

Lifestyles of the Poor and Nerdy  
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For whatever it's worth, I've found that my sermons can turn out better if I keep them to ten minutes. I chose the reading on clergy burn-out not as a way to tell you I'm burned out, because I am most assuredly not burned out, but because I thought, surely ministry is not the only field of work with a burn-out trend and the pressure "to forsake one's highest calling." On this Sunday before Labor Day, I reflect on today's attitudes toward work and earning, and what success looks like when honoring our so-called call.

The word *vocation* has a Latin verb at its root, *vocare*, to call. Ministers are not the only ones who receive some kind of call, some sign of the path you are meant to take in life. I remember throughout my training as a minister I would get that question an awful lot: what was *your* call to ministry, or more to the point: so, why do you want to be a minister?

I found the question awfully tiresome. I highly doubted that other vocations received the same scrutiny. "So, why do you want to be a lawyer? Why do you want to be a software developer?" Rather than guess at what people expected to hear I replied glibly, "It's a viable career option."

It turns out this response was absolutely correct; I'm grateful to be entering my 13th year of full-time employment as an ordained pastor. What about you? Do you remember a magical moment when you knew for certain what it was you were meant to do with your life? Did you receive a call? A call to teach perhaps, to write, a call to be a leader in some way, a call to design, create, a call to business?

I'm sure some of you did receive such a call, and I'm happy for you. But today I put on my humanist hat and invite us to question this matter of call altogether. Because it's always struck me as a bit high-falutin', especially in light of the fact that, while all societies have work at their center, western society was the first to suggest that we should enjoy it.

It was not long after the Renaissance when practical activity began to be praised.<sup>1</sup> Many kinds of work became ennobling and could inform one's character. The trend coincided with the development of freer and more equal societies, so that by the time the New World idealized itself as a non-hierarchical society, what an American does for a living became a distinguishing feature of one's identity. As you know, it is to this day, and how much money you make remains the default measuring stick of success. Has growing up to be rich and famous always been an American child's first dream? The cultural relic of the 1980's that glorified this dream was that silly show, *Lifestyles of the Rich & Famous*. The show ran for over ten years, ending in 1995, 22 years ago.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Pleasures and Sorrows of Work* by Alain de Botton, p. 110.

They must have run out of rich people's mansions to display. Because goodness knows the most of us are not rich and famous, but poor and nerdy.

There are a strata of meanings behind the word “poor,” but today I use it this way: the poor is anyone who has to hustle month to month to meet basic needs, who isn’t quite sure what the future holds. The poor are those who wonder, in their more private moments, if they are or could ever be part of the middle class or not. By this definition, many of us are poor - especially newer generations compared to their forbears. Because it’s becoming the new norm for kids to not launch from the nest until 30 or so, there’s been some cultural consensus to make that okay.

No one wants to feel like a loser, but in this economy there are plenty of cool people who are losing, because wages haven’t gone up, while expenses have. It’s basic math, and I want to highly recommend the new book by Elizabeth Warren, “This Fight is Our Fight,” published a few months ago. I spared you by not reading excerpts from this book earlier in the service, but I feel it explains in very plain language why the middle class is shrinking, and how much more we stand to lose in the current era.

Here’s some good news. In today's culturally flip-flopping world, being poor and nerdy isn't so bad. I’ll explain.

Being rich and famous isn't so cool anymore. Remember Paris Hilton, or whatever happened to poor, Lindsay Lohan? Wanna be notorious like Charlie Sheen or Mel Gibson? You’ll pass? If you're going to be rich and famous, you better be someone like Bill Gates, the man who single-handedly won revenge for all nerds. Nerdiness has been chic for some time now. What else could explain the rise of Michael Cera, geek star since the early 2000s? Or Issa Rae of “Awkward Black Girl” and “Insecure.” I theorize that the popularity of the nerd factor in our culture has a few roots. One goes back to Bill Gates, and the rise of the tech sector of our economy.

According to US Bureau of Labor Statistics, employment in computer systems design and related services is on course to rise by 45 percent between 2008 and 18. To keep up with this demand for tech labor, the US economy actually *needs* more computer geeks.<sup>2</sup> Another theory is the individuality factor. From the days of Walt Whitman, we have glorified expressive individualism, and the geek mystique is another rendition of how cool it is to be unique. Terminally unique, if we’re not careful, but I’ll get to that.

My last theory links up with being poor, a much harder thing to sell as being cool, however, American culture finds a way. We have always been the society of no class-consciousness - that is, we have been most comfortable identifying with the middle class, even as it shrinks. To let being poor and nerdy be okay is another layer of this class unconsciousness; it's becoming the new normal of the American way. So uncomfortable are we discussing economic class, that we ignore the systemic oppressions that are melting the middle class as fast as climate change is melting our polar caps. Meanwhile, the 13,000 richest families in America have almost as much income as the 20 million

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<sup>2</sup> Let it be noted, however, that the number one field of job growth will be in health care.

poorest households; those 13,000 families have incomes 300 times that of average families.<sup>3</sup>

Anyone who's feeling financially stressed knows that being poor is not cool. One of my kernels of hope today comes from a Dolly Parton lyric, from her song "Coat of Many Colors." It's about her childhood, growing up in Appalachia, dirt poor. Dolly's mom makes her a coat from rags, and the kids at school made fun of her coat. But she sings,

*And I couldn't understand it  
For I felt I was rich  
And I told them of the love  
My momma sewed in every stitch  
And I told em all the story  
Momma told me while she sewed  
And how my coat of many colors  
Was worth more than all their clothes*

*But they didn't understand it  
And I tried to make them see  
That one is only poor  
Only if they choose to be*

I often wonder if part of what makes us feel poor at times, whether we really are or not, is that nagging feeling that, somehow, we missed our call. We were called, but we didn't pick up, we didn't listen. That if we had chosen a different career path, or if we'd followed that dream, we wouldn't be in this predicament, whether that's being un- or underemployed, or burned out and confused in a current position.

What I think is closer to the truth, however, is that there is no call. A career counselor in a college once remarked "that the most common and unhelpful illusion plaguing those who came to see him was the idea that they ought somehow, in the normal course of events, to have intuited . . . what they should properly be doing with their lives. They were tormented by a residual notion of having through some error or stupidity on their part missed out on their true 'calling.'" (From "The Pleasures and Sorrows of Work by Alain de Botton).

If there's no call, then there's only what we choose to do, what we choose to commit our hearts and souls to, whether if it's "where we're *supposed* to be" or not. We choose those feelings of regret, or that wallowing in, 'I missed my chance.' *We choose to place so much of our identity in that image of what we do for a living, that sometimes we forget to live.* We choose to be poor in spirit when we obsess over what we don't have. "One is only poor, only if they choose to be." So what *can* we always choose to have?

We can have all the things that are on the *inside* – a sense of pride about who we are, as we live with a spirit of generosity toward others, honoring all the obligations of right

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<sup>3</sup> *Elsewhere, U.S.A.* by Dalton Conley, p. 11.

relationship as best we can. We have love for the most special people in our life; we have the hope we harbor for humanity, redeemed everyday by small acts of kindness, honesty, and integrity.

I tried to explain this to my boy who is turning 8 years old today. Last week I went to Back-to-School night for his class, and we learned about a pilot program in our district that seeks to affirm young people's self-worth as soon as they're elementary-aged. Recently the district paid for a Stanford-led study that showed an epidemic of teens defining success exclusively as achievements – good grades, or entry into a prestigious college. The district sought to account for skyrocketing anxiety and depression among teens, and they found their answer.

So as parents, we were coached to ask our new 2<sup>nd</sup> grader how he defines success, and to model it by answering the question ourselves first. They have to all be things that originate on the inside, not on the outside – not career, not money, not the zip code, etc. If you're a parent and your kids are 6 and up, give it a try. Observe how you might really have to think about that before you could model answering it well first.

I don't know if I got a fancy call to ministry or not, but I know that I'm doing the right line of work because I have love and support backing up what I do – to me, that's the successful part. I get that from the community I serve, from my colleagues, and from my friends and family. I told my son Pender, that success to me is feeling good about my place in the community to which I belong, and all the roles I play. Success is knowing people have my back as much as I have theirs.

I want to examine a definition of nerdiness that is not cool - that is, it's nerdy to not feel like you're part of something, it's nerdy to not know where your sources of support can come from. It's nerdy to not have friends. An example of this kind of nerd might be the character George Clooney played in the film *Up in the Air*, constantly traveling and without community. Even he admitted at some point, "If you think about it, your favorite memories, the most important moments in your life... were you alone? Life's better with company." Being communityless is a hard way to go, and it's hard to change it, too. You have to put yourself out there, you have to take a leap of faith, and say, "love me!"

Like the ministers who feel they've lost their call due to the pressures of consumer society, it's easy to give in to our own fears associated with the pressures of a consumer society. It's easy to lose sight of who we really are, and who we really want to be. Here's an example of that pressure: I've heard over and over that the reason the economy is no longer working for enough people is because consumers aren't spending enough.

While it's true most of us don't feel we have the money to spend, I also like to think it's partly because we're just tired of it. We're waking up to the fact that we're not happy buying stuff all the time, that there are more important things in life, like good relationships and the freedom of simplicity. That to live within our means debt-free is a happier way to be, especially if we are rich in friends and relationships, woven snugly into the one big soul to which we all belong.

This one big soul is a mixed bag – you have your most destitute souls, those who Jesus called the most holy, and then you also have your ultra-rich, your lifestyles of the rich and famous, but most of us are somewhere in between. Our numbers are powerful if we show the world what true compassion, what true *success*, looks like in this world.

My favorite book of all time has always been “The Grapes of Wrath,” by John Steinbeck. Nothing could describe this “one big soul” better than the famous speech by Jim Casey in chapter four, that I’ll end with:

"Before I knowed it, I was sayin' out loud, 'The hell with it! There ain't no sin and there ain't no virtue. There's just stuff people do. It's all part of the same thing.' . . . I says, 'What's this call, this sperit?' An' I says, 'It's love. I love people so much I'm fit to bust, sometimes.' . . . I figgered, 'Why do we got to hang it on God or Jesus? Maybe,' I figgered, 'maybe it's all men an' all women we love; maybe that's the Holy Sperit-the human sperit-the whole shebang. Maybe all men got one big soul ever'body's a part of.' Now I sat there thinkin' it, an' all of a suddent-I knew it. I knew it so deep down that it was true, and I still know it."