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HAS EVERY ONE A NATURAL CALLING?[1]

IT is not a rare occurrence to hear of a person that he has "missed his calling." People mean that his natural faculties and endowments are better fitted for other kinds of work than the one in which he is engaged. Here, then, we meet with the presumption that the person in question is especially well qualified for a particular occupation. Upon this presumption is based the meaning of the word "calling." He who is called to perform a certain kind of work or to fill an office is given credit for the qualifications it requires.

But let me ask, is there any such thing as a natural calling for every one? that is to say, is there in man a combination of faculties which qualifies him for a certain kind of activity, and for no other? Is he predestined, if I may use the term, to his calling, by the peculiar mixture of natural gifts he possesses?

The Germans are apt to answer this affirmatively. They maintain that every one is particularly well equipped by Mother Nature for one kind of activity, but that it is difficult to discover for which one, and that many persons fail in discovering it, choosing a field of occupation for which Nature has not intended them. In many cases their chosen profession or occupation is not the right one, which is illustrated in numerous cases. In truth, the fact that many pursue a calling in which they are not successful seems to indicate the strength of the argument. Yea, "to miss one's calling" was a proverb long before Bismarck characterized the journalists as men who had missed theirs.

In America we are apt to answer the question in the negative, and just as emphatically. The American will grant only in rare cases that a man may have a natural calling. Generally it is asserted that every one has the calling to earn his livelihood; and, as to the different kinds of human activity, our reverence for the self-made man prompts us to believe that every one is capable of doing any thing, provided he takes hold of it with pleasure and good-will.

Here, then, we have two opposite opinions, — on the one side, the German idea, that every one is equipped, that is, called for, a special kind of work, which idea has been developed in the most ideal manner, and defended by the ablest arguments; on the other side, the American idea, that every one may be or is prepared for or called to many, if not to all kinds of work. Which of the two ideas is correct, — either or neither of them? If neither, which one comes nearer the truth?

In order to answer these queries understandingly, it will be well to inquire into the origin of the two diametrically opposed ideas.

The Germans are an old nation, with a history and national culture of more than a thousand years. When first appearing upon the historic stage, they were divided into ranks, — in high and low nobility, free-born retainers, and serfs or servants, among whom were again distinguished body-servants and servants of the estate. When through war and strife, particularly in consequence of hostile invasions, it was found necessary for many to leave their isolated abodes, crowd together in cities, and live securely side by side behind ramparts, palisades, and town-walls, the social status of former times could not be retained. It was hard to give up privileges, for he who is in possession shuns the change; and it is proven in history that it is easier to yield an inborn right than to relinquish a privilege (a private right). But necessity knows no laws. The privileges of the free-born were disregarded in towns where all had to live together, side by side, and the will of the majority became law. The cities were populated, and soon became the very backbone of resistance to oppression and transgression of princes and nobles. In due course of time, inequalities vanished, and the citizens acquired equal rights, though not until after hard struggle and civil strife.

Even noblemen found it necessary to resort to some occupation where every one was obliged to make a living; and so we see families of great repute and noble name become merchants, armorers, etc. And just as among the Romans some trades were despised, we see in the cities of Germany that some occupations became honored, others despised and detested. The patriarchal government of those times soon regulated every thing, even the number of masters in each trade. Guilds sprang into existence, originally for the protection of their members, afterward for the exclusion of outsiders. Soon the guilds were sharply defined, and formed communities within the community. Even within the narrow confines of a guild numerous grades and subdivisions were established. There were tailor, carpenter, weaver, cobbler guilds, etc. Joiners and carpenters were not permitted to confound each other's work, any more than could nail-makers and blacksmiths, bricklayers and stonemasons. The cobbler who made men's boots and shoes was prohibited from making ladies' shoes: that was meddling with some one else's trade.

These guilds have a history of eight hundred years. Their pernicious influence upon culture and civilization is a matter of history, and need not be stated here; but it must be mentioned that they fostered the idea of seclusion and separation. They gave rise to the idea of a predestined calling for every one; and this idea became so predominant, that the accident of birth decided not only nationality and religion, but also the calling of the child; and to a limited extent this is still the case in our times.

In this country we ridicule the idea. Here the new-born child is not placed face to face with such an idea. He breathes the free air of a country which enjoys political and social liberty, as well as liberty of trade. In Germany the child seems to inherit the germ of the idea that his destiny is preconceived, and he inhales, figuratively speaking, an atmosphere which is fitted to develop this germ. A child of German parentage in America may inherit

[1] Paper read before the Anthropological Society in Washington, March 18, based on Professor Rohrbach's treatise on this question, by L. R. K.