

---

## Follow Your Calling

---

“I didn’t mind the misery of a vocation but I dreaded not being called.”

- Patti Smith

Back in 1957, Robert Caro was a young writer, landing his first job as a political reporter for the New Brunswick Daily Home News. He was working for an old politician, and was tasked with writing his speeches.

He would accompany him to events, joining him for rides in his limousine. Then came Election Day, and his boss took him around the polling venues as he made sure that everything was top-notch. Caro didn’t know what it was, but it was a strange, different day. For one thing, the man behind the wheel of the limousine wasn’t the regular driver, but a police captain this time.

As they dropped by each polling venue, his boss would roll down the window and ask a police officer about how things were going, and he would be told, “It’s under control”. At one particular place, however, a police officer reported that they were undergoing some trouble, but it was already being taken care of. Caro peered out the window and saw a group of African American protestors, being prodded along with nightsticks and shoved into the paddy wagon.

Caro could never forget the look on their faces — it was a look of helplessness, of powerlessness. As he put it, it was as though they had accepted it as a normality, and that they had even come to expect it.

Without saying a word, Caro got out of the car as soon as they got to a stoplight. “I had realized that I — Bob Caro — wanted to be out there with the protestors,” he said. At that point, Caro hadn’t exactly figured out what his mission as a writer was. Only he knew that any form of injustice angered him, and he didn’t want to be a mere spectator. He knew that he wanted to be in the forefront of change.

He started working for a different newspaper in New York called *Newsday*, and that was when he was assigned with reporting on a bridge that public official Robert Moses had wanted to build across Long Island. The bridge was a bad idea, as other officials strongly agreed when Caro interviewed them. It would cause much larger traffic jams, and it would pollute the shoreline. And so, such was Caro’s report, and the task was considered done.

A few weeks later, a friend in Albany called, saying, “Bob, Robert Moses was up here yesterday, and I think you better come back.” As Caro visited the same officials who strongly opposed the bridge idea, he was appalled to find that they had completely changed their minds. They were now strongly in favor of the bridge. In that moment, he realized who Robert Moses truly was — and the power he had. He could convince other public officials to build a bridge, *just because he wanted it there*.

That night during his long drive home, Caro couldn’t stop thinking about everything. He thought to himself, “Everything you’ve been doing is bullshit. Underlying every one of my stories was the traditional belief that you’re in a democracy and the power in a democracy, and the power in a democracy comes from being elected.

Yet here was a man, Robert Moses, who had never been elected to anything, and he had enough power to turn around a whole state government in one day. And he's had this power for more than forty years, and you, Bob Caro, who are supposed to be writing about political power and explaining it, you have no idea where he got this power." — and as he would soon realize, neither did anyone else.

And that was how Robert Caro's lifelong calling truly became clear. It was his vocation to study powerful figures, and not merely writing biographies to narrate their lives, but to expose the inner machinations of political power — how it actually works, how it is obtained, and its effect on its wielder, and the people whom it is wielded against. It was a truth that no had openly talked about before, and Caro was hell-bent on his newfound vocation.

"Following your calling" is different from "following your passion", because with your calling, you never have to fake it till you make it. Rather than being a fantasy, it's grounded in reality. It's something you know you're good at, and that you could do it better than most people can. You're leveraging on your unique strengths, and that puts you in a position of being able to create art in ways that only you can.

But unfortunately, to create good art, having a natural talent or interest for a craft is not always enough for you to see it as a calling. You need to have a compelling enough reason to drive you to get to work, or a message that you're so driven to deliver. And that doesn't always come easy. For Robert Caro, he knew early on in his life that he wanted to be a writer — step one done. But it took him a longer time to really find the answer to his question, "Why do I write?"

It's not an easy thing to hear, but a calling is when you're out to create art, not necessarily because it's your dream, but because you

*can't not* create it. It's when you have something so important to say that you can't shut it off. It hurts to repress it, and you *need* to create it, to turn it into something real. You need to get it out of your system, and doing that means sticking your butt to your seat and getting to work.

Offering his heartbreaking piece of advice, songwriter Bob Dylan once said in an interview that "The world don't need any more songs...As a matter of fact, if nobody wrote any songs from this day on, the world ain't gonna suffer for it..Unless someone's gonna come along with a pure heart, and has something to say. That's a different story."

That being said, how do you figure if it's your calling to do something? As the poet Rainer Maria Rilke wrote in one of his letters, "There is only one way. Go into yourself. Examine the reason that bids you to write : check whether it reaches its roots into the deepest region of your heart, admit to yourself whether you would die if it should be denied you to write. This above all : ask yourself in your night's quietest hour : *must* I write? Dig down into yourself for a deep answer. And if it should be affirmative, if it is given to you to respond to this serious question without a loud and simple 'I must', then construct your life according to this necessity : your life right into its most inconsequential and slightest hour must become a sign and witness of this urge."

Otherwise, if it's only something that you *kind of* want to do, it's time for you to do something else.

Following your calling could mean that you're a part of something much larger than yourself. It's humbling in a way, as it often requires you to place your own desires aside, and instead do what's most fitting for the work at hand. Giving any less than your best would

make your work feel incomplete, and it tugs on your mind and heart until you get it right.

When he worked on “The Power Broker”, Caro tried to write the book without emphasizing on “the human cost of highways”. It was a difficult thing to do, because it meant figuring out a way to allow the reader to picture and feel the effects that building Robert Moses’s highway had on the thousands of people who had lived in its trail.

He said, “I would start outlining the next chapters, to go forward without the East Tremont chapter, and it was as if something in me would rebel, and I would sit there for hours, fiddling with the outline, knowing it was no good, knowing that if I went forward, the book behind me wouldn’t be the book it should be, and my heart just wouldn’t be in the writing anymore.” He felt as though “there really was no choice involved; that I didn’t really have one.”

Similarly, novelist John Steinbeck felt as if he was responsible for his characters, that if he threw in the towel, the characters died.

For Steve Jobs, it wasn’t uncommon for him to press the reset button on a project and start again altogether, if he felt that something wasn’t right — while most other companies would have proceeded anyway.

And so, here is a strategy that can help you streamline your calling and create art that is uniquely valuable. What important truth do you know or seek to understand, that is rarely talked about? In fact, what are you bothered about? For Caro, it was discovering, and wanting to reveal how political power worked. It wasn’t a topic that was widely written about, because well, not many people were aware of it in the first place. If you’re feeling somewhat angry or surprised at why other people haven’t talked about a topic that you think is

important — or if you're dying to create a useful product that you wish had existed — perhaps that would be a good place to start.

But at the end of the day, the most crucial thing about your calling is to, of course, follow it. If you don't follow the inner voice that tells you where to go, it will always keep calling on you — you will be thinking about it forever.

Life isn't merely a preparation for a future job or a retirement. Life is right now and you're living in it. As you put off your life, it's ebbing away, whether you choose to be aware of it or not.

So don't delay your calling. Listen to it, follow it, act on it. Before it's too late.

As Friedrich Nietzsche wrote, “In nooks all over the earth sit men who are waiting, scarcely knowing in what way they are waiting, much less that they are waiting in vain. Occasionally the call that awakens — that accident which gives the ‘permission to act’ — comes too late, when the best youth and strength for action has already been used up by sitting still; and many have found to their horror when they ‘leaped up’ that their limbs had gone to sleep and their spirit had become too heavy. ‘It is too late,’ they said to themselves, having lost their faith in themselves and henceforth forever useless.”