

Spring 2012

Reflections

Y A L E D I V I N I T Y S C H O O L

Seize the Day: Vocation, Calling, Work



What Is Worth Doing?

By Stephen H. Phelps

The concept of vocation gives voice to a mystical hope, that the prime Worker might call us to our work and cooperate in it sensibly. The blaring horns of Western culture, however, have nearly drowned out the concept in noisy banalities. On one hand, the word vocation loses its meaning when used as a synonym for occupation or job. On the other, not a few who like to think their call was uttered by the Caller seem glib to assume it was given once and for all. Surely the churches' timid silence amid the violence of waste and war and wealth in America should chasten us clergy to question our own vocation.

Let us admit our predicament. Unlike unpaid prophets of old, we paid preachers often have it much harder hearing the Caller once we've got the call from the search committee. Rather than defining it as "what I do," let us think of vocation as a species of discernment ever subject to re-direction, and even to suspension.

At the first judicatory meeting following my ordination, a minister was being honored on news of his early retirement. He had a cancer to attend to. After warm words from many friends, he addressed the assembly. "If you believe that the sovereign God called you to your work," he said, "then you must accept that God can hang up on your call, too. I believe God has ended my call in order to speak with me in a new way."

This pastor's fierce sober-mindedness served as an invocation upon my ministry. The word thrilled me: vocation as a live wire bound to go dead when you are wanted on another line.

Call Waiting

Before I was twenty years old, the question, *What is worth doing?* laid an inexorable grip on my thoughts. It seemed alive. It vexed my choice of a college major. For more than a dozen years thereafter, my skills and interests brought me to no adequate answers.

At any point, I could have taken a good-paying job doing work which did not matter to me, but this seemed a devil's bargain. Rather than commit to such an occupation of my soul, I worked as a bicycle mechanic for a few years. I was good at it, but that did not quiet the question of worthy work. And that was the point – to not give up; to stay alert, through

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a distinct angst, to a hope which I could not account for, calling me beyond what I was doing.

If we define identity as the matrix of one's foremost commitments, mine was taking shape as a hunger after a fuller use of my freedom and intelligence than I was able to engage at that stage of my life, in that place where I lived, in that time in history. Understood this way, vocation is an inwardly sensible desire for a meaningful connection between self and society – between one's intelligence (that is, one's entire particular giftedness) and one's perception of what the times need. The divine timbre in vocation's voice resounds in the energies

of discovery, both of oneself and of others, and in the persistence of personal will for more discovery, when all seems unresponsive.

In practice, a large proportion of the workers of the world have no vocation to their daily work. Divine discovery in connection with society does not enter into their conception of the meaning of their labor. Fervently we might pray that any whose labors are so constrained by necessity may know vocation to marriage, parenthood, participation in a spiritual community or in civic life, or another form of society. Even so, every vocation is limited – or focused – by historical conditions, for you can't choose to do what your times don't need.

The Via Negativa

Still, this leaves a wide field for vocational discernment, since the times are always changing, and the freedom to choose an ill-paid path in hope of seeing a far country cannot be foreclosed. In my own case, after bicycles, I took jobs that involved more of my intelligence, yet they did not adequately answer to my desire for work worth doing. Today I think of all those jobs together as vocational training on the *via negativa*, the ancient spiritual path of discovery by negations. It was as if the Caller were saying, “No, my son, not this. And no, regrettably, not that either – but further in and further up.”

In desiring vocation, a person becomes aware that her identity hangs on an adequate resolution of a paradoxical desire: she *must* apply the gift of her intelligence to meaningful purposes yet which she freely chooses. God knows, work is a necessity laid upon us by our bodies. This we share with all the animals. However, the divine image shimmers in the hunger for meaning from our hours. Together, these issue as the paradox in vocation: where one feels freed to cooperate with necessity in connecting one's self with society, a person has a vocation. For some, it seems the elements of need and choice and action all fall together in a joyful symphony. Very many, however, must discern their vocation in the breach – that is, in the absence of actual work which uses their intelligence well. In this breach is a still small voice in the concept of vocation, so hard to hear in these times.

What if the breach from meaningful work is viewed as a gift of the Holy Spirit? I receive a similar gift rather regularly during the writing of sermons. I notice that the words I am putting down seem labored or obvious or boring. I take it as a warning: *Do not proceed in this direction. Never mind that it is already 4:00 a.m. on Sunday. Stop! Wait! Listen! Another word must come.*

Obviously, the anxiety accompanying this crisis of the night has quite a different inflection from that of not having the right work. But the connection is too valuable to ignore. I put it this way. In the gift of God, my inward ear has become disciplined to the sound of the divine *Stop!*; and my will, to wait in silence.

Not just sermons but my pastorates, as well as the spaces between them, have borne the fruits of this vocational discipline. By means of it, my calling has been re-directed several times. Therefore, I commend to those feeling alienated from their work to consider whether that feeling can reveal a voice

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reminding and encouraging them, that if they do not bend too hastily to the present necessity, they will discover in their own intelligence a new gift connecting them with the need of others.

For this possibility to emerge, one must practice inward hearing. To heed the voice that calls a stop, as well as the voice that sends one forth, a person needs spiritual discipline. You need to know how to be at one with yourself, how to be alone at prayer and meditation, for it takes fortitude to bring nothing into emptiness. Why, even a little of the stuff that so easily occupies our minds instantly dissipates the energy of attention we need to see ourselves and to discern the gifts of the Spirit. *Wait upon the Lord!* Attention *is* vocation. Indeed, apart from attention, there is no vocation.

A person might feel great satisfaction with his work, but satisfaction is not the criterion of vocation. Rather, as we have been saying, it is desire for a voice, an inner hearing with the authority to release us from excessive attachment to our outer concerns, and the power to open us to a new thing at the right time.

“The Old Words Fail ...”

The ecclesiastical machines of the twentieth century all but ceased offering guidance and practice in such practical Christian life patterns as these. It is not a coincidence that a large part of Western culture abandoned churches where, in Bonhoeffer's words, “the old words fail ... and Christian life consists only of prayer and trying to do the right thing.” Churches trekked into the deserts of our broken society with our own broken body, but lost the way to the well.

No wonder people stopped coming. Real food and drink were too scarce. But wherever a community is teaching and supporting practices that help the faithful know that “place in the soul which neither time, nor space, nor created thing can touch” (Meister Eckhart), it is there, on the *via negativa*, where the people can find the face of the future in Christ.

To renew this teaching from the heart of the theology of the cross, those who have wrestled with

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their vocation to the work of God’s church may use their own struggle as curriculum for learning how to listen for the Caller.

It is a rough consequence of the economic recession that churches have drastically reduced openings for pastoral positions and many recent seminary graduates have been waiting a long time for ordination. The process for receiving a call to a church has changed in these conditions, but they have not altered the meaning of vocation. Rather, the conditions shift the terms of call to a deeper level.

And that depth in church leaders is what the church needs most of all. Indeed, these difficult times may be preparing the church’s next servants to guide it into the reformation that must surely come now.

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JOURNEYMAN’S WAGES

By Clemens Starck

To the waters of the Willamette I come
in nearly perfect weather,
Monday morning
traffic backed up at the bridge
a bad sign.

Be on the job at eight,
boots crunching in gravel;
cinch up the tool belt, string out the cords
to where we left off on Friday –
that stack of old
form lumber, that bucket of rusty bolts
and those two beat-up sawhorses
wait patiently for us.

Gil is still drunk, red-eyed, pretending he’s not
and threatening to quit;
Gordon is studying the prints.
Slab on grade, tilt-up panels, Glu-lams
and trusses ...

Boys, I’ve got an idea –
instead of a supermarket
why couldn’t this be a cathedral?