

INTRODUCTION

It is a signal honor to introduce this edition of Frank Parsons' classic work, *Choosing a Vocation*. This reprint of his original work recognizes the 80th anniversary of its first publication in 1909 and highlights the recognition he is receiving this year from the guidance community.

For many career counselors, however, the name "Frank Parsons" is shrouded in mystery. True, he is cited in the literature as the "father of vocational guidance" in much the same way that his chronological counterparts Henry Ford and the Wright Brothers are given credit for the development of the automobile and the airplane. But, too little is known about Frank Parsons today and the need to fill that void prompted the republication of this book.

Frank Parsons was born in Mount Holly, New Jersey on November 14, 1854. Indeed, when he was born there were many who had lived fully as long as the "United States of America." At the age of 15, Parsons enrolled in Cornell University and graduated three years later with a degree in engineering. More important, perhaps, than his engineering degree was the encouragement Parsons received at Cornell to try new ideas and the good that they can create for people. The young Parsons went to work in the railroad industry but his career was cut short by the depression of 1873 and he was forced to work as a laborer. As conditions improved, he located a job teaching art, mathematics, history, and French in Southbridge, Massachusetts.

After teaching six years, Parsons accepted the urgings

of a local judge to take up the study of law with him, the customary method of preparing for the field in those days. For the next few years, he pursued his legal studies and in 1881 passed the Massachusetts bar examination with what were reportedly the highest scores in 12 years. This was also the midpoint of Parsons' life and he was yet to enter the field for which he is known today.

Parsons practiced law for a number of years and even made an unsuccessful try at running for mayor of Boston. He taught law courses for many years at Boston University and for this reason was often referred to as "Professor Parsons" in his later years.

In the late 1890s, Parsons taught for two years at what is now Kansas State University and at the short-lived Ruskin College in Missouri. He maintained his teaching ties with Boston University, however, even while in the midwest.

The turn of the century heralded an intensive period of innovation and publication which established his role in the history of guidance in the United States. Between 1905 and his untimely death at age 54 on September 26, 1908, Parsons turned his full attention to developing the core of the vocational guidance movement in Boston. He had packed an eventful career lifetime into his first years—engineer, laborer, high school teacher, lawyer, politician, professor, author—and now used this to help young people and adults to make intelligent career choices. Many might consider him unqualified to counsel, based upon today's standards. But, in those days, there were no undergraduate courses in tests and measurements or personnel techniques or graduate programs in counseling and guidance.

Parsons wanted to influence and be a part of the social, economic, and political changes going on in his era. He was a passionate and active participant in the events of his day. For many in America, life was hard and suitable work was both difficult to obtain and difficult to execute. Given the rigors of life it was far too glib to refer to the 1890s as the

“Gay 90s” and too easy to lose track of the plight of most Americans while the media was euphoric over “America’s emergence as a world power” after the successful (from our standpoint) Spanish American War. Consider the facts that Frank Parsons worked before personnel departments began to spring up in American businesses in the 1910s, before a few dozen counselors met to form the first guidance association in 1913, before Social Security emerged in the 1930s to give many a reasonable chance for a life after work, and before the expansion of higher education in the 1940s greatly increased chances for upward mobility in our society.

But, back to Boston at the turn of the century. The settlement house movement was in full swing when the Civic Service House was opened in Boston in 1901. Shortly after, Parsons was invited to head up a sort of workers institute. Today, we might call it a continuing education center but then it was graced with the more earthy “Breadwinner’s Institute.” Between 1905 and 1908, hundreds of adults passed through its doors and a high proportion were aided in the process. Based upon the success of this effort, in January 1908 Parsons renamed the institute the “Vocational Bureau of the Civic Service House.” It was privately funded. His work at the Bureau led to Parsons’ book—this book—*Choosing a Vocation*, which was actually published in 1909 after his death.

For those interested in more details on Parsons’ life, two highly recommended works are *Frank Parsons—Prophet, Innovator, Counselor* by Howard V. Davis (a book published in 1969 by the Southern Illinois University Press) and “The Counselor as a Prophet: Frank Parsons, 1854-1908” by Richard M. Gummere, Jr. (an article which appeared in the May 1988 issue of the *Journal of Counseling and Development*).

Looking back over time, one can easily sense that Parsons’ ideas, his methods, and his concern for career

development for all people represent thinking far beyond the scope of his day and provided a framework modified over the years by counselors to focus their work today. Here are a few examples selected from this book.

1. An emphasis on the scientific method in career decision making. (Chapter 1)
2. A clear statement of purpose:
“In the wise choice of a vocation, there are three broad factors: (1) a clear understanding of yourself, your aptitudes, abilities, interests, ambitions, resources, limitations, and their causes; (2) a knowledge of the requirements and conditions of success, advantages and disadvantages, compensation, opportunities, and prospects in different lines of work; (3) true reasoning in the relations of these two groups of facts.” (page 5)
3. A clear outline of how to proceed with the purpose of vocational guidance in a logical method (Chapter 5)
4. A logical classification of industries. (Chapter 7)
5. A proposed counselor preparation program. (Chapter 13)
6. A series of case studies for those who want illustrations. (Chapter 15)
7. Finally, for those who want to be reassured about the concept that individuals should be allowed to make their own decisions, Parsons has this to say:
“The Bureau does not attempt to decide for any boy what occupation he should choose, but aims to help him investigate the subject and come to a conclusion on his own account, that is much more likely to be valid and useful than if no effort were made to apply scientific methods to the problem. Our mottoes are Light, Information, Inspiration, Cooperation.” (page 92)

I invite a new generation of counselors to share in the joy and inspiration by reading Frank Parsons in the original. Read for the big ideas. Try not to focus on some of the gender problems and the few peculiar approaches of

Parsons. Read *Choosing a Vocation* in the context of 1908 and see how much of it makes sense to you today. Search diligently for the long term truths and the meaning and application of Parsons' ideas to your work today. For your reading, I wish you a full measure of the vision, forethought, and compelling sense of good will toward all people which characterizes the work of Frank Parsons.

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