

The Question of Vocation: or, Learning to Ask the Right Question

Rev. Dr. Kit Carlson

I remember an early school assignment -- the kind we did on a special sort of paper. The lower half had a few rows of lines so that we could make our letters properly as we wrote our answer to the question, and the top half was blank, so we could draw a picture that illustrated our writing. The name of the assignment was “What Will I Be When I Grow Up.” And when we had finished our vocational dreaming, when we had printed with care our statement of hope and ambition, and when we each had sketched a primitive, distorted image of ourselves as a grown-up, the teacher posted all of our work on a bulletin board for Back to School Night, so parents could see the range of identities their children hoped to attain.

It was the mid-1960s, so you can imagine the selection. Boys wanted to be football players, doctors, lawyers, farmers, and there was one lion tamer in the circus. Girls wanted to be mommies, teachers, secretaries, or TV stars. I wanted to be a writer, and my drawing showed a girl typing at a table. Our parents were all suitably impressed with our printing, our drawing, and our dreams.

What do you want to be when you grow up? The question still gets asked of children and teenagers, and as they approach the final years of high school, the question gets more intense. The intensity grows, because the stakes in this question are quite high. It is not a question of vocation, but of identity. The question is not “what do you want to do?” The question is not “what

sort of job do you think you might enjoy or be good at?” The question is more existential. “What do you want to BE when you grow up?”

If children could unhook the question of being from the question of doing, and if they could answer that question truthfully, they would probably not talk about being lion tamers or TV stars or farmers or secretaries. They would say things like, “I want to be happy.” “I want to be independent.” “I want to be important.” “I want to be loved.” “I want to be excited to wake up every day.” “I want to be satisfied.” And even more basic: “I want to be alive.” “I want to be safe.” “I want to be fed.” “I want to be warm.” “I want to be sure tomorrow won’t bring worry and fear.”

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Our society asserts, in so many ways, that a job or a career is the means by which adults can achieve these goals of being. In higher-income, high-achieving families like those I work with in my congregation, and like those I raised my own children among, there is a more specific assumption. This assumption is that if a child gets the best grades in the right courses, bolstered by the right extra-curriculars, that will inevitably lead to the right college and the right career—and that this pathway will automatically deliver things like happiness, independence, importance, satisfaction, excitement, and love.

However, when that assumption fails to deliver on its promises, things can get terrifying. Because a high school diploma no longer provides an automatic gateway to a job that can provide even a living wage, much less happiness, satisfaction, or importance. My own son never finished college. Although we set him on

that track of grades, courses, extra-curriculars, and college, he failed to thrive. After high school, he dropped out of university, and then out of community college, and for some years he lived hand to mouth delivering pizzas. Fortunately, a friend helped him land an entry-level job at an internet provider answering the phones. That has blossomed into a career in IT. He does internet security, beating back spammers and hackers. Is this the job of his dreams? That's unclear. But it is a job that he is good at, and it provides some mental stimulation and satisfaction, while it pays a decent wage.

Maybe that's the best anyone should hope for—a job that you are good at, that provides some stimulation and satisfaction, and which pays a decent wage. That's certainly the assumption behind the drumbeat of “jobs, jobs, jobs” that we hear from politicians and the media. That is even the assumption behind vocational education as it was traditionally practiced. Back in the days when vo-tech education meant home economics, shop class, typing, welding, or cosmetology, the goal was to train young people—and generally young people from lower socio-economic strata—for a job that could last their entire working lives. And in the twentieth century, there were plenty of jobs, even good, middle-class union jobs, for people with this kind of training. But the days of good union jobs in factory is over.

Nonetheless, the necessity of meeting basic needs endures. “I want to be alive.” “I want to be safe.” “I want to be fed.” “I want to be warm.” “I want to be sure tomorrow won't bring worry and fear.” A steady job, a decent, well-paying job, can accomplish this at least.

But apart from simple security, there are those deeper needs which endure in every human being. “I want to be happy.” “I want to be independent.” “I want to be important.” “I want to be loved.” “I want to be excited to wake up every day.” “I want to be satisfied.” And if vocational education is designed to ad-

dress only the basic questions, and not those deeper needs, then the essential humanity of all students will be stunted and disfigured.

Perhaps a deeper consideration of the very word “vocation” could help expand the vision of ways that education can help all students “be” something when they grow up ... something that will help them meet their basic needs, while allowing them to strive toward those deeper hopes and ambitions.

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For centuries, since sometime in the Middle Ages, the word “vocation” has had a religious connotation. It was used to refer to the lives of monks and nuns and priests. If one gave up one's life to the Church, one had a “vocation.” And the word is still used in this sense by Catholics today. There are discernment programs, days of prayer, and all kinds of concerted efforts made by church officials to generate the idea that some children and young people can discover a vocation to serve the Catholic Church as a priest or a nun.

But the word has a more basic root. It derives from the Latin word *vocare*, which means “to call.” That's why it has such a strong religious connotation. Who is doing the calling? In the Middle Ages, they understood that God did the calling, because in the Bible, all sorts of people are directly addressed by God—they are *called*—and then they are told to take on a special task to benefit the world and God's people.

In the Bible, Abraham is told to leave his home in Haran and head out for a destination

yet unknown, where he will settle and have uncounted descendants who will bless the world. Moses hears a voice out of a burning bush that tells him to bring the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt. A young girl named Mary is greeted by an angel who tells her she will bear the Son of God. A man named Saul is knocked off his horse by a vision and gets renamed Paul, apostle to the Gentiles. So it's understandable that in reading these stories, the Church understood calling as something holy and specific, as something that comes from God. In this medieval understanding, God called special people for special work. God called priests and monks and nuns into lifelong vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience and into lifelong service to the institutional Church.

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In the sixteenth century, the Protestant reformer Martin Luther rejected this idea of vocation as purely ecclesiastical. He asserted that all Christians were made part of Christ's priesthood by virtue of their baptism, and thus there was no distinguishing between the value of a nun's work and the value of a mother's work, if both kinds of work were done with a faithful intention, and were done in a way that glorified God. He wrote in his *Lectures on Genesis*, "If you are a student, mind your studies; if you are a maid, sweep the house; if you are a servant, care for the horses, etc. A monk may live a harder life, wear poorer clothes, but he will never be truly able to say that he serves God in this manner. But they who serve society, the state, and the church can say it." Or as seventeenth-century poet George Herbert wrote, "Who

sweeps a room as for Thy laws,/Makes that and the action fine." Out of the Reformation grew an understanding that ordinary people could consecrate their daily work to God, and thus live out their own vocations, no matter how small or menial.

It was not until the early days of the twentieth century, and the rise of the vocational counseling movement that the word "vocation" moved fully into the secular vocabulary. With the founding of the Vocation Bureau in Boston in 1908, the word "vocation" became inextricably linked to the efforts to provide education and job training for immigrants and underprivileged youths, an understanding that has led to modern ideas of vocational education and vocational counseling. And thus in our current lexicon, the word "vocation" has come to mean one of only two things—either it's a life given over in service to the Catholic Church, or else it's a job or trade that can be learned without going to university.

If we could retrieve a broader and a deeper sense of the word "vocation," that might help broaden the understanding of what vocational education is for. And perhaps then educators and other professionals could help students—*all* students, regardless of socio-economics, ethnicity, or national origin—dream about their own vocation. Not as something to do to make money, although that might be part of it. Not as something to be, as a core identity, although that could perhaps happen. But to claim again the idea of vocation as calling, as a response to a call that comes from outside oneself, a call to something that can use an individual's gifts and talents to meet the needs of the wider world. That is, actually, the way author and theologian Frederic Buechner defined vocation in his book *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC*—as "the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." There is a double-sided desire at

work in Buechner's definition. First, there is the desire of the individual to attain some of those core longings: "I want to be happy." "I want to be independent." "I want to be important." "I want to be loved." "I want to be excited to wake up every day." "I want to be satisfied." But there is also a desire coming toward the individual from the world itself—a longing to be healed, fed, delighted, repaired, nourished, or set to rights.

Buechner described it as "the kind of work (a) that you need most to do and (b) that the world most needs to have done. If you really get a kick out of your work, you've presumably met requirement (a), but if your work is writing TV deodorant commercials, the chances are you've missed requirement (b). On the other hand, if your work is being a doctor in a leper colony, you have probably met requirement (b), but if most of the time you're bored and depressed by it, the chances are you have not only bypassed (a) but probably aren't helping your patients much either."

In my late twenties, I was only partially fulfilling part (a) and coming to realize that my work was truly not at all part (b). I was working for a large nursing home company, coordinating advertising and marketing. For a few years, I was excited to climb the corporate ladder, to find my abilities stretched every day, and to realize I could grow and improve as I stretched. There were deadlines to meet, arguments to have with upper management, schedules to coordinate. I was living on a series of adrenaline rushes, working long hours and weekends. The crash I experienced was probably inevitable. After a while I realized that while quality long-term nursing care is important, the work I did advertising and marketing that care was not meeting the world's deep hunger. And adrenaline is a thin sort of substance to live on, day in and day out.

I left that job and began a long journey of trying to discover what really was letter (a). What *was* the work I most needed to do? And

how could that intersect with letter (b), what the world most needs to be done? As I struggled with this dilemma, I took a course at my church called "Linking Faith and Daily Life," and in one of the readings, I was introduced to a story about a grocery store checkout clerk named Maxine.

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Although her stated job was ringing up and bagging groceries, Maxine saw her real job as sharing compassion with her customers. She talked about observing the faces of her customers, and how she offered a word of encouragement to someone who seemed sad, or how she packed bags a little lighter for a weary-looking customer. "Compassion is the most vital tool of my trade," she said. "There are many sad stories to be heard while ringing up grocery orders. Many times I find I'm called upon to help nurture the emotional state of a shopper—just as the food they're buying will provide nourishment to their bodies...When I succeed in easing the pain of another human being, it is then I realize just how important my job as a simple cashier is."

Maxine was able to link (a) with (b). Her deep gladness was in being a person who shared compassion with others, and the world's deep hunger was to receive compassion. The fact that she was a checkout clerk only provided the vehicle for Maxine to live out her vocation. She could have exercised that same vocation as a doctor, or a teacher, or a letter carrier, or as a vice-president of a large institution. Her vocation and her job were not necessarily the same thing.

This opened my own thinking about vocation. At the time, I was wondering if I had a religious vocation in the classical sense of the

word—if I was being called to be a priest in my own Episcopal denomination. But Maxine’s story stopped me in my tracks. It encouraged me to think about many things I did as vocation.

I realized that my letter (a), my deep gladness, comes from being able to be with people and to connect groups of people to one another in nourishing ways. The world’s letter (b), its deep hunger, is for more connection, more love, more friendship, more understanding. So for a while I worked for a cultural exchange program as an area coordinator, helping American families and foreign students as they worked to live together. And I also volunteered as a court advocate for a young girl who had been abused by her father and who was living under the court’s authority. Over time, I saw myself less and less as someone who needed a job as a “professional helper,” and more and more as someone who could be that helping person in many different situations.

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So when I did end up in a religious vocation, when I was ordained a priest, I saw it more as a vehicle—a more official and more comprehensible vehicle, but a vehicle nonetheless—for me to live out my deep vocation of (a) and (b), of what I needed to do most and what the world most needed to be done.

Educator and author Parker Palmer writes in *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*, “I understand vocation ... not as a goal to be achieved but as a gift to be received. Discovering vocation does not mean scrambling toward some prize just beyond my reach but accepting the treasure of true self I already possess. Vocation does not come from a voice

‘out there’ calling me to become something I am not. It comes from a voice ‘in here’ calling me to be the person I was born to be.”

And so we come back to the original question: “What do you want to BE when you grow up?” How do we help children discover—not ultimate fulfillment in a specific job, but true fulfillment in becoming the person they were born to be?

Parker Palmer describes how he realized that his granddaughter was born as a distinct person, with certain dislikes and certain desires, definite personality traits, and gifts that needed to be nourished. “She did not show up as raw material to be shaped into whatever image the world might want her to take. She arrived with her own gifted form, with the shape of her own sacred soul.”

And he warns about the forces that will try to bend that gifted form out of shape. “We arrive in this world with birthright gifts—then we spend the first half of our lives abandoning them or letting others disabuse us of them. As young people, we are surrounded by expectations that may have little to do with who we really are, expectations held by people who are not trying to discern our selfhood but to fit us into slots.”

Every young person an educator encounters arrives as a distinct individual, each with their own gifted form, each with the shape of their own sacred soul. But by the same token, by the time these students arrive in any classroom, the world they inhabit outside of school has already tried to shape them into its own images. And that is true for the economically disadvantaged child in the inner city, for the non-native English speaker in the school already bursting with immigrants, or for the exhausted child of overachieving parents in an upscale neighborhood.

And then the educational system takes its own turn at bending those gifted forms. And often the demands of testing, of too many students and too little time, can keep even the most sensitive educator from helping a student to listen for the real voice of vocation, the calling that draws their truest selves into deep engagement with an aching world.

What if vocational education could engage students in deep questions of meaning and purpose and joy? Not abandon career counseling or technical training, but come to those practical practices only after fully engaging with the question of vocation at its deepest level. How might the innate gifts and inner joys of a student be drawn out and applied to effective

and rewarding pursuits that can make the world a fit place for all of us to live in?

What if we changed the question? What if the question we asked a child—from the day they walked into a kindergarten classroom until the day they crossed the stage and flipped their tassel—was not, “What do you want to BE when you grow up?” What if we could ask, and keep on asking, “Who ARE you—truly, today—and how do you hope to engage this truest self with this troubled world?”

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