



Soul-Searching Life-Planning: Refreshing Your Professing Pathways to Embedding Professional Resilience

Part 4 of 4: Dying an Unlived Life: Are you living your life to the full, with gusto?

The upcoming CIP 2018 National Conference in Winnipeg, on the theme of *Soul*, is providing an opportunity for revisiting related aspects of the CIP 2017 conference in Calgary, when the theme was *Building Resilience*. As a College of Fellows panelist then I was inspired to explore the connection between ‘life-planning’ and ‘professional-self design’. The overall framing of [my 2017 panel offering](#) reflected an interest in insights from the application of Theory U, an awareness-based social learning technology, dealing with themes such as absencing and presencing (See Part 1 of 4). In this series I am highlighting the ‘life-planning’ foundation via three themes rooted in ‘soul-searching’ – to refresh one’s professing. The current offering, **Dying an Unlived Life**, asks: Are you living your life to the full, with gusto?

*“I will not die an unlived life / I will not live in fear of falling or catching fire /
I choose to inhabit my days, to allow my living to open me, to make me less afraid /
more accessible, to loosen my heart until it becomes a wing, a torch, a promise /
I choose to risk my significance, to live so that which came to me as seed /
goes to the next as blossom, and that which came to me as blossom, goes on as fruit”.*

~ Dawna Markova (2000), *I will not die an unlived life*.

Beyond simply ‘work’, and/or ‘play’, there is – all inclusively – ‘life’. It is precious, and deserving of the utmost reverence. As professionals especially, we are called to engage fully with life – body, mind, heart and soul; our worst fate would be to die an unlived life. This is ‘choice-territory’ par excellence; it is something for each of us to choose, or not. Dawna Markova, above, shares her life-affirming choice with us, with metaphors full of life – seeding, blossoming, fruiting.

Yet, this is no small challenge for ordinary mortals; it can easily become a venue for *de facto* ‘absencing’, settling for a smaller, restrained, qualified ‘life’ – that may be more about surviving and subsisting (than thriving and flourishing), that may be well-contained

within an unduly limited ‘comfort zone’. Our resilience may well be compromised, or greatly impaired – inadvertently, unconsciously.

Where resilience is concerned, the slightest prospect of dying an unlived life merits a special form of ‘threat’ assessment, and conscious surfacing of potential associated ‘weaknesses’ or deficiencies. It calls for a deep ‘scan’ of one’s ‘inner’ environment, and some dedicated ‘inner’ work - encompassing some of the extraordinary reflective practice referred to earlier (Parts 2 and 3, of 4), to avoid any semblance of ‘an unexamined life’, and to assiduously cultivate ‘an undivided life’). Such ‘scanning’ will quickly reveal that, underlying all resilience considerations, is the implication of vulnerability.

Each of us needs to find the resolve to openly address our relationship with vulnerability. A constructive response will have us aiming for **a robust vulnerability**, to actively cultivate it in our selves, to presence it - rather than absence it, to build it into ourselves as a spiritual fortification of sorts. David Whyte, a poet-extraordinaire, has helped me – consoled me - in my own ‘wrestling’ with vulnerability, and achieving some ‘robustness’. Whyte offers that ‘robustness and vulnerability belong together’, and in doing so indicates a ‘presence’ connection. Here is Whyte, first of all on the ‘robustness’ aspect:

“To be robust is to be physically or imaginatively present in the very firm presence of something or someone else. Being robust means we acknowledge the living current in something other than ourselves. Robustness is a measure of the live frontier in a conversation... Without robustness all relationships become defined by their fragility, wither and begin to die. To be robust is to attempt something beyond the perimeter of our own constituted identity; to get beyond our own thoughts or the edge of our own selfishness. Robustness and vulnerability belong together. To be robust is to show a willingness to take collateral damage, to put up with temporary pain, noise, chaos or our systems being temporarily undone. Robustness means we can veer off either side of the line while keeping a firm on-going intent” (Whyte, 2014, p. 187).

... and then on ‘vulnerability’...

‘VULNERABILITY is not a weakness, a passing indisposition, or something we can arrange to do without, vulnerability is not a choice, vulnerability is the underlying, ever present and abiding under-current of our natural state. To run from vulnerability is to run from the essence of our nature, the attempt to be invulnerable is the vain attempt to be something we are not and most especially, to close off our understanding of the grief of others. More seriously, refusing our vulnerability we refuse the help needed at every turn of our existence and immobilize the essential, tidal and conversational foundations of our identity...

The only choice we have as we mature is how we inhabit our vulnerability, how we become larger and more courageous and more compassionate through our intimacy with disappearance, our choice is to inhabit vulnerability as generous citizens of loss, robustly and fully, or conversely, as misers and complainers,

reluctant, and fearful, always at the gates of existence, but never bravely and completely attempting to enter, never wanting to risk ourselves, never walking fully through the door' (Whyte, 2014, 233-234)

[<https://awakencompassion.com/2014/06/05/vulnerability-by-david-whyte/>]

The connection between 'true resilience' and 'robust vulnerability' is particularly well-made by Lisa Devine, who also draws on David Whyte:

'(Robust vulnerability) allows us to keep our soul in touch with and moved by the world, and to draw strength and inspiration to respond from our deepest intuitions, from what we really value and want to stand for in the world' (Devine, 2011, 18)

For professionals especially, given the organizational settings we work in, it is equally important to collaborate with trusted others to collectively nurture **a well-held vulnerability**. I came to appreciate the importance of this in the context of a recent book, *An Everyone Culture*, where it appears absolutely fundamental to the possibility of achieving a 'deliberately developmental organization' (Kegan and Lahey, 2016). They draw heavily on the work of Brene Brown (2015), on the courage needed to be vulnerable:

'Vulnerability is at the core of shame and fear and our struggle for worthiness, but it appears it is also the birthplace of joy, of creativity, of belonging, of love'... *(however, only a minority of people seem to be attracted to the latter perspective)* 'they realize that vulnerability is important; they kind of walk toward it'... *(but Brown states clearly)* 'that's not me... I don't even hang out with people like that' (Brown, 2015).

Kegan and Lahey draw on this to establish a key point for them (about deliberately developmental organizations at the leading-edge of 'an everyone culture'), namely:

'a shared and surprising reversal of the most fundamental agreement in ordinary organizational life: the separation of the personal and the public... The ordinary organization is like the 'old Brene Brown'... it doesn't 'do' vulnerability, and it doesn't hang out with those who do. The ordinary organization conspires with part of its employees' psyches that believes the place for imperfection and vulnerability and shame and unworthiness is somewhere far away from work' (2016, 56).

They go on to articulate three key practices underlying a 'pan-developmental culture' – **holding on**, **letting go**, and **sticking around** – and a critical underpinning, especially as regards the 'holding on' is 'the experience of vulnerability'... as 'a wellspring':

'... but to be willing to be vulnerable you must trust that the community will still receive you, include you, and value you. Everyone has experienced the kind of vulnerability that leaves you feeling cast out, more alone, unworthy and ashamed. *Well-held vulnerability* is our term for feeling simultaneously as if you are the

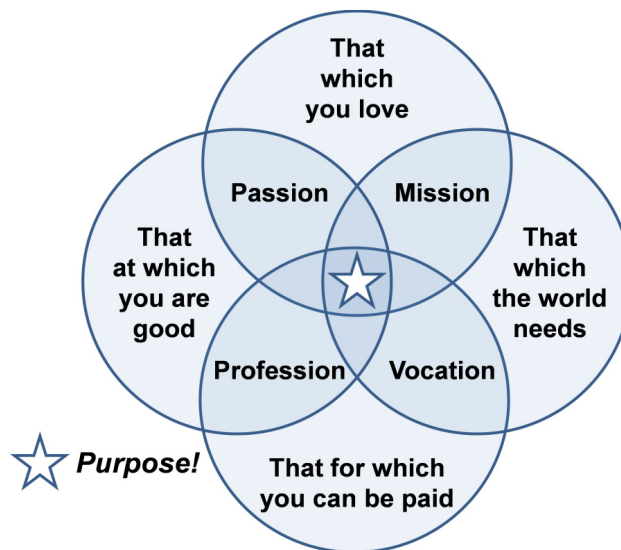
furthest thing from your most well-put-together self but you are still valued and included... Well-held vulnerability is an experience people do not feel often enough' (2016, 154)

A well-lived work-life is very much about a healthy relationship with vulnerability – personally robust, collectively well-held. It is a *sine qua non* for resilience. Its realization is very much aided by attention to the praxis-making and ethos-making referenced earlier in this series, but it is also a manifestation of a higher (meta-) professional ‘making’ – **poiesis**. This is the territory or landscape for aligning ‘Spirit and Purpose’; more than inter-professional, more trans-professional; more than inter-personal, more trans-personal. This is the ‘open will’ co-presencing, at the bottom of the U – spiritually fuelling extraordinary awareness-based collective action, a synergy of purpose, passion and professing.

Dawna Markova’s subtext is very much about ‘reclaiming purpose and passion’. For us it may be more about reclaiming purpose and **profession** (or should that be, simply, ‘**professing**’), with vocation and mission also in the mix (see Figure 1 – Purposing).

Figure 1. Purposing: Meshworking... Passion, Mission, Profession and Vocation

[The diagram below appears frequently when searching these terms, but is never authoritatively referenced]



“Purpose is the place where your deep gladness meets the world’s needs”

~ Frederick Buchner

(In Dawna Markova, 2000 *I will not die an unlived life*, p.137)

Where purpose is concerned - goodness as well as gladness seems to be in play, with the world’s needs in mind (and not simply one’s own need for remuneration).

“For while purpose has to be found in solitude, it has to be lived in community... We need each other to truly discover and enact it. Purpose is a constellation, not a destination. It is a pattern that helps us find our unique path to serving others,

which ultimately is the only way we can serve ourselves. It's not a solution, a decision or an event. It's not necessarily what we do for work, although work can be a vehicle for its expression. Rather, purpose is the current of a river hidden under the ice. It defines the energy with which we can commit to something, but not the outcome"

~ Dawna Markova (2000, 138... 140)

We each need to discern our own purpose, in all its constellating. Markova (2000, 141) discerned an 'intuitive guidance system': four lines of questioning – essenced for her in the acronym, LIVE – 'a blossom in my mind':

'L' stands for the question, "What do I love?"

'I' represents "What are my inner gifts and talents?"

'V' equals "What do I value?"

And 'E' means "What are the environments that bring out the best in me?"

What one professes is part of one's purpose - along with one's mission, passion and vocation. 'Purposing' can be navigated/negotiated on a range of 'territory', or landscapes. For Markova these are, progressively, landscapes of the mind, the heart, the soul and the spirit. Passion may also link more to Markova's 'landscapes' of soul and spirit; we might therefore want to keep it very much in play – especially when seeking to align soul and role, and, in particular, spirit and purpose. Passion is also something that is likely to emerge and evolve depending on life experiences and conditions.

I am particularly 'passionate' about the profession/professing angle, and feel this should probably be privileged in a 'professional education' program. What becomes important is what you come to 'profess' (acting out of 'faith'), from your core. This may be considered to involve considerable 'reflective practice' - the mark of a true professional for Donald Schon (1983; 1987). This in turn is associated with some deliberate, in-depth, 'self-inquiry' (into your 'passion/s', among other elements) – the kind of 'examining' which can richly inform your 'professional-self design'.

So, with a view to building your resilience, be passionate especially about such self-inquiry - to gain clarity on what you will 'profess', what you want to 'will' in your professing, in your professional practice. This could encompass your very personal 'articles of faith', the virtues you uphold, the values you espouse - effectively, your professional essence (your 'prof-essence'). At its most evolved this will include that healthy relationship with vulnerability referenced above (personally robust, collectively well-held). This will yield what Kegan and Lahey identify as 'systematic transparency and trustworthiness' and the associated 'clarity about intentions' – as a pretty deep 'groove' of your practice and practicing... your praxis, ethos and propensity for poiesis.

With all this you will naturally 'embody' your own passion - and much else besides, that will serve you well as a professional, in service to the world. Your passion reflects your spirit at work; it becomes the conduit for aligning spirit and purpose, a foundational 'pairing' for evolved professionals - en route perhaps to an even larger identity, self-transcendingly, as meta-professionals, or integrals (Wight, 2014; 2015).

The Territory of Praxis:
Self and Service / Self in Service

The Territory of Ethos:
Soul and Role / Soul in Role

The Territory of Poiesis:
Spirit and Purpose / Spirit in Purpose

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