

Life Calling *Explorations*

Summer

2004

DISCOVER YOUR LIFE CALLING

Unleash the Power of Purpose in Your Life

Bill Millard

From the time I first entered college, I pursued an interesting approach to career exploration—I studied them all. This approach continued through several graduate schools as well. I studied history, law, Greek, journalism, ministry, public health, dentistry, education, geology. What compelled me to pursue so many different fields? Confusion coupled with a determined search for meaning. At the heart of my actions and decisions, there was a driving need to find an overriding purpose for my life.

Even when I finally did start working, I pursued several paths. However, in whatever profession I found myself, I was known as much for helping struggling people discover solutions to life problems based on who they were as I was for doing the work I was hired to do.

It then occurred to me that I had been helping people in this manner most of my life, and that this was the purpose for my life! I decided to make it my career as well—helping others find a purpose for their own life. Suddenly, I was energized by my work, I pursued a doctorate in leadership, and my impact extended over the lives of many other people.

Importantly, it was not until I made it a priority to not only seek that overriding purpose, but to help those around me understand the same thing for their lives, that I discovered how to unleash the power of purpose. At that point, it became more than just a purpose. It became a life calling.

What is a “Life Calling”?

Life Calling is a confidence in an overriding purpose for your life based on a conviction that your life has foundational value, a unique design as an individual, and a personal vision that leads you to take action in response to the needs of the world. Everyone has a life calling. Discovering it and developing confidence in it is where problems arise. We often confuse life calling with our job, but life calling is larger than an occupation, more profound than a profession or life’s work. These are worthy purposes in our lives, as are family relationships, community service, values, missions, and strengths. However, none of them by themselves constitute our life calling. They are like individual rivers running into an ocean. The ocean is our life

Center for
Life Calling & Leadership
indiana wesleyan university



The Center for Life Calling and Leadership enables individuals to find an overriding purpose for their lives, equips them to make life decisions based on this purpose, and empowers them to develop this purpose into world changing leadership.

CENTER FOR LIFE CALLING AND LEADERSHIP

Indiana Wesleyan University
4201 S. Washington Street
Marion, IN 46953
clcl@indwes.edu
<http://clcl.indwe.edu>

calling—where all the various purposes for our lives come together. My pursuit of a life calling through relationships and circumstances was life-changing, both for me and those around me.

As this occurred, I concluded that for purpose to be unleashed at a level that propels us toward a life calling, it must overcome four major barriers.

First, for purpose to be unleashed at a level great enough to gain life calling status, it must become strong enough to overcome the selfishness of indifference. Most of us search for our life's purposes in the context of "it's all about me." But when we invest time and resources into helping others discover their life calling, our own life calling is better developed and discovered through examination of who we help and how. There is an inward and outward focus that must be pursued to discover our life calling.

Second, for purpose to be unleashed at a level great enough to gain life calling status, it must become strong enough to overcome the comfort of complacency. It always seems easier not to do anything, but doing nothing leads to nothing. When we take action, we plant the first seed of achievement.

The discovery of our life calling requires us to be active explorers, not passive bystanders.

Third, for purpose to be unleashed at a level great enough to gain life calling status, it must become strong enough to overcome the fear of failure. Most of us fear failure. So we decide not to approach any

significant challenges to avoid the opportunity for failure. The problem is that when we do this, we guarantee that we will never achieve anything significant. Most achievements come along with many failures. Thomas Edison had far more failed inventions than he did successful ones. But he is remembered for his successful ones. If we hope to discover our life calling, we must be willing to take risks.

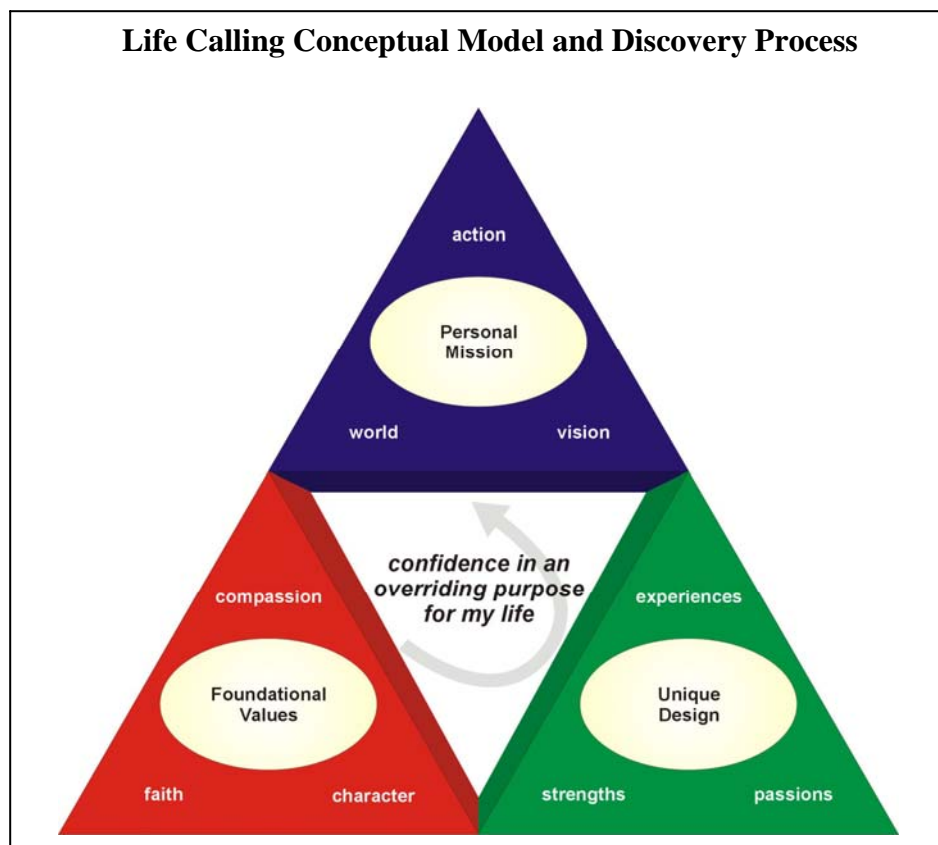
Fourth, for purpose to be unleashed at a level great enough to gain life calling status, it must become strong enough to overcome the avoidance of pain. Achievement always includes an element of change. Discomfort and pain are noticeable indicators of change and are nearly always encountered along the path to achievement. If pain is always

avoided, then gain likely will be as well. In fact, it is when we face the painful circumstances of our lives that we often discover the clearest picture of our life calling. If we hope to discover our life calling, we must be willing to change.

When the various purposes in our lives combine into a life calling, an overriding and consistent context develops that motivates and guides a lifetime of endeavors and decisions. Until that happens, we will never overcome these four barriers.

Life Calling Model

The discovery of our life calling emerges from exploration of three crucial life dimensions: foundational values, unique design, and personal mission. This is illustrated in the diagram below.



The arrow in the model indicates that the discovery of our life calling starts with establishing foundational values in our lives. We must then examine our unique design, which gives us distinctiveness compared to others. Only then can we formulate our values and design into a personal mission to make the world a better place.

Foundational Values

At the core of each person's life, there exists a set of foundational values the person holds about reality, themselves, and others.

Faith forms the first foundational value. We value the reality of a universe that comes from an intelligent design. We see ourselves as an intentional and meaningful part of this universe, placed in it by a power greater than ourselves who gives us our life calling. A call presupposes a

caller, and this reality is what motivates us to search for our life calling. Without that reality, there would be no source of

overriding purpose and no reason to search for a life calling.

Character forms the second foundational value. We value ourselves as individuals within the greater scheme of the universe. Character implies that we do not merely subscribe to the concept of faith in a higher power, but that we take moral and ethical actions in our lives congruent with the faith we have developed.

Compassion forms the third foundational value. We value others

around us in a spirit of community. Compassion implies that our actions of character are carried out with a sense of responsibility to others. Ultimate meaning is found not in self-centeredness but in community-connectedness with a deep awareness of and sympathy for the condition of others.

Faith leads to character and character gives rise to compassion. This foundation based on values permeates all other aspects of our lives.

Unique Design

Foundational values may have universal application, but they have individual expression as they are conveyed through our unique design. This unique design can best be observed in the *strengths*, *passions*, and *experiences* that make each of us distinct individuals.

Our *strengths* form the first element in our unique design. They are found in five important areas of our lives: 1) spiritual strengths, 2) psychological strengths, 3) intellectual strengths, 4) emotional strengths, and 5) physical strengths. Within each of these areas, these strengths take shape first from the gifts that are inherent in our lives, second from the knowledge we acquire, and third from the skills that we develop.

The *passions* we have for life form the second element in our unique design. A good place to start exploring for our passions is by simply asking the question, "What would I do if I had no limitations?" Our answers reveal a great deal

about who we are and yield important information about where we can be most effective. Passions are those things we desire intensely. More than just interests, they burn within our heart and often drive the actions or paths we take.

Experience forms the third element in our unique design. Our strengths and passions are fundamental to our unique design, but these are molded and reshaped by our life experiences. As an example—coal, graphite, and diamonds are all elemental carbon, yet they end up with very different properties and uses, depending on how much heat and pressure the carbon has experienced and how long the process lasts. Similarly, our strengths and passions develop in a distinct pattern based upon our unique experiences—whether these experiences are triumphs with rewards or mistakes with consequences.

Early in my life others observed that one of my strengths was the ability to influence those around me. Many of my teachers saw this as a problem. My mother, however, saw it as a potentially valuable asset that just needed shaping. Her inspiration gave rise to my passion of encouraging others to discover their uniqueness and value. However, during the first part of my adult life, I kept pursuing roles that did not match my strengths and passion. I achieved a certain level of success, but I did not achieve a great deal of satisfaction, and the impact of my life calling remained minimal. This time was not lost. These experiences

provided the shaping that my mother envisioned. In the end, a unique design revealed itself and personal worth emerged.

Personal Mission

Our foundational values and unique design set the stage that enables us to discover a personal mission in life. This takes place as we interact with the *world*, formulate a *vision* in response to specific people and needs we observe, and then take *action* of personal leadership to bring about positive change.

Personal mission starts with our reaction to the *world*. Life calling entails relationships of service within community. Throughout the world we encounter different types of people and situations with various needs. It is impossible for any one individual to respond to all types of people, situations, and needs. Yet we are called to serve others.

To successfully identify a personal mission, we need the freedom to respond in a focused manner to certain people, situations, and needs. To what types of people do we find ourselves most often drawn? Mother Teresa was drawn to people in other nations, while Martin Luther King, Jr. was drawn to people in his own nation. Leonard Davis and Ethel Percy Andrus responded to older people and founded the AARP. George Williams felt drawn to teenagers and created the YMCA. Fred Rogers had a heart for young children and started a television program to entertain and educate them.

Once we identify the people to whom we feel called, we need to ask: What kinds of needs touch us the most? Are they economic needs? Spiritual needs? Social needs? Educational needs? Health needs? Environmental needs? Political needs? Needs of justice? Our response to these questions will provide a focus to how we respond to people.

The second element in our personal mission emerges as we begin to formulate a *vision* for a better future in response to the people and needs to which we are drawn. What will that future we envision look like? Martin Luther King saw a world where children of all races and creeds could hold hands in harmony and be free. How will our vision change the world for the better? Mother Teresa had the vision that living in the poorest, most disease-ridden slum of Calcutta to care for the sick and the needy would help improve their condition.

Finally, as the vision becomes clear, we take *action* to carry out the vision in personal leadership. This does not have to be an official, recognized position. Leadership more often results from actions that impact the world with a positive influence in connection and collaboration with others. That's precisely what happened with each of the individuals mentioned previously.

The development of a personal mission often takes a long time. For me it happened when I was nearly forty. I found myself drawn to people who were confused about what to do

with their lives. I began to develop a vision of organizations where people discovered their unique purpose in life and where the leaders valued and made use of their unique people. Then I took actions in my life that allowed me to make this vision a reality. Sometimes I have been able to do this as part of my job, and at other times, I have had to resort to accomplishing this in volunteer service. In either case, it has become my personal mission and guides the decisions and actions of my life.

Life Calling Discovery Process

These three dimensions of life calling—foundational values, unique design, and personal mission—are not isolated from each other. Instead, they are interactive and integrated starting with foundational values and following a sequence, as indicated by the arrow in the model. Our foundational values inspire the inward search for unique design, while the inward search for unique design manifests the values we hold. The foundational values we hold and the unique design we possess motivate and define the outward response through personal mission, while the personal mission fulfills the foundational values we hold and the unique design we possess.

We encounter the dimensions of life calling in constantly reoccurring cycles. As each cycle takes place, we develop tools that help us explore more effectively each dimension. The value of this is best illustrated when painful circumstances occur. At that point, we are faced with a

choice: we can choose to allow these circumstances to become baggage that weighs us down into hopelessness, or we can choose to use life calling discovery tools to incorporate these circumstances into strengths for the future. I had a hard time in elementary, middle, and high school. Some of the things I experienced still impact me today, but I have chosen to use those experiences to learn about the assets I possess and then incorporate these into my personal mission.

The absence of any dimension greatly diminishes the potential power of our life calling. If there are no foundational values as an anchor, there will be no hope when life and circumstances get tough. If we ignore our unique design, there will be no clarity in our lives and our efforts will be misdirected. If there is no outward response to the world

through personal mission, then our life calling will remain unfulfilled.

On the journey that leads to the discovery of our life calling, we are all on either the giving or receiving end of some relationship. In any of these relationships, one person believing in us can make an amazing difference in our confidence about our life calling. For me that one person was my mother. She continually encouraged me that I could do whatever I set my heart to do. She believed in me even in the darkest times. Her example taught me that it only takes one strong advocate to help a person overcome a host of difficulties and detractors. Here is the challenge for each of us. In whatever relationship we find ourselves, we should make it our number one priority to help those around us to understand the foundational values in their lives, to explore their uniqueness, and to pursue a personal mission in life.

There will be times when personal responsibility requires us to make career choices that may not be directly compatible with our life calling. Circumstances will continue to catch us by surprise. Our imperfections will still get in our way at times. We will still misread the road map for our lives on occasion and suffer the consequences. But if we regularly encourage and support each other to seek a life calling in our lives, a beacon will begin to brighten the darkness of confusion and despair that seems so often to grip our lives.

In the many people I have encountered throughout my life, I have observed a desire in all of them for three things: purpose, significance, and hope. When you discover your life calling, you finally realize those three forces, and you unleash their power in your life.

(This publication is reprinted from an existing article "Discover Your Life Calling...Unleash the Power of Purpose in Your Life." Copyright ©2004 Bill Millard. Used by permission.)

Dr. Bill Millard is the Executive Director of the Center for Life Calling and Leadership at Indiana Wesleyan University and an Associate Professor of Leadership.