

“You can be whatever you wish” and other myths

After college, my friends and I chased fulfillment like it was the Holy Grail.

by [M. Craig Barnes](#) in the [May 23, 2018](#) issue



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When I was in my last year of college in 1978, I tried to come up with a plan for what I wanted to do next with my life. In those days many of us were privileged to think that the future stretched before us as opportunity, and if we worked hard we could succeed at anything we wanted to do. It was a myth, of course, but it was so compelling because it was unencumbered by any nagging problems of limitations.

It still is. When my daughter graduated from college I was dismayed to hear the commencement speaker peddling the same drivel I heard when I graduated. He looked out at 5,000 young lives and proclaimed: “You are among the brightest and best we have ever seen. Set your goals high. Dream your own dreams. Chase your own star, and you can be whatever you want to be.”

It's staggering that these ridiculously untrue claims still have a viable shelf life. No graduating class is the brightest and best; for years we've all been pretty evenly flawed. And while chasing stars sounds wonderful, the Bible makes it clear that even the Magi get lost in such a pursuit. But the biggest lie is that we can be whatever we want to be.

For several generations we've been promoting this illusion, not only at college graduations but whenever a visiting aunt or uncle puts a child on their knee and asks, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" The subtext is that it's up to us to assemble life the best we can, because it's all a matter of making good choices, and one of the most important ones is our choice about work. If we choose well, and work hard, we can be fulfilled. Or so the illusion goes.

When my friends and I were leaving college, we thought the key to finding our blissfully fulfilling vocations was knowing ourselves. So we threw ourselves into lots of personality inventories, guidance counseling, and books like *What Color Is Your Parachute?*—all in the hopes of unlocking the internal mystery of ourselves. Those of us who sought spiritual help in this quest were assured that God had created us with unique gift patterns, and that if we were clear about these gifts we could contribute to the kingdom of God in a way that would be fulfilling. We chased fulfillment like it was the Holy Grail.

Before leaving college, burdened by the need to assemble my life, I took a trip to visit my widowed grandmother so I could ask her, "Was Granddaddy fulfilled as a tobacco farmer?" She cocked her head, confused by my question. I had to explain the concept of fulfillment to her. After this went on for a while she finally shrugged and said, "I don't know, honey. He was a farmer." She was the first person to pierce through the new mythology I had swallowed about choosing a life. Like the five generations before them, my grandparents became farmers because it was the life they inherited.

We no longer think of our identity as an inheritance but as an achievement we self-construct. So when the commencement speakers call the next generation to dream their own dreams, they might as well say, "We have nothing for you to inherit. Put life together the best you can."

I'm actually very thankful that my future was not determined by the long line of farmers that preceded me. But I worry that we've made a serious mistake in telling

the next generations that they're on their own to put life together by chasing an idealized image of their futures. I believe we all want a sense of calling to our lives. We want to know why we are here, and what we should do with our fleeting years. Whether we realize it or not, we want a sacred inheritance that molds our identity and mission.

When our society dismantled sacred claims on life, we assumed that individuals would intuitively know who they are and what they want from life. Ironically, deconstructing these tethers to the holy instead made it impossible to discover such core insights. And nothing is more frustrating than freedom without calling.

Forty years after leaving college, I'm quick to say that I have no regrets about discerning a call to serve the church, and I think it's often been fulfilling (although I'm still not always certain what people mean when they use that word). But I am sure Jesus never promised that any job, including being a pastor, would make one fulfilled. As I tell our seminarians, one of the secrets of enjoying working for the church is to remember that it's just church. It can't fill up the hole you have in your heart. Some days it even seems like working for the church makes the hole bigger, but that is just a call to prayer.

The same argument could be made about our other choices in life—relationships, marriage, children, volunteerism, where we will live, how we will spend our time and money. No matter how carefully we choose, none of these choices can satisfy the soul's yearning. For that, we have to turn to our primary calling, which is to glorify and enjoy God. That's our great inheritance from the sacred tradition. And when we attend to that primal need, we find the rest of life can be relatively fulfilling, even if it's a lot of work.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "The fulfillment myth."