#1

This first brief reading (below) reflects one way to understand vocation/calling that has been helpful for students as I've worked with them to make sense of it within the context of careers and jobs. It's part of a more detailed Prezi presentation that I use during open house presentations.

Eric

Job →Career →Vocation

Between career development and spiritual development lies an area of overlap, an area in which some students explore meaning and purpose in their lives. These students are obviously different from those who are focused primarily on the career as a means to an end, and they are different even from students who seek fulfilling and interesting careers. The overlap is the place where they find calling and vocation, where “what they do” becomes intimately connected with “who they are”.

I believe that this “spirit” in career development is any of the non-measurable (but very real) influences that guide our life decisions and take us beyond skills and interests to ways in which we make meaning and find purpose.

I think the progression looks something like this:

Skills = JOB

Skills + Interests = CAREER

Skills + Interests + Meaning & Purpose = VOCATION

Which do you want to focus on?

Focusing on meaning and purpose in your career is not necessary in order to find a job; you can just look at what you do well, and then get a job that uses those skills. You can even pursue a job that you enjoy without focusing on meaning and purpose.

But you change and discover things when you choose to pursue meaning and purpose. Then “what you do” becomes intimately connected to “who you are.”
In the reading for this week I’ve summarized the thoughts of three well-known people in the vocation world. They reflect a strong “service” mindset, and it pushes us beyond thinking about vocation in terms of employment, although these thoughts can definitely relate to the world of employment as well.

Eric

Three Views of Vocation

I’ve summarized some basics from three vocation “thinkers”:

“SERVE THE NEIGHBOR” – MARTIN LUTHER

Among other interesting views on vocation, Luther believed that we should focus on “serving our neighbor”. Other ways to think about this concept: the one “at hand”, or the one whom we are “given” to serve. In other words, wherever we find ourselves in life, we can literally and figuratively look around and find the people we are called to serve.

“FOLLOW YOUR BLISS” – JOSEPH CAMPBELL

Campbell found that he was able to connect with the idea of bliss or rapture, “doing what you truly love.” He said, “If you follow your bliss, you put yourself on a kind of track that has been there all the while, waiting for you, and the life that you ought to be living is the one you are living.”

“[FIND] THE PLACE WHERE YOUR DEEP GLADNESS AND THE WORLD’S DEEP HUNGER MEET” – FREDERICK BUECHNER

I think that Buechner’s thoughts are a beautiful blend of Luther and Campbell. His term, “deep gladness” is a wonderful restatement of Campbell’s “bliss”, and our sense of “the world’s deep hunger” certainly depends on our awareness of the “neighbor at hand”. This creates a whole picture for me; I am in relationship with the world, and I have a purposeful place in that world.

I’ve paraphrased this further in the “How to Choose a Major and a Career” booklet:

Find your center.
What is your deepest gladness, what are your deepest needs, the work that you need most to do?

Look around you.
What work does the world need most to have done? What is the world’s deepest hunger that calls to you?

Pay attention.
Become aware of the places where your deep needs and the world’s needs intersect.
Now we’re on to the third reading, which is really two readings from different authors on the same subject: “Wherever you are” calling vs. “Big” calling. People often talk about “calling” as if it needs to be a loud and clear message, and these are their responses to that notion.

Eric

“Wherever you are” calling vs. “Big” calling

From “Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the voice of vocation” by Parker Palmer (p.10-11):

The idea of “vocation” I picked up [when young] created distortion until I grew strong enough to discard it. I mean the idea that vocation, or calling, comes from a voice external to ourselves, a voice of moral demand that asks us to become someone we are not yet – someone different, someone better, someone just beyond our reach.

Today I understand vocation quite differently – not as a goal to be achieved but as a gift to be received. Discovering vocation does not mean scrambling toward some prize just beyond my reach but accepting the treasure of true self I already possess. Vocation does not come from a voice “out there” calling me to become something I am not. It comes from a voice “in here” calling me to be the person I was born to be, to fulfill the original selfhood given me at birth.

There is a Hasidic tale that reveals both the universal tendency to want to be someone else and the ultimate importance of becoming one’s self: Rabbi Zusya, when he was an old man, said, “In the coming world, they will not ask me: ‘Why were you not Moses?’ They will ask me: ‘Why were you not Zusya?’”

From “Callings: Finding and Following an Authentic Life”, by Gregg Levoy (p.4-6):

We tend to think of “calling” as divinely inspired. Calls are, in our minds, big, and we feel we have to respond in a big way, which, or course, can be paralyzing. It is important to remember, first, that a call isn’t something that comes from on high as an order, a sort of divine subpoena, irrespective of our own free will and desire. But really, we have a choice. We have a vote!

Second, few people actually receive big calls, in visions of flaming chariots and burning bushes. Most of the calls we receive and ignore are the still, small voices, the daily calls to pay attention to our intuitions, to be authentic.

The great breakthroughs in our lives generally happen only as a result of the accumulation of innumerable small steps and minor achievements. We’re called to reach out to someone, to pick up an odd book on the library shelf, to go to classes each day, to turn left instead of right.

Perhaps our callings, the wisdom of our true natures, can only be hinted at, anyway – filtered through symbols, dreams, symptoms, happenstances, and synchronicities. They are not shown to us directly. We need to learn to recognize our calls in many disguises. We have to stay in dialogue, stay vigilant, and be willing to be seized by our encounters, by what comes our way. They come in a variety of forms. They include:

- A dream that keeps coming back, or something that “pursues” you in your dreams.
- A symptom that recurs and is metaphoric, like a pain in the neck from shouldering too much responsibility.
- A statement in a conversation you overhear that seems as though it was spoken directly to you.
- Places in your life where there’s friction. Where, for example, do your words not match your deeds? Where do you fight with others? Where do your longings rub against your security?
- Song lyrics you can’t get out of your head.
- Thoughts that arise naturally from the silence of meditation.
- What you would speak about if invited to do a TED Talk.
- The decisions you need to make in your life right now; the issues are hanging in midair waiting for resolution.
This fourth reading includes the views of three people who disagree with the popular understanding of vocation and calling. Or do they? As you read through these views, I’d like for you to think about our very typical “either-or” perspectives (“either A is right, or B is right”), and consider the “both-and” perspective: Does one idea need to be wrong in order to another idea to be right? Or are there times when “both A and B” can be correct?

Eric

Dissenting opinions about vocation and calling

*Excerpted and adapted from a blog post by MaryAnn McKibben Dana*

**DON’T ask about the “world’s deep needs”!**

I wonder if “calling” has outlived its usefulness. [People say that calling is] all about the Frederick Buechner quote: *Your vocation is where your deep gladness meets the world’s deep needs.* So what do we do with people who’ve discerned a call, but there are no jobs available? Were they just wrong?

**DON’T ask what makes you “come alive”!**

Even my current favorite quote (another dissenting opinion) from Howard Thurman can be problematic:

*Don’t ask yourself what the world needs; ask yourself what makes you come alive. And then go and do that. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive.*

Sometimes, it isn’t possible to “go and do” what makes us come alive. Sometimes we need to find a way to come alive in a place where we do not feel called to be.

A friend recently said she felt stuck in a less-than-ideal situation. The extrovert in me blurted out without thinking, “Maybe it’s not that you’re stuck. Maybe you’re being held in this place until you’ve learned what you need to know in order to move to the next thing.”

I have sometimes felt stuck, and in hindsight, many of those stuck places gave me precisely the structure and boundaries I needed to work on some things to be ready to move on.

**DON’T “follow your passion”!**

Mike Rowe (another dissenting voice) of “Dirty Jobs” fame wrote a piece for Forbes about traditional career advice in relation to the people he meets on his show:

“In the long history of inspiration, “follow your passion” has got to be the worst. I condemn the sentiment as dangerous, not because it’s cliché, but because so many people believe it. Over and over, people love to talk about the passion that guided them to happiness. When I left high school—confused and unsure of everything—my guidance counselor assured me that it would all work out, if I could just muster the courage to follow my dreams. My Scoutmaster said to trust my gut. And my pastor advised me to listen to my heart.

“Why do we do this? Why do we tell our kids—and ourselves—that following some form of desire is the key to job satisfaction? If I’ve learned anything from this show, it’s the folly of looking for a job that completely satisfies a “true purpose.” In fact, the happiest people I’ve met over the last few years have not followed their passion at all—they have instead brought it with them.”

[Rowe goes on to clarify that the people who are passionate about what they do (like the maggot farmers and road kill picker-uppers on his show), never aspired to the careers they now enjoy. None of them were guided by a burning desire to do a particular thing. What they did was followed the available opportunities—not their passion—and built a balanced life around the willingness to do a job that nobody else wanted to.]

My husband has had a very fruitful career. Not all of his jobs have been awesome. Yet he’s content with the path he’s taken. And he doesn’t put that much thought into The Next Step or how a specific move will “set him up” for the move after that. And there’s no five or ten year plan. He’s simply done the next right thing as it’s presented itself. I see...a man who’s pretty content with where he is, and who somehow ends up with satisfying work that puts food on the table.
This week’s reading is about the “tikkun olam”, which comes from the Jewish tradition. I think that it presents us with another way to understand vocation, as well as containing some familiar ideas.

The piece below is from a weekly radio program called “On Being”, hosted by Krista Tippett. The introduction summarizes part of Krista Tippett’s interview with Rabbi Lawrence Kushner, and then expands on that with a story remembered by Rachel Naomi Remen. I hope you enjoy it. And if you’re really curious, you can find the whole interview here.

Eric

**Tikkun Olam**

Rabbi Lawrence Kushner says that the Jewish moral commandment, *tikkun olam* is not so accurately translated “repair the world” as “repair the cosmos.” Here is a memorable way that the Kabbalistic connection between *Ein Sof* and *tikkun olam* has been told, by Rachel Naomi Remen, as her grandfather told it to her:

In the beginning there was only the holy darkness, the *Ein Sof*, the source of life. And then, in the course of history, at a moment in time, this world, the world of a thousand, thousand things, emerged from the heart of the holy darkness as a great ray of light. And then, perhaps because this is a Jewish story, there was an accident, and the vessels containing the light of the world, the wholeness of the world, broke. And the wholeness of the world, the light of the world was scattered into a thousand, thousand fragments of light, and they fell into all events and all people, where they remain deeply hidden until this very day.

Now, according to my grandfather, the whole human race is a response to this accident. We are here because we are born with the capacity to find the hidden light in all events and all people, to lift it up and make it visible once again and thereby to restore the innate wholeness of the world. It’s a very important story for our times. And this task is called *tikkun olam* in Hebrew. It’s the restoration of the world.

And this is, of course, a collective task. It involves all people who have ever been born, all people presently alive, all people yet to be born. We are all healers of the world. And that story opens a sense of possibility. It’s not about healing the world by making a huge difference. It’s about healing the world that touches you, that’s around you.”
For this week, as we consider vocation to be a reflection of meaning and purpose in our lives, I’d like for you to think about how we find clues to that meaning and purpose. What should we pay attention to? Does everything happen for a reason? Here are two viewpoints on that question from Parker Palmer and Gregg Levoy.

- Eric

Does everything happen for a reason?

LIFE’S ROADBLOCKS and VOCATIONAL CLUES  
From “Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the voice of vocation” by Parker Palmer (p.42)

I do not ask everyone who gets fired to conclude that it was the work of a gracious God offering clues to one’s true vocation. Sometimes it is the work of a pathological boss or a corporate culture... Sometimes it is the result of an economic system that robs the poor of their jobs so that the rich can get richer still. Like everything else in the spiritual life, getting guidance from roadblocks requires thoughtful discernment.

COINCIDENCE, MEANING and CONFUSION in our “CALLING”  
From “Callings: Finding and Following an Authentic Life, by Gregg Levoy (p. 7)

We cannot declare a happenstance “just a coincidence” without looking at whether it corresponds to a theme or an issue in our lives.

If you’re bored with your work, for instance, does that mean you need to leave it or change it? Does falling in love with Someone Else mean that your relationship needs dissolution or attention? If you didn’t get the job, does that mean you weren’t supposed to pursue the career, or that the rejection is a test of how much you want it? Is a calling true if it’s propelled, in part, by a desire to prove something? If you’re afraid, does it suggest the need for courage and a leap of faith, or do you need to back up and reevaluate? How do you know when you’re procrastinating or when the answer you seek simply hasn’t revealed itself to you yet?

The channels through which callings come – whether dreams and symptoms, or intuitions and accidents – aren’t meant to be treated as psychic “vending machines” that dispense information. They are to be approached for dialogue. Their answers are typically metaphorical, paradoxical, poetic, and dreamlike, and they require reflection and conversation.
Among the many great thoughts that you shared last week, one that comes to mind is the focus on being aware of the different beliefs that our peers have, and to work within their world view, being open minded. This is very important in your work. Another was the idea that when we are pursuing our careers and vocations we often don’t realize that we may face challenges along the way. Indeed! Rather than guaranteeing an easy life, following one’s passion often means even more challenges! 😊

This week’s reading is a bit longer. Two pages. Katharine Brooks is writing about “linear thinking”. As you read her example, you might consider how linear thinking with vocation, calling and careers is like predicting the weather: it works, sometimes. Like predicting the weather, linear career thinking is most effective in the short term. For example, I can tell you that accounting majors are truly likely to get accounting jobs when they graduate, but their careers are likely to shift over time. I was a chemistry major, and my first job after college was “Industrial Chemist”. Predicting next week’s weather is much more difficult.

Eric

Does your vocation connect to your major?

From “You Majored in What?” by Katharine Brooks

It starts so innocently. Someone asks you what your major is, so you tell them. There’s a slight pause. Then comes THE QUESTION:

“What are you going to do with that?”

OK, think fast.
“I’m going to law school, you say, even though you aren’t really sure you want to, but it sure sounds good. Or “I’m thinking about med school,” even though you have no interest in science classes.

The questioner’s face relaxes; maybe the person even smiles, and pat’s you on the shoulder, and says, “Wow, that’s great!”

And that’s how the lie begins...

Do you feel sometimes there’s a cosmic joke at work? That you chose this really interesting major but now you’re wondering, was it worth it? Or perhaps you’re just starting college and THE QUESTION is already making you nervous.

THE PRESSURE OF THE LINEAR PATH

The problem behind THE QUESTION is that it assumes a linear path between your major and your career. And the lure of the linear path is powerful. It’s embedded in our thinking. From the time you played with fire trucks and people asked you if you wanted to be a firefighter, linear paths to careers have been assumed to be the natural state of things. So it seems only logical that you would pursue a major that would become your ultimate career. Business majors go into business. Engineering majors become engineers, philosophy majors become…?

Hmmm...

Your parents would probably be thrilled if you had a glitch-free linear path from school to work all worked out. You know, “I’m studying accounting so I can be an accountant,” or “I’m going to be an English major so I can teach English.” You might be secretly relieved as well.
Whatever your reason for pursuing your major, you, like many others, are probably struggling with THE QUESTION: What do I do with this degree? Where is my linear path?

To help you envision such a path, here’s a list of the actual careers of some graduates, drawn from alumni surveys from three institutions. Note the relatively direct relationship between their majors and their careers.

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<th>MAJOR</th>
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<td>Art</td>
<td>Cartoonist</td>
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<td>Teaching English as a second language in Korea</td>
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<td>Veterinarian</td>
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<td>Classics/Archaeology</td>
<td>Latin teacher</td>
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<td>MTV program developer</td>
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<td>Bond trader on Wall Street</td>
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<td>Editor, textbook publisher</td>
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<tr>
<td>French and Spanish</td>
<td>Foreign Service Officer</td>
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<td>Geography</td>
<td>High school geography teacher</td>
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<td>Government</td>
<td>Special prosecutor, district attorney’s office</td>
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<tr>
<td>Political Science</td>
<td>Republican National Committee PR staff</td>
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<td>Psychotherapist</td>
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<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>Minister, single adults program</td>
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Can you see the linear relationship that exists between a major and a career? The symmetry between the job duties and the use of the graduates’ skills? The English major is using her writing skills. The psychology major is helping people. The economics major is working on Wall Street. It’s reassuring, isn’t it? Not only can you get a job, your job can be directly related to your major.

There’s only one problem with the list: it’s all wrong. These are the actual careers of graduates with those majors:

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Oops.

Is something wrong here? No, something’s actually right. Clearly, reality doesn’t always match up to that traditional linear career path. These graduates, whether by design or by accident, have channeled the real, deep value of their academic and life experiences, and taken them beyond traditional thinking.

The linear career path hasn’t disappeared. Some psychology majors do become psychologists and some English majors become English professors. But linear thinking can keep you from thinking broadly about your options and being open-minded to new opportunities.
On Work (and vocation)

from "Letters to my Son" by Kent Nerburn

No matter how much you might believe that your work is nothing more than what you do to make money, your work makes you who you are, because it is where you put your time.

I remember several years ago when I was intent upon building my reputation as a sculptor. I took a job driving a cab, because, as I told people, "I want some job that I will never confuse with a profession." Yet within six months, I was talking like a cab driver, thinking like a cab driver, looking at the world through the eyes of a cab driver. My anecdotes came from my job, as did my observations about life. I became embroiled in the personalities and politics of the company for which I worked and developed the habits and rhythms of life that went along with my all-night driving shift. On the days when I did not drive and instead worked on my sculpture, I still carried the consciousness of a cab driver with me.

Whether I liked it or not, I was a cab driver.

This happens to anyone who takes a job. Even if you hate a job and keep a distance from it, you are defining yourself in opposition to the job by resisting it. By giving the job your time, you are giving it your consciousness. And it will, in turn, fill your life with the reality that it presents.

Many people ignore this fact. They choose a profession because it seems exciting, or because they can make a lot of money, or because it has some prestige in their minds. They commit themselves to their work, but slowly find themselves feeling restless and empty. The time they have to spend on their work begins to hang heavy on their hands, and soon they feel constricted and trapped.

They join the legions of humanity who Thoreau said lead lives of quiet desperation - unfulfilled, unhappy and uncertain of what to do.

Yet the lure of financial security and the fear of the unknown keep them from acting to change their lives, and their best energies are spent creating justifications for staying where they are or inventing activities outside of work that they hope will provide them with a sense of meaning.

But these efforts can never be totally successful. We are what we do, and the more we do it, the more we become it. The only way out is to change our lives or to change our expectations for our lives. And if we lower our expectations we are killing our dreams, and a person without dreams is already half dead.

So you need to choose your work carefully. You need to look beyond the external measurements of prestige and money and glamour to see what you will be doing on a day-to-day, hour-to-hour, minute-to-minute basis to see if that is how you want to spend your time. Time may not be the way you measure the value of your work, but it is the way you experience it.

What you need to do is think of work as "vocation." This word may seem stilted in its tone, but it has a wisdom within it. It comes from the Latin word for calling, which comes from the word for voice. In those meanings it touches on what work really should be. It should be something that calls to you as something you want to do, and it should be something that gives voice to who you are and what you want to say to the world.

So a true vocation calls to you to perform it and it allows your life to speak. This is very different from work, which is just an exchange of labor for money. It is even very different from a profession, which is an area of expertise you have been sanctioned to represent.

A vocation is something you feel compelled to do, or at least something that fills you with a sense of meaning. It is something you choose because of what it allows you to say with your life, not because of the money it pays you or the way it will make you appear to others. It is, above all else, something that lets you love.

When you find a vocation, embrace it with your whole heart. Few people are so lucky. They begin their search for work with an eye to the wrong prize, so when they win, they win something of little value. They gain money or prestige, but they lose their hearts. Eventually their days become nothing more than a commodity that they exchange for money, and they begin to shrivel and die.
I often think of a man I met on the streets of Cleveland. He was an assembly-line worker in an automobile plant. He said his work was so hateful that he could barely stand to get up in the morning. I asked him why he didn't quit. "I've only got thirteen more years to go to retirement," he answered. And he meant it. His life had so gotten away from him that he was willing to accept a thirteen-year death sentence for his spirit rather than give up the security it earned.

When I spoke with him I was about twenty. I was young and free; I didn't understand what he was saying at all. It seemed incomprehensible to me that a man could have become so defeated by life that he was willing to let his life die as he held it in his hands.

Now I understand too well. Lured by what had seemed like big money at the time, he had chosen a job that didn't offer him any inner satisfaction. He lived a good life, rolling from paycheck to paycheck and getting the car or the boat that he had always dreamed of having. Year by year he advanced, because businesses reward perseverance. His salary went up, his options for other types of employment went down, and he settled into a routine that financed his life. He married, bought a house, had children, and grew into middle age. The job that had seemed like freedom when he was young became a deadening routine. Year by year he began to hate it. It choked him, but he had no means of escape. He needed its money to live; no job he might change to would pay him as much as he was currently making. His fear for the health and security of his family kept him from breaking free into a world where all things were possible but no things were paid for, and so he gave in.

"I've only got thirteen more years to retirement" was a prisoner's way of counting the days until the job would release him.

Most people's lives are a variation on that theme. So few take the time when they are young to explore the real meaning of the jobs they are taking or to consider the real implications of the occupations to which they are committing their lives.

Some have no choice. Without money, without training, with the pressures of life building around them, they choose the best alternative that offers itself. But many others just fail to see clearly. They chase false dreams, and fall into traps they could have avoided if they had listened more closely to their hearts when choosing their life's work.

But even if you listen closely to your heart, making the right choice is difficult. You can't really know what it is you want to do by thinking about it. You have to do it and see how it fits. You have to let the work take you over until it becomes you and you become it; then you have to decide whether to embrace it or abandon it. And few have the courage to abandon something that defines their security and prosperity.

Yet there is no reason why a person cannot have two, three or more careers in the course of a life. There is no reason why a person can't abandon a job that does not fit anymore and strike out into the unknown for something that lies closer to the heart. There is risk, there is loss, and there likely will be privation. If you have allowed your job to define your sense of self-worth, there may even be a crisis of identity. But no amount of security is worth the suffering of a life lived chained to a routine that has killed all your dreams.

You must never forget that to those who hire you, your labor is a commodity. You are paid because you provide a service that is useful. If the service you provide is no longer needed, it doesn't matter how honorable, how diligent, how committed you have been in your work. If what you can contribute is no longer needed, you are no longer needed and you will be let go. Even if you've committed your life to the job, you are, at heart, a part of the commercial exchange, and you are valuable only so long as you are a significant contributor to that commercial exchange. It is nothing personal; it's just the nature of economic transaction.

So it does not pay to tie yourself to a job that kills your love of life. The job will abandon you if it has to. You can abandon the job if you have to.

The man I met in Cleveland may have been laid off the year before he was due to retire. He may have lost his pension because of a legal detail he never knew existed. He may have died on the assembly line while waiting to put a bolt in a fender.

I once had a professor who dreamed of being a concert pianist. Fearing the possibility of failure, he went into academics where the work was secure and the money was predictable. One day, when I was talking to him about my unhappiness in my graduate studies, he walked over and sat down at his piano. He played a beautiful glissando and then, abruptly, stopped. "Do what is in your heart," he said. "I really only wanted to be a concert pianist. Now I spend every day wondering how good I might have been."

Don't let this be your epitaph at the end of your working life. Find out what it is that burns in your heart and do it. Choose a vocation, not a job, and you will be at peace. Take a job instead of finding a vocation, and eventually you will find yourself saying, "I've only got thirteen more years to retirement," or "I spend every day wondering how good I might have been."

We all owe ourselves better than that.