

# 10 Questions

WITH NOTEWORTHY PEOPLE

## Dick Bolles on Knowing Yourself, Creating Careers, and the Staying Power of *Parachute*

by Shelley A. Lee



**Who:** Richard “Dick” Bolles

**What:** Author of *What Color Is Your Parachute?*

**What’s on his mind:** “The point is not to figure out what you’re good at. It’s to figure out what you love—what your favorite skills are. Tell me some stories about that. Then tell me where you’d love to do it. That’s your career.”

In 1968, Dick Bolles found himself at his own career crossroads, although he may not have recognized it at the time. An Episcopal priest, he was let go as canon pastor of Grace Cathedral in San Francisco, California, during a budget crunch. He wanted to stay with the church, but not necessarily in a parish. So he took a position with a consortium of denominations supervising campus ministers in nine Western states. Visiting with campus ministers, he heard familiar tales of woe—they, too, were facing the possible loss of their jobs because of budget issues. They asked Bolles for career advice for their futures. “Because of what I was hearing, I decided to research the question, ‘What’s Plan B?’” says Bolles.

Bolles first put together a 28-page booklet for the campus ministers. After additional research and collaboration with John Crystal—a man who combined his knowledge of economics and his experience as a spy during World War II and who himself became a career guru—the booklet turned into a 128-page self-published book, *What Color Is Your Parachute?* which Bolles introduced on December 1, 1970. He sold about 2,000 copies of it before Ten Speed Press took over commercial distribution in 1972. *Parachute* has now been updated 36 times—annually since 1970. It has sold nine million copies, at one point selling 20,000 copies each month, and been translated into 13 languages. In 1996 it was named one of the “25 Books That Have Shaped Readers’ Lives” by the Center for the Book at the Library of Congress. *The New York Times* says *Parachute* has “peculiar power” and Fortune

called it “the gold standard of career guides.” Ten Speed Press recently released *What Color Is Your Parachute? For Retirement*. Bolles is regularly described as the most widely read and influential leader in career planning. His background is in engineering, physics, and theology. He is a graduate of M.I.T., Harvard, and the General Theological (Episcopal) Seminary in New York City. He also holds two honorary doctorates and is a member of Mensa. Bolles recently talked with the *Journal* about the phenomenal success story of *Parachute*, the one key ingredient to mastering your own career, and why “career tests” are mostly useless.

**1** What about that title—where did it come from?

At a meeting with some colleagues during my time working with campus ministers, one asked me to write down on the blackboard what we were going to discuss that day. Well, we were going to talk about ministers who wanted to bail out from their current careers. A parachute came to mind. So I simply wrote the phrase down on the blackboard. Everybody laughed. I remembered that later and used it for the book’s title. I didn’t have to please a commercial publisher—no doubt a publisher would have nixed the title. Years after I went with Ten Speed Press, Phil Wood, the founder, told me that if this little book had died it would have been the title that killed it. But since it lived—and very well—it was the title that saved it. Nobody forgets it—although I used to go into bookstores

and find it in the sports section, with books about parachute jumping.

**2** *What expectations did you have for the commercial success of the book?*

None. I didn't write the book to make money. I wrote it to help people. I thought I was just writing a helpful manual for campus ministers. But then it began to be ordered by all sorts of strange buyers—colleges, public libraries, the State Department, the Pentagon. When Ten Speed Press started publishing it in 1970 I realized I could expand it and change the language to appeal to wider interest. It really took off—within a year it was at the top of the paperback nonfiction best-seller list and stayed on the *New York Times* list for 288 weeks. Because of its success, the *Times* actually created a new category for advice and how-to books, which of course is huge today. People all around the world buy it. Wherever there's a free market, people fully understand the ideas in the book.

**3** *Your own educational and career background is quite diverse—physics, engineering, ministry, and then for many years career advice. Since you stress that self-knowledge is crucial to a satisfying career, what does your own career path offer as a lesson? What would a typical career counselor say to a person with a strong aptitude for the sciences who “switched” to ministry and then had an accidental, and phenomenally successful, career as a career expert?*

I have an intense and eclectic curiosity. I read voraciously. God gave me a very high I.Q. and I'm the steward of it. I do seem to understand much about the physical, chemical, and spiritual worlds. The career tests I took when I got out of the Navy “told” me I should be an engineer, but I found that my heart was in ministry.

**4** *You've been critical of personality or psychological tests that claim to show people their true career or calling. Is your own situation a good example?*

There's no test available that can you tell you what you should be doing, although there's a lot of hype by testmakers to convince you otherwise. Tests will tell you what “family” you belong to. It won't tell you where you fit in that family. In other words, these tests tell you these are the characteristics of all the people who answered the way you did. But they can't guarantee it describes you. People take these tests and think, “I'm going to find out who I am.” No, you won't. Career evaluation or psychological tests, or whatever you want to call them, used to be shrouded in a veil of mystery. I think many people now see them for what they are—interesting, perhaps useful in some situations, but not something that can tell you that your calling is to be such and such. Many big companies with big human resources departments still use a wide variety of tests, but I don't think they're much help to the average person who is interested in, for example, a career change.

**5** *Why are so many people still using the résumé as their career search tool?*

I don't know, because the statistics are dismal. Only 1 of 1,470 résumés results in a job. Companies use résumés to screen people out, not to select them in. They typically weed somebody out in eight seconds. It's very efficient for them. What's worse is the graveyard of résumés on the Internet. Some experts believe there are 40 million résumés floating around on the Internet. It's like the Sargasso Sea—they're dead in the water. The purpose of your résumé should be a slightly extended business card—it's to say, “Can I have an appointment to talk with you?” Don't put your entire life story on there. Seeking a job and deciding on the right career is more like dating than buying a car. Once people understand that they are as much in control of the “selection” process as the would-be employer—to ask questions, see if this is the right fit, and so on—it's very freeing.

**6** *How different is the whole notion of “career” than when you first wrote the book in 1970?*

One thing that's changed tremendously is the idea of changing careers. Nobody even blinks now if you mention that you want to switch from being an engineer to an art teacher, or something like that. They say, “Oh, great! Sounds wonderful.” Thirty-five years ago it was considered an act of disloyalty or evidence that you were floundering in knowing what you really wanted to do. My advice is always to figure out your favorite skills. People start by asking themselves and others, “What am I good at?” That's not the point. And generally speaking, you don't love to do something if you're not good at it, but it doesn't always work the other way. I was really, really good at fundraising for capital campaigns when I was in ministry, but I intensely disliked it. Tell me what you love to do and where you'd love to do it. That's your career. My conviction from the beginning was that people perform at their best when they are using the skills they love and in an environment they love. That was new when the book first came out.

**7** *Other than many career changers, what else is new about careers?*

Thirty-five years ago, a career was kind of an unplanned jumble of jobs that was called a career. It's not all that different for many people today. But the biggest changes have been that, today, many jobs wind up being “temporary”—there's not as much stability—and that your career has to be viewed like a learning seminar. You must continually increase your knowledge and skills. It's more of a survival skill today. If you don't take control of your own career decisions, you're at the mercy of other people and other forces.

I do think that more people today work for the reward of self-satisfaction. There are plenty who work for the money, the next promotion, or the next advancement, especially if that means changing companies, but

many people also realize that their happiness has to come from the work itself. Incidentally, I rather dislike the term “golden parachute,” because it’s so totally contrary to my philosophy about careers and that only you can create, help, or save your career. “Golden parachute” implies that somebody else—the company that just booted you as the CEO—has set you down gingerly and is taking care of you.

**8** Why is it so hard for people to really get a handle on what they love and are good at? Sometimes when we hear others describe us, we’re surprised to hear things we didn’t realize about ourselves.

You’d think we would have gotten better at clearly identifying what we love and what makes us strong, but our society tends to minimize that. We say to little Johnny, “Oh, don’t talk about how you’re good at something. It’s not polite to boast. Focus on your weaknesses and try to improve them.” That’s terrible. Unfortunately, I think our educational system helps people erase the ability to know themselves and recognize their own excellencies and interests.

Try this exercise: Sit down with two other people and the three of you write stories about what you were doing when you truly enjoyed yourself. Then the three of you together analyze the skills it took to do that well. It will help you get over blindness to self. This exercise is particularly helpful to the person who wants to change careers without going back to school.

**9** What observations can you offer about how different generations view careers, such as the perception that Gen X’ers are chronic job-hoppers?

I have a good friend who believes all that nonsense! First of all, generalizations—about gender, generations, whatever—are the kiss of death. As for those viewed as frequent job-changers, people who move around frequently experience an accelerated learning curve. They become more valuable. What’s wrong with that?

**10** What advice from the book is the most timeless?

The best approach to your career is the one in which you seek more information—not about the job market, but about yourself. That will give you a much higher success rate, whether you’re just starting out or changing careers at age 50.

Read more about the latest version of *What Color Is Your Parachute?* including the new one about retirement, at Ten Speed Press: [www.tenspeed.com](http://www.tenspeed.com).



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## A New 21<sup>st</sup> Century Version of *Parachute*

Much of *What Color Is Your Parachute?* remains the same from annual update to annual update—including the woodcut graphics and cute cartoons. Sample: dour-looking man reading a book titled *What Color Is the Hole in Your Parachute?* and the caption, “The latest self-help book for pessimists.” When Dick Bolles wrote and self-published the first version, in 1970, he decided it needed some graphics and visuals. “I was cheap,” says Bolles. “I couldn’t afford a designer so I found copyright-free drawings and used them.” Snoopy and Lucy, from the *Peanuts* gang, even make an appearance, with Lucy saying to Snoopy, “I’ve often wondered what made you decide to become a dog.”

The 2007 edition, however, is, according to Bolles and Ten Speed Press, the most dramatic rewrite of the book in 25 years. Bolles re-researched, re-thought, and re-explained in new ways his ideas and perspectives on careers, motivated by his conviction that the most dramatic changes in the last few years are the new forms information has taken—blogs, podcasts, RSS feeds, TiVo, satellite radio, and Webcasts.

The 2007 edition is divided into three sections: “The Problem” (short bursts of text with the underlying point being the least amount of information the reader needs to know to get help fast), “The Playing Field” (for readers with more leisure who want information in the form of a search for wisdom about the broader context of careers) and “What, Where, and How” (which delivers information in an interactive way to help readers with hard thinking about who they are and how to pursue their dream). Bolles also offers the provocative and salient points the book is known for: how to build your own philosophy of work, nine steps to identifying your dream job, six essential warnings about career tests, and three rules for making decisions about the future. The updated annual edition of *Parachute* will be released each January.