



# DO WHAT YOU ARE

## OS GUINNESS



Yehudi Menuhin, the renowned maestro and violinist, has held audiences all over the world spellbound with his conducting and virtuoso playing. Like many great musicians, his gifts were precocious. He made his violin debut in San Francisco at the age of seven and launched his worldwide career at the age of twelve with a historic concert at Carnegie Hall. In his memoirs, *Unfinished Journey*, Menuhin tells the story of how he began his long love affair with his violin.

From the time he was three years old, Menuhin's parents frequently took him to concerts in New York where he heard the concertmaster and first violinist Louis Persinger. When Persinger broke into solo passages, little Yehudi, sitting with his parents up in the gallery, was enchanted.

"During one such performance," Menuhin wrote, "I asked my parents if I might have a violin for my fourth birthday and Louis Persinger to teach me to play it."

Apparently his wish was granted. A family friend gave the little boy a violin, but it was toy one, made of metal with metal strings. Yehudi Menuhin was only four. He could hardly have had the arms and finger to do justice to a full-sized violin, but he was furious.

"I burst into sobs, threw it on the ground and would have nothing to do with it." Reflecting years later,

Menuhin said he realized he wanted nothing less than the real thing because "I did know instinctively that to play was to be."

Stories like that are common in the lives of creative artists. Artie Shaw, a famous clarinetist in the old Big Band days, shared his heart with an interviewer. "Maybe twice in my life I reached what I wanted to. Once we were playing 'These Foolish Things' and at the end the band stops and I play a cadenza. The cadenza—no one can do it better. Let's say it's five bars. That's a very good thing to have done in a lifetime. An artist should be judged by his best, just as an athlete. Pick out my one or two best things and say, 'That's what he did: all the rest was rehearsal.'"

John Coltrane, the saxophonist who played for Dizzie Gillespie and Miles Davis, said something very similar. In the early 1950's "Trane" nearly died of a drug overdose in San Francisco, and when he recovered he quit drugs and drinking and came to put his faith in God. Some of his best jazz came after that, including "A Love Supreme," an ardent thirty-two minute outpouring to thank God for his blessing and offer him Coltrane's very soul.

After one utterly extraordinary rendition of "A Love Supreme," Coltrane stepped off the stage, put down his saxophone, and said simply, "Nunc dimittis." (These are the opening Latin words for the ancient prayer of Simeon, sung traditionally at evening prayer: "Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, for mine eyes have seen thy salvation.") Coltrane felt he could never play the piece more perfectly. If his whole life had been lived for that passionate thirty-two minute jazz prayer, it would have been worth it. He was ready to go.



## WHAT DO YOU HAVE THAT WAS NOT GIVEN YOU

“To play was to be,” said Yehudi Menuhin. “All the rest was rehearsal,” said Artie Shaw. “Nunc dimittis,” said John Coltrane. Somehow we human beings are never happier than when we are expressing the deepest gifts that are truly us. And often we get a revealing glimpse of these gifts early in life. Graham Greene wrote in *The Power and the Glory*, “There is always one moment in childhood when the door opens and lets the future in. “Countless examples could be added to these stories, but they all point to another crucial aspect of calling—God normally calls us along the line of our giftedness, but the purpose of giftedness is stewardship and service, not selfishness.

Giftedness does not stand alone in helping us discern our calling. It lines up in response to God’s call alongside other factors. Giftedness does not stand alone in helping us discern our calling. It lines up in response to God’s call alongside other factors, such as family heritage, our own life opportunities, God’s guidance, and our unquestioning readiness to do what he shows. But to focus of giftedness as a central way to discern calling reverses the way most people think. Usually when we meet someone for the first time, it isn’t long before we ask, “What do you do?” And the answer comes, “I’m a lawyer,” “I’m a truck driver,” “I’m a teacher,” or whatever.

Far more than a name or a place of birth, a job helps us to place a person on the map in our minds. After all, work, for most of us, determines a great part of our opportunity for significance and the amount of good we are able to produce in a lifetime. Besides, work takes up so many of our waking hours that our jobs come to define us and give us our identities. We become what we do.

Calling reverses the thinking. A sense of calling should precede a choice of job and career, and the main way to discover calling is along the lines of what we are each created and gifted to be. Instead of, “You are what you do,” calling says: “Do what you are.” As the great Christian poet Gerald Manley Hopkins wrote in his poem about kingfishers and dragonflies, “What I do is me: for that I came.” Albert Einstein, even as a teenager, had theoretical physics and mathematics in his sights. He wrote in an essay in Aarau, Switzerland, “This is quite natural; one always likes to do the things for which one has ability.”

There is, to be fair, a growing trend toward fitting

jobs to people. “Suit yourself—the secret of career satisfaction” one book promises. But many of these approaches are inadequate compared to calling. First, the more secular approaches tend to use very general “personality types” in their testing. So the results are too broad to be specific for individuals, and they are more about general personality traits than about the specific gift of individuals.

Second, even more clearly Christian approaches suffer from weaknesses. Some use testing that concentrates on spiritual gifts and ignore natural gifts. This allows the testers, usually large churches, to use results to direct people to employ their discovered gifts in their churches—thus diverting them from their callings in secular life...

Others broaden the testing to discover both spiritual and natural gifts, but they divorce the discovery of giftedness from the worship and listening that is essential to calling...The result is a heightened awareness of giftedness, but the emphasis on giftedness leads toward selfishness rather than stewardship. Archbishop William Temple underscored this danger sternly. To make a choice of career or profession on selfish grounds, without a true sense of calling, is “probably the greatest single sin any young person can commit, for it is a deliberate withdrawal from allegiance to God of the greatest part of time and strength.”

In the biblical understanding of giftedness, gifts are never really ours or for ourselves. We have nothing that was not given us. Our gifts are ultimately God’s, and we are only “stewards”—responsible for the prudent management of property that is not our own. This is why our gifts are always “ours for others,” whether in the community of Christ or the broader society outside, especially the neighbor in need. This is also why it is wrong to treat God as a grand employment agency, a celestial executive searcher to find perfect fits for our perfect gifts. The truth is not that God is finding us a place for gifts but that God created us and our gifts for a place of his choosing—and we will only be ourselves when we are finally there.

This theme of wider purpose was unambiguous to the Puritans. John Cotton, for example, was an eminent seventeenth century minister and the architect of New England congregationalism. Educated at Trinity and Emmanuel Colleges, Cambridge, he preached the famous farewell sermon “God’s Promise to His



Plantation” at the sailing of the *Arbella* in 1630. Three years later he came to the New World himself. His sermon “Christian Calling” is a stirring seven-point exposition on the subject.

Cotton gives three criteria for choosing a job. The top criterion is that “it be a warrantable calling, where we may not only aim at our own, but at the public good.” The other criteria are that we are gifted for the job and guided toward it by God—criteria that would surely supersede Cotton’s first one on most people’s lists today. All who seek to follow Christ and to answer his call should pursue the key link between their giftedness and their calling, and use the best Christian books and tests on the subject. There is a joy in fulfilling a calling that fits who we are and, like a pillar of cloud and fire, goes ahead of our lives to lead us.

But who are we? And what is our destiny? Calling insists that the answer lies in God’s knowledge of what he has created us to be and where he is calling us to go. Our gifts and destiny do not lie expressly in our parent’s wishes, our boss’s plans, our peer group’s pressures, our generation’s prospects, or our society’s demands. Rather, we each need to know our own unique design, which is God’s design for us.

## OURS FOR OTHERS

It is easy to become spoiled if we concentrate on the core of our giftedness—as if the universe existed only to fulfill our gifts. We live in a fallen world, and the core of our gifts may not be fulfilled in our lives on earth. If there had been no Fall, all our work would have naturally and fully expressed who we are and exercised the gifts we have been given. But after the Fall this is not so. Work is now creative and partly cursed.

Thus to find work now that perfectly fits our calling is not a right, but a blessing. Those in modern societies who are middle class or higher can probably find such a fulfilling match between calling and work. But for many others today, and probably for most people in most societies, there is no happy match between work and calling. Work is necessary for survival. Even the almost most universally recognized artistic genius like Michelangelo once complained: “having seen, as I said, that the times are contrary to my art, I do not know if I have any hope of further salary.

This tension created by the Fall lies behind the notion of “tentmaking.” Needless to say, there was

no advertised job that was perfect for Paul’s calling: “Apostle to the gentiles: \$50,000 per annum.” So Paul, not wishing to depend on wealthy Corinthian patrons, earned money by making tents. Doubtless he made his tents well because they too were made for the glory of God. But tentmaking was never the heart of Paul’s calling, it was only a part, as all of life is. As a part of our calling such “tentmaking” at worst is work that frustrates us because it takes time we wish to spend on things more central. But at best it is work that frees us to get to that which is central. By contrast, whatever is the heart of our calling is work that fulfills us because it employs our deepest gifts.

The difference is impossible to mistake. George Foreman, flamboyant heavyweight champion of the world and a Baptist preacher says, “Preaching is my calling. Boxing for me is only moonlighting in the same way Paul made tents.”

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