

Calling and Vocation

When I was 12, I decided I wanted to be a lawyer. All the lawyers I had been exposed to in my life had been “good” people: Harper Lee’s Atticus Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Law and Order’s Jack McCoy, and several of the “cool parents” of my closest friends. In fact, up until last month, I still believed one of my closest family friends and mentors of the last 20 years was a lawyer, simply because I had grouped him as a “good” person in my mind. To my twelve-year-old self, being a lawyer seemed less to do with what one actually did, but more about how one lived – as a passionate advocate for justice and a faithful believer in a cause greater than oneself.

In the ten years since that time, I’ve learned what being a lawyer actually entails, and while I still admire the work, I know it is most definitely not for me. Lawyers actually have to write. A lot. It was a sad day indeed when I learned my friend’s dad spent more time in an office than making eloquent courtroom speeches. I had idealized the career, when really, it was the people behind the career that I wanted to emulate.

I had a similar learning moment last semester. Like every other senior, the question of what to do after college consumed me. In my case, the job choices narrowed to a decision between for-profit consulting (cue the groans) and non-profit consulting (cue the confusion). Sure, both positions were consulting gigs at their core, and yet changing those three letters from *for-profit* to *non-profit* seemed to make a world of difference in how people perceived my interests and moral rectitude.

In struggling to make this decision, I focused on my perceived sense of calling, and what that implied with regards to my vocation. While many people associate calling and vocation with religion, I apply these terms more broadly.

For me, calling represents purpose – examining my moral framework to determine the values I hold most dear, and building an impactful life around those values – whether it be in praise and worship of an almighty God, or in a moral utilitarian fulfillment of integrity and other important virtues. In my fellowship, Harvard College Faith and Action (HCFA), I find a shared calling toward inclusive community – demonstrating love not just to God, but also toward others. As a former co-leader of the organization’s Social-Action team, I enjoyed a variety of weekly service activities that satisfied, to a certain extent, that calling.

Vocation then speaks to the manner in which I live out such a calling. Littered on the trail of my career aspirations are various other occupations – public policy advisor, microbiologist, financier – I’ve changed what I “want to do when I grow up” almost as much as I’ve changed my concentration. What hasn’t changed, though, is what I perceive my calling to be. Vocation is mutable; calling, much more immutable.

One of the ways I have sought to live out my calling here at Harvard, is in my vocation as a director at the Harvard Square Homeless Shelter. Not only is there great physical need for a warm place to sleep and food to eat in this freezing cold winter, there is also great emotional and intangible need that I find too important to ignore. I am passionate about pursuing social justice, and the shelter helps me accomplish this. Even moreso, the shelter, like HCFA, stands for an inclusive community that demonstrates love to everyone.

Yet, when I compare my experiences with those of my friends who have spent their time here exploring other pursuits, I don’t think my experiences made me any more moral or better. Calling can be lived out in so many different vocations – as a faithful student researcher, as a

skilled columnist for the Crimson, or even as a diligent member of the Harvard Undergraduate Beekeepers. Loving others is not limited to non-profit work.

In the case of my job decision between for and non-profit consulting, I found myself again idealizing the career above the person. I was in love with non-profit consulting, in part because I thought it made me out to be a better person. For-profit consulting is not inherently better or worse than non-profit work. In fact, I now realize, it is the way that I live my life that matters more than any position. Why do I now know this? Well, a lawyer told me so.