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(Re)discovering Calling in the Wake of Loss through Secure Bases

By honouring our calling, we can no longer hide from the responsibility of living a true life. Calling is an important theme on the Transition Cycle, the cyclic themes relevant in forming and ending relationships on our journey through life. Living our calling manifests meaning in all aspects of our life. This article invites you to reflect on some of the many poignant inquiries that arise when we explore what our calling may be.

In 2016, Victor Strecher lost his nineteen-year-old daughter, Julia, to a heart disease she contracted when just six months old. Devastated by this loss, he found new meaning by studying the teachings of ancient philosophers, finding a lesson that holds its value until today:

Imagine a drug that was proven to add years to your life, reduce risk of heart attack and stroke, [...] help you relax during the day and sleep better at night, double your chances of staying drug- and alcohol-free after treatment [...]. The pharmaceutical company who made the drug would be worth billions. The inventors of the drug would receive Nobel Prizes and have institutes named for them. But it's not a drug. It is purpose. And it's free.

Since finding our purpose and living from it has this effect, imagine what if we started living our lives from calling? Paraphrasing Strecher we say:

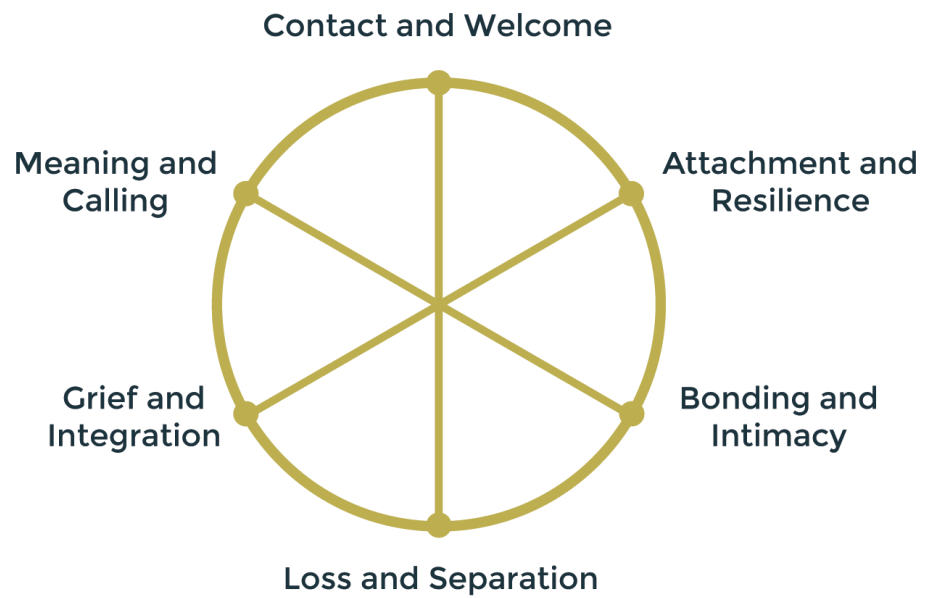
Imagine a drug that was proven to heal grief. But it is not a drug. It has benefits even beyond living your life from purpose. It's a calling. It comes with (re)connecting to secure bases. And it's still free.

Calling

Living our calling is free. But it also comes with a commitment: by honouring our calling, we can no longer hide from the responsibility of living a true life.

True to our beliefs – true not only to those we are attached to, but also true to those we are connected with and with a true inclination to bond to people, places and goals we encounter. Calling is an important theme on the Transition Cycle, which depicts the cyclic themes relevant in forming and ending relationships on our journey through life (Van Wielink et al., 2019).

Figure 1 – The transition cycle



Living our calling is a strong combination of who we are at our core (identity), what we “have to” do in this life, and the unique contribution we are propelled to make to the world. It’s the dance between “being” and “doing”. Living our calling manifests *meaning in all aspects of our life*: personal, professional, social and organizational. Finding our calling enables us to become more of who we are, to live and work based on our deepest values. To be authentic. Closer to who we are meant to be, in all the different roles we fulfil. Our calling accompanies us all the time, whether we are aware of it or not. Vocalizing our calling, putting it into words, enables us to consciously make choices based on our calling.

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Steve was a hardworking, down-to-earth sales director for a local branch of a big consumer-products company. His world consisted of sales and profits during the working hours of the week while spending the free hours with his family, his wife Carol and their daughter Lily, and enjoying sports. Steve had a no-nonsense approach to “doing business”, as he called it. He left social events to his wife. When Carol fell seriously ill, Steve found himself on unknown territory, with a young daughter to care for at home while managing his business between visiting hours at the hospital. Carol didn’t recover. Steve was devastated. He managed as well as he could, but he couldn’t bear his daughter crying for her mom, while he missed his wife. Work provided

an escape and he put in long hours. It wore him out, though, and at home he coped still less with the needs of his daughter.

Having lost his own father at a young age, Steve had long since struggled with being a parent. But he had always had Carol at his side, who seemed to have a natural gift. And Steve had grown a special relationship with his father-in-law, who gave him the confidence he lacked. Faced with the task of being a single parent, Steve turned to his in-laws for support. Though experiencing their own grief of losing their daughter, Steve's in-laws assisted where they could. With the practical day-to-day business being taken care of, Steve could begin to face his own grief.

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Secure base

Living our calling is no easy task, one we can only perform with the assurance of our secure bases. Based on the groundbreaking attachment theory work of John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth, Kohlrieser et al. (2012) define secure bases as –

people, places, goals, or objects that provide us with a sense of protection, safety and caring on the one hand, while at the same time offering a source of inspiration and energy for daring, exploration, risk taking and seeking challenge.

The secure bases provide us with assurance of *being available and being present*. In providing *caring on the one hand*, offering help and support, and providing *daring at the same time* they inspire us to exceed our own expectations in the choices we make in life. In realizing we can always exercise a certain degree of freedom in our choices, our calling helps us assess whether the choices we are facing are helping us being the best version of ourselves.

Steve was not one to feel sorry for himself. But he felt amputated, as he called it, since Carol always took care of the demands of their social life, and Steve had a hard time adjusting. Baffled by the enormous support in their neighborhood, he found himself lost for words when he was confronted with kindness. His father-in-law, Tom, a retired Navy officer, witnessed Steve's discomfort and took him on a weekend trip to the mountains. Hiking for hours in silence, the two men finally set up camp near a small stream. Watching the sun set behind the surrounding peaks, Tom was the first to speak. He compared the dying light to the passing of Carol and confessed to deep feelings of despair.

Right in our deepest ordeal lies the test of our calling.

And yet he refused to succumb to meaninglessness. In helping to care for their granddaughter Lily the way Carol would have wanted, Tom and his wife had found new meaning. Tom urged Steve to share his feelings and, for the first time ever and feeling at peace in those beautiful surroundings, Steve was able to open up. He admitted to feelings of utter helplessness in the upbringing of his daughter and he talked about his unease being unable to connect to other people.

Meaning reconstruction

Significant losses challenge us deeply. Loss of loved ones, but also life transitions such as loss of perspective, dreams or ambitions that are meaningful to us, touch us on an existential level. The duality of grief, with the sometimes-all-consuming intrusiveness of the loss, and at the same time trying to meet the demands of a world that does not stop turning, challenges us to integrate this loss in our life story. Beyond that, grief challenges us, considering this loss, to live our calling even more than before.

By turning to our secure bases in grief for comfort and care, for support, and to dare not only to go on but even to go beyond, we can transform loss and thereby ourselves. Right in our deepest ordeal lies the test of our calling. That is where we find the inspiration for the meaning of our true contribution to the world. Secure bases help us – through dialogue – develop a growth mindset and our ability to consciously focus our mind's eye on aspects that assist in meaning reconstruction (Neimeyer, 2019). Rediscovering our calling and reconnecting with it in the wake of loss contributes to the possibility of post-traumatic growth.

Tom listened and let the silence do the work, with the stars and the surrounding peaks as his witness. Deep in the night Steve bade Tom goodnight and remarked smilingly that it had taken them a good hike into the mountains to surmount the discomfort of sharing inner feelings.

Becoming aware of our true calling helps us to fulfil our roles better and new roles in yet-unexplored domains.

Our calling serves as a foundation, supporting the variety of roles we fulfil in the various domains of life; it lies at the core of all of them. When we experience differences in our calling, depending on the specific domain, we haven't found our true calling yet (Craig, 2018). Our calling remains unvarying, across various domains and contexts, working through us in the different roles we fulfil and showing our authenticity in each and every one of them. Becoming aware of our true calling helps us to fulfil our roles better and new roles in yet-unexplored domains that may present themselves because of it.

Figure 2: Window of roles supported by our calling



Steve sat outside the tent all night, pondering Tom's words. He hadn't felt this close to Carol for a long time. Replaying conversations with her in his mind, his head cleared and her words found their way to his heart, becoming his own words. He pledged a solemn vow to Carol to honor her by continuing her warm and loving approach to others in his own way. A deep serenity came over him and he could see himself being not only at ease with other people, but also being supportive in their time of need. When Tom awoke, he found Steve ready to return as a better version of himself, eager to put into practice the insights that the night had given him.

'Transition Cycle' – inspired loss and grief work

In applying the Transition Cycle themes in work with clients, the counsellor/ therapist serves as (temporary) secure base.

In applying the Transition Cycle themes in work with clients, the counsellor/ therapist serves as (temporary) secure base, travelling with the clients on their deeply personal journey through the desolate landscape of their loss and grief. Through caring and daring, clients are supported to (re)discover their calling, thereby reconnecting to significant others in their lives, fulfil their existing roles more profoundly and exploring new roles.

Soon people started noticing the change in Steve. He was still the same in most ways – a hardworking, down-to-earth sales director. But

What is my calling?

How am I living my calling?

How do I connect with secure bases myself?

What more do I need to do or be to honour my calling?

now he went out of his way to accommodate others, he paid everyone sincere and ample attention, and made it a priority to take time off to spend with Lily. When Steve finally, hesitantly, approached the local community center, offering to start a sports program for kids growing up without a father, the counselor remarked how very much of 'Carol-way' Steve was embodying.

We close this article by inviting you to reflect on some of the many poignant inquiries that arise within the counsellor/therapist while accompanying the client:

What is my calling?

How am I living my calling?

How do I connect with secure bases myself?

What more do I need to do or be to honor my calling?

Wishing you a fulfilling journey to your calling.

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