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WHY CHOOSE A CAREER IN COUNSELING?

*What you are in love with, what seizes your
imagination, will affect everything.*

—Pedro Arrupe, S. J.

CAREERS BEGIN AT THE BEGINNING

I wanted to be a cowgirl. Not just any cowgirl. I wanted to be Annie Oakley. This goal may have been more likely had I grown up on a farm or ranch instead of the west side of Chicago, where the only horses to be found were in books or movies. But I was not deterred. Annie was amazing. How did I know that? Because she had her very own television show.

I grew up during the “Golden Age of Westerns.” Each of the three major channels had their own star-studded lineup—all of them featuring men. Annie was the only woman with a show of her own. Actually, Annie was the only woman in a Western with a life of her own. She had her own horse, her own gun, and her own adventures. Yup . . . I wanted to be just like Annie and throughout my life I have tried to emulate what I came to understand was best about her. I gave up the idea of literally riding horses, saving settlers, and chasing outlaws as a way of life. But figuratively, my days as a counselor are filled with helping folks establish and live their lives fully. Everyone needs to feel safe and happy in their own skin. Everyone has an outlaw or two who have made their lives difficult. Everyone struggles—with

the harshness of nature, with sadness and loss, with transition, with betrayal—with something. Everyone also has a shadow side. Annie did. Her need to be independent made it difficult for her to allow companionship. She believed that she couldn't have both, and perhaps, in the world she inhabited, she couldn't.

Many years later, the image of Annie Oakley still inspires me to do my best to be true to myself and be generous to and authentic with others in a world that can sometimes be difficult and feel unforgiving. And so I finally get to the questions of what and/or who inspired you as a child: Who were your heroes? Why were they important to you? When you dreamed of what you'd become as a grown-up, what were the shapes of those dreams? How did your early dreams lead you to counseling? How do they fit—right now—into work as a counselor?

Certainly, family can have a major (and sometimes complete) influence on future aspirations. What were the messages sent by your parents, grandparents, siblings? Carl Jung suggested that “The strongest psychological influence on children is the un-lived life of their parents.” Are your counseling aspirations an outgrowth of family demands that were constants as you were growing up? Of health, gender, or financial issues that were never resolved satisfactorily? Of parental needs that were never met? In discerning what is authentically you, Sharon Daloz Parks suggests that it is useful to hear the “still, small voice” but also to recognize that we carry with us an entire committee of voices and being a strong committee chairperson is the challenge (Parks, 2000, p. 85).

All of these questions are important to ask and answer. Not because a specific answer is a better or worse reason to choose a counseling career, but because you need to be completely clear as to why you're making the choice. In “A Path Well Chosen,” an article in a recent issue of *Counseling Today*, counselors from across the United States were asked what led them to the field. Penny Mechley-Porter, a counselor in private practice in Erie, PA, responded, “I know counseling is a good fit for me because it matches who I have always been” (Bray, 2017, p. 35).

LIFE AS A COUNSELOR— COMMON THREADS

The American Counseling Association's *20/20: A Vision for the Future of Counseling* “provided profession-wide clarity as to what it means to engage in professional counseling” when it offered the following consensus definition: “Counseling is a professional relationship that empowers diverse individuals, families, and groups to accomplish mental health, wellness, education, and career goals” (Kaplan,

Tarvydas, & Gladding, 2014, p. 366). Because every key organization and professional association that represents counselors chose to embrace this definition, it can and does speak directly to our professional identity. It signifies that counseling is a separate and distinct profession from all other helping professions, with its own educational and training requirements, ethical principles, and core competencies.

This definition also translates into a myriad of specific careers based on a range of variables including an individual's personal values, skillset, and career goals; education attained; and lifestyle preferred. Under the large occupational umbrella called "counseling" there are a host of options. While this book will outline several, there are many more to consider. Also, it's helpful to keep in mind that many counselors have been able to customize roles to truly fit their specific professional interests and career aspirations.

Calling and Meaning Making

"If you understand the ways in which the person you are and the needs of the larger world intersect, you have some idea about your calling. The question then broadens from 'what can I do that will make me happy?' to 'what can I do that will give me purpose?'" (Hettich & Helkowski, 2005, p. 146). If you filled a ballroom with people from all realms of the counseling world and asked them "How did you come to choose this career?" almost all of their responses would include the concept of "helping people" as the prime determinant of their vocation. They may differentiate the types of people they'd most like to help or the ways in which they believe that help can best be provided, but helping others is at the heart of their career decision. Most would also suggest that this is the work they were called to—work where they found meaning and discovered their purpose.

As the millennium approached, a change occurred in the way traditional counseling was conceptualized and practiced. Counselors recognized that the barriers clients faced in obtaining care and needed services must be removed and that issues of social justice and advocacy needed to be addressed by the profession itself. Counselors began to see themselves not only as helping others but also as instruments of societal change. Counselors for Social Justice became an officially recognized division of the American Counseling Association (ACA) in 2002 and made social justice a clear priority for the field. In 2003 the ACA identified specific competencies counselors must possess to advocate successfully. In September 2017 a search on the ACA website for "advocacy" and "social justice" brings up 10 books, 461 articles in *Counseling Today*, 236 articles in the *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 22 podcasts, and 9 webinars. The profession of counseling

embraces advocacy in education, thought, research, and action and proves itself to be a home for those whose purpose is as much societal as individual.

It's Personal: Experience and Shipwrecks

In my more than 30 years of work as a counselor specializing in career issues, I have heard many reasons why people have chosen to pursue a career in counseling. Many feel as though they have been doing this work most of their lives. They are the folks that friends and family seem to gravitate to when times are tough. It is difficult, especially for individuals with limited experience, to understand that while their intentions were good, it is very likely that they were sharing their opinions and essentially telling those who came to them what to do. And, while sometimes advice-giving is helpful to people, it is not counseling. In fact, using this kind of experience as the sole rationale for choosing to be a counselor makes as much sense as becoming an attorney because you've always liked to argue. In both cases, these experiences represent something associated with the profession but certainly not enough to make a commitment to it or to believe it is your destiny.

Does your personal experience count in making this career choice? Of course it does. But the experiences you should be looking to are those that cultivate a worldview, micro-skills, and competencies that are in line with the counseling profession. Involve yourself in work that fosters relational skills. Put yourself in roles and organizations that promote cultural competence. Learn more about the field by joining professional associations, reading, and developing relationships with counselors who are doing the type of work that interests you. Ask questions of others and of yourself. Reflect on your personal and professional development and compare your findings to the professional identity of the field. Whether there is a good fit or an uncomfortable one, it is information that is necessary for solid career decision-making.

On the flip side, we often seek to emulate someone who has been there for us through difficult times or circumstances. In particular, we are drawn to the professions those individuals inhabited. If you have used the services of a counselor and those services have been effective in helping you through a shipwreck or transition, it is not unusual to consider becoming a counselor. A shipwreck—and we all have them—is Parks's description of a loss that changes everything and leaves us depleted. It irrevocably reorders life by calling into question "things as we have perceived them. Or as they were taught to us, or as we had read, heard, or assumed. This kind of experience can suddenly rip into the fabric of life, or it

may slowly yet just as surely unravel the meanings that have served as the home of the soul” (Parks, 2000, p. 28).

Rebuilding a life is a process, and many of us seek help moving through it. If that help came from a counselor, then why not pay it forward? That is an excellent question, and for some the response is “why not, indeed!” But for others, the distinction between being helped and doing the helping is significant.

For example, I have a considerable sweet tooth and there’s nothing I love more than an exceptional chocolate donut. There is a wonderful family-run bakery very close to my office, and some days my car just turns into the parking lot to satisfy my donut cravings. And while I love everything about this bakery, I actually hate baking. I don’t like the time and energy it takes to follow a recipe specifically, measure accurately, or preheat the oven. So I leave it to the professionals, and I simply enjoy the fruits of their labor of love. The point is that it is not enough to choose a counseling career because you loved your results when you worked with a counselor. You also have to want to spend your days doing what a counselor does!

The Impact of World Events

National and global events both suggest and shape careers. In the early 1960s, John F. Kennedy inspired American youth to “ask what you can do for your country.” He established the Peace Corps on March 1, 1961, and within six years the Corps had attracted 14,500 volunteers to programs in 55 developing countries. Since that time, over 220,000 Americans have joined the Peace Corps and responded to President Kennedy’s original challenge (<https://www.peacecorps.gov/about/history/founding-moment>).

September 11, 2001, was, for some, another kind of national call. Post-9/11, applications to the CIA and FBI rose significantly as did interest in all federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies. In the face of this national tragedy, the need for counselors also increased as people sought out ways to make meaning of the events of that day.

In the last year alone, we have faced a contentious presidential election—communities divided by issues of race, immigration, economic parity, and environmental disasters. Right now ACA’s home page is asking counselors from across the country to mobilize in response to the victims of hurricanes that have ravaged parts of Texas, Florida, and all of Puerto Rico. Individuals seeking a profession that will allow them to make a difference on a national as well as local level are right to consider counseling.

LOOKING FORWARD

Much like human development, careers have stages as well. In their December 2013 article for the American College Personnel Association website, Londoño-McConnell and Matthews outline a model of career development for counselors. While the article is specific to university counseling centers, I think it generalizes well. The authors call the first stage The Young Guns. These are the highly motivated new professionals who are anxious to practice what they have learned in graduate school. They are testing the waters of the profession and may try their hand at a range of professional options. They are working to become competent, get licensed, and reduce their reliance on external expertise to do their jobs. They also look for professional recognition and work/life balance.

Crossroads Counselors (Stage 2) have been in the field for 6–10 years and are facing important professional decisions. Should they stay in this area of the field or is it time to move on? Should they expand their range of professional involvement or contract the number of activities in which they're immersed? Motivated to achieve and grow in a career with short career ladders, they run the risk of taking on too much and experiencing burnout or compassion fatigue. This stage is a time for deep reflection and clarifying their professional identity.

A counselor in the field for 10–16 years has entered Stage 3: The Next Generation. This stage, hallmarked by changing job descriptions and relationships with colleagues and clients alike, can offer potential for supervising and mentoring of younger counselors. Erik Erickson's Theory of Psychosocial Development calls it generativity. Counselors with this level of experience need to clarify their professional and personal priorities to keep their passion for the field burning brightly.

The Seasoned Sage (Stage 4) finds new challenge and growth in the work by staying on top of the latest professional developments and diversifying their experience. Counselors at this stage know that they can trust their internal expertise. "Over time, experience-based generalizations and accumulated wisdom replace the use of 'external' sources of expertise and prescribed way of doing things. In this sense, the 'seasoned' professional has their own body of knowledge that they rely on much more heavily in the work" (Londoño-McConnell & Matthews, 2013).

The lifelong impact of a counseling career upon the counselor is difficult to specify or quantify. However, if you still believe that a counseling career is worth

considering or continuing, perhaps Samuel Gladding provides us with the best answer to the question, “Why counseling?”

It (counseling) looks at reality and accepts what is, but it doesn't stay there. Counseling offers three ways of dealing with what stands before us. It offers *care* in the form of knowing how to respond and when to act. It offers *creativity* in helping people put their lives back together in a way that is ever new, ever changing, and productive. Finally, it offers *hope* both in what we can be and who we can help others become. The holistic view of humankind that counseling offers goes beyond the mundane and the tragic that all too often fill the world. The possible and productive side of counseling call out to a world in chaos that there is hope that comes in the form of listening, understanding, and responding in ways that bridge gaps instead of create them. (Gladding, 2009, p. 303; emphasis in original)

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