, sacrifice, and prosociality will be valuable in my analysis on the impacts of calling on the individual and community. Each of these categorizations and metrics I have described are lenses through which I will explore not just the individual benefits and drawbacks of pursuing one's calling, but also the methods by which community connection can be realized or severed in the modern day.

IX. INDIVIDUAL BENEFITS OF CALLING PURSUIT

What do the scholarly research and published narratives say about how people are affected by pursuing callings in America? Are the practical outcomes from calling pursuit caused by the nature of the work, the construction of companies in American capitalism, or subsistence and workist pressures? I will start with what happens at the individual, psychological level when someone pursues their calling.

If taken as accurate that an individual is indeed pursuing their calling, then the practice of actualizing it in their workplace role does seem to incur immense benefits. In Dobrow and Tosti-Kharas's sampling of 1,500 calling-pursuant individuals, for example, they find that establishing work within a calling domain promotes a strong sense of satisfaction, job self-efficacy, professional clarity, and deeper insight into one's role. They also found that high schoolers and young adults who find early calling alignment are more likely to attend a college program related to their field of passionate interest, then go on to pursue a professional career in that domain (2011:1042). This conforms with my discussions around the entrenchment of calling encouragement in our society, as students are indeed influenced by cultural messaging to professionalize their pursuit for passionate labor.

One's satisfaction and pride in their work may also come from the enhanced labor productivity that comes with commitment to a called role. Preliminary research out of Russia's Vologda Oblast by economic scholars at the Institute of Socio-Economic Development of Territories of Russian Academy of Science in 2014 and 2016 contends that a called worker's dedication, creativity, spiritual connection, and positive mental attitude toward their work can increase labor productivity and result in higher wages. The authors control for outside pressures

and find this conclusion stands even if the calling is not in one's educational specialty or expertise (Shabunova et al. 2017:163).

Antonio Francisco Menezes da Silva Filho, Bruno Felix, and Emerson Wagner Mainardes with the Brazilian FUCAPE Business School illustrate well the opposing benefits and drawbacks of calling pursuit in their research entitled "Occupational callings: A double-edged sword for burnout and stress." They utilized a 41-question survey with 539 individuals outside the United States in a wide variety of fields, including construction, technology, entertainment, healthcare, consumer products, advertising, transportation, manufacturing, banking, mining, hospitality, and teaching, and measured their perceived calling alignment, burnout syndrome, work stress, and the experience of external pressures against one's personal work interest (Filho et al. 2021:49-50). Like previous research, which suggests that people who perceive their work as a calling find benefits in more pleasure, personal fulfillment, positivity and satisfaction in their work environment, motivation, gratitude, and less emotional exhaustion, they found that occupational calling pursuit is negatively correlated with burnout syndrome and stress at work (Filho et al. 2021:46-48, 52-53). That is, the more strongly one feels called to their role, the less they will feel burnout and stress as compared to their non-called coworkers in the same field. Overall, calling pursuit benefits individuals' lives through improving emotional well-being, personal fulfillment, and workplace satisfaction.

X. INDIVIDUAL DRAWBACKS OF CALLING PURSUIT: WORKAHOLISM, WORK-LIFE IMBALANCE, AND THE ETHICAL OBLIGATION TO PURSUE ONE'S CALLING

While an inverse relationship has been found between calling pursuit and burnout or stress, this Brazilian study and others find that the pursuit of a calling could also tip work-life balance off its scales (Filho et al. 2021:53). According to researchers Anna Dalla Rosa and Michelangelo Vianello in the *Journal of Career Assessment,* workaholism may be a natural job outcome for those predisposed to viewing their called work as a direct link to satisfaction and success. The authors find that three subcomponents of the calling–identity, pervasiveness, and sacrifice–may combine to create "an addiction to work that leads to many negative individual, interpersonal, and organizational outcomes" like uncontrollable work compulsion, mental preoccupation, health problems, and deterioration of work-life balance. The authors contrast workaholism with obsessive passion, which describes a compulsion to work based on the content of that work, rather than the process of working itself. Callings are likened to harmonious passion, wherein people freely engage with the work they love. Dalla Rosa and Vianello find in their study of 235 Italian workers (mostly female social workers, nursing assistants, and administrative staff) that the pursuit of a calling may protect against workaholism because it integrates a sense of purpose, enjoyment, prosocial orientation, and transcendent meaning that reduces obsessive passion and increases harmonious passion. However, they do note other scholars' conclusions that calling pursuit may foster an unhealthy attachment to work due to societal and personal values linked to work (Dalla Rosa and Vianello 2020).

Neoclassical calling pursuit is especially vulnerable to workaholism, as those who feel a sense of intrinsic duty toward their role may feel it important to put in as many hours as possible.

Neo-Christian calling pursuers are one example of a group that experience high ethical obligation to their role due to the view that they have a divine responsibility, thus making it hard to maintain a work-life balance. The authors (2021) of a study published in the *Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling* that involved conversations with seven Christian counselors found that for those "whose work is their calling, work-life imbalance could be exacerbated if Christian discourses of continual giving and self-sacrifice created uncertainty about whether, and when, it was acceptable to refuse work." For example, they found that being commissioned as a representative of God on Earth, a sacred and awe-inspiring role, gave them an outsized sense of responsibility toward their clients. One participant expressed that they felt as though they "had to keep giving, [because] if you had something from God, you should never pull back from it. You should be giving it all the time." The counselors reported feeling as though God had ordained them with talents perfect for their roles, such as curiosity, empathy, compassion, and being a good listener, which then allowed them to connect more deeply with their clients. However, this meant that they loosened the boundaries of their emotional labor and role-related research beyond work time, thus interfering with sleep and rest, family time, and hobbies or activities. Participants reported that clients' stories stayed with and weighed on them, and that their friends encroached on their capacity to provide counselor-level support outside of work hours (Frost and Gardner 2021).

A study in *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* by Scott Dunbar, Thomas Frederick, Yvonne Thai, and John Gill of California Baptist University identified the main consequence of these encroachments: burnout. They define burnout as "a prolonged response to chronic emotional and interpersonal stressors on the job," with characteristics of "exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy" (2020:173). For Christian ministers and more broadly across the labor force,

burnout leads to lower job satisfaction, higher turnover, lower job performance, and deep psychological problems such as depression, irritation, and life dissatisfaction (2020:174).

Workaholics' inability to separate work and free time has another consequence beyond burnout in the form of inter-role conflict. For example, the aforementioned Christian counselors reported that doing research in non-work time began to overtake the role they played in the family. One counselor spoke of work's interference with their relationship with their husband: "Well, my husband…he's a very tolerant man. But there's also times that he says, okay, we need to go for a weekend away or we need to go on a holiday or in the beginning, he was a bit frustrated with me being on the computer so much" (Frost and Gardner 2021). Filho and colleagues note that the problems associated with a "rigid working identity" include the obstruction of "personal and professional adaptation," thereby causing "high sacrifice, personal tension and exhaustion, [and] reduced subjective well-being" (2021:48). In line with this conclusion, Dunbar and colleagues found that Christian ministers experienced deep stress and added burnout because of a "mismatch between an individual's roles in separate spheres of work and family," with conflict occurring around time, strain, and behavior (2020:174).

XI. MORE INDIVIDUAL DRAWBACKS OF CALLING PURSUIT: EXPLOITATION AND UNREALIZED CALLINGS IN A MARKET ECONOMY

This inter-role conflict can otherwise be called "job creep," and it is one consequence of multiple pressures toward working ever more. Alongside the intrinsic pressures of moral duty and workaholism, the external push of one's manager or coworkers can also pressure called workers to settle for non-paid or alternate forms of payment like "credits," kudos, and exposure for overtime work. A called worker's deep passion toward a particular field might make them accede to these external pressures, as they can justify that they do not mind the boss's exploitation because they intrinsically enjoy the work. These phenomena of job creep and self-justified inequitable compensation have been documented by Emily Vickers and Zoua Sylvia Yang (2022) in *Notes,* the quarterly journal of the Music Library Association, in the field of music librarianship. They argue that while the vocational awe of being a music librarian has the "capacity to heal, connect, and inspire," librarians are also pressured by peer communities to implement "struggle, sacrifice, and obedience" in a manner that may lead to negative self-outcomes, including even physical trauma like "carpal tunnel, hearing loss, damaged vocal chords, chronic muscle tension, and tendonitis" (2022:344-345).

Beyond the internalized job creep, then, the worker is also feeling pressure vertically from supervisors and horizontally from coworkers. As previously discussed researchers Bloom, Colbert, and Nielsen (2021) claim, once an individual has determined their calling and begun to realize it in their work life, the final step is forming a strong identity connection to their work in a way that others see them as legitimate professionals. This means that their "personal identity," which includes this sense of divine passion or intrinsic values, might begin matching the "role identity" of their profession and benefitting that role identity as seen by others. As the authors

describe it, workers achieve this alignment through identity customization, adapting themselves and their own identities to reflect their work situation (2021:301). However, this process may cause an internal dilemma for workers because they must balance their intimate sense of themselves with the "demanding norms, values, and expectations" of their profession and the other individuals who dictate its bounds, like their bosses and coworkers (2021:302). They write: "A called professional therefore faces a tension in that they must construct an identity that is both similar to the identities of other professionals…and yet somehow unique because it is integrated with their self" (2021:302). Interestingly, Bloom and colleagues observed that individuals following either the discerner or explorer path were motivated by the same set of influences: professional legitimacy and personal authenticity. While they had many milestone experiences confirming they were "full, competent members of their professions," other milestone experiences were built around their ability to "enact 'personally significant beliefs through work'" (2021:308).

Finally, the worker feels systemic pressures not only from company rules and procedures, but also the innate rules of our American economic system, where a called worker's passion faces the pressures of subsistence. Daniel Koltonski at the University of Delaware argues that "in a market economy, members of professions…for whom their profession is a vocation…are vulnerable to a distinctive kind of objectionable exploitation" due to "their vocational commitment" (2018:345). When someone like a professor is called to a position and begins to see that their "practical identity includes a vocational commitment to college teaching," they are less likely to see refusing to engage in or leaving an exploitative situation as a viable decision, since doing so would be denial of one's sincerely felt core personal or moral need to pursue that work (2018:324). Koltonski recalls a conversation he had with an adjunct instructor, Sara:

“Me: Don’t forget how little the school is paying you to teach this course. You don’t get paid enough to do this additional work.

Sara: I know, I know. [pause]

Me: But you’re going to do it anyway, aren’t you?

Sara: Yeah, I am. My students need me” (2018:325).

In this case, Sara’s dedication to her called field and those that she serves within it outweigh the fact that the university system generally pays adjuncts very poorly for their educational background and the work they do. In fact, a 2020 study by the American Federation of Teachers on part-time professors found that they lacked the competitive wages, health benefits, retirement plans, and job security of their full-time counterparts. Further, while 90% of them have at least a master’s degree, 60% make less than $50,000 per year. A whopping four in ten require government assistance. *USA Today* writes that they “also often go uncompensated for the routine tasks that come with the job–prepping for classes, holding office hours, writing recommendation letters and serving on committees” (Nittle 2022). Thus, balancing the demands of the job means that it almost necessarily creeps into non-paid hours. For those adjuncts who are pursuing a calling in this role, they may feel especially trapped in their exploited position.

Berg and colleagues (2010) also pick up on the systemic clash between our work structure and individual calling in a few different manners in their scholarly article on unanswered callings. “Even in the more flexible knowledge economy of today,” they write, “jobs are typically designed so that individuals specialize in a particular set of tasks and are assigned a specific set of responsibilities,” and the workplace itself often enforces “formal policies and

monitoring systems" which "demand standardized work procedures and practices." While allowing for interconnection and collaboration, this system places pressure on employees to adhere to certain deadlines so they can function alongside a team, thus restricting their freedom to complete and perform duties as personally desired, all while being required to work more than 40 hours a week (2010:975).

Yet these drawbacks only affect a worker if they are pursuing a calling. And as I have discussed at length, the subsistence effect on labor means many workers do not even get the chance to do so. In fact, Berg, Grant, and Johnson (2010) write that "unanswered callings may be more common than ever before." They define an unanswered calling as "an occupation that an individual (1) feels drawn to pursue, (2) expects to be intrinsically enjoyable and meaningful, and (3) sees as a central part of his or her identity, but (4) is not formally experiencing in a work role" (2010:974). In speaking with university lecturers, non-profit workers, and corporate employees who viewed themselves as holding unanswered callings, the researchers found that those who are unable to pursue their callings experience deep regret and stress. However, they also found that participants took action to cope in many different ways. They crafted their current work roles, mindset, and leisure time around creating enjoyable and meaningful experiences by emphasizing certain tasks at work, expanding or reframing their role, or capitalizing on the flexibility of free time. For example, customer service representative Tracy speaks about job expanding at her manufacturing firm:

> "Within the company I've volunteered to do the Spanish-English translating whenever they need help…I feel great about it because, for one, I love translating…And then I love that fact that the employees here know that someone can help them, because sometimes

they come to the front office and they need something, and they can't communicate. And I just feel good about helping more, making sure that they understand" (2010:981).

Workers also utilized hobby participation and volunteerism to pursue their callings in a domain outside of a strict work role, thus breaking past the subsistence barrier. Peggy illustrates how she finds fulfillment through volunteerism at a children's hospital:

> "For the last five years, I have been a volunteer at the Ronald McDonald House… It's the house where families stay when their children are sick and in the hospital… I think there is something to be said about consistency of interest and things you find fulfilling. This goes back well beyond the very fact that I was interested in children and illness. [It] goes back to experience I had in high school working at a children's hospital in Philadelphia, working in their play therapy area, watching kids dealing with illness, and wanting to understand that better and make a difference… so it doesn't surprise me that even in my volunteer work, I seek out something that also feeds that interest" (2010:984).

Andy's story also showcases how the hobbyism of writing a novel can serve to connect himself with his identity:

> "Part of the reason I am working as a lecturer is because I am trying to write a novel. So that pays no bills at the moment, but that, in my heart of hearts, is more important to me than the teaching… If somebody said I had to stop writing, I would have no idea who I was, as a person" (2010:984).

XII. BRIDGING INDIVIDUAL DRAWBACKS TO POSITIVE COMMUNITY CONNECTION: THE FUZZY SECTOR'S PREDICAMENT IN AMERICAN CALLING

Andy's role as a writer is clearly integral to his identity, and the inability to pursue his passion would be devastating to him. Though he found an avenue to express his calling, it involves spending most of his day doing a job only tangential to his real passion of writing. Andy is part of the fuzzy sector, one of the populations that most experiences unrealized callings.

In Olga Khazan's (2018) *Atlantic* article, she notes an interesting differentiation that Dweck and Walton make between certain sectors of labor, *fuzzies* versus *techies*. In fact, if you recall the experiment that Dweck and Walton conducted, which found that viewing one's passions as fixed prevents exploration and creates over-rigid interests, these categories of "fuzzy" and "techie" were the "fixed identities of interest" that participants self-selected into. The terms come from Scott Hartley, who said in his book *The Fuzzy and the Techie: Why the Liberal Arts Will Rule the Digital World* that he first heard them while studying political science at Stanford (Strowe 2017). In the Stanford version, fuzzies are generally those students in the humanities and social sciences, while the techies study engineering or the hard sciences. Dweck and Walton's study, which also comes from Stanford, involved one group self-selecting into these two categories. The fuzzies were asked to read about the future of algorithms, while the techies read a piece on Derrida, to determine how much the "fixed" theory played a role in task enjoyment and interest (Khazan 2018).

For the purposes of this thesis, however, I will expand the definition of these terms to include not just students, but those who dedicate their lives in the professional or hobbyist realms toward either the fuzzy or techie fields. This distinction thus separates the abstract, humanities-

related *fuzzies* like the artists, crafters, poets, writers, musicians, journalists, fashion designers, and filmmakers from the *techies* in the medical, technological, and "practically applicable" world, like engineers, doctors, nurses, and even the tech industry workists. It is important to note that these categories have significant exclusions and crossovers. Management and business, for example, fall in neither category, and some professions, like woodworking or industrial craftsmen, may be ambiguous.

Paradoxically, the fuzzy fields seem most apt for calling pursuit and self-actualization because they are inherent mediums for artistic expression shaped by one's personal feelings, thoughts, experiences, and conflicts. Yet, as Lois and Gregson (2019) write, "creative careers are particularly difficult to break into and sustain, regardless of artistic medium," because of how few and selective opportunities there are available in the field. On top of previously discussed negative impacts from the inability to pursue one's calling, like regret and stress, exclusion from the field through means like publisher rejection may become all the more demoralizing when the role of a writer is entrenched in one's personal identity.

In fact, this selectivity may be built into our economic system itself. As Andy's story shows, some kinds of fuzzies are less capable of actualizing their callings into a work role because the American economic structure of subsistence through labor does not favor them. Rather, it favors those whose callings have a more stereotypically discernible productive impact, which may be more lucrative for the firm and therefore more likely to pay the worker at the cost of living or higher. Generally, that means the more techie sectors. Engineers and doctors, for example, play a vital role in the functioning of our society and economy and are compensated accordingly (while paying off steep student loans, to be fair). In contrast, the quintessential fuzzy is the actor or musician that moves to L.A. to pursue their career, waiting tables and serving

coffee for years while they take small gigs and audition after audition. I wrote about the more subsistence-based motivations to pursue one's calling as a side-hustle hobby in the earliest section of this thesis. It is no wonder that those in the fuzzy sector relegate these pursuits to the free time they have after their day job. Sometimes, it is required.

Otherwise, the passion that comes with a calling may encourage fuzzy workers to undergo extreme financial hardship in order to pursue their dream role, in a similar manner to the intrinsic pressures faced by the neoclassically called Christian counselors. For example, a study on Italian theater professionals by organization management lecturer Silvia Cinque and business professors Daniel Nyberg and Ken Starkey (2021) finds that material hardship and poverty are rampant in the field. Pielle and Gaine, two interviewees, described their experience of unemployed acting as "artistic darkness" or an "artistic void." A "lifelong precariousness" hung over study participant Istevene, who feared that his career could end with just a broken finger: "I am like a horse–I get shot and there's another ready to take my place." Finally, Sidore expressed anxiety because, as he said, "From one day to the other you may stop working [and] you will not be able to bring home the daily bread" (2021:1767).

Another problem arises for those who have made it into the upper echelons of the American fuzzy sector (in other words, those who are paid well to do it as a full-time career): one can feel culturally insignificant and unappreciated in their field. In 2015, *New York Times* writer Benjamin Moser posed the question, "Is Being a Writer a Job or a Calling?" He captures this predicament of the fuzzies, who are less favorably compensated than the techies but nonetheless feel magnetized to the sector as an avenue of self-fulfillment:

> "We never know if we are doing it right. Even the best writing will never have the immediate, measurable impact that a doctor's work has, or a plumber's. To discover if we are on the right track, we can, and do, become obsessed with our 'careers,' which is the word we use for what other people think of us. And we secretly welcome the unanswered emails and unpaid royalties that beleaguer us as they do every working life–their whiff of bureaucracy making us feel part of the adult world. Because, hard as it is, writing rarely feels like a real job.
>
> But there is something dreary about wanting writing to be a real job. The sense of inner purpose, so often unmentionable in a society enamored of professionalization, distinguishes a writer from a hack. Emily Dickinson didn't turn her calling into a job, and neither did Franz Kafka, or Fernando Pessoa, or Wallace Stevens, or any of the millions of writers who have never earned a penny for their thoughts. A defrocked priest forever remains a priest, and a writer–independent of publication or readership or 'career'–is always a writer. Independent, even of writing. Writing, after all, is something one does. A writer is something one is" (Moser 2015).

Indeed, the demoralization is understandable. Yet, as Moser captures, the role of writers, poets, musicians, and other fuzzies serve a different but arguably just as important purpose to our society: they establish cultural narratives and communicate otherwise indescribable experiences, thus creating more connection.

Even as early as the late 1700s, called female writers in New England were using their poetry as a way to re-establish their own narrative over the experience of being a woman. This was especially true as blooming print culture came to include *querelle des femmes,* or "printed

attacks on and defenses of women." During this period, male authors found women "'crooked by nature,'" less-than, jealous, and withholders of "sexual favors" (Cowell 1994:107). Pattie Cowell, retired English department chair at Colorado State University, explains that, "Writing became as much an act of vocation for early women poets as it was for the ministers and magistrates, clerks and bookkeepers for whom writing instruction was intended: they got their 'living' by it" (1994:114). For example, Connecticut poet Martha Brewster was able to express self-consciousness in the introduction of one poem: "But since some have a gust for novelty / I here presume upon your clemency / For rare it is to see a female bard / Or that my sex in print have 'er appear'd…." (1994:110). By taking charge of their callings to write and publish, some early New English women were thus able to illuminate their own self-descriptions and draw overt attention to the historic lack of women in the field. This aided to open up the culture to the idea of their presence.

This transcendent ability of called artists to create of their own hands for broader society has been described as "divinely inspired" in a letter from Pope John Paul II to artists in 1999. In fact, the late Pope expressed in his letter the notion that artistic creativity allows an individual to appear "more than ever 'in the image of God'" as they accomplish "this task above all in shaping the wondrous 'material' of his own humanity and then exercising creative dominion" (1999). His Holiness supports the charge of the called artist:

> "Those who perceive in themselves this kind of divine spark which is the artistic vocation–as poet, writer, sculptor, architect, musician, actor, and so on–feel at the same time the obligation not to waste his talent but to develop it, in order to put it at the service of their [neighbor] and of humanity as a whole. Society needs artists, just as it needs scientists, technicians, workers, professional people, witnesses of the faith, teachers,

fathers and mothers, who ensure the growth of the person and the development of the community by means of that supreme art form which is ‘the art of education.’ Within the vast cultural panorama of each nation, artists have their unique place” (1999).

XIII. COMMUNITY DRAWBACKS OF CALLING PURSUIT: CLASS GAPS AND ELITE SIGNALING

While the individual and communitarian benefits to pursuing a calling in the artistic fields have thus been documented–by a Pope, no less–one way in which calling pursuit may hinder societal connection in America is by the fact that the ability to pursue passionate work can serve as a signal of privilege and elitism to those who do not have means. In our terms, this means those who tend to have subsistence motivations over passion motivations for labor. It is a major faux paus in the all-American "pull yourself up by your bootstraps" philosophy to publicly live beyond subsistence *and* find success while you're doing it in a domain of non-physical, unstereotypically "productive" labor. One example of such a phenomenon we have seen in recent news is the "nepo baby," short for "nepotism baby." These are the children of rich celebrities that have success in similar industries to their parents', like the movie producer whose last name is just familiar enough that you go to search for them on Wikipedia, only to find that their father is a major director and filmmaker. Hello to Gwenyth Paltrow, Dakota Johnson, Jack Quaid, Kristen Stewart, and even Billie Eilish, all nepo babies. This topic of conversation exploded this past year as TikTokers created montages of thus unexposed nepo babies, the assumption being that their rise to fame and success could now be attributed exclusively to family ties instead of hard work or talent. *Vulture* equated the term to psoriasis: "the label was something you were born with, and those who had it found it equally irritating" (Jones 2022).

But this hate of "success without hard work" is not limited solely to the economically privileged. In fact, some scholars see the above gap in the ability to pursue artistic work as one major contributor to the culture war between white working class Republicans and those they see

as the “liberal elite.” Graeber, who contributed the bullshit jobs taxonomy and treatment of the caring classes that I previously incorporated, has valuable commentary on this front.

According to Graeber (2011), there exists an ideological clash between the working-class minorities most often attributed to “identity politics,” who view “the higher education system as a potential means of social advancement,” and the conversationally absent working-class Republican identities, like Baptists or “rednecks” (his term), who are “largely excluded from college campuses and all the social and cultural worlds college opens up.” Instead, this latter group views the economic avenues outside college as the way to rise; Republican parents cannot see a future where their children become a part of the “liberal elite,” but there is certainly a chance they may become a millionaire in this American meritocracy (2011:189). Yet elite institutions like universities also serve as facilitators of extremely valuable activities that may be both non-economic *and* particularly appealing to the calling pursuers. Graeber writes:

> “What we are really talking about are jobs that open the way to the (legitimate, professional) pursuit of any forms of value other than economic. Whether it’s the art world, or charity, or political engagement as in, say, journalism, or activism–that is, whether we are talking about Love or Truth or Beauty–we are speaking of ways that one can dedicate oneself to something other than the pursuit of money” (2011:195).

Thus, Graeber finds that “the ‘culture wars’ in the US are better interpreted as a struggle over access to the means to behave altruistically,” not just pursue one’s calling for individual self-fulfillment purposes (2011:186).

But even when one is capable of dedicating themselves to something other than money, the same isolating and disconnecting factors I have been discussing come back into play.

Philanthropy, which was used by historical American figures like the Gilded Age Rockefellers and Carnegies as a signal of community support by helping protect others from subsistence pressures, no longer *presents* as such. While according to Charity.org "the U.S. continues to be the largest source of charity in the world," this may be due to lack of "social safety net that other countries offer," thereby making it "critical to provid[ing] support at all levels of society" (Blyler 2022). Putnam finds that, for example, about 75 percent of church members gave to charity and spent up to $20 billion on social services as of *Bowling Alone*'s publication more than two decades ago (2020:67). Yet only $485 billion was charitably given in 2021 in the U.S., as compared to the $21.06 trillion of personal income that Americans accrued in the same year (Blyler 2022; Statista Research Department 2022). The Philanthropy Roundtable (2023) finds that less than half of those in the lowest income bracket charitably give, as opposed to 83% of those making $93,751 to $125,000, 91% of those making $125,001 to $162,500, and a whopping 93% of those making more than $162,501. The class gap of contributing to philanthropy mirrors that of income inequality, which makes sense, considering one must first reach and exceed the amount it costs to subsist before one can consider the survival of others. (Tithers, missionaries, and extreme minimalists may argue.)

In fact, a major nonprofit that has filled the contemporary philanthropy gap called GiveWell has captured the rich effective-altruist demographic. Outsourced and optimized like all good workist pursuits are, GiveWell claims on its homepage to "search for the charities that save or improve lives <u>the most</u> per dollar" on behalf of those who wish to donate and publish their list for free (GiveWell). Make no mistake–GiveWell's vetting process is rigorous and selective. But its style of philanthropy inherently separates the contributor from the recipient. While workists pursuing their callings can contribute significant donations to individuals halfway across the

world through GiveWell, thereby providing the workist with personal satisfaction, no true connection is made with another human being through this donation. Like the social isolation that accelerates as technology takes over leisure time, utilizing a third-party platform technology such as GiveWell separates the donor from the decision-making and giving process. GiveWell also does not recommend charities for every cause and almost exclusively donates overseas to alleviate global illness and poverty, in line with its commitment of highest value per dollar donated (GiveWell). While these are good causes to contribute to, and potentially benefit the donor by allowing them to amorphously "connect" to a global cause, the technological and geographical distance created between them and the recipient group is a problem that GiveWell does not aim to solve. Further, any personal satisfaction gained from this charity is fomented not through the work itself, but rather one's satisfaction with redirecting the strictly monetary fruits of one's labor to partially alleviate another's misfortune.

However, the state of community connection in America is not completely hopeless. In fact, the passion of pursuing one's calling can be translated into personal meaning through contributing to others' lives, as I will explore in the next section.

XIV. POSITIVE, FULFILLING CONNECTION FOUND IN CALLING PURSUIT, ESPECIALLY THROUGH SACRIFICE AND NEEDS-FULFILLMENT

Arthur C. Brooks, my oft-cited Harvard happiness scholar, has identified four community pillars of meaning: friends, family, faith, and work ("America is Pursuing Happiness" 2022). But whether due to the time we must spend working to make a survivable wage, the isolating technology we sink into during the time we do have off, or the magnetizing pull of pouring our identities into our work (especially if we feel called to the role), our collective withdrawal from the institutions and relationships that form the first three pillars has culminated in the latter space serving as our primary grounds for community meaning.

Aggregate research in the field of calling points to some straight-edge positive impacts of pursuing one's calling on the connections they make within the bounds of their workplace. For example, Dobrow and Tosti-Kharas found in their 1,500-participant study that calling alignment is correlated with higher professional association membership and meeting attendance (2011: 1042). This may mitigate some of the drop in membership rates for unions and nearly every major trade association that occurred after 1970, as Putnam discusses in *Bowling Alone* (2020:84).

However, other trends in connection–not just with one's coworkers, but also with their clients and broader community–have surfaced in many of the personal narratives that calling pursuers tell about fulfillment within their roles. My review of calling literature finds that in particular, the acts of fulfilling others' needs and sacrificing for others are woven throughout most, if not all, of these calling stories in some capacity. I have already incorporated some examples of this phenomenon into discussions about the individualized benefits and drawbacks

of calling pursuit. For example, while the Christian counselor may experience workaholism and burnout as a result of her dedication, she still continues to do her work because of certain internalized motivations like moral duty. Most interestingly, however, is the fact that the actualization of the moral duty that compels her is directed towards benefitting others– specifically, helping her clients out of deep-seated emotional and spiritual turmoil. This positive interaction with and contribution to others may account for much of the meaning that calling pursuers experience.

Keren Dali, a Morgridge College of Education assistant professor, recounts the deep job engagement expressed by librarians who serve immigrant communities in large urban centers such as New York City and Toronto. Dali recognized their callings from the beginning, especially in terms of how passion for their work directs them to find personal happiness by aiding others. She writes:

> "[t]he librarians' dedication to working with immigrants was astounding. They talked about how deeply invested they were in immigrant communities, how it was absolutely impossible to turn off the work and tune out when they went home, how their work and private domains were intertwined, how librarians derived the greatest satisfaction from helping people" (2022:207).

And a manager described her librarians' willingness to go above and beyond for her clients:

> "I have not scheduled [the librarian] recently to go to the homeless shelter–she says, 'Oh, please, when can I go back?' and I say to her, 'Why are you so eager to go there instead of the university?' She says, 'I feel they need more, they want more. Every time I go there, and I give out this information, they are really hungry for it. [...] when I go to the

shelters, there are so many different cultures there needing help. You know? And that's where I feel that I should be" (2022:224).

It is clear from their testimony that these librarians' multicultural background allows them to support immigrants intellectually, emotionally, psychologically, and socially through many difficult processes, such as with gaining a cultural understanding of the United States or participating in the citizenship process (2022:217). In this way, they serve as a sort of community glue by acting as "cultural facilitators, community liaisons, and invaluable community resources" (2022:217). Dali found that these librarians also served a variety of roles beyond the strict tasks of a librarian, going above and beyond the expectations of the position to become translators and interpreters while "bring[ing] a creative flare and soul" to their work (2022:216). In literally speaking their language, the librarians were able to funnel their knowledge toward clients in a manner that allowed them to feel valued as a need-provider and servicer.

The called librarians' practice of volunteering their skills to fulfill others' needs has also been observed in another population: lawyers. Isaac Mamaysky, a national corporate law partner at a "big law" firm in New York, provides an interesting perspective as a worker in the villainized sector in his piece for the Santa Clara Law Review. Adapting this volunteerism sentiment to his field, Mamaysky writes that "the happiest and most fulfilled attorneys are those who live a life of meaning and purpose" (2022:63). Like Graeber's thoughts on bullshit jobs, Mamaysky found that billing over two thousand hours of late nights on "projects of questionable significance" made him "ready for a change" (2022:68). Instead of those projects, he began to spend his nights writing a business plan and eventually raised millions of dollars, which allowed him to launch a large public health nonprofit. Mamaysky was not originally inspired to write his

law review piece because of his own story, however. Instead, the motivation for his memo was Travis Mitchell, a third-year associate at Davis Polk & Wardwell. What Mr. Mitchell posted in his LinkedIn feed earlier that year accumulated thousands of inspired reactions:

> "[I] found out at my review that I billed over 400 pro bono hours this year. Before going into 'big law,' I promised myself that I wouldn't lose touch with the issues I care deeply about and worked closely with pre-law school…Many people told me or heavily implied that this wouldn't be possible as a corporate lawyer at a large law firm…As a law student, I know I was not the only one [who] experienced the angst of feeling torn between two seemingly disparate paths (each with their own advantages and drawbacks)...You should never sacrifice your values for a job, and you can always find a way to combine your professional and personal goals" (2022:65).

While in the prose of an aspirational LinkedIn post (take with that as you will), Mitchell's behind-the-scenes dedication toward providing hundreds of hours of free legal services may illustrate the mutual benefit of pursuing meaning in one's role. It may also indicate a certain level of sacrifice on the part of Mitchell, who supplants his valuable free time away from law to advocate for his non-paying clients.

Another population that experiences community connection is the janitorial class, which reaches anyone who steps into a clean building because of their sacrifice and acclimated passion. Scholars from the Indian Institute of Management, including Dheeraj Sharma, Koustab Ghosh, and Madhurima Mishra, partnered with Illinois Institute of Technology associate business professor Smriti Anand to tackle the impacts of pursuing invisible "dirty work," particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors collected data from 1,765 hospital staff handling

COVID patients, including janitors, ward attendants, and housekeeping staff, in the national capital region of India during the summer of 2020 (Sharma et al. 2022:6). From the outset, they identify the inherently sacrificial nature of such kinds of caring class work. A sense of moral duty to "sacrifice their own comfort, safety, family welfare, and social inclusion" was essentially necessary to overcome the occupational stigma of their day-to-day work, as well as their job insecurity and endangerment to their health during the pandemic (2022:1). While other jobs of similar pay like store stocking or warehouse work would have been available and in demand during this time, these workers stayed in the janitorial field. The authors utilize the lens of neoclassical calling citing Thompson and Christensen to best describe why. They state, "Calling can transform even the most unpleasant, unrecognized, dirty tasks into ones having transcendental meaning and significance by dint of a strong moral obligation of those who are performing the tasks on a regular basis" (2022:2). Overall, while this work is often undervalued and socially marginalized, even to the point of hostility and mistreatment from managers or suppliers, the authors identified a strong pro-social contribution which allowed workers to develop a buffer of subjective career success (2022:3, 12).

In "The Call of the Wild: Zookeepers, Callings, and the Double-edged Sword of Deeply Meaningful Work," calling scholars J. Stuart Bunderson and Jeffery A. Thompson find another example of neoclassical calling in an unlikely place. Bunderson and Thompson take hard and fast to the theory that the zookeepers they interviewed were discerners, that "their basic nature, their 'hardwiring,' if you will, predisposed them for a career working with animals" (2009:36). Below are some testimonials from the zookeepers, which seem to align with their theory:

> "It's a part of who I am and I don't know if I can explain that. When you use the expression 'it's in your blood,' like football coaches and players can never retire because it's in their blood. Whatever my genetic makeup is, I'm geared toward animals…
>
> I slept and ate and read reptiles when I was a little boy. I thought that's all there was…
>
> Zookeepers relate better to animals than they do to people. But then sometimes I think you're just born an animal person" (2022:36-37).

But the personal moral duty and obligation that zookeepers experienced toward their field came with further sense of sacrifice, particularly with pay and their physical safety. Bunderson and Thompson relay multiple zookeeper testimonials about the poverty wages and back-breaking, exhausting physical labor that has the potential to go awry with a "high strung" animal (2022:42). In their analysis, the scholars find that "the primary focus is always on the self in society, on discovering that place and that community in society's division of labor where one fits and is needed." In the Lutheran sense, "cleaning cages is part of their offering to society, an offering they feel obligated to make because of their particular gifts and society's need" (2022:51).

From pro-bono lawyers, to volunteer librarian-translators, and even to janitors and zookeepers, the feeling of contributing one's own time, energy, and expertise to clients who are in need of those resources is a thread weaved throughout their work.

XV. WHAT ABOUT THE MANAGERS?: THE POLITICAL CALLING

In the course of doing research for this thesis, I have come across many articles from random websites that claim to hold the secret formula to turning apathetic, lonely, subsistence-driven workers into the most impassioned workers on Earth. Normally, these articles will begin by implying that the reader's aim should be to pursue passionate work. In 2017, for example, Jennifer Spencer published an article on her *Medium* page called "How to Pursue your Life's Calling." It starts with the questions, "Have you ever wondered why you were born? Have you ever wanted to figure out if you had a true purpose for being here on this spinning planet we call Earth?" After initiating an existential crisis upon the reader, the article may continue along the lines of, "Unfortunately, most of us aren't born realizing what our purpose is. We have to work hard to find true meaning and happiness. We have to find the missing key to unlock our calling." Then, the reveal: Spencer cites tips from Joel Brown, the founder of "the number one motivational website online," Addicted2Success.com (no, I did not make this up). These transformational tips are: to get past your self-limiting beliefs; find your "why;" and strategically chunk your goals. On the burning question of how the reader can know if they truly found their ultimate purpose, she has a simple answer: you will just know (Spencer 2017).

But whether due to subsistence pressures, unfinished exploration, important responsibilities, or other factors as we have discussed, not everyone will find their calling, much less find work in it. Though this thesis is about intrinsically impassioned work, it is important to view other methods of discovering passion and motivation at work, not only because labor is ubiquitous in America, but also because unpassionate work is sometimes necessary for a functioning society. This is particularly true for those whose roles don't seem fit to be "callings," yet are vital for running our infrastructure. Some essential workers, like our store stockers,

cashiers, or janitors, do acclimate to the passion that may come from serving others or building connections with them. But it is not difficult to see how many others–the ones who largely make up the statistics in my subsistence chapter about disconnection from the workplace–may be apathetic toward the monotony or disparagement of their position. It may even lead to anger against the "liberal elite," who do not "have to" do these jobs. When the intrinsic passion of the calling is lacking in this section of the workforce, then, the manager stands up to serve as our extrinsic motivator, passion-builder, and hypemaker. To do this, they utilize the power of human connection.

Dr. Garrett Potts, a philosophy and religion visiting instructor at the University of South Florida, writes (2020) about this in a special issue in *Business Ethics*, naming it the "calling of the virtuous manager." More specifically, he frames the concept with the idea of the *political calling*. This *political* calling is a similar yet separate duty to the calling I have been discussing, as it is not based on intrinsic passion, but rather one that must be fulfilled by managers due to the nature of their position. Managers do not just delegate responsibilities and establish policy in the workplace–they are also tasked with creating a positive environment that motivates and inspires their employees to do good work. According to Dr. Potts, this is done through supporting "(a) good work, (b) the good of individual lives, and (c) the common good of communities that their organization reaches" (2020:6). He also applies the Bellah framework of job, career, and calling orientations toward work to classify the political calling of a manager. A manager must support practices that are simultaneously good for the individual worker, the workplace, and the communities that their workplace touches, as Dr. Potts says (2020:9). This parallels Bellah's *calling* perspective yet orients it toward the responsibilities extrinsically applied to the manager through their role in the workplace. In contrast, job and career orientations to work tend to

negatively impact the managers' ability to connect, because these orientations place individualistically desired external goods like profit or self-esteem over "the thoughtful considerations about the good of others and their communities" (2020:10).

In preparing to write this thesis throughout this past year, I conducted multiple interviews with the Director of Talent and Development at HEB, Mr. Myric Polhemus, to better understand his job role as a passion-builder. Even before we introduced the deeper topics of human well-being, happiness, and fulfillment associated with the *calling*, it was clear to me that Myric is constantly thinking about how he can provide a meaningful workspace for HEB's employees. He mostly works with the company's C-suite, helping them to develop their conflict resolution and communication skills. However, he acknowledged in our conversations that quite a bit of HEB's worker base (store stockers, cashiers, and self-checkout aids, for example) are not at the upper end of the pay scale. Rather, they are more likely to be motivated by what I have been calling subsistence, either relying on or supplementing their incomes through this work. Thus, many of our conversations addressed the role of lower and middle managers in the lives of these workers.

During our second meeting last June, Myric said that one of the most effective things management can do to ensure an uncalled person finds passion in the workplace is to develop a strong relationship with them. The goal with this approach is to help the employee transcend the temporary hedonic happiness of a pay increase, promotion, or kudos toward a more eudaimonic outcome with meaningful human connection. He teaches a "human-central leadership philosophy" in his advocacy, where he helps managers develop a sincere interest in employees, recognize their humanity, and treat them with respect as individuals. In doing so, Myric takes an approach that aligns with Dr. Potts' conception of the political calling. A "virtuous" manager is one who cultivates a genuine interest and connection with their workers to the political calling of

managerial work. “People are not machines,” Myric told me. “Sometimes, the most important thing you can have at work is an immediate manager or team that supports you.”

XVI. WHAT NOW?: REMEDIES FOR THE DRAWBACKS OF CALLING PURSUIT IN AMERICAN CAPITALISM

I have also taken a descriptive approach to the topic of calling pursuit up to this point. However, there are normative implications to consider when attempting to alleviate the tension between the need to work for subsistence and the passion principle toward American labor, if such a goal is worthy to pursue. Despite the subjective nature of the calling, it is clear through the myriad narratives about calling pursuit I have included here that called individuals are magnetized to a certain domain and experience heightened fulfillment from their participation in it. Actively dampening this passion may likely result in the same negative implications that I have shared from those whose callings are partially or fully unrealized, like those unemployed in the fuzzy sector. However, the subsistence side of the equation is more easily malleable–here, we are dealing in terms of statutes and regulations, not the human "soul" or whatever cause of the *calling* you believe. In this way, a question arises: should we prioritize calling pursuit through socioeconomic policy?

Erin Cech (2021), author of the *Atlantic* article "Loving Your Job Is a Capitalist Trap" that I have previously referenced, is a hard "no" on calling pursuit as the system currently stands. In fact, she writes that the passion principle creates "existential hazards" borne from the systemic nature of American capitalism. She goes on:

> "Put frankly, the white-collar labor force was not designed to help workers nurture self-realization projects. It was designed to advance the interests of an organization's stockholders. When people place paid employment at the center of their meaning-making

journey, they hand over control of an essential part of their sense of self to profit-seeking employers and the ebbs and flows of the global economy" (Cech 2021).

In Cech's view, the profit motive for businesses is entrenched in American capitalism, just as the need to work is for the American consumer, since they must be compensated through labor to buy vital goods and services. Thus, one way to tackle this problem could be to reorient systemic motives by using more hands-on governmental action and regulation against subsistence pressures so that businesses and consumers can achieve calling pursuit goals. The universal basic income, for example, has been highlighted in the past few years as a method of decoupling wages from subsistence. If one is capable of acquiring most or all of their basic necessities without inputting labor, the subsistence motivation is by definition mostly or completely eliminated. The American government even implemented a form of no-strings-attached supplemental income during the COVID pandemic through federal CARES Act emergency relief. (It was not universal–the payout scale gradually decreased for higher tax brackets–but it *was* multiple rounds of basic and direct financial support for no work.) According to a study of over 3,800 participants across 74 countries by professors at the University of Buckingham School of Psychology and Wellbeing during pandemic periods of substantial social aid, engagement in creative activities like home crafts and artisanship, fine arts, musical and performing arts engagement, niche and IT interests, and language activities vastly increased. Participants also reported an increase in sports and outdoor pursuits, though not to the same degree. Further, this heightened creative expression and mental stimulation at home also led to higher well-being during the pandemic, contributing to the notion that doing the non-compensated activities one naturally enjoys can promote health and happiness (Morse, Fine, and Friedlander 2021).

However, America is fairly skeptical of implementing these measures in non-emergency situations over the long term. For one, widespread American policy that makes welfare contingent on job-seeking indicates that we have an implicit governmental priority toward encouraging productive participation in our economy. Further, on a sociocultural level, Americans recoil at the abstract idea of non-capitalist systems like socialism that give more control to the government instead of the free market. *CBS News* called the word socialism a “buzzword” that conservative leaders depicted as a “democracy-killing bogeyman” during the 2020 election season (Gornstein 2021). Indeed, only 36% see socialism somewhat or very positively in America, while 60% see it negatively, including an entire third of respondents who saw it very negatively in polling by the Pew Research Center at the end of 2022 (Doherty et al. 2022). (This poll finds that views of both capitalism and socialism have worsened since 2019 by relatively similar margins.)

For a specific example, conversations around universal basic income policy spurred by the 2020 Democratic presidential campaign of New York entrepreneur Andrew Yang also failed to inspire change. Ballotpedia notes that the cornerstone of Yang’s campaign was his “Freedom Dividend,” a universal basic income of $1,000 per month for every adult American, no matter their income status (Ballotpedia). However, by August of 2020–in the midst of the pandemic–Pew polls indicated that a narrow majority of Americans still opposed this guaranteed income (Gilberstadt 2020). Yang won a measly 2.8% in the New Hampshire presidential primary and 1% in the Iowa caucus for the cause of UBI before he suspended his campaign nine months before Election Day (Ballotpedia).

For these reasons, it is unlikely that changes to the overall American economic system would be well received. In contrast, Cech recognizes that more practical solutions to this

subsistence predicament would not be to restructure the system entirely, but rather implement policy change through the workplace and at the labor level. In order to do that, however, I must revisit my conclusions about why people are unhappy in their non-called work roles.

Cech finds that the subsistence-versus-passion tension has created a labor situation where paid work often feels like drudgery. She writes that, “The passion principle is ultimately an individual-level solution. It guides workers to avoid the grind of paid work by transforming it into a place of fulfillment. But it does nothing to address the factors that make paid work feel like drudgery in the first place” (2021). This drudgery may lead to the hesitancy that I have previously discussed around building friendships at work or sticking around the office after hours. But our discussions about workaholism and exploitation, which involved reports of music librarians, adjunct professors, Christian counselors, and others, show it is not just “drudgery” that impassioned workers are asked to tolerate, but also poor boundaries, poor pay, mistreatment, and other issues detrimental to the workers in America’s labor infrastructure.

In this way, the pressures both self-induced and external alike that I have discussed in previous sections can also dampen calls for healthier workplace policy. Music librarianship scholars Vickers and Yang write that vocational awe hides systemic issues behind a guise of individual failure, redirecting attention from the toxic infrastructure that causes burnout in the first place (2022:346). On this note (not the kind music librarians are usually concerned with), then, the pursuit of a calling may lead to exploitation because it displaces accountability to create a more fulfilling environment onto the worker, instead of the managers or the workplace.

Cech thus suggests multiple policies at the workplace level that might protect called workers from issues such as drudgery, exploitation, and unfulfilling work. In implementing these

policies more wide-scale, however, she notes that these policies would also benefit those whose roles are not so passion-inducing. She states:

> "Expanding social safety nets and protections for workers would go a long way to make passion seeking less financially risky. And advocating for collective solutions–better working conditions, more predictable hours, better benefits, more bargaining power, less overwork–in our workplaces and through national policies would not only make paid work more manageable, but also make work better for people in jobs that have little potential for the expression of passion" (Cech 2021).

Alongside the workplace policy reforms that Cech suggests, changes at the individual company level could also include plugging the list of holes in the social safety net that I mentioned at the beginning of the subsistence section: improving paid time off, paid parental leave, disability insurance, childcare options, and unionization protections. This could even include increasing pay to more accurately reflect cost of living, which may ease subsistence burdens, or alleviate the fuzzy-techie pay disparity I have discussed and lift more called workers in the arts from financial peril. Stricter regulations around work hours could also create an external pressure *against* putting in that overtime. These adjustments would not only address the subsistence side of the equation, then, but also help to ease workers out of our compulsive and ubiquitous work lifestyle.

Perhaps this approach places too much focus on the economic side of the equation, however. Instead, we could attempt to change our collective mindset surrounding the passion principle and the function of work as identity. As I traced in the section about our culture of workism, Americans are inundated with the message that they *should* want to work for passion,

even from the first day they step into the kindergarten classroom. It is no surprise, then, that this tenet mixes with other quintessential American views on meritocracy and the Protestant ethic to create a population which strives to achieve their dream career, even if that means placing themselves in financial strain. In his *Atlantic* piece "How to Want Less," Arthur C. Brooks (2022) calls this the "*Satisfaction = getting what you want*" formula. This belief explains the overwhelmingly aspirational goal of finding happiness at work expressed by high school and college-aged students that I have noted. In remembering the notion of the hedonic treadmill, however, Brooks sees this formula as flawed and suggests a different one: "*Satisfaction = what you have ÷ what you want*." He writes:

> "The secret to satisfaction is not to increase our haves–that will never work (or at least, it will never last). That is the treadmill formula, not the satisfaction formula. The secret is to manage our wants. By managing what we want instead of what we have, we give ourselves a chance to lead more satisfied lives" ("How to Want Less" 2022).

Brooks approaches these unfulfillment and unhappiness problems by addressing the individual reader or listener–his podcast series published by *the Atlantic* is called "How to Build a Happy Life," not "happy society," after all. Yet his sentiment could also be applied more broadly to our collective desires for fulfillment. Indeed, we have turned to the convenient, ubiquitous space that is work to find meaning and happiness in our lives. But it is clear from the University of Buckingham study on pandemic activities, as well as observations about passionate work in general (the idea of a calling being found in a non-work *domain*, for example), that happiness and passion can be found in many activities outside the workplace. Seeking a stronger work-life balance by decoupling our identities from our role as a worker, pursuing enjoyment and fulfillment in non-work pursuits like creative projects, sports and outdoors activities, and

volunteerism, and engaging in community third spaces like library book clubs or bowling leagues may help us more effectively turn new *wants* into fulfilling *haves.* Cech makes this third solution the final word in her article:

> "In order to circumvent the existential problems of passion, individuals can shift their personal philosophies about work. [One] solution is to diversify our meaning-making portfolios—actively seek out new places to root a sense of identity and fulfillment… Working for pay can be tedious, disappointing, even crushing, and having meaningful work is one way to make the hours pass more pleasurably. But the solution to those challenges should not necessarily be to position work as a centerpiece of our identity. By understanding the traps of passion, we can be better equipped to envision alternatives to it. Follow your passion if you must, but also find places outside of work to anchor your sense of self" (2021).

XVII. WHAT CANNOT BE ANSWERED, AND CONCLUSION

One potential concern when writing about and studying the calling is the bias found in self-reporting. The inaccuracy of surveying, which involves making an honest and accurate self-diagnosis, is noted in many of the research papers I read. Ten pages into *Bullshit Jobs,* David Graeber acknowledges that in social science research of this kind we have to make assumptions about the validity of self-measurements, such as whether one truly does have a bullshit job, or whether someone truly is pursuing their calling. “Since no one has ever figured out an adequate way to measure it, the worker’s perspective is about as close as one is likely to get to an accurate assessment of the situation,” he writes (2018:10). In considering the nature of callings, this makes sense: one cannot be one hundred percent sure that they are called to a particular role, or why. They could be mistaken that that role is right for them, even if a 15-question survey says they are. Indeed, this is the nature of passion, fulfillment, and feeling in general. One can perhaps measure or describe how intensely they feel and how long that feeling lasts, but only in hindsight and with language that cannot fully capture or translate that emotional experience. Thus, one must accept the inevitability that faults in self-perception and self-reporting will be baked into the analysis when writing about a subject like this. I have tried to accommodate through careful language (with a little bit of hedging to boot).

Additionally, the calling is usually seen as a noun job rather than a verb role when placed in the context of our American labor system. I had many one-off conversations during the course of this project about the idea of the calling with those I know in my personal life, peer students, and professors, including a management professor I consulted. These conversations revealed a variety of preconceptions about the term, especially its definition and what exactly it includes or excludes. Certain types of jobs that have vague or expansive verb roles, like teachers (teaching)

and entrepreneurs (business-building), can actually span many fields. I have tried to incorporate some of these calling orientations into the explorer category, since it presupposes an intrinsic desire to do a certain kind of task but requires certain modifications to be fit into a noun job that can serve a functionable work role in the American economic system. But this is not a clean fit. The management professor in particular balked at my focus on the calling subject, viewing the transference of skills as of higher importance.

Finally, I want to make note of the racial, gender, and class lines that are woven throughout this construction. Though I do mention these disparities while addressing current day unfair inequality, my explanation of the transformation from Martin Luther's *vocation* to the current-day *calling* is extremely reductive. It does not consider the entrenchment of social and class divides in America's history, nor the lack of occupational mobility for some populations due to legalized discrimination, oppression, and even enslavement. In fact, our economy was dependent on ensuring that enslaved Black individuals were occupationally stationary in back-breaking agricultural labor. Greg Timmons (2018) writes for *History* that, "Slave labor had become so entrenched in the Southern economy that nothing–not even the belief that all men were created equal–would dislodge it." For women, who were relegated to homemakers and child-rearers throughout much of American history, pursuing one's passion in an external workplace was not permitted nor socially acceptable.

I started the planning part of this thesis without much idea as to my calling, and it is no surprise that I did not find my life's purpose in a single year. Even though I did not find my "one true calling," I believe that my view of interpersonal relationships and family has evolved for the better. I vaguely knew about the relationship between meaning and connection before I started writing, but only while researching happiness and fulfillment did I come to realize that this

meant most–*the most*–meaning is created through connection. The definition of a *calling* involves some task that purports to be individually fulfilling, all on its own. But understanding how we function more meaningfully as people in community, even–or especially–in cases when someone is pursuing a calling, was an unexpected outcome of this project that drastically altered my perspective on work and passion. For example, I now see my partner as that much more connected to his clients through his work as a crisis counselor. He has stated that his job is the most difficult yet self-fulfilling career path he could have chosen, that it is what he is meant to do. Like the other healthcare workers and professionals I read about in scholarly work, such as the hospital custodial staff in Indonesia, he finds immense internal satisfaction in the sacrifice his job requires. His intrinsic desire to have guiding power over others allows him to aid his clients by counseling them through personal issues and giving them tools to improve their emotional stability and well-being. He sees first-hand the impacts of unfair inequality in this role, as many of his clients are houseless or amid financial crises, but his internal passion for this work bridges some of the difficulty.

The modern trap of calling and American work, in sum, is that in this individualist, self-actualizing American culture, you are supposed to find and practice your passion as a source of personal fulfillment. However, our capitalist economic system mandates that you must work to earn a wage in order to pay for basic necessities, such as housing and food. These competing forces interact in different ways for different people. For those who are called to a certain work, they might have to settle for a non-calling job due to financial necessity; those that can pursue their callings experience both individual and community-oriented benefits and drawbacks. Whether it be with co-workers or clients, greater fulfillment can be fomented through calling pursuit in the service of or collaboration with others. Indeed, while the calling has transformed

from a medium of community contribution to an individually determined engine of self-fulfillment, one thing has not changed since the 16th century: we are social creatures who derive meaning from our connections. I hope that by reading, you, too, have been impassioned at least in part to find meaning and connection in the job you are required to have.

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