

Edward Howard Griggs

Self- Culture Through Vocation



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INTRODUCTION

We want to spend our time doing something worthwhile. The typical jobs in which we find ourselves seem to be full of the mundane and the uninteresting. We lurch from one weekend to the next; from finishing one holiday to booking another. And often lack of enjoyment can show itself in shabby work.

And we feel trapped. The need to earn to meet our living costs means we have little time to get ourselves free.

There is no simple solution to this. The magic formulas just seem to work for others. But there are those who have reflected and written helpfully on these issues - not with glib advice, but with deep thoughtful correctives. And they wrote from the height of the industrial age when work was more mundane, the hours were longer, and pay was worse.

One classic, published about 100 years ago, is 'Self-Culture through the Vocation', by Edward Howard Griggs. Griggs was a professor and writer. He was one of the most popular lecturers of his day. The New York Times said of his writing that 'he has an easy, flowing

style, rich in imagery, full of allusions to history, literature and art'.

As you read this book you will know you are sitting at the feet of a scholar with quotes from Plato and Aristotle as well as popular writers from his own day. You will admire the writing as a work of art. You will enjoy reading and want to reflect and reread.

But above all Griggs helps us to look at our work in a new way. He points us to the need for a 'liberal cultivation of the mind and heart'. This is what he means by 'Self-Culture'. Work, no matter how mundane, done in the right way is part of a cultured life.

And work is a calling, a vocation. We must render a service to others. Work must be reconnected to vocation.

Griggs does not just deal with the 'higher aspects' of work, but raises the day to day problems; the mother who stands washing the dishes knowing that within a few hours the whole process will have to be repeated; the job which consists in the mechanical repetitive task. How enticing is a chapter entitled 'Dead Work'?

The book reaches a real climax in the final chapter 'Work: a way of life', but don't cheat. Prepare yourself for it by savouring all that comes before.

Perhaps to finish, a quote (many could have been selected) which gives a taste of the book:

'The best work, however, comes neither from the commercial nor the professional spirit, but only from viewing our vocation as an opportunity and a mission, as a way of life for ourselves and others.'

Alan J Finch

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THE VOCATION: OUR PROBLEM

There is today a nation wide awakening to the need of vocational education.

We have come to see that if education is to equip adequately for a happy and helpful life, it must prepare every individual to take hold somewhere, in work that is worth while, and make an effective contribution.

There is no more pathetic spectacle than the cultivated ne'er-do-well — the man of fine appreciation and liberalized spirit, who is unable to do any one thing effectively; and so drifts through life, his refined sensibilities perpetually tortured by economic failure. Education fails if it does not do everything possible to avoid such tragedy.

On the other hand, education that makes the individual a mere cog-wheel in a productive machine, fails no less sadly. When a man becomes either a head or a hand, in the long run he does neither good head work nor good hand work. There must be a whole human being at work to get permanently good results in any field of action. It is possible to "kill the goose that lays the golden egg" of economic prosperity; and the goose that lays the golden egg is manhood, womanhood and especially childhood, exploited for the sake of immediate commercial results.

Such exploitation is the true race suicide; and that nation will win and retain leadership, even in the economic struggle of the nations of the earth, that keeps its men, women and children human beings, first, and cogwheels in a productive machine, afterwards, if at all.

Thus not only do we fail of cultivation for life, but the very aim of vocational education itself is defeated, unless behind the training for specific action there is the liberal cultivation of the mind and heart.

Such life education comes only in limited degree through the schools. By far the larger part of it comes in life itself through the two great primary channels of action and experience — the work that we do and the relations we sustain in love and friendship to other lives.

When Goethe wishes to portray the whole development of a typical personality in Faust, he divides the work into two parts: the first dealing with the little world of personal relationships and introspective study, the second, with the larger world of action, in art, war, science, productive labour and philanthropy.

Thus the problem of life-culture through the work itself is, though little recognized, even more important than that of the education equipping for the work.

By far the larger part of our work, moreover, lies in our vocation — in what we choose, or are driven to undertake, as our business in life. This is true for rich and poor alike. Even if one's work is not paid for in money or reputation, still what one regards as the life-call is the main line of action. The problem of the vocation is, therefore, constantly before all human beings, through the whole of life.

Is it not strange that this problem is so little considered in ethical philosophy? I know but one great work focussing on the problem of self-culture through the vocation, and that is a novel — Goethe's 'Wilhelm Meister'. One reason for this neglect is doubtless in the fact that the ethical philosopher, only too often, has turned his back upon the real world of living problems, retired into his study, and worked out his scheme of duties apart, for human nature as he imagines it. The result is an admirably logical theory, but often singularly inapplicable to life as we know it in experience.

This attitude of the ethical thinker explains in part the relative neglect of all the concrete problems of life; but there is a further reason for the wide failure in the past to deal with the one before us.

The vocation is our problem, as it has concerned no previous epoch of man's existence. One need go back but a little way in history to find small respect for good, honest work. In classical antiquity only two vocations were revered for themselves — war and statesmanship — the vocation of killing men and that of governing or, more often, misgoverning them. A Plato or a Phidias, it is true, gained recognition, but because of the height of personal genius, not for the vocation's sake; while all the foundation work, on which civilization must ever rest — the tilling of the fields.

Simple artisan labour — was done by slaves or by those but little removed from the condition of slavery. Thus Aristotle says: "It is impossible to live the life of a mechanic or labourer and at the same time devote oneself to the practice of virtue." ¹

More completely he expresses the same view: "In a state in which the polity is perfect and the citizens are just men ... the citizens ought not to lead a mechanical or commercial life; for such a life is ignoble and opposed to virtue. Nor again must the persons who are to be our citizens be husbandmen, as leisure which is impossible in an agricultural life is equally essential to the culture of virtue and to political action." ²

The whole purport of Aristotle's argument is that, of course, you cannot have culture without slavery. If

there are to be cultivated men at the top, then there must of necessity be slaves at the bottom, to do the work which, in the Greek view, it would be degrading for self-respecting free citizens to perform.

Similarly Plato says in the Laws: "He who in any way shares in the illiberality of retail trades may be indicted for dishonouring his race by any one who likes . . . and if he appears to throw dirt upon his father's house by an unworthy occupation, let him be imprisoned for a year and abstain from that sort of thing."³

The Middle Age added a third vocation — that of the clergy — to the two respected in antiquity. War, statesmanship and the priesthood: these were the three callings respected in the Middle Age; there was no fourth. The schoolmaster had no recognition; the physician was the barber, and there was as much respect, or lack of respect, for one as for the other; while still all the basic work of civilization was done by those tied as serfs to the soil or but little above that plane.

Indeed, the main growth in respect for work has come subsequent to the French and American revolutions. It is not too much to say that there has been more progress in respect for honest work during the last hundred years than in all the preceding centuries of human history. There are, it is true, honest vocations still not generally respected, and it is worth noting that

just in these it is most difficult to get good work done; but the progress has been amazing.

It has been argued that the dress of the leisure class in all ages has been chosen because it indicated that the wearer did no useful work, and therefore was an aristocrat.⁴ Perhaps "Twere to consider too curiously, to consider so" but how impossible it would be to do field labour or the ordinary work of the household in evening dress, or, worse, the knightly armour of the Middle Age. Even to-day a Chinaman of higher rank lets certain fingernails grow as long as bird claws, thus proving he has not worked with his hands and hence is an aristocrat.

Thus everywhere in the older society those who were free from the severer pressure of the struggle of life were respected because of that fact. It is true they made their contribution often a significant one; but it was given somewhat patronizingly from above, through noblesse oblige the obligation of nobility. To-day increasingly we recognize that it is a primary obligation on every human being to pay his own way, to leave the world as well off as he finds it. Not that the contribution must be made in forms gives rewards with money and reputation, but in some form it must be made, if the man or woman is to be even honest.

This changed view shows how the whole problem has been transformed, through the coming up into the free

struggle of life of an unnumbered multitude who yesterday lived only that someone else might live. Today they are living for themselves, and, let us hope, in some measure for humanity. Thus, while the world is richer than in any past time, the tension of the struggle of life is more severe than in any period of history. The great ends of life, therefore, as never before, must be attained in and through the struggle of life, or we shall fail to reach them.

The beautiful culture of the few in the old Greek world was in part made possible by a saner view of life than ours - but largely it rested on the terrible foundation of human slavery. We have, therefore, a double problem: first, to reform the view of life so that we may come to prize more justly its real ends as against its adventitious interests; second, to substitute machinery for human slavery, using discovery and invention, not to increase tasteless luxury, but to free man and give leisure to all. Not until these ends are achieved, may we hope for a cultivation of the multitude comparable to that of the few in classic antiquity.

In the past, culture was always the badge of a segregated class. Even Goethe in the very 'Wilhelm Meister' cited as focussing on the problem of culture through vocation, held that culture is of course impossible for the ordinary citizen as it is the heritage of the nobility. The argument is, it is true, made by a dramatic character; but that it is Goethe's own view is

attested by his action, in choosing to be an attaché of the Weimar court rather than an independent citizen in his native town, Frankfort.

It was a beautiful culture the old society achieved in its aristocratic class. We have still among us surviving examples of the gentleman and lady of the old regime. How charming they are, carrying the beauty and fragrance of an old-time, walled-in garden, protected from the storms of the world outside. Behaviour echoing their lovely courtesy appears, even in our commercial age. It is still possible to see a gentleman remove his hat when a lady enters an elevator in one of our vast office buildings. Occasionally one witnesses a man give his seat to an older woman, even in an elevated train on that bridge of pandemonium (of all the devils) connecting New York and Brooklyn, and, still more rarely, one does see a woman remember to thank a gentleman for such a courtesy, even to-day. The experiences are so unusual, however, that when they come to us we are apt to remember them for weeks afterwards, as quite out of the ordinary routine of existence, lending a rare beauty to life.

Indeed, we may even be glad the old time gallantry is passing, if we can substitute for it something a great deal larger and better. After all, the fine courtesy of the old society toward a little group of protected ladies was accompanied by a very different attitude toward the mass of women caught in the economic struggle of life.

Not the chivalry of nobility, but the culture of humanity is the need.

There is, it is true, a protected class in our society, but its members are continually changing. You can guarantee to your children your fortune, if you have one, but not to your grandchildren. When the brain power and moral energy that built up the fortune disappear from the family stock, how quickly the fortune takes wings and flies away. The constant change in the members of the protected group prevents the permanent segregation of an aristocratic class; and while social snobbery may, in consequence, seem more coarse and blatant, it really tends to disappear. If those who display it do not pass fast enough, it is always possible for the people to rise and hasten their exit, as was done with such memorable success in the French Revolution.

Thus less than at any time in the past is culture represented today by a segregated group above and apart. We cannot separate the ends of the spirit from the routine business of life as was done so often in the past. It is impossible to wait until the serious work of life is finished, and then hope to gain culture. We must somehow find it through the action and experience of life, all along the way, or we shall fail of it altogether. Thus the problem of culture through the vocation is our problem as it has been that of no other age.

ACTION VERSUS DREAMS

Since the vocation is a way of life, is it not a pity that it is currently regarded merely as an opportunity of making a living? It is that, and we have seen how imperative is the duty that each human being should give to the social whole at least as much as he receives from it. That, however, is merely paying running expenses in the vocation of life; and any business man will acknowledge that to carry on an undertaking for many years and succeed only in paying running expenses is failure. The test of the business is in what is earned beyond that, and so is it with life.

Thus the true meaning of the vocation is as an open pathway to the great aims of life — culture and service ; and only when it is so regarded does it take its rightful place in our lives.

Like all other phases of the art of life, the vocation can never be reduced to science. It is always a problem of the artistic adjustment of two factors, each of which is constantly changing.

The whole sum of subjective capacities, differing every day, must somehow be adjusted to the whole sum of objective needs and demands of the world, also ever changing. Is it any wonder the problem is difficult? That is not the worst of it: action is inexorable limitation,

compared to the ideal inspiring it. While we dream, we might do anything; when we act, out of the infinity of possibilities, we affirm one poor, insignificant fraction.

That explains many of the paradoxes of life, as, for instance, why our babies are so interesting to us. The parent looks into the eyes of his two-years-old child and dreams of all the possibilities inherent in that little atom of humanity. That child might think Plato's thought, write Shakespeare's Hamlet, or live with the moral sublimity of St. Francis of Assisi. Why not?

" I am the owner of the sphere,
Of the seven stars and the solar year,
Of Caesar's hand and Plato's brain,
Of Lord Christ's heart and Shakespeare's strain."

Emerson is right: all these potentialities are in the humblest of us: give us time enough and opportunity enough, and we can develop limitlessly in any direction. Each is a unit part, not a mechanical part, of humanity — a sort of germ-cell containing the possibilities of the whole. We may not be able to think Plato's thought today, but we may take one step forward in the intellectual life: give us eternity, and the point will be reached when we may think Plato's thought. One may be far below the moral sublimity of St. Francis now; but one may climb a little with each step: if the number of possible steps is endless, no mountain summit of life is unattainable.

Infinite time and opportunity, however, are just what never are given in this world, whatever be the truth for worlds to come. We must live this chapter; we have to plan for time as well as eternity. If we spend all the seventy years, more or less — usually less — granted to us here, merely in laying a foundation, we have no temple of life. If we lay a narrow foundation, and build each story out, wider and wider, as the structure grows, it falls to the ground and we have no temple of life. We must somehow both lay the foundation and erect the superstructure — see to it that we get something done, before the curtain falls on the brief chapter we call life.

Thus what the parent forgets, as he looks into the eyes of his little child, is that out of the endless wealth of potentialities, gathered up in this fresh incarnation of humanity, at best only a poor little fragment will be realized in the brief span of life given us in this world. That is one reason genius seldom survives the cradle.

Emerson quotes from Thoreau's manuscripts: "The youth gets together his materials to build a bridge to the moon, or, perchance, a palace or temple on the earth and, at length the middle-aged man concludes to build a woodshed with them."⁵

That is just about the relation of the world of action to that of dreams; but this, after all, is the important point: it is better to build one honest woodshed that will keep the fuel for the fires of life dry, than it is to go

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