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The Summoned Self

By **DAVID BROOKS**

This is a column about two ways of thinking about your life. The first is what you might call the Well-Planned Life. It was nicely described by Clayton Christensen in the current issue of the Harvard Business Review, in [an essay](#) based on a recent commencement talk.

Christensen advised the students to invest a lot of time when they are young in finding a clear purpose for their lives. “When I was a Rhodes scholar,” he recalls, “I was in a very demanding academic program, trying to cram an extra year’s worth of work into my time at Oxford. I decided to spend an hour every night reading, thinking, and praying about why God put me on this earth.

“That was a very challenging commitment to keep, because every hour I spent doing that, I wasn’t studying applied econometrics. I was conflicted about whether I could really afford to take that time away from my studies, but I stuck with it — and ultimately figured out the purpose of my life.”

Once you have come up with an overall purpose, he continues, you have to make decisions about allocating your time, energy and talent. Christensen, who is a professor at the Harvard Business School and the author of several widely admired books, notes that people with a high need for achievement commonly misallocate their resources.

If they have a spare half-hour, they devote it to things that will yield tangible and near-term accomplishments. These almost invariably involve something at work — closing a sale, finishing a paper.

“In contrast,” he adds, “investing time and energy in your relationship with your spouse and children typically doesn’t offer that same immediate sense of achievement. ... It’s not until 20 years down the road that you can put your hands on your hips and say, ‘I raised a good son or a good daughter.’” As a result, the things that are most important often get short shrift.

Christensen is a serious Christian. At university, he was the starting center on his basketball team and refused to play in the championship game of an important tournament because it

was scheduled for a Sunday. But he combines a Christian spirit with business methodology. In plotting out a personal and spiritual life, he applies the models and theories he developed as a strategist. He emphasizes finding the right metrics, efficiently allocating resources and thinking about marginal costs.

When he is done, life comes to appear as a well-designed project, carefully conceived in the beginning, reviewed and adjusted along the way and brought toward a well-rounded fruition.

The second way of thinking about your life might be called the Summoned Life. This mode of thinking starts from an entirely different perspective. Life isn't a project to be completed; it is an unknowable landscape to be explored. A 24-year-old can't sit down and define the purpose of life in the manner of a school exercise because she is not yet deep enough into the landscape to know herself or her purpose. That young person — or any person — can't see into the future to know what wars, loves, diseases and chances may loom. She may know concepts, like parenthood or old age, but she doesn't really understand their meanings until she is engaged in them.

Moreover, people who think in this mode are skeptical that business models can be applied to other realms of life. Business is about making choices that maximize utility. But the most important features of the human landscape are commitments that precede choice — commitments to family, nation, faith or some cause. These commitments defy the logic of cost and benefit, investment and return.

The person leading the Well-Planned Life emphasizes individual agency, and asks, "What should I do?" The person leading the Summoned Life emphasizes the context, and asks, "What are my circumstances asking me to do?"

The person leading the Summoned Life starts with a very concrete situation: I'm living in a specific year in a specific place facing specific problems and needs. At this moment in my life, I am confronted with specific job opportunities and specific options. The important questions are: What are these circumstances summoning me to do? What is needed in this place? What is the most useful social role before me?

These are questions answered primarily by sensitive observation and situational awareness, not calculation and long-range planning.

In America, we have been taught to admire the lone free agent who creates new worlds. But for the person leading the Summoned Life, the individual is small and the context is large. Life comes to a point not when the individual project is complete but when the self dissolves into a larger purpose and cause.

The first vision is more American. The second vision is more common elsewhere. But they are both probably useful for a person trying to live a well-considered life.