

What Should I Do With My Life?

A best-selling author finds that people are searching for meaning in their work, not necessarily happiness.

Bob Smietana

My mother found her calling late in life. She retired at sixty, after a forty-year career as a nurse, when she was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, a condition that made the physical demands of her job unbearable.

She had become a nurse more by happenstance than by choice. As a young woman she had hoped to go to college to study journalism, but her parents could not afford the tuition. She didn't want to work in a factory like her mother, so when a guidance counselor offered her a scholarship to St. Luke's Nursing School in New Bedford, Massachusetts, she jumped at it. While she excelled at her work, eventually becoming a manager, it wasn't her dream.

A few weeks after her retirement, she was approached by the director of the Little Blessings Preschool at the Covenant church in Attleboro, Massachusetts. My mom had been a Sunday-school teacher for years and the director wondered if she would consider becoming a preschool teacher. She hesitated for all of fifteen seconds, and said yes.

Four years later, she revels in being "Miss Barbara" at the preschool, and would not go back to nursing even if she could. "I love my job and I'm going to do it as long as I can," she says. "Nursing was another life to me."

In *What Should I Do with My Life?* (Random House, 2002) author Po Bronson profiles fifty-five people who, like my mother, were forced by life's circumstances—illness, being fired, or family concerns—to transform their lives and find their calling. People like Sydney Ross, who went back to law school in his late fifties after the university he worked for decided it had too many chemistry professors and pushed him out; Katt Clark, who turned down two chances to try out

for the U.S. Olympic team because her daughter needed her; and Don Lind, a Harvard-educated investment banker who became a catfish farmer after his company asked him to make one too many unethical deals.

Bronson, who interviewed more than 900 people in researching the book, found that most of the people he talked to had thought about changing their careers (and lives) for years, but never did it. "People ponder the question, 'What should I do with my life?' all the time," Bronson says. "People really push to answer it often only when they are forced to."

The book was prompted by a turning point in Bronson's life. In the late 1990s, Bronson seemed to have it made. His first two novels, *Bombadiers* and *The First \$20 Million Is the Easiest*, were bestsellers. He was writing for a

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television show and for publications like *Wired*, the *New York Times Magazine*, and *The Wall Street Journal*. His non-fiction book on the Silicon Valley hi-tech industry, *The Nudist on the Late Shift* (named for a computer programmer at Pixar Studios who worked in the all together), was published at the height of the dot.com boom and made him a celebrity.

Then, just as the stock market was going bust, so was his career. The television show was canceled. The magazines he wrote for had financial troubles and stopped assigning stories. He was about to become a father for the first time, and wondered, despite his previous success, if he'd be able to support his family. So he started asking himself, "What should I do with my life?" And then he asked the same question to anyone he met. (He found most of his interview subjects through word

of mouth and email.)

What he found were lots of people asking, "What kind of work will give my life meaning?" not "What will make me happy?"

"It's easy to find things that you think will make you happy," Bronson says, "but often those things don't last and the happiness can come and go. When people looked for something meaningful and significant, they often made a different choice than if they were looking for something to make them happy or something that looked like it would be fun."

One of the most intriguing characters in *What Should I Do with My Life?* is Don Lind, the investment banker turned Mississippi catfish farmer. He quit after being asked to give misleading advice to a client's company, which would have left them saddled with debt

they could not repay but would have made a bundle for Lind's bank. There were personal reasons as well—he was gone from home so much, traveling five and six days a week for work, that his two-year-old son didn't recognize him.

"I was a stranger," Lind tells Bronson. "He'd cry if his mother walked out of the room, but he'd cry if I'd walk into the room."

Lind gave his company thirty days notice, and started looking for something new. About that time, his father-in-law was visiting, and he described the problems the family-owned catfish business was having. If they couldn't find anyone to run it, they would have to sell. So Lind, who hated the outdoors, took the job.

"What made his work meaningful

Bob Smietana is features editor for the *Companion*.

Why Are We Here?

LIVING A
PURPOSE
DRIVEN LIFE

Brad Boydston

One of the shining stars on the *New York Times* list of best selling advice books is *The Purpose Driven Life* by the easy-going and unpretentious Rick Warren. Warren is the pastor of Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, California—a congregation that attracts 16,000 people each weekend. He developed the book to fuel “40 Days of Purpose,” an extremely successful church renewal program.

Perhaps most indicative of success in the evangelical world is the line of trinkets and associated paraphernalia that are riding the coat-tails of the phenomena—purpose driven journals, purpose driven wall crosses, purpose driven Bible covers, the “Songs for a Purpose Driven Life” CD, etc.

Hopefully this book will outlive its faddishness—it’s actually very helpful and stimulating, especially for new Christians or believers who have never quite grasped the big picture of discipleship.

Warren, who is a master of one liners, has divided his book

into forty easy-to-read chapters to be read over forty days. Each chapter has a point to ponder, a verse to remember, and a question to consider. The content is fairly unoriginal. Many of the illustrations are drawn from the common bank of sermon stories used by thousands of pastors. Yet, because *The Purpose Driven Life* is well packaged, people are finding that it really connects, filling in the gaps for millions of believers.

It seeks to answer the basic questions of life and purpose. Why am I here? Is there a reason for everything?

Indeed, says Warren, we exist for the pleasure of God. This is clear from the first page, “It’s not about you. The purpose of your life is far greater than your own personal fulfillment, your peace of mind, or even your happiness. It’s far greater than your family, your career, or even your wildest dreams and ambitions. If you want to know why you were placed on this planet, you must begin with God. You were born by his purpose and for his purpose.” This is why we must surrender and live lives of worship.

A word of caution, though, true worship in all its aspects is not for the benefit of the worshiper. Warren writes, “As a pastor, I receive notes that say, ‘I loved the worship today. I got a lot out of it.’ This is another misconception about worship. It isn’t for our benefit! We worship for God’s benefit. When we worship, our goal is to bring pleasure to God, not ourselves.”

This kind of God-centered worship is our purpose. But it’s not just a one hour a week purpose. We live out our purpose in an ongoing friendship with God, through the community life of the church, and as

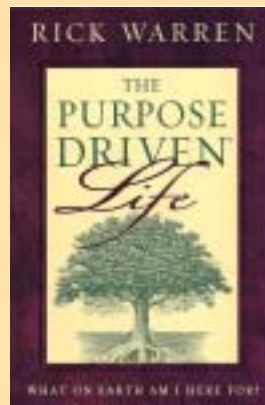
we are transformed into the likeness of Christ. This means accepting the fact that we were designed to serve God—in a general way and in unique ways. We are all uniquely gifted and are called to serve God in specific ways. “We were made for mission,” says Warren.

There are also chapters on overcoming temptation, transformation through life’s troubles, how to grow in faith, perseverance, and how to have balance in life.

I picked up the book because I was looking for an introduction to living life as a Christian—something I could suggest as a starting point for people who have recently come to faith in Christ. Generally speaking it suits that purpose well.

I do wish that Warren had said at least something about the importance of the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper in the development of our walk with Christ. A good Southern Baptist, he does mention baptism, but tends to dwell only on the symbolic meaning of it. Covenanters have traditionally seen these sacraments as more than merely symbolic professions of faith, but also as means of grace that actually nurture our faith.

In spite of this shortcoming *The Purpose Driven Life* is a wonderful introduction to Christian living. □



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Epiphany or A Quiet Calling?

WHILE ABOUT HALF of the people author Po Bronson interviewed were active in the life of their church, only three people had what he calls “epiphanies”—moments when God spoke directly to them about the course of their lives. In those cases, what people got was a message that God would take care of them—not a specific career path. And even then, it was years before they found their true calling.

Bronson found that many people know what their calling is—by their interests or values—but don’t see a way to make their lives fit that calling. Besides, they say, if it was a true calling, it would be more spectacular—more of a Damascus Road or Burning Bush event.

Instead, Bronson found that our calling often comes in quiet, less spectacular ways. “Here’s my point,” he writes, “usually, all we get is a glimmer. A story we read or someone we briefly met. A curiosity. A meek voice inside, whispering. It’s up to us to hammer out the rest. The risks of pursuing it are only for those who are willing to listen attentively, only for those people who really care.”

was not that he was outdoors working with fish rather than with dollars,” says Bronson. “What made it meaningful was that he felt integrated into the community. He bonded with strangers, and to him it made it feel like people are inherently good and the world is a good place and people of different races and backgrounds can work together and feel connected.”

Lind found that he could put his business skills to work for the community. Soon after he arrived, a financial scandal was discovered at the local catfish processing plant—where embezzlement by the former plant manager meant the plant was close to bankruptcy. This would hurt Lind’s business, and the other farmers, and also the several hundred workers at the plant. While those jobs paid only \$12 an hour, they were vital in a community with 12 percent unemployment.

Lind took over the plant, saving those jobs, and making it profitable again. He also opened the first senior center in the community, meaning that local people would not have to leave the community to find care for their ailing parents.

Since the book was published last

December, eventually becoming a number-one bestseller, Bronson has been on the road speaking to businesses, community groups, and churches. He says that many of the pastors he has spoken to tell him that, after helping people deal with family crises like illness, they spend most of their time helping people find their calling in life.

Bronson says that there are two major obstacles that people face in trying to find meaningful work, to connect their values with their career. There is never enough money,

he says, and never enough time. What’s more significant are the internal road-

blocks that people put up—I’m too old, I’d have to go back to school, I’d have to move. If you get past those internal obstacles, he says, “the external obstacles—never enough money, never enough time—begin to be solvable.”

The main internal obstacle, he says, is a belief that “by the time you graduate from high school or college,” you are supposed to have your life figured out.

“I found just hundreds of stories of people who got good at things they never expected, who found gifts they never imagined they had,” he says. “The truth is that many gifts take a long time to come to you, and you can get good at what you need to do to serve what you believe in. You are not supposed to know at twenty-two what it is you are supposed to do. You can discover over time a lot of the gifts that you have to offer the world. You don’t have to work the rest of your life with those few that showed themselves early.” □

Excerpts from *What Should I Do with My Life?*

WE ARE ALL writing the story of our lives—we want to know what it’s “about,” what are its themes and which theme is on the rise. We demand of it something deeper, or richer, or more substantive. We want to know where we are headed—not to spoil our own ending by ruining the surprise, but we want to ensure that when the ending comes, it won’t be shallow. We will have done something. We will not have squandered our time here. This book is about that urge, that need.

I LEARNED that it was in hard times that people usually changed the course of their lives—in good times, they frequently only talked about change. It surprised me how often we hold ourselves back until we have no choice. So the people herein suffered layoffs, bankruptcies, illnesses, and the death



Author Po Bronson

of loved ones, and as a result they were as likely to stumble into a better life as they were to arrive there by reasoned planning. They made mistakes before summoning the courage to get it right. Their path called into question the notion that calling is something you inherently know when you’re young. Far from it. These people discovered in themselves gifts they rarely realized they had.

