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As recently as the mid 1990s, a search of available electronic databases under the titles “spirituality and work” or “spirituality and corporations” or “holiness and marketplace” yielded few hits. Today even a cursory examination of Amazon.com under similar entries yields a plethora of works, literally thousands. The last two decades have seen significant attention to connecting spirituality and working lives. Loving Work is a pleasant entry in this field.

The author has crafted a pastoral book that could assist individuals seeking to discover more deeply who they are through finding their life vocations. Mike Hayes, a former sports journalist and current university campus minister, achieves his purpose, for people in the early stages of establishing life’s work. While the author suggests that his personal story-telling, insights, and references could also assist those anticipating retirement, he overreaches. The examples Hayes uses to illustrate the point that discovering who we are truly called to be is integral to discovering life work are confined to early stage working experiences. That is not to detract from the validity of the insights Hayes offers but to dispute their scope.

Hayes writes that he discovered that his own calling was to be inspirational. Of everything he did in his young career, he found the greatest satisfaction when he was able to inspire others. Accordingly, he has turned being inspirational into a career—in spiritual direction, retreat work, writing, and simply being with students. A strength of Hayes’ brief book is the obvious passion he experiences in his ministry and his conviction that his vocational journey—from being a sports journalist and radio program producer for a major national sports radio station to being a campus minister—is illustrative of how vocational discernment may occur.

Throughout the book, as Hayes encourages others to similarly discover and follow their true callings, appropriate and helpful illustrations are drawn from Gospel incidents in Jesus’ life and from masters of the spiritual life, such as Ignatius and Merton. But the book is not a systematic exploration of either Christian scriptural or ethical insight into work. Others have done that, ranging from such diverse perspectives as Wolf in Work in the Spirit: Toward a Theology of Work (2001) to Novak in Business as a Calling: Work and the Examined Life (1996) to Hahnenberg in Christian Vocation: A Theology of Christian Call (2010). An ongoing and excellent publication by the National Center for the Laity, Initiatives, provides a bi-monthly update of news and publications around the topic of work/spirituality/faith/marketplace (http://www.catholiclabor.org/NCL.htm).

Hayes’ contribution to this broader field of work as a calling is modest, mostly a self-help book that should resonate with younger adults as they ask deeper questions about their working lives.

But within this limited audience, I believe Hayes ignores a contemporary reality that challenges his narration. Mostly Hayes seems to suggest that in discernment, one will likely discover her true self in fields and activities
other than her current occupation. Hayes’ personal journey moved from a desirable position at a major sport media outlet (he enjoys telling stories of brushing shoulders with famous athletes, such as Michael Jordan) to being the founder and developer of the young adult oriented web site, BustedHalo.com, to his present campus ministry position in Buffalo, NY.

But the reality of the contemporary job market (and likely the market for some years to come) is that landing one job, let alone leaving a job to seek vocational fulfillment, is far more difficult than the author seems to intimate—especially if the young person would seek to follow Hayes into a vocation working in lay ecclesial ministry. Authentic vocational discernment attends to not only skills, desires, and self-fulfillment but also to discovering who God calls us to be within our circumstances. Often times Jesus told those whom he had healed to remain where they already were. The greater vocational challenge is to manifest the sacred within the existing stations of our working life. Or as the Second Vatican Council stated in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church: “And so, worshipping everywhere by their holy actions, the laity consecrate the world itself to God” (34). This consecration clearly includes the working environments within which individuals daily discover their callings.

It would have been helpful if more of Hayes’ narrative addressed those who must discover their road to holiness within existing working circumstances, or as the author stated in his preface, “The larger question is whether the work we do is loving.” Ultimately, that is the question. That said, Hayes’ book would be an excellent resource for any young adult group.