

# Is Your Work a Calling?

An interview with Kimberly Cothran

by Margie Carter



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*"A true vocation calls us out beyond ourselves; breaks our heart in the process and then humbles, simplifies, and enlightens us about the hidden, core nature of the work that enticed us in the first place.... A serious vocational calling demands a constant attention to the unknown gravitational field that surrounds us and from which we recharge ourselves, as if breathing from the atmosphere of possibility itself."*

David Whyte

*Consolations: The Solace, Nourishment, and Underlying Meaning of Everyday Words*



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Margie Carter has been a regular writer for Exchange for over 20 years, beginning when she was a child care director. She has co-authored seven books with Deb Curtis, each aimed at supporting teachers and administrators to engage in reflection for learning and renewal. You can learn more about her work with Harvest Resources Associates by visiting [www.ecetrainers.com](http://www.ecetrainers.com).



I discovered the writing of David Whyte during the early years of drafting the first edition of *The Visionary Director*. While I try to stay current with research, literature, and 'cutting edge' thinking and practices in our field, my own professional learning has always ventured out beyond ECE. I discovered David Whyte as a poet and philosopher highly sought after in the corporate world. While his language can at times seem abstract, his ideas seem so pertinent to working in early childhood. The above quote is from his newest book, *Consolations: The Solace, Nourishment, and Underlying Meaning of Everyday Words*, which is full of gems for people trying to catch their breath and find meaning and hope amidst living with stress. Whyte got me thinking again about why and how people in ECE keep on keeping on despite all the challenges.

People who become leaders working in the early childhood field have tremendous tenacity. They tend to the big picture as well as small details. Steadily building a vision and a team to bring it to life, early childhood leaders are often robust, not foolish, risk takers. I think they are in touch with what Whyte calls the "core nature of the work that enticed us in the first place." Many would say they came to work in ECE because they love children. But I want to probe deeper about the core nature

of this work to see if that aligns with what we are paying attention to, what recharges us, and if we are "breathing from the atmosphere of possibility itself." Heady thoughts here from David Whyte, worth exploring for ourselves.

Those who take on the work of directing an ECE center have their own particular thoughts on what enticed them to this work in the first place. Often it's an excitement about being in charge, having the power to really make things happen. Given the complexities of the job, it doesn't take long for disillusionment to set in. For directors to thrive, not merely survive, I wonder if they have to see this work as their calling, their vocation, not just their job. I'm also remembering how Kristie Norwood (*Exchange*, May/June 2016) describes the distinction between her job and her work. She says, "I find a great difference between my job and my work. My job is about tasks that I complete. It's laid out in my job description. My work is about purpose. It informs me on how to do my job." Directors and program administrators in ECE have burnout jobs. But if they, in David Whyte's framework, give "constant attention to the unknown gravitational field that surrounds us and from which we recharge ourselves" they will stay in touch with the deeper purpose of their work. That fire in their belly will keep them from burning out.

## An Interview with Kimberly Cothran

Around the time I met Kristie Norwood at Chicago Commons Child Development Program, I also met Kimberly Cothran. Though they no longer have jobs in the same organization, I sense they see their work in a similar way. Like Kristie, Kim has become a Harvest Resources Associate, a group of ECE professionals that Deb Curtis, Wendy Cividanes, Debbie Lebo, and I support, learn, and draw strength from as we each strive to infuse our work with our shared core values. Over the years, Kim has held different jobs at Chicago Commons and currently she is the director at Nia Family Center at Chicago Commons.

**Margie:** I'd love to dig into this David Whyte quote with you, Kim, wondering how it resonates with you. Do you think of this notion of ECE as a vocation or calling for yourself? Kristie Norwood talks about knowing the difference between your job and your work, while David Whyte says a true vocation calls us out beyond ourselves. How are you thinking about this in relationship to the hard, complex work of directing a center?

**Kimberly:** I am certain that the work I do for children and families is a 'calling.' I know in the depths of me that this is my calling because my posture toward this work reflects an attitude of commitment, passion, humility, and a willingness to keep going no matter the challenges. Although challenging at times, this ECE work fulfills my purpose.

I like Whyte's use of 'going beyond ourselves' because before I was 'called' to be a director, I served in the role of Education and Disabilities Specialist. In that role I worked alongside teachers supporting them with teaching and learning. I was very comfortable in that role. I knew how to do the 'job.'

Although humble and grateful for my experiences, I did, however, begin to feel like I was stagnating. My daily tasks felt rote. My passion was fading.

Settling for comfort was just not how I identified myself. I was not settled with the routine of things. I believe when one is called to do something, you understand that the labor goes beyond you. In other words, it's not really about you.

**Margie:** I'm imagining this understanding can offset burnout when it begins to sear you around the edges.

**Kim:** I am learning in my new role as a center director that the trends in early education are constantly shifting or being revised. So as a director I have to adapt, adjusting to those changes, cultivating a climate of collaboration, maintaining quality programming, building partnerships with my parents and the community, trying to develop innovative ways to support teacher practices. It can be difficult to balance, and many days I feel defeated. But because this is a calling, I 'go beyond myself,' recognizing that this work is not about me. It's a part of a bigger purpose.

As I reflect on Whyte's wise statement about *vocational calling*, I feel that he has encapsulated how I function on this journey thus far in my role as a school director. Daily I am reflecting and asking questions to myself such as: Was today a good day? Did I demonstrate a work ethic that was selfless? How can I demonstrate to parents, staff, and children that even when I don't feel my best, I want to be with them? And how can I create an atmosphere that resonates love? For me, reflecting is like my skin, it's a part of me. So, I will forever analyze and adjust and will have many questions along the way. However, the one thing I know is that I have a respon-

sibility to my vocation that is beyond my 'job' title and it is purpose driven.

**Margie:** Whyte says that a vocational calling "breaks our heart in the process and then humbles, simplifies, and enlightens us about the hidden, core nature of the work that enticed us in the first place." I find that such a provocative notion. I think we all instinctively want to keep our hearts from being broken. To get through all the stress most people think we have to steel ourselves, not let our hearts be cracked open. But if this process humbles, simplifies, and enlightens us, that's a good thing, right?

**Kimberly:** I agree, Margie. I think we all want to guard our hearts. Sometimes we steel ourselves because of fear of failure. For many, taking risks is not an option, so protecting the heart seems a safe place to be. That safe place, however, contradicts what I think Whyte is trying to convey. I believe he is suggesting that we allow ourselves to be open to the unknown. When I think about his statement "breaks our hearts in the process and then humbles, simplifies, and enlightens us about the hidden..." a key word that stands out for me is the word *humble*. Humility, I think, is a critical stance to take if one is certain that he or she is called to this 'work.' Humility involves reducing self. Reducing self, I think, is empowering. It disables pride and positions me to be vulnerable. To be vulnerable allows one to be 'cracked open' as you say Margie, open to make mistakes and open to growth and development.

## Being Vulnerable

**Margie:** Wow, Kim, that is such a powerful notion that 'reducing self' is empowering because it disables one's pride and opens you up to learning from vulnerability.

**Kimberly:** In my role as a center director for the past three months, I have been 'cracked open' often. Some days I feel

insecure and others days I feel empowered. I believe both are necessary to experience because they both provide me an opportunity to learn. This may sound strange, but to feel both powerful and unsure are an affirmation, so to speak. Possessing these feelings assures me that this work as a center director is not about me. I say this because when I worked solely with teachers, I was the navigator. My work with them was driven by my past experiences because I once sat in their seats. As a teacher I had many pockets, which is what I call the places where I go to pull from my experiences and resources. However, as a center director I often feel a sense of ambiguity because I don't have all the answers. In these early months of being a director, I found many days when decision making required spontaneous resolve. Some issues didn't have a manual, policy, or procedure written to help me. Some outcomes were failures and others victories. In the past I thought failures were bad. I believed they would expose me as a person who didn't know what she was doing. But as I learn about myself and get a little bit closer to understand what I am purposed to do, failures strengthen me. Today, uncertainty for me as a director is acceptable. Embracing it has broadened my knowledge and understanding. It has equipped me to be my best for children and families. The processes that I go through daily are gifts: a reward for being open to the 'broken heart.'

**Margie:** You've so vividly brought to life, Kim, a way of understanding how being vulnerable can make you strong and broaden your understandings. That's so powerful. I'm reminded of Brene Brown's very popular Ted Talk, "The Power of Vulnerability" and her new book, *Daring Greatly*, where she makes some of these very points you've discovered (see references below). I wonder if this should be assigned reading for any director credential or degree program to help people

re-conceptualize the role of vulnerability in claiming their power.

## Finding What Recharges You

Turning to the second sentence in Whyte's quote above, "A serious vocational calling demands a constant attention to the unknown gravitational field that surrounds us and from which we recharge ourselves, as if breathing from the atmosphere of possibility itself," my thoughts immediately go to children as the known gravitational field surrounding us, but I think Whyte may be pointing us to the idea that even though we may say we do this work "for the love of the children," there is something more profound in the point he is making. How do we see children such that they humble, simplify, and enlighten and recharge us?

**Kimberly:** I have held many positions in my 20 years in the field of ECE. Most of my years were working as a teacher with children ages three to twelve and some of the years were in administration. Both roles kept me close to children and these different roles have been good for me because they have given me a very broad view of the field. The roles of a teacher and of an Administrator have provided me a foundation for my current role as center director.

Becoming a center director was never a part my personal continuum of professional development, but as fate would have it, I am here because my passion for this work takes me 'beyond myself.' I am humbled daily by my experiences as a center director. The relationships that I have with my staff, the educational leadership that I provide to my staff, the engagement with parents, and my community relations all keep me stimulated and perplexed in a good way. Of course, the perplexities of this work can also be challenging. Budgets, compliance regulations, and mandates are difficult to tackle on a daily basis,

but without the funds attached to those, our agency would be reliant on grants, philanthropy, and other donations to fund the program, and those can be inconsistent. So I am grateful to work under guidelines.

**Margie:** So what recharges you amidst all these perplexities?

**Kim:** The element of this work that keeps me committed and recharged is absolutely the children. Working for children drives my vision for the program. Focusing on the children is where the work begins and ends. If I had to choose the one experience that particularly makes me so grateful to work with and on behalf of children, I could not identify just one; it's impossible. As I sit and reflect on some of the experiences I've had with children as a teacher, I want to cry because they have truly transformed my life. My love for them is inexplicable. When I see children, my soul smiles.

If I could draw from one story that I have had with children that humbles, simplifies, enlightens, and recharges me, it is an experience I had with a child that I worked with over 15 years ago (see box).

I believe children have their own goals for learning and if the teacher is alongside them facilitating teaching and learning and not dictating, the partnership between the teacher and the child can be remarkable. So this is contrary to one part of Whyte's idea that when your heart is broken open, things are simplified. I would say there is nothing simplistic about children. They are complex, competent beings that motivate me to continue the 'work.'

## Creating a Culture of Purpose

**Margie:** If we take this conversation to a practical place, how do you think directors can develop their organizational



Shannon (the name I will give her), was four when I met her. She was a typically-developing child and a leader in our group. Her interactions with her peers are so vivid in my mind. Dramatic play was her favorite interest. The second was drawing. During her dramatizations she was always the mother. She loved giving direction, cooking, and making sure that her children did their homework and took naps. One unique characteristic that stands out about Shannon was that her language was well developed. She had an expanded vocabulary with children, but she refused to speak to me. I was intrigued with her conscious choice to speak to whom she wanted and when she wanted. Her actions humbled me. I respected her right to choose. I had no concerns because she was actively engaged with children daily.

One day she entered the classroom with someone (perhaps a family member, neighbor, or caregiver) I was not familiar with, crying and very sad. I was concerned because she could not be consoled, not even by her peers. I tried puppets, reading books, I asked her to tell me through the use of toys, but no feedback. This day she looked out the window for about 45 minutes before I could get to the root of the problem. Based on this scenario, traditional thinking about children would conclude that Shannon needed to see a social worker. But I was not inclined to impose someone else on her considering that she was so fragile. I had to think critically about what I could do to understand the meaning behind her tears. Since she didn't talk to me, I asked her to draw for me what makes her so sad. She gathered the materials, grabbed my hand, and we sat down. She wiped her face and immediately began to draw. She was communicating through her drawing. I was enlightened by her drawing because it told a story. I asked her if she could explain and she stared at me. She started to cry again. After a few minutes Shannon's caregiver arrived and I explained to her the type of day Shannon had experienced. I showed her the drawing and I asked if she could explain. She smiled as she looked at the drawing and she told me, "Shannon's brother fell down the stairs when they were leaving to come to school. Her mother brought her to me and took her brother to the hospital." When her depiction of what made her so sad was realized, I was astounded by how clear and articulate Shannon's explanation was through her drawing. This was incredible work by Shannon. However, I was not surprised by her work.

culture so that it is focused on children as a source of inspiration and learning? In the current educational context, your job suggests you keep teachers focused on being in compliance, on the curriculum requirements, the rating scales and assessment tools, not to mention the budget. Have you found some strategies that help

people stay focused on, in Norwood's words, "the work, rather than the job"?

**Kimberly:** The culture of an organization describes the basic assumptions, shared beliefs, and orientations that emerge to unite members of a group. The culture often exists outside our conscious awareness, but it shapes everything in

the center (Bloom, 2005). At Chicago Commons Child Development program we believe that every child has the potential to be a powerful learner and a great citizen. We also believe that each child has strengths and potentials that must be recognized and supported in a respectful manner. This then means that the director must lead our programs with those beliefs at the helm of the work.

Margie, I would like to speak a bit about my own educational path because I believe that will give our readers some insight about why I lead with children as my focus. My own experiences moving through different ECE jobs have taught me about the influence of both teacher education and an organizational culture to shape the work of teachers. For instance, when I entered the field, I had my own hopes and dreams about working alongside the children, but I quickly learned that my educational training did not align with what I had envisioned about my interactions with children. I believe the work of the teacher is to work alongside children, getting to know their identities and interests. The word 'alongside' denotes that the teacher is working with children intentionally, with the purpose of getting to know the child.

The contradiction came when my educational training challenged my personal philosophy on how I believed children learn and develop. My formal education taught me that the role of the teacher was to 'fill' children with knowledge. This was reinforced by the organizational culture of my early jobs in ECE. With the staffing patterns I was working in solitude, which further pushed me to conform to the 'traditional' educational values that were not consistent with my values. I had no colleagues to reflect with about my ideas and thoughts about the teacher's role. My practices became regimented and one-dimensional. I was not learning about children's identities. I was

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*Perhaps the greatest legacy we can leave from our work is not to instill ambition in others, though this may be the first way we describe its arrival in our life, but passing on a sense of sheer privilege, of having found a road, a way to follow, and then having been allowed to walk it, often with others, with all its difficulties and minor triumphs; the underlying primary gift, of having been a full participant in the conversation.*

David Whyte

‘teaching,’ but not supporting children’s learning.

It was not until I began working as a preschool teacher at Chicago Commons Child Development Program that I experienced a different organizational culture in which my enthusiasm for teaching became visible. That enthusiasm has persevered for over 20 years and that is why I sit in the director’s seat today. I am humbled by the charge to do this ‘work’ and I want to give back to my team what the Commons organizational culture has given to me. As a director, I am listening and watching daily to see how parents interact with parents, how staff interact with parents, how children interact with teachers, how staff interacts with each other, and so forth. This listening and watching helps me assess our organizational culture and whether it is aligned with our values and beliefs.

So you asked how this shared belief that children deserve the very best from us provides inspiration to go beyond thinking about protocols, standards, budgets, and mandates. The reason that I have been working at Chicago Commons for over 15 years is because of our values and beliefs about children. I think creating a culture that supports reflection is vital to the role of the teacher and the program. Our main objective for reflection is to enable teachers to think critically about what they do and why. The reflective process is used to support teachers in thinking critically about how to support children and their own professional development. We believe that reflection empowers the teacher to understand his or her own thoughts about teaching and learning.

## Reflecting is a Source of Renewal

**Kimberly:** Reflection is important to the learning process. It enables teachers to learn about themselves and how they learn. Reflective practice is a powerful tool to share with children. It empowers

children to examine their own thoughts. My hopes for our organizational culture going forward would be to see reflective practices extend to the children. I would like to see children actively reflect about themselves and their learning. Just imagine if a child is pursuing how to solve a problem and he or she gets stuck. I’m envisioning the child pausing, reflecting, adjusting, evaluating, and then proceeding to solve the problem. How powerful! It is my hope that I develop an organizational culture of reflective practices that is infectious. I would like to see reflection transmitted from myself, to the staff, to the children, to the parents, to the community. Now that would be a shared belief that is not unique to the school. Imagine it beyond the walls of the school.

**Margie:** What a beautiful vision, Kim, projecting that the practice of reflection can flow outside of our programs to become a different way of being in our communities. I’m grateful for how you have helped us see that an important source of renewal for all of us can be returning again and again to the deeper purpose of this work in ECE.

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