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PUBLIC SERVICE AS A CALLING: REFLECTIONS, RETREAT, REVIVAL, RESOLVE

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ABSTRACT

A nascent interest in work as a vocation—a profound source of life meaning and human dignity—may be emerging today. This impending change is discussed by focusing on "calling"—that wonder from antiquity—which commands conviction and commitment in service to the public. The nature of calling, its retreat, the possibilities for its revival, and the need for resolve are examined in seeking lives of significance.

> Our greatest fear should not be of failure, but of succeeding at something that doesn't really matter.
>
> —Anon

The role of work in life has been viewed in many ways throughout history—as a curse, a punishment, salvation, a social duty, and self-actualization (Donkin, 2001; Hardy, 1990). Whether it is denounced as a necessary evil or praised as essential for human dignity, the legacies of these perspectives affect today's understanding of labor as either degrading and demoralizing or enriching and ennobling. As a central life interest, it follows that work varies considerably in its purpose for people. It may be seen as a way to secure survival, success, or significance—that is, as a job (a means for financial gain), a career (an avenue for advancement), or a calling (one's true place in the world).

When compared to a job or a career, a calling provides a sense of deep meaning at work and authentic engagement in work. Such a belief, identity, and

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commitment is not reducible to self-interest, especially given the responsibilities inherent in public service. Despite, or perhaps because of, the contemporary neglect of calling, a nascent interest in this orientation toward work may be developing as men and women search for endeavors that bring out the best in them.

This study analyzes the meaning of work by focusing on public service as a calling in contemporary times. In recent decades, there has been an appeal to scholars to study work (most notably in the landmark *Habits of the heart* by Bellah et al., 1985). Researchers from many disciplines have contributed to a substantial literature that examines a broad range of concepts such as work commitment, values, and satisfaction, as well as job involvement, workplace spirituality, and organizational citizenship (see, e.g., review in Wrzesniewski, 1999).

In comparison, however, there is relatively little on "calling" itself, especially in the current public administration literature. There is an interesting literature on the public service ethos (e.g., O'Toole, 2006) and motivation (e.g., Perry & Hondeghem, 2008), although it does not concentrate on calling. In addition, there are, of course, any number of works that speak generally to the nature and spirit of public administration and government (e.g., Frederickson, 1997; Neiman, 2000; Terry, 1990; Wamsley et al., 1990). Yet for the most part, and despite Weber's (1991) classic essays on vocation, consideration of calling is uncommon in books and journals in the field (exceptions include Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Schorr, 1987).

The present analysis explains the nature of calling, examines its retreat, explores the possibilities for its revival, and expresses the importance of resolve. With the possible exception of self-reported perceptual data, calling is a difficult-to-measure, nebulous, tacit idea. The discussion here, therefore, emphasizes its normative dimensions, and examines how the public service can and should be regarded in the quest for genuine substance in work.

REFLECTIONS ON THE MEANING OF CALLING

The linkage between basic questions about work and the purpose of life is found in the Latin root of vocation, *vocare*, which means "to call." Clearly transcending a job or a career, a *vocatio* involves embracing a sense of direction stemming from sacred or secular sources. It lights the way for an individual to perform personally and socially significant labor, which in turn contributes to a better world (for a succinct comparison of religious and secular views of calling, see Donkin, 2001; Hall & Chandler 2005).

Characteristics of Calling

Any work dedicated to human dignity can be a vocation, a profound source of meaning and self-identification. What matters is the relationship to work rather than the type of work. As Martin Luther King, Jr. observed,

> If a man is called to be a street sweeper, he should sweep streets even as Michelangelo painted, or Beethoven composed music, or Shakespeare wrote poetry. He should sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven and earth will pause to say, here lived a great street sweeper who did his job well.

No trade is too humble, menial, or insignificant, as all honest labor can be a vocation providing that the call is heard and that the task is beneficial, not harmful, to others. Some jobs, it should be noted, contribute to the welfare of others, but use harmful production processes. More complex ambiguities also exist. The key point in working through such conundrums is whether human life flourishes (see Guiness, 1998, and Shuurman, 2004, for Catholic and Protestant "distortions" of the work ethic).

Each person's calling, while not easily ascertained, is unique and fits his or her abilities (Novak, 1996). The enactment of a vocation is a product of situational factors and individual talents, and is not necessarily limited to the workplace. Gregg LeVoy (1997) further suggests that a call can be to do something (e.g., go back to school) or to be something (e.g., be more imaginative). People may also have primary and secondary vocations (employee, spouse, parent) summoned from their own depths or from outside of themselves. Finally, some commentators (e.g., Collozzi & Collozzi, 2000) believe that collective callings can occur in response to historical events, as among 1960s civil rights activists, 1989 Tiananmen Square protestors, or ground-zero volunteers in the aftermath of the 2001 terrorist attacks.

The components of vocation include introspection, exploration, and assertion—discerning one's path on earth and pursuing one's calling with passion and urgency. A calling is a way of life, a raison d'être, that contributes to one's identity; fitting work is that which the individual needs to do and that which society needs to be done, where a person's "deep gladness and the world's hunger meet" (Buechner, 1973: 95). A vocation, in fact, takes for granted that the work itself and/or the context that develops around it can beckon people to participate (McSwite, 2002). Indeed, McSwite offers a telling analogy to baseball, where the idea of "the game" (and the respect for it) holds a kind of metaphysical reality that goes beyond individual performances and contests. The story is told about a batter who lost the ability (and desire) to get out of a batting slump—he lost the sense of "game," the feeling of contributing to something greater than himself, the sense of the sport as a calling.

Calling in Public Service

A vocation, then, is a state of consciousness, an integration of heart and mind, that gives voice to a complete human being. With respect to government, it is a common denominator, a guiding principle, a glue holding the civil service together, with the intention of championing shared values in service to the people

(Pratchett & Wingfield, 1996). Although the focus here is on the civil service as a calling, it is understood that public services are also provided by nonprofit organizations and business contractors.

Yet has there ever been a clear sense of calling in government? Is public service as a vocation anything more than a quaint myth? Certainly, not every civil servant is concerned about such existential matters. As early as 1938, in fact, William Mosher, dean of the Maxwell School, held that modern public administration "failed to develop the public service . . . as a professional calling" (quoted in Plant, 2009: 1042).

The core idea is fealty to the commonweal; for governmental officials, this implies the moral responsibility to be a steward to the general will. Indeed, public employment is a vocation because creating democratic governance is largely dependent upon citizens taking up this station in life. In devotion to the public, for example, the federal civil servant takes the oath of office to help achieve "government by, for, and of the people."

Since the founding of America, the belief has persisted that an enlightened citizenry would have concern for the well-being of the whole country. Modern bureaucracy, accordingly, was a response to the deterioration of government during time of the 19th-century spoils system, when public service was used as a means to promote self-interest. Service to the nation is, or should be, imbued with values displaying a sense of mission and character that sustains duty and creates social capital. The establishment of a unified, permanent, merit-based, apolitical civil service has certainly been one of the distinctive accomplishments in United States history.

Public service as a public trust is manifested in principles of political neutrality, incorruptibility, honesty, fairness, responsibility, and accountability. Such ideals can inspire and direct civic-spirited employees, and form criteria for their attitudes and actions at work. Public administration, as a distinct vocation, is particularly critical, because officials represent and exercise the power of the state. Key to sustaining these values is a disinterested civil service committed to excellence but subject to hierarchical control to ensure responsiveness to the populace (Bowman & West, 2009).

While the ambiguity and subjectivity of the concept is readily acknowledged, its socially constructed meaning contains a recognizable set of virtues. The realization of a vocation, in fact, depends on virtues; as noted, norms such as integrity, impartiality, accountability, and service in the public interest inform calling. George Frederickson and David Hart (2000: 152; italics in the original) argue that "a special relationship should exist between public servants and citizens . . . , [t]he belief that *all* public administration must rely upon, and be guided by, the moral truths embodied in the enabling documents of our national foundation."

The notion of calling has evolved over the millennia. Its modern form may have largely superseded trust in providence, but it still champions edifying

goals, values, and beliefs not only about matters of self definition but also about ministering to others. The idea, as United Nations Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjold observed, also has enigmatic but very real properties:

> I don't know Who—or what—put the question, I don't know when it was put. I don't even remember answering. But at some moment I did. Yes to Someone—or Something—and from that hour I was certain that existence is meaningful and that, therefore, my life, in self-surrender, had a goal. (quoted in Placher, 2005: 1)

It may not be possible to see a calling, but it is possible to see what it does; mystery can be just as illuminating as clarity in human affairs. A calling can awaken those who live life in what Thoreau referred to as "quiet desperation"(Hyde, 2002: 123) They can then seek and celebrate their destiny with fulfilling work that enhances the common good. It should be evident that, despite the emphasis here on the American experience, the spirit of calling is by no means restricted to one nation.

THE RETREAT OF CALLING

Prior to the 1980s, the existence of an essentially altruistic public service, while not unchallenged, was largely taken for granted. Since that time, however, the New Public Management (NPM) movement has swept across Western democracies and transformed bureaucracies (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2004). Reformers may have acknowledged civil service values, but little was done to protect them. The fundamental restructuring that occurred, modeled on a stylized image of the private sector, called into question the role of government and the norms of commitment to government as an employer (Bowman & West, 2007). Enterprise and entrepreneurship, English scholar Barry O'Toole (2007) observed, were infused into the management of government; these are values that tend to elevate private over public interests.

The civil service was not seen as an institution to protect democracy from moneyed interests and political corruption. Instead, reformists in the United States and elsewhere saw a self-centered elite that created a culture of big government, one that was out of touch with the people. The response was to defund, deregulate, and decentralize public institutions in the belief that they interfered with free markets. NPM's stress on business-like values and market-style reform rested on public choice theory and its assumptions of rationality, self-interest, and extrinsic motivation.

This approach led to an excessive emphasis on efficiency at the expense of the esprit de corps of public administration. The virtues inherent in a vocation gave way to the defining of the value of the employee as an entrepreneur, measured by how much he or she produced. Employment was nothing more than an economic transaction; government work would be a commodity to be controlled and outsourced whenever possible.

This post-traditional strategy eroded the authority, parameters, and support systems of government. Its uncritical reliance on corporate values led to the devaluation of the civil service and relegated government to the status of an employer of last resort, where someone might work for a time before moving on. According to two British scholars, "The great institutions of state became colonized by private morality and private aspiration" (Brereton & Temple, 1999: 418). The goal of an enlightened citizenry committed to the responsibilities of democracy gave way to the belief that people were driven by consumerism, careerism, and commercialism. The emphasis on instrumental values (short-term ends, limited objectives, efficiency) eclipsed the broader framework of the common interest. Public service, for many employees, was now an ordinary job; they would have little institutional sense of what it meant to work for government.

The distinctiveness of the civil servant as a custodian of constitutional values was further undermined as public administration became diffused both everywhere and nowhere in a hybrid enterprise of private companies, nonprofit organizations, and government agencies. New people and different organizations, as a part of a networked public service, inevitably interjected disparate values and questioned traditional assumptions. With personnel who are not civil servants entrusted with spending public monies and providing services, orthodox administrative norms went into retreat. "Reforms such as reinventing government and New Public Management," Patricia Ingraham (2007: 82) points out, "placed their faith in oversimplified and discredited management nostrums."

As a result, much has been lost in recent years in terms of public service values as New Public Management shifted governmental administration toward managerialism, entrepreneurism, and expedience and away from the promotion of what the Preamble of the Constitution calls the "general welfare." Predicating reform in economics meant that the value base of change became one-dimensional, with the outcome that the ability of officials to shape government was limited, except to emphasize efficiency and cost containment. Joanne Ciulla (2000: 154; italics in the original) says it well, arguing that "When *commitment* is reduced to time at work, *loyalty* to something one pays for, and *trust* to a legal contract, these terms are emptied of their meaning."

During the last several decades, in sum, the effect of New Public Management was to alter the identity and intent of being a civil servant (Bockel & Noordegraaf, 2006). The distinction between pursuing objectives as a function of monetary exchange and pursuing objectives as a function of duty—the distinction between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation—was blurred, if not lost. The doctrine of calling was largely replaced by instrumental reason. If vocational callings generate loyalty, mutual trust, and concern for the long term, NPM limited the opportunities for high-trust relationships. Indeed, the tensions inherent in contractual relationships and the greater scope for managerial discretion

facilitated opportunistic behavior, abuse, and corruption (Hebson, Grimshaw, & Marchington, 2003). In a period of privatization and marketization, the public servant's obligation was less to serve the greater good and more to sacrifice it to the free market; society was to serve the economy, not the other way around.

A REVIVAL OF CALLING

With unparalleled and unpredictable technological and economic innovation, today's fast-paced world offers virtually endless choice and change. It can also lead to a decline in commitment and continuity. One minute there is "the vertigo of unlimited possibility," writes Os Guiness (1998: 176), "and the next the frustration of superficiality." The effect is not only overload and burnout but a profound loss of unity, solidarity, and coherence. When people not only have multiple jobs but also multiple careers, earlier understandings of vocation are more difficult to apply—but perhaps easier to appreciate. Many citizens, for example, still regard public-spirited behavior as morally superior to self-interested behavior. This section, then, discusses (a) aspirations, (b) changing conditions, and (c) supporting data that suggest a revival of calling.

Aspiration to Seek a Vocation

While the socioeconomic conditions that once sustained vocations may have changed, "the aspiration to find a calling has not" (Muirhead, 2004: 11). A new interest in calling (even though the term may not be used) could be occurring as people search for a more humane and robust way to comprehend work life.

In fact, the "great risk shift" from institutions to individuals dramatically changed the social contract at work (Hacker, 2006). Aggressive investor expectations of financial markets eroded traditional notions of fairness in the workplace, and replaced them with a relentless focus on cost reduction. Many employers refused to pay employees for more than anything except their immediate ability to contribute, regardless of how long they had worked or how much they had contributed in the past. It also became clear that business and government wanted little to do with their own workers, as human resource management tasks (e.g., recruitment, training) were contracted out. Importantly, compensation and benefit risks, once managed by employers, were increasingly transferred to employees, causing anxiety and hardship in the workforce.

Such changes led to concerns about the meaning of work—why employee commitment is expected when so little commitment is made by the employer in return. In the search for "lives that matter," hard questions are now asked about how best to make a living and what work has to do with self-identity (Schwehn & Bass, 2006). With the erosion of the traditional social contract, significant work is expected, if not demanded, by thoughtful people.

Emerging New Conditions

Instead of government mimicking business techniques, the values that animate calling can act as a beacon for those who wish to integrate what they do with what they are. Time will tell how bright this light will glow, but perhaps its ideals shine most in troubled times. In fact, a host of conditions in the first decade of the new century, discussed below, reinforce the conviction that there may be a renaissance in the meaning of work and, by extension, in the civil service as a vocation. Many of these trends, in varying degrees, can be found throughout the developed world.

First, the dawn of the new millennium has led to a realization that people need to reconsider how they relate to one another and what this means for the future, which is a time sure to be filled with dangerous crises. Most dramatically, in the aftermath of the 2001 terrorist attacks, more than a few individuals decided to commit to work that contributes to the greater good (e.g., teaching, law enforcement, social welfare, medicine, military service) in a more direct way than other occupations (Wrzesniewski, 2002). Indeed, post-baby boom generations are widely believed to be seeking meaning, commitment, and fulfillment at work (e.g., Jurkiewiez, 2000).

Second, as the world economy continues to evolve toward a service orientation, figuring out exactly what this entails may involve a rethinking of values. Third, with the decline of families, neighborhoods, churches, and civic groups, the workplace has become a primary source of community—and concern. Fourth, the contemplation of work and life receives an impetus from baby boomers as they delay retirement, plan for encore careers, look for part-time employment, or leave the workforce. Fifth, the movement toward holistic living, illustrated at work by telecommuting, wellness initiatives, and employee assistance programs, fortifies the idea that a productive workplace depends upon a healthy balance between home and office. Sixth, as the velocity of change accelerates, the quest for stability in an unstable world generates meaning-of-work questions. Seventh, as individual workers continue to be made responsible for leadership and systemic failures through pay cuts, downsizing, and layoffs, one consequence may be that they question the meaning of labor in life.

Finally, the lack of integrity in private and public institutions in the "lost decade" of the new century—a litigated presidential election, the Enron Era, preemptive war, secret prisons and torture, influence peddling and sex scandals, reckless banking industry practices and lack of oversight—has caused people to seek a deeper sense of national purpose. In the wake of the 2008-2010 recession, for instance, citizens have raised doubts about the efficacy and benevolence of the private sector and questioned whether the market is efficient and self-regulating (see Martinez, 2009 and Marques, Dhiman, & King, 2007, upon which this discussion of change is partly based).

For all these reasons (the arrival of the new millennium, the implications of the service economy, the perception of the work organization as a community,

baby boomers' late-career planning, the need for holistic living, the search for stability, the blame laid on employees for institutional failures, and ethical problems in business and government), it seems a propitious time to rebuild the public service on the basis of calling. Indeed, public servants confront extraordinary challenges: war, financial regulation, health care, the housing market, unemployment, global warming, and the energy predicament. Not only has government been compelled to expand into areas once the domain of private enterprise, but also it has had to develop new approaches to both old and new policy arenas. Stated differently, if the NPM-contrived management crisis discussed earlier provoked change, then these very real problems provide the urgency to respond to a call for service (small parts of the rest of this section are adapted from Bowman & West, 2011; also see the Conclusion of Berman, Bowman, West, & van Wart, 2012 for other adaptations).

More than any other president since John F. Kennedy (who also experienced difficult years in office), Barack Obama has focused on service to country and commitment to the common good, in an appeal, like Kennedy's, that could become a self-fulfilling prophecy. The issues today are so daunting that pretense and pride must give way to a recognition that an extraordinary commitment to solving them is central to their solution. In fact, since budget forecasts indicate that the nation's debt will outpace income growth for at least 10 years, it is evident that America—and much of the rest of the developed world—faces a protracted test to sustain domestic harmony and international leadership. It should not be assumed that the citizenry is barren of anything but selfish values. Rather, real change requires sacrifice, and Gardner, Csikszentmihalyi, and Damon (2001:10–12) argue that people will seek "good work in difficult times."

Supporting Data and Incipient Reform

Government, then, could once again be seen as an employer of choice: indeed, survey findings from a wide variety of sources indicate that this may be the case. Pattakos (2004) reported, after in-depth interviews with over 200 public officials, that nearly all of them ultimately believed that "making a difference" was very significant to them in their jobs. More recently, the U.S. Office of Personnel Management found that 91% of federal employees say their work is important, and 84% know how it relates to their agency's mission (Losey, 2009).

Further, whereas graduates and would-be graduates in medicine, engineering, and law once sought fortunes in banking and finance, government and public service vocations were the most popular among college students out of 46 career fields in early 2008. A year later, career counselors at 200 colleges and universities found that 90% of students were interested in federal jobs or internships (Davidson, 2009; Goldin & Katz, 2008; Light, 2003; Rosenberg, 2009).

The opportunity to capitalize on these dispositions is furnished by the "perfect storm" of widespread unemployment, impeding retirements, the economic

stimulus package, the in-sourcing of government programs, disenchantment with business, and presidential appreciation of public service. Many of the new millennium social trends canvassed in the previous section suggest that it may be necessary to encourage citizens to serve the commonweal; but this is not sufficient. In addition, governments must change the way they treat their employees. The key is to enhance governmental capacity; the responsibility is to reform process and structure to fulfill the constitutional obligations of public administration.

This will involve strengthening the organizational, analytical, and managerial capacities of the organs of government and encouraging investment-oriented initiatives (e.g., in infrastructure, research, and children's health) rather than consumption-oriented entitlement and transfer-payment programs (e.g., farm subsidies). Bilmes and Gould (2009) have offered a detailed outline of what this new civil service would look like and how to pay for it. Federal chief human capital officers and the Government Performance Coalition have also provided "roadmaps to reform" that identify ways to elevate the federal workforce and strengthen organizational potential (Kamensky, 2008). One conceptual framework within which such initiatives might reside is supplied by Denhardt and Denhardt's (2007) "new" public service, which describes the role of government as a broker among interests among to create shared values.

Fostering more competent, professional government involves reducing the number of political appointees, flattening the federal hierarchy, restaffing hollowed-out agencies, emphasizing to agency leadership that quality personnel are a top priority, shortening the lengthy hiring process, seeking pay comparability with the private sector, supporting the enactment of a ROTC-like program for the civil service or the proposed National Service Academy (or both), and investing in workforce training and development (Light, 2008). Smart human resource management policies and the engaged workforce they produce may not guarantee success, but not having them will ensure failure. Such changes could lead to the restoration of government as a model employer and might begin to overcome the cynicism with which citizens regard their government (Cohen & Rucker, 2010). Working for the people could once again become less of a contractual relationship focused on personal gain and more of a covenantal commitment to country.

A recognition that public administrators are "the *only* officials that pay attention to governmental activities all the time" (Goodsell, 2006: 63, italics in the original) and as such hold a special duty to protect and serve the public interest may be growing. Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that 8 out of 10 Americans say they would encourage a young person to work for the federal government (Adams & Infeld, 2009; PEW Research Center, 2010). Doing the public's work," writes Alex Pattakos (2004: 106), "has always been a noble calling"; public service, regardless of political ideology, should be viewed with respect as an honorable vocation.

While it is important to recognize the noble features of calling, the potential for harm should not be overlooked. If, for example, the lofty aims that attract people to government are not achieved—either due to an unrealistic assessment of one's own abilities or due to uninspiring jobs—then frustration, disillusionment, and resignation may result (Steen & Rutgers, 2009). Alternatively, should individuals' goals be fulfilled, vocations can produce "true believers" whose narrow views could exclude relevant information, develop into extremism, and impair decision making (Dobrow, n.d.). Still, such problems may be less likely to occur in the civil service because the call to serve the public is a call to do so in a disinterested, accountable manner. It behooves government, nevertheless, to ensure that reforms are effective in meeting the needs of employees and the public alike.

If Patricia Ingraham and David Rosenbloom (2000: 381; italics in the original) are correct in claiming that "the United States has *never* had a long-term, consistent model of what public service should or could be," then life in a calling holds out hope against anomie and alienation at work. Indeed, public administration, as a value-driven activity with deep moral groundings, provides the conditions necessary to permit the exercise of virtue and excellence (Dobel, 2005). The survey findings and reform proposals discussed here suggest that, in the post-NPM period, employee aspirations and societal conditions may produce a new spirit of calling.

THE RESOLVE TO HEED THE CALL OF SERVICE

Whether as a necessary evil or a desired good, many people have come to identify themselves, and be socially defined, by their work. Yet much of contemporary employment is impoverished by dead-end or temporary jobs and by careers with little security. In recent years, service to citizens has been reduced to a nexus of contracts or simply a set of transactions in a NPM-type hybrid public service. Democracies, de Tocqueville observed, are always in danger of slipping from high ideals; it is imperative, accordingly, that public service norms be more fully articulated.

Government is a morally serious calling, and men and women are needed to respond to it. Not to do so damages the integrity of the citizenry itself as well as the foundations of self-government. Philosophers have long proposed that *eudaimonic* well-being is the doorway to human flourishing. "The only way to achieve success," as Aristotle observed, "is to express yourself completely in service to society." Let it be resolved, then, that people will come alive to the true meaning found in pursuits that command conviction and commitment in public service. Democracy is one of the great achievements of the world. Calling—that wonder from antiquity—gives voice to an abundant life by discerning purpose in what one does in government.

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