

"Follow your bliss" and other myths about call

By [MaryAnn McKibben Dana](#)

August 1, 2013

These days I know a startling number of pastors and seminary graduates who cannot find jobs in the church. Some are geographically limited by spouses—many of whom are pursuing their “dream job” while the wife (and in virtually every case it’s the wife) languishes in under- or unemployment. Some of my friends are quirky, or young, or gay, or they lack the pedigree to get a second look from churches who’ve realized that they can afford to be choosy, what with this glut of talent out there.

It’s very frustrating. It’s frustrating for me as their friend, because these are incredibly talented people who’ve been seminary trained, tested, pushed and prodded, folded and spindled through the call process. But my frustration is only a fraction of what they must feel. Plus, *they need to eat*.

Add in the people who are in ministry calls that don’t really “fit,” but whose options are limited for various reasons, and I wonder if aspects of our theology of call has outlived its fruitfulness.

When I was in the call process, it was all about the Frederick Buechner quote: **Your vocation is where your deep gladness meets the world’s deep need.** This was practically tattooed on people’s foreheads as we all bustled our way toward paid ministry in the church. So what do we do with people who’ve discerned a call to parish ministry, but there are no jobs available? Were they just wrong? I can see how people would feel like their gladness and the world’s need do not intersect, but rather run parallel to each other.

Even my current favorite quote can be problematic. Howard Thurman:

Don't ask yourself what the world needs; ask yourself what makes you come alive. And then go and do that. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive.

Sometimes, it isn't possible to pull and Thurman a "go and do" what makes us come alive. Sometimes we need to find a way to come alive in the exact place where we do not feel called to be.

A friend recently said she felt stuck in a less-than-ideal situation. The extrovert in me blurted out without thinking, "Maybe it's not that you're stuck. Maybe you're being held in this place until you've learned what you need to know in order to move to the next thing." I kicked myself later, because it's presumptuous of me to lay that on someone else. Sometimes the situation is just bad and we need to get out, call or no call.

So let me put it in an "I" statement: **I have sometimes felt stuck, and in hindsight, many of those stuck places gave me precisely the structure and boundaries I needed to work on some things to be ready to move on.**

The Danas are big fans of Mike Rowe of Dirty Jobs fame. [He wrote a wise piece for Forbes some years ago](#) about traditional career advice in relation to the chicken sexers, lamb castraters and spider-venom collectors he meets on his show:

In the long history of inspirational pabulum, "*follow your passion*" has got to be the worst. Even if this drivel were confined to the borders of the cheap plastic frames that typically surround it, I'd condemn the whole sentiment as dangerous, not because it's cliché, but because so many people *believe* it. Over and over, people love to talk about the *passion* that guided them to happiness. When I left high school-confused and unsure of everything-my guidance counselor assured me that it would all work out, if I could just muster the courage to follow my *dreams*. My Scoutmaster said to *trust my gut*. And my pastor advised me to *listen to my heart*. What a crock.

Why do we do this? Why do we tell our kids-and ourselves-that following some form of desire is the key to job satisfaction? If I've learned anything from this show, it's the folly of looking for a job that completely satisfies a "true purpose." **In fact, the happiest people I've met over the last few years have not *followed* their passion at all-they have instead brought it with them.**

I realize that "follow your passion" isn't exactly the same as Buechner's deep gladness and Thurman's coming alive. But I think they're related.

My husband has had a very fruitful career in IT, doing a number of different things over his 20 years in that field. Not all of his jobs have been awesome. Yet he's content with the path he's taken. And aside from a brief stint with a career counselor, he doesn't put that much thought into The Next Step or how a specific move will "set him up" for the move after that. And there's no five or ten year plan. He's simply done the next right thing as it's presented itself.

The whole thing drives me a little crazy because I'm a big goal-setter and plan-maker. It feels reactive to do it his way. But I can't argue with what I see, which is a man who's pretty content with where he is, and who somehow ends up with satisfying work that puts food on the table.

It sounds a bit like the "yes-and" [of improv, eh?](#)

Originally posted at [The Blue Room](#)