

# A High Calling

*[This is a true account as well as I can reproduce it. I have changed names to protect the innocent. Or the guilty. Or perhaps the noble...it's just hard to tell. GF]*

My friend Stephen strikes me as the consummate professional educator. It is his passion and, for a long time, it was his day job. After ten years of youthful wandering in search of answers to life's great philosophical mysteries, like so many children of the sixties Stephen somehow managed to become a Christian. He headed off to seminary for a bit, then earned his degree and settled into the role of public school educator. Over the course of a dozen years Stephen rose to the level of assistant principal in a big city school. Then, feeling a need to give back to society (as if a life dedicated to educating school children weren't enough), he accepted an offer to become the principal of a private school in one of that city's sprawling socioeconomic ghettos.

Administrators and faculty were supposed to live in the area so they could relate to their students (think 90% single parent homes, 49% below the federal poverty line with per capita income less than \$6,700, drive-by shootings, gangs, all of it...). Stephen got a special dispensation to live a few miles away in a slightly nicer neighborhood, but he and his family experienced many of the privations of living and working in a highly segregated, economically crushed environment - not the least of which was a major cut in salary and benefits when he left public education. All this was okay, though, because it was supposed to be a short stint - two years, tops.

Stephen did a superb job for the school, raising classroom achievement, managing cultural differences, overcoming educational handicaps, coaching faculty and staff on personal & family issues - *being a leader*. He was the "daddy" figure for a lot more than his own family. It was challenging in every way, but worth it. And then Stephen's two years were up and the school couldn't find a replacement. Stephen stayed one more year, and another.

He burned out some time around the 10-year mark - heart murmur; high blood pressure, occasional blackouts. Not good. The doctors ordered a change, the school found an interim principal, and Stephen bowed out.

For some months after that, I saw him occasionally at Sunday worship services lying low, recuperating. Little by little he got involved with activities around the church and started to become his old cheerful self. He took a nice job as president of a quasi-missionary educational enterprise and worked to help them improve their curriculum, raise money, build staff expertise and market their product. At the end of five years or so, Stephen left on good terms and began looking for the next thing.

The next week we met for one of our occasional breakfasts and our conversation was all about some new opportunities Stephen was considering. He had been approached by the leading publisher in his field to become their regional representative to public schools. The publisher made him a substantial offer, including an impressive benefits package, plus a liberal bonus arrangement. He knew everybody in the territory; he would be selling quality materials that were reordered on a regular basis. With one child attending a private college (financed entirely by student loans), and another just three years from high school graduation, it looked like an opportunity to repair the badly eroded family balance sheet.

Meanwhile - because when it rains it pours - Stephen was approached about becoming executive pastor at the church - a modestly salaried administrative position. After talking about the pros and cons of the two offers, it seemed like a no-brainer to me.

A week later I caught up with Stephen at church and asked if he had made a decision. He had: Stephen passed on the publishing deal and was in line for the executive pastor slot at the church. The senior pastor used the "D" word on him - *Destiny*. He said he was comfortable with the decision, feeling it was more in line with his life's calling. It was a done deal.

I wanted to be happy for him, but I walked away wondering. Why was it more in line with his spiritual destiny to accept a job running the business affairs of a church than placing high quality educational material into public school systems? If anything in our society is badly broken, it's surely education. And Stephen's family certainly could have used the extra money.

A sentence from a New Testament letter from the apostle Paul to his protege Timothy kept coming to mind: "If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever." [1 Timothy 5:8 New International Version]. I don't mean to imply that Stephen hasn't provided the basics for his family - I believe he has. It's just that he gave up a lot when he left his career in public education to give back to society and I find myself wondering, *How much is enough?*

And is it right for the Stephen's of the world to make decisions that are personally gratifying at the expense of their families? Is that even what happened here? I don't know; I only suspect. I respect Stephen's decision...I think. But would it have been any less "spiritual" to make the other choice? There's so much mysticism and guilt and this centuries-old tradition that all work is good but some work is *holy*.

I don't know, maybe this isn't even about Stephen; maybe this about... Nah, I'm sure it's about Stephen.

**Geoff Finch (posted on 4/23/2006)**

## Discussion Questions

- Do you identify more with the writer or his friend Stephen? Talk about your connecting points.
- Talk about the perception that church work is more spiritually significant than other work.
  - Is that tension present in your spiritual community?
  - Do you think there's merit to that position? Talk about that.
- Given what you can guess about Stephen from Geoff's story, do you think Stephen is doing his best to provide for his relatives in the spirit of the apostle Paul's standard in 1 Timothy 5:8?

**"If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.**
- Given what you know about yourself, talk about whether you think you're more likely to err on the side of misguided sacrifice or misguided self-interest?
  - What part do you think fear plays in that?
- Try to balance your thinking about all this against this passage from Jesus:

**"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.**

**“The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are good, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eyes are bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!**

**“No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.**

**“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?**

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**“And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own. - Matthew 6:19-34 [New International Version]**

- Talk about your most significant insight in this conversation.
- Why do you find that significant?
- What do you want to do about that?