



Michaela O'Donnell: ([00:03](#))

The whole aim of this process is really to move from stuck to unstuck. It's not to get super clear on everything for your life's journey. It's not to figure out and take inventory on all your giftedness, but it's to move from stuck to unstuck. And the more I've listened to people, Jo, we get stuck. Sometimes, it's big stuff. "What am I doing for work?" Sometimes it's the little stuff. "How might I adjust this little part of a program I'm leading."

Joanna Meyer: ([00:28](#))

You're listening to the Faith and Work podcast, where we explore what it means to serve God and neighbor and society through our daily work.

Joanna Meyer: ([00:38](#))

Hi, and welcome to the Faith and Work podcast. My name's Joanna Meyer and I'm the Director of Public Engagement at Denver Institute for Faith and Work. I'm joined today for the first appearance on the podcast by Jeff Hoffmeyer, affectionately known as Hoff, our new Vice-President of Advancement. Hi, Hoff.

Jeff Hoffmeyer: ([00:55](#))

Hi, Jo. How's it going?

Joanna Meyer: ([00:56](#))

Good. It's a chilly Wednesday morning here in the Denver area, but I am so, so excited about our conversation today. Before we get too far along, I would love to give you a chance to introduce yourself to our listeners. Tell us a little bit about your background and what you'll be doing at Denver Institute.

Jeff Hoffmeyer: ([01:14](#))

Well, I have to say, Jo, I've been dreaming of this moment ever since I took this job two months ago at Denver Institute because as soon as I found out about this job, I've been binging on this podcast and so...

Joanna Meyer: ([01:24](#))

Oh, fun.

Jeff Hoffmeyer: ([01:25](#))

... I feel like I'm with a celebrity now just to be doing this with you. But I've been working at Denver Institute for a couple months. So, I'm leading fundraising at Denver Institute, which I'm really excited about. I've been a pastor for 15 years, so this is a vocational shift will make it all the more exciting for me to listen to what Michaela has to say about being stuck in work and making those transitions. But really being a pastor is about listening and about connecting people to God's story and that's a lot of the work



I'm going to be doing with all of our very generous donors at Denver Institute. So, so glad to be a part of this team with you and others, and really excited for this conversation today.

Joanna Meyer: ([02:09](#))

Yeah. I think I say this every episode that I'm excited, but I am so, so excited to talk to today's guest. We'll be talking to my friend Michaela O'Donnell. She is an entrepreneur, an academic, and an organizational leader. She recently a book on work and calling and I've read a lot of books on work and calling and in my humble opinion, when it comes to really understanding this dynamic and what it looks like to navigate the complexities of a changing world of work, Michaela really gets it and she offers some really practical solutions. Not formulas, but habits that can help us be more resilient when we face challenges and work in a very practical process that we can walk through in both big to small ways to better steward our gifts and understanding our calling. And what that actually means in today's work world. Would you introduce us to Michaela, Hoff?

Jeff Hoffmeyer: ([02:57](#))

Well, Michaela O'Donnell, she's a rock star, so just a bit about her. She's the Executive Director of Fuller Seminars De Pree Center for Leadership. She completed a PhD at Fuller in Practical Theology and she focused on practices that contribute to the formation of entrepreneurs. And as you just mentioned, Jo, she recently wrote a book called, *Make Work Matter: Your Guide to Meaningful Work Within A Changing World*. She's the co-founder and CEO of Long Winter Media. She's a teacher, a strategist. She's a consultant who presents on the topic of vocation, career and leadership to diverse audiences.

Jeff Hoffmeyer: ([03:36](#))

So, Michaela, welcome, so excited to have you. And really your book could not have had come at a more, I don't know, crucial time. A lot going on in our country around work, but particularly this thing called the great resignation. Around 4.3 million people have quit their jobs since August. That's 2.9% of the workforce. Michaela, what is going on and why are so many people leaving their jobs?

Michaela O'Donnell: ([04:05](#))

Well, that is quite the question, Jeff, we can certainly get into that. But first let me just say hi and thanks for having me. I am such a giant fan of the work of the Denver Institute for Faith and Work. And I think I have made myself an honorary president of Joanna Meyer's fan club, so it's really a treat to be with you both today, so thanks for having me.

Michaela O'Donnell: ([04:26](#))

Yeah, the whole, the great resignation, record numbers of people quitting their jobs, quite the phenomenon, I think depending on who you're talking to. Some folks would say, "Well, this is really just the evolution of what's already been," or anytime over the last 10 years, you probably could do a quick



Google search, "How many people don't like their jobs? How many people are disengaged with work?" And you would get statistics, honestly, anywhere between 40 and 80%.

Michaela O'Donnell: [\(04:52\)](#)

The thing that makes this moment really unique and something to call out is that people are moving from not just disliking their jobs or feeling disengaged, but actually thinking about quitting their jobs. So, it begs the question like, "What's this all about and why are so many people thinking about quitting their jobs and why are we starting to see record number of people actually take action on that?"

Michaela O'Donnell: [\(05:16\)](#)

A couple things. One, I think that the pandemic, it really did upend and turned upside down so on much of how we do life, right? And for a large swath of time, which varies based on where you're at, but here in Los Angeles, it was a very large swath of time, you were confined your home and you were asking questions. You're asking questions about, "Okay, what am I doing and who am I doing it with? And what am I putting my shoulder to everyday?" So, some of these bigger questions are starting to surface.

Michaela O'Donnell: [\(05:46\)](#)

But the other thing that that's happening is there's a lot of systems and particular industries that aren't necessarily easy to work in, right? You think about a restaurant industry and often, you're getting a lack of access to healthcare, other benefits. You're getting long hours. You're getting unpredictable wages. So now, you've got an economy where there's potentially more mobility and you're having people say, "This might be a time to make a change." So, I think that it's complex and it's contextual in terms of why all these folks are actually quitting their jobs.

Michaela O'Donnell: [\(06:22\)](#)

But that it ranges from, "I really want what I do to feel a little better. I want my boss not to be so toxic. I would love to work from home," to "This whole thing I'm doing just is not sustainable. And now, there's many more possibilities in adjacent industries. Let me go try something else on for a size." And there's probably more than that, Jeff, but let me just start there.

Joanna Meyer: [\(06:46\)](#)

Yeah. I think reality of people not having to commute, alone, people have found that that dramatically increases their quality of life. And so, the thought that an employer would expect them to commute five days a week and sometimes a long drive into work just isn't even palatable for some people anymore.

Michaela O'Donnell: [\(07:03\)](#)

Yeah. One more thing there. I saw an article. It was a few weeks ago at this point that Amazon, and it was the latest major tech company to say, "Okay, everybody work from home permanently." Right? And that saves them a bunch of office space, but here's the caveat, Jo, is, is that right after I read that article, I kid



you not, I went outside to pick something up and saw the Amazon driver driving back, driving down our block. And I had this realization that not everybody gets to work from home. You can't deliver packages or packed boxes from home. So, there's a class divide that is going to happen and has been happening there.

Michaela O'Donnell: [\(07:37\)](#)

So, it certainly is a privilege really, and myself included in this. It's a privileged thing to be able to say, "Yeah, I want my quality of life to go up and I want to be able to work from home." And at the same time, this is where I think our duty, if you will as people of faith, is to also think about industries and jobs in which, okay, we can't just say, "Why don't you deliver packages from sitting in your home office." There's some complex realities there.

Joanna Meyer: [\(08:02\)](#)

So, Michaela, I wanted to ask a little bit about your own experience. Because you have spent years dialoging with people about their jobs, figuring out maybe how they feel, just dissatisfied. People who feel stuck in their roles as if what they're doing isn't a fit. And I know that's reflective of your own career journey at times. And so, I wondered how your personal experience has informed both your work at Fuller and the book you've written.

Michaela O'Donnell: [\(08:26\)](#)

Yeah. That's a great question. I work at the Max De Pree Center for Leadership at Fuller seminary and a couple of years ago, we started a program that is now called The Road Ahead. And we started this program. I had the fancy idea that we were going to teach people to be more entrepreneurial. And this will, I promise you link back to your question. And I was like, "Okay, if the church could teach people to be more entrepreneurial, that would be something really cool. That'd be a great gift. We have all these ideas out there. I'm an entrepreneur at heart. Let's do that." And so, I got a couple of really willing people, who are willing to come and do something very messy, very beta-E, and just show up.

Michaela O'Donnell: [\(09:05\)](#)

And it was on night two of our time together that I realized, "These people do not want to be more entrepreneurial. That is not what they were coming in here for." They're coming here because they feel stuck. They feel stuck in some way, shape or form. They don't quite know what to do next. They're wondering what God might be saying and they feel they have been doing all the networking stuff and the professional things. But it's not quite working out for them or their peers are advancing faster than they are and they just need some space to process that. They need some space to discern what might be next.

Michaela O'Donnell: [\(09:38\)](#)



And so, we actually ended up rebuilding those groups around moments of stuck-ness. And that ended up being a good fit for me because I have had so many of these own moments in my career trajectory. The biggest one was probably right after grad school. I got a degree in Theology and I actually graduated in the middle of the great recession. And as it turns out, Theology is not a very marketable skill in the middle of a recessed economy. Learned that one fast and the hard way. And yet, there I was, a newly married person and both of us, we're really trying to figure pay rent. And my husband had the same degree I did, so we had two Theology degrees and Los Angeles rent, and it was just, it wasn't in the cards and we were stuck. We didn't really know what to do next.

Michaela O'Donnell: ([10:26](#))

And I took a job doing data entry for my aunt, which was a really merciful opportunity, right? She just, she gave me this opportunity and it required me quite literally to insert forms into a typewriter, line up the processing, and type that. And not everybody would know my personality type, but that is not exactly the best fit for my personality type. That is a very precise job and I want to be creative and relational and explorative. And yet, there was a ton of mercy in that opportunity because it allowed us to pay our rent.

Michaela O'Donnell: ([11:02](#))

And it was out of that moment of stuck-ness that ended up leading to a series of steps to reform the company, a series of other steps where I went back to study vocation and how we might kind of help other people as the church and as Christian leaders deal with stuck-ness. So, yeah, this stuff is it's real for me, Jo.

Jeff Hoffmeyer: ([11:22](#))

Michaela, just a couple of things I love about that. I mean, one as an ENFJ on Myers-Briggs, you just mentioned personality types. You're really honoring feelings in work. These are important and also just, so much of our identity comes from our work and clearly that's part of your story you're articulating. Work can be, it's such an individual personal thing, but a lot of your work and a lot of what you write about in your book, you're really bringing out some larger changes that are happening within the fabric of our society.

Jeff Hoffmeyer: ([11:57](#))

So, this kind of gets us into the meat of your work. You've identified four key dynamics or postures that we can adopt, any of us, just to help us navigate that stuck-ness or any kind of changes, so can you share with our listeners about those four postures?

Joanna Meyer: ([12:17](#))

Yeah, I will. But even before that, I want to pick up on something you said, which is just, yeah, we've got a lot of feelings about work. And I think that even just saying that is surprising to some of us, because



work is a thing we do and it's, we're supposed to be great at. And part of it is because of what you said, Jeff, we make a lot of sense of ourselves through what we do. It's the very first question we ask people when we're getting to know them. You go to a party and it's like, "Hey, what do you do? What do you do?"

Joanna Meyer: ([12:46](#))

And what we mean is, "What is your paid work?" And when people are not in seasons of paid work or their work is unpaid, because they're caring for home or children, it actually can end up being and they can feel the awkwardness or the tension right there. So, we do, I think for better and oftentimes for worse, define each other and ourselves in terms of work. And as it turns out, that's a lot of pressure to put on work. I'm not sure that's work's job.

Joanna Meyer: ([13:15](#))

I'm not sure that's what the Bible says about work, right? Work is good and holy in a way to participate in what God is doing and work comes before the fall. And therefore it is, of God. And I think, I really do think it's a gift to humans, but as the soul container that we make space of ourselves, that's actually a distinctively American phenomenon. I've seen a series of articles come out over the last several months in The Atlantic, in the New York Times.

Joanna Meyer: ([13:41](#))

And one brilliant journalist titled it "Workism." It's like it's this thing. It's like we worship at the altar of work. And what that means is when things don't work out, it's not just that our work doesn't work out or that we don't get a pay raise. It's all of a sudden these questions of like, "Who am I and where do I belong? And what's my purpose?" Start to come front and center in ways that feel really, they feel really discomfiting and disconcerting. And so, I think the first thing is just to make a lot of space for those feelings that you named, Jeff. Work has a lot of feelings.

Jeff Hoffmeyer: ([14:19](#))

And just to jump in, I mean, if we're stuck in our work then, and if we're deriving so much identity from work to the point of we're worshiping our work, then that stuck-ness takes over a lot more than just those 40 or 50 hours of our life. That becomes really a personal crisis.

Michaela O'Donnell: ([14:38](#))

Absolutely, and I actually think we've seen that. And I think the many conversations I've had with people would affirm what you just said is that there's a lot of crisis that comes up. And so, the task then is ironically in order to move forward in our work, it's like we've got to relocate where the meaning and identity and sense of purpose. We got to extract that a bit from work into the whole of life that God has for us, the Christian community, and aligning with God in our relationships and the kind of things that we put our hearts and head and hands to outside of our paid work.



Michaela O'Donnell: ([15:17](#))

And as we start to fill out a whole life, because we're whole people. Like you said, we take our stuff and we go have crisis, and the rest. We take our stuff from work and we go have crisis in the rest of our lives. Well, if we have things that are healthy in the rest of our lives, how might that feed back into our expectations on work? Okay, some of the pressure is off, which is ironically, having some of that pressure off helps us start to think about how to get a bit more clarity and sense of direction and next steps when we feel stuck. So, at the core of what it means to wrestle with it is actually to widen the view and think about our sense of meaning, our sense of identity in terms of not just work.

Jeff Hoffmeyer: ([15:58](#))

Right. Yeah.

Joanna Meyer: ([16:00](#))

Michaela thinking about this just has me reaching for the antacids, which is why I think your work is so important. And one of the things I appreciated is that you strike a real lovely balance in your book between giving people a to-do list of like, "Take this personality assessment and boom, this is the occupation you should be in." And the far contrast of that, sometimes when we talk about calling in the faith and work community, it can be very abstract in esoteric, just a theological treatise on what it looks to be called.

Joanna Meyer: ([16:32](#))

And you actually provide a very human process for navigating both the tensions that people feel related to their work and being able to take small steps forward. And I wondered if you could tell us a little bit more about the process that you have developed and especially, how have we fallen astray for maybe how God would have us discern calling?

Michaela O'Donnell: ([16:55](#))

Yeah. I think that's really good. So, a lot on calling, I think and before going to calling, I want to go back to something that I didn't answer that Jeff asked because I got very excited about feelings. So, let me start there. I know, I know. Let me start there and then, because I think it's a good setup for this.

Michaela O'Donnell: ([17:12](#))

And that is, "What does the world look right now? What are the dynamics that we're trying to make sense of our lives and our works within?" And in the book that I wrote, there's four that I've named. And these probably aren't the only four. You might listen to them, you want to add three more and/or one of them might feel very right to you. But the first one is that we've traded static career paths for dynamic ones.



Michaela O'Donnell: ([17:39](#))

Reid Hoffman, the founder of LinkedIn has an image in a book he wrote called, *The Startup Of You*. It's actually an older book now, but where he describes a career path kind of like an escalator, right? It's like it's going up at a predictable rate, one step at a time. You get on that escalator when you're early in career and then eventually, you get off that escalator. And you might even have a gold watch and a pension, right? And these days not many people are getting escalator career paths. Instead, it's much more like riding down whitewater rapids in a kayak. Trying to traverse this and that and yet still take this journey, number one, so we've traded static career paths for dynamic ones.

Michaela O'Donnell: ([18:21](#))

Second is, which is interesting to say, but I think one of the basic task in this age, in this time of work is to prepare to be unprepared. That's it. Change is our constant companion. If we are people riding down a river on a kayak, then we're going to hit bumps. We might even fall in the water. And living in denial about that reality isn't going to help us traverse down the rapids. Right? So, just to be unprepared. Expect for change to be our constant companion.

Michaela O'Donnell: ([18:54](#))

The third one is sobering, but I'm going to say it anyway, and that's that we've got to navigate our own way forward. No one else is going to do it for us. I sit with a lot of people who are like, "I just, I got all this well-meaning career advice and it's just not panning out." And it's like, "Yeah." Because again, things are changing and a lot of people are consumed understandably so in their own path. And so, so much of figuring out what we're going to do for work is really in our hands.

Michaela O'Donnell: ([19:23](#))

Now that's not to say that the role of people is not critical, because it is. The role of mentors is central to how we navigate our way forward. But no one is going to pick up that war for us. It's just not going to happen. And then the fourth one, so trade static career paths for dynamic ones, expect change, we're going to navigate our own way forward down those rapids. The fourth one is I think increasingly critical and that's that we may have to reroute or rebuild the very path we travel, right?

Michaela O'Donnell: ([19:49](#))

Increasingly, I think, even the pandemic and as it accelerated our awareness on that, but there are certain work systems that work really well for some people and do not work for other people. And there's a lot of, honestly, a lot of toxicity at play and to say, "Yeah, we're just going to ride down those rapids in the midst of those toxic waters," isn't necessarily going to yield the fruit that I think as people of faith we're looking for. And so, sometimes in certain contexts we got to build from the ground up. We got to sort of step out of the kind of systems that would seek to exploit us or others or built on greed.

Michaela O'Donnell: ([20:29](#))



So, those are just some of the factors, which then bring us to "How do you make sense of calling," right? How do you make sense of calling in the midst of a world where there's so much change. And I'll be briefer here and, and let you all jump back in. But I teach classes on calling and vocation as part of my role at De Pree Center at Fuller. And one of the things I ask people on the first day of class is, "So, what is calling? What actually is it?" And it's not that easy to describe or define.

Michaela O'Donnell: ([20:56](#))

You'll get some people who'll be like, "Oh, it's a Latin word," and they'll get all fancy and I applaud that, I applaud that. But the thing I get most common is something like this, "A calling is a job I love. A calling is the work I was meant to do." And I wish, I wish, Joanna, that that was actually what calling meant, right?

Joanna Meyer: ([21:19](#))

That's why I'm laughing.

Michaela O'Donnell: ([21:19](#))

I wish that it was... I know, right? You're laughing because...

Joanna Meyer: ([21:22](#))

Because it sets up for disappointment.

Michaela O'Donnell: ([21:22](#))

... that would be nice and tidy. Yeah, right. But unfortunately that's not, the Bible doesn't talk about calling as equated to paid work, right? It talks about an invitation to belong to Jesus and to participate in redemption and to be creative agents. And now do Matthew 4 and 2 Corinthians 5 and Genesis 1, the agents of creativity. And then, right? Then God does call individuals toward a lot of particular places and peoples and moments. But we often run to those particulars and have that be the entire container for how we think about a Theology of calling when really those particulars are an expression of all those other callings that are nested within.

Michaela O'Donnell: ([22:06](#))

The last thing I'll say here is that it's been helpful for me to think about calling with a visual and that is a set of nesting dolls, right? And that, that innermost is the call to belong to Jesus. Then we get the call to participate in redemption. Stacked out next is the call to create in loving service of our neighbor. And then finally, and that outermost all is the call to all the particulars. The problem is if you're engaging particular sense of calling without the other that's nested within, it gets pretty hollow pretty fast.

Jeff Haanen: ([22:39](#))

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Jeff Hoffmeyer: [\(23:24\)](#)

I love that, Michaela. Can you add a little bit about calling and community? You definitely had me with your whitewater analogy when you were talking before. Back in the day, I was a whitewater river guide and actually just recently I got up a three week trip on the Grand Canyon through some of the biggest whitewater in North America.

Jeff Hoffmeyer: [\(23:42\)](#)

And you're right, just to go back to that third dynamic, no one else will do it for you. You've got to navigate your way forward. And so, when I got the oars of that boat, it was up to me to get the boat through the rapid. And I cannot imagine doing that trip or even having the confidence to go through that rapid without community. So, say a bit more about that and just connecting calling to a community.

Michaela O'Donnell: [\(24:09\)](#)

Yeah, that's critical. I'm thinking about my own rapid experience. So, I was never a river guide, but I in college lived near basically the mountain in Tennessee where they had done a lot of the 1996 Olympic stuff. So, it was very big and rivers and a bunch of my friends wanted to be river guides. And one of my friends, Jessica, she was very petite and I had deemed in my mind that she was not strong enough to be a river guide. Let me just fast all the way forward inaccurately, but I was like, "I'm not going with her. I'm going to go with my friend, Chris, who's 6'2" and weighs 200 pounds."

Michaela O'Donnell: [\(24:47\)](#)

Okay now, we're revealing all my gender bias and stereotypes about who can be a river guide. But my best friend Jess said, "You need to come with me. You need to get on the river." And so finally, it was a mark of our friendship and I was like, "Okay, I'm going to go with you." And I kid you not, I have never listened to the safety speech with more attention than that day. I'm like, "Okay, we're going to do this and this and this."

Michaela O'Donnell: [\(25:06\)](#)

And two seconds into that, into that river trip, a guy next to me fell out of the boat and it would have been fine, right? Except for that we were about to go over a class four rapid that was known for recirculating people. Okay? It was known for trapping people in the rapids, so this is very scary. And so, Jess looks at me. I was closest to this guy and I had been listening to the safety speech. And so I extend, I



turn my oar around and I give him the end of my T-Paddle and I bring him near and she heaves him in the boat, 110 pounds, heaves this grown man in the boat.

Michaela O'Donnell: ([25:42](#))

But I actually think that story is emblematic of what you're talking about, which is much of the time we feel alone, but what if we're really in a raft with each other, right. And what does it mean to have each other back? One of my favorite professors back in grad school, it was one of the first times I really started thinking about the Theology of vocation, he's at West Lane and he said, "In the Methodist tradition, it would be really insane for anyone to think that they had sensed a calling of God that was not confirmed by the community." And basically like you cannot be in your own head interpreting the call of God all by yourself.

Michaela O'Donnell: ([26:22](#))

The issue is that increasingly, I mean, you all have seen the statistics on people's and engagement in church and what church community looks like. It's like, "What does the shape of that community look like?" We could say like, "Okay, it needs to be the local church." And I know I'm a fan of the local church. I'm a member of the local church and aware that those conversations on calling don't always play out in the confines of that community.

Michaela O'Donnell: ([26:47](#))

One of the big reasons people discuss even coming to some of our offerings that we do at De Pree Center is to get exactly what you're describing, Jeff, is other fellow travelers to be able to help discern? Because I think deep inside, we know we can't figure it out all of ourselves and yet the whole idea of community in a more distributed, more scattered age at work or otherwise is increasingly complicated, sometimes fragmented. And so, I think community is central, but access to community, isn't a given.

Joanna Meyer: ([27:19](#))

Michaela, I'm wondering if you could briefly describe the process for discerning in community calling or at least even next steps on our vocational journey. Tell us a little bit more about you discovered through your research and what you explained in the book.

Michaela O'Donnell: ([27:36](#))

Yeah, thanks, Jo. I mean, these are concepts I've been playing with for years now. And so, Jo, you and I have even talked about these. When I did research and then we started testing these out in groups of people. So, in forms of community, really four different things rose up to the top, actually five. I'll add a fifth one here. One is the capacity to name why we're stuck. And we take people, I take people through an exercise that helps them identify pain points.

Michaela O'Donnell: ([28:04](#))



And I say, it's this whole complicated multistep process, but at the core of it is this, "Where do you feel disappointed, frustrated or stuck in your work. And we get to the basis of that. Then we flip that and say, "Okay. How does each of those disappointments, frustrations or feelings of stuck, what might those reveal about what you're longing for?" And so, people are like, "Oh." And really naming that, what we're longing for in our work is step 1.

Michaela O'Donnell: [\(28:34\)](#)

Step 2 is a little counterintuitive. Step two is empathy, move toward empathy, move toward other people. And there's a bit of a kind of almost whiplash that happens here when people are like, "You just had me go deep within my own fields. And now, you're asking me to step outside of myself and move towards other people." We've got a whole process for how we direct people towards that and that's in the book.

Michaela O'Donnell: [\(28:56\)](#)

And empathy starts to lay the basis for imagination, which comes next and then leads to risk taking and ultimately towards reflection. And the whole aim of this process is really to move from stuck to unstuck. It's not to get super clear on everything for your life's journey. It's not to figure out, and take inventory on all your giftedness, but it's to move from stuck to unstuck. And the more I've listened to people, Jo, we get stuck a lot. Sometimes it's big stuff, "What am I doing for work? Sometimes it's little stuff, "How might I adjust this little part of a program I'm leading?"

Michaela O'Donnell: [\(29:29\)](#)

So, naming longings, then empathy, imagination, risk taking, and reflection. And we could go into detail about any one of those steps at length.

Jeff Hoffmeyer: [\(29:39\)](#)

Michaela, this is so fascinating to me because a year ago I was the most stuck I've ever been in my vocational journey. So, I've been a pastor for 15 years and at the end of this journey, here I am now working for Denver Institute. So, a lot of what you just described was my experience on a macro level. But it seems like what you're also saying is this doesn't have to be for those huge big career decisions.

Jeff Hoffmeyer: [\(30:07\)](#)

I've had an executive coach and, and I asked him a couple months ago, I said, "Can you help me come up with a five-year plan?" And he just laughed at me like, "There are no five-year plans, especially right now." But it seems like that process you just described, I mean, almost, we could be doing that on a quarterly basis or monthly, or even some of the stucks we get in, they're not the huge like need-to-change career kind of stuck. Is that true?

Michaela O'Donnell: [\(30:35\)](#)



It is true. I'll just add one more thing and that it's not just a process for us personally and for own careers though. It is helpful there, my team and I, the other day, we're trying to figure out how to expand a program that we're working on. And somebody said, sort of ingest and sort of seriously, "Let's go through the steps, Michaela. Let's go through the empathy, imagination, risk taking and reflection. Let's ask what if? Let's take it next to a doable risk."

Michaela O'Donnell: [\(31:00\)](#)

And so we did it as a team about what might we do next as a program. So, it's actually a tool and a process and in many ways it's built on design thinking. It's built on some of the research I did. It's built on refining this process. We've had at the De Pree Center, I just got some recent data, 250 people now go through this, go through our Road Ahead groups, which uses the same process that's in the book.

Michaela O'Donnell: [\(31:23\)](#)

And so, we've tweaked it a bunch along the way. And so, and in that have realized and people have said, "Yeah, then I took that to my work," or "My spouse and I talked about something." So it's an open and enough, it's a structured process, but it's not prescriptive. In that, you could sort of hang it on a lot of, let's say, decisions or discernment moments.

Joanna Meyer: [\(31:46\)](#)

Yeah. That concept of taking the next doable risk, of all the things that you talk about in the book, I think in some ways that's the catalyst that will get you unstuck. You need the reflection and the process ahead of it, but just realize that you don't have to bite off this enormous, life changing career, but you can begin to do small things. Can you give us some examples of what are some ways that you've seen people take next doable risks?

Michaela O'Donnell: [\(32:11\)](#)

Yeah. Thanks, Jo. Next doable risks. So, I'm from Nebraska and I learned along the way from my husband that even though I did not grow up on a farm, I speak in farm idioms.

Joanna Meyer: [\(32:20\)](#)

I love it.

Michaela O'Donnell: [\(32:21\)](#)

And I know, right? I guess it's just all around me. So, one of the things we talked about in Nebraska is a bet-the-farm kind of risk. And you know exactly what I mean. These are the kind of risks that you got to go all in on. It takes everything. And because it takes everything, most of us approach those kind of risks with a lot of caution, a lot of thinking before we do it and all that waiting actually usually keeps us from those risks.



Michaela O'Donnell: [\(32:48\)](#)

And all the way on the other side of that is a concept that I'd like to call next doable risk. And these are risks that you already have the resources to do. Resources being time, maybe money, networks, space in a project, so you already have the resources. And their next doable risks are something that you could do within the next week. Right? So, just bringing it all the way down to concrete.

Michaela O'Donnell: [\(33:17\)](#)

And I find that when I teach people about risk, there are a certain number of people who will say, "I am just not a risk taker. I'm just absolutely not a risk taker. That's not me. I'm not. It's not safe. I'm not comfortable." And these are the same people that have been oozing empathy, right? Just oozing empathy for one another. And what I'd like to say is, if you have ever truly moved toward someone and empathy, you have already been practicing risk. That is a risky thing to move toward other people, to go with them, to share space with them.

Michaela O'Donnell: [\(33:48\)](#)

And I had one woman, she's a lawyer. She's an immigration lawyer and in COVID times, all the jobs have changed and her husband was in a different country and she was here in the States and she had to spend many weeks apart from. It was just a lot of chaos and she was one of these people. And she would say like, "I just, I'm not a risk taker, Michaela."

Michaela O'Donnell: [\(34:10\)](#)

And so, we outlined things that she could do, literally in terms of, what it is she was longing for in light of the empathy and the imagination she had done. And they were like, "Send an email to so-and-so and call this person on the phone and send a thank you note." I mean, really basic things and she did those things. And she came back to me and reflected on it and we talked about him. And she's like, "I cannot believe just what that did."

Michaela O'Donnell: [\(34:37\)](#)

Maybe not even the results that came from the thank yous and the emails. But in the reframing those actions as the risk taking moves they actually are and stacking those together, both to build confidence and to be a more realistic path toward the bigger risks that sometimes are in front of us, in our careers.

Jeff Hoffmeyer: [\(34:57\)](#)

Mikaela, I love that. Just say a bit more though, what was it for you, even in the last year? I mean, I'm kind of, I'm putting words in your mouth, but if I can imagine your life as you stepped into leadership at the De Pree Center, there's been this transfer of leadership from our mutual friend, Mark Roberts, so he was leading that organization. Well, I imagine you probably have a different style. That sounds like a big risk to me. What did you learn experientially as you went through that?



Michaela O'Donnell: [\(35:25\)](#)

This is a fantastic question. And just a little bit more context for anybody who's wondering. Jeff and I have a mutual friend, Mark Roberts, who is my former boss and now, colleague. Now, he technically works for me. So, Mark was the Executive Director of the De Pree Center for six years. When I came to De Pree Center three years ago in the role of Senior Director, Mark and I were already having this conversation about eventually at some point, there might be a future here, if everything unfolds in the way that we might hope.

Michaela O'Donnell: [\(35:56\)](#)

And it started to, I started to hit the limits of my role, quite honestly. And if you ask Mark, and if he was sitting here right here, he might say, "I was starting to want to really focus on some new and emerging possibilities that I didn't have the bandwidth to, as Executive Director." And so, that led, but you still need a catalyst for those moments. Right? And so, there were some catalysts that were part of that, and that led to a decision that he mostly made. It was firstly first his decision and then second was mine. "Do I want this job or is this really the best fit?"

Michaela O'Donnell: [\(36:28\)](#)

And he decided, "Yeah, I want to move into a different role, still staying at the De Pree Center." And it's Mark's plan to actually stay at the De Pree Center for a while, which makes me very, very happy. So, this is not a "I'm sort of phasing out into retirement" kind of move. And I became the Executive Director just about six months ago. And so, now I am running a center where my former boss now works at the center.

Michaela O'Donnell: [\(36:49\)](#)

And exactly what you said, Jeff, of course, Mark and I have different leadership styles. We're two different human beings. It's just, and they're very complimentary, but they're very different. And there's a ton of risk involved there. There's risk in the relationship, right? Mark's probably been the most important mentor I've ever had in my professional career. So, things didn't go well that would really hurt me and/or him, but also risk for the organization. And if this all falls apart, we're kind of in a growth season, what might happen.

Michaela O'Donnell: [\(37:24\)](#)

And I had to break this all the way back down into the next doable risk category. And I had to sort of try it on for a size. And I had to talk with lots and lots of people. Probably some of those people were like, "Could you please stop talking about this possibility?" Both before we made the transition and sense, I think which is the critical thing because we're still living in that risk. The risk is not, I think it's easy for us to think about risk as, "Okay. We took the risk and then it played out."

Michaela O'Donnell: [\(37:54\)](#)



But much of the time we subject ourselves in situations, another word here for risk would be, that are vulnerable, that could turn out in ways that work out and could totally implode. But we believe in enough what might happen and we trust that God is active. And we've done the work to sense God's activity that we're willing to exist in that vulnerable, risky space, because we believe that the benefit will ultimately outweigh the cost. And so, yes, I am living the risk stuff in a day-to-day way right now.

Jeff Hoffmeyer: [\(38:28\)](#)

Yeah. And so, encouraging and inspiring that you and Mark took those risks together and stepped forward. I think a lot that so much of us can learn from in that.

Joanna Meyer: [\(38:38\)](#)

Michaela as we wrap up our conversation today, I would love to give you the final word. I think you have a unique vision and a passion for helping people really steward their lives well. Would you give a charge to our listeners, if anyone is listening and feels stuck in their career?

Michaela O'Donnell: [\(38:53\)](#)

Yeah. Thank you, Jo. I think I would say that this stuff really plays out contextually for different people and that sociocultural realities play a big part here. And that for some of us, we can kind of rise above into the clouds and have conversations on calling that really take a pretty privileged shape. And for others of us, it's like, "We're trying to make ends meet and this conversation doesn't really feel like it even applies."

Michaela O'Donnell: [\(39:19\)](#)

And so, a couple of things there. One, I would say that at the base, our worth and our mattering is found simply in the fact that we belong to God and as baseline. And I know it's simple, but coming back to that over and over and over again. And that can be expressed in wherever we find ourselves for work, right? And at the same time, sometimes we hit points in work, which we need to make changes. It's time.

Michaela O'Donnell: [\(39:45\)](#)

I think some of this stuff plays out differently for men and for women. And honestly, one of the things I want to do is point people to the work that you're doing, Jo. I know it was recently, recent enough at the event that you all host, Women Work and Calling, and I saw, I saw some of this stuck-ness and some of this hope and the courage and the wrestling playing out, both in the people that were there and then on stage. And I also saw the community aspect.

Michaela O'Donnell: [\(40:10\)](#)

So I would say, not that I'm saying, "Just go find people who are you." But I'm saying find people who might understand you and talk this stuff out with them, because that is always a generative start to the process of getting unstuck.



Joanna Meyer: ([40:25](#))

Thanks so much for your leadership and for being part of the conversation today.

Michaela O'Donnell: ([40:29](#))

Thank you both.

Joanna Meyer: ([40:31](#))

Okay. That was a thought provoking conversation with Michaela O'Donnell. I'm telling you, you want to buy her book. It's called *Make Work Matter: Your Guide To Meaningful Work in a Changing World*. And we will link to that in our show notes. It's so worth it, you guys. It's one of the most unique perspectives on calling I've seen.

Joanna Meyer: ([40:47](#))

And I joke sometimes that around here, we have the spiritual gift of resources. So, in our show notes, we want to point you to two more opportunities. One is we will link to *The Road Ahead*, which is a program offered by Fuller seminary. It's a six-week guided cohort experience in small group discussion. It can be done in person or online. And it will help you really navigate some of those questions related to calling in community. I have friends that have done it and have loved their experience.

Joanna Meyer: ([41:11](#))

And the third resource we'll point to are a couple of courses in the Faith and Work classroom related to calling. You'll get to hear from folks like Tim Keller or Amy Sherman or Eugene Peterson. Just thinking biblically and also, practically about how do we cut through some of these myths of finding the ideal job to really find what the Lord would have for us, which I think is a place of deep satisfaction. But we come about it in a way that maybe is, is not traditional. So, I hope you take advantage of these amazing tools to help you walk with God and steward your gifts. And we'll see you again in two weeks or hear you again, I should say, in two weeks on the Faith and Work podcast.

Joanna Meyer: ([41:49](#))

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