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David R. Foster

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The Structure of Our Vocations

David R. Foster

I believe that our lives are more like Tom Hanks in Saving Private Ryan than like Kramer, Jerry Seinfeld’s neighbor; more like Frodo Baggins, in Lord of the Rings, than like Elaine or George. By this I simply mean that to view life in terms of a call from God is to realize something profoundly true about our lives. God does have a part for us in His plan and He calls us to it.

The Lilly Endowment, by its grant making, began encouraging students to consider their life in terms of a calling, and academics to consider the meaning of “vocation.” The Endowment’s efforts received a strong response in part because the topic is so timely for college students.

I have worked for Seton Hall University’s Center for Vocation and Servant Leadership for the last seven years and I would like to add my reflections to the vocation discussion. As a philosopher, I am particularly interested in discerning the essential nature of vocation. In the article that follows I do four things: offer a definition of vocation, suggest a basic dynamic to vocations, find in the Scriptures three essential parts of any vocation, and suggest why vocations are often unclear to us.

In Saving Private Ryan, Tom Hanks is sent by his commander on a mission to save the last remaining Ryan brother on D-Day plus one. In Lord of the Rings the diminutive hobbit, Frodo Baggins, is given the mission of carrying the one ring that can bind all rings to its destruction, lest it be captured by the Dark Lord of Mordor. I do not suggest that our lives could or should have an equal number of battles, but I do believe that like them we have been given a mission, that our lives serve a higher purpose, and that, like the hobbits, there is more to us than meets the eye. At some point in life, many people experience a sense of being called, of being bidden to do a task by a higher power. If it does not happen, they begin to wonder if they have missed their calling.

Allow me to start my explanation with an objection posed to me. Shortly after becoming the Director of the Center, I had the occasion to explain to a group of prominent alums that our Center made students more aware that each of them had a personal vocation. Afterwards, one of them took me aside to object: he had had a successful career selling insurance, yet he did not feel that he had a calling to that. Moreover, it seemed fatalistic or at least an infringement on free will, to have such a life assignment. At the time, I did not have a good answer for him; I think I have a better one now that I will share with you.

First, a definition: by vocation I mean each person’s invitation from God to play a part in His plan for the salvation of the world. Vocation by this definition has four aspects. First, it is an invitation or call. “To call” is the literal meaning of the Latin word Vocatio. The English “calling” is an appropriate synonym. Now a “calling” implies two persons and that gives us the next two parts of our definition.

The second aspect is the One who calls, which implies a caller. What puts the zing and the sting in calling is that God is asking us to do something—a vocation is a call from the One who above all has the right to call us—our Father in heaven. It is rarely a dramatic experience like that of St. Paul or Joan of Arc; it often comes from a small inner voice or is recognized only in retrospect. Yet, we recognize it as something being asked of us and not simply equal to what we want. This is only true, however, until we discover our deepest desires and realize that God’s call is consistent with them.
The third aspect is the person who is called. A vocation entails a personal call to each of us individually—even the Blues Brothers in a comical way took this seriously. God calls everyone to play a part in His plan and every call from God in some way calls one person to help another, even though the help may be an unseen sacrifice. It is not just about me. A calling must not be reinterpreted as me deciding what my passion is, or for that matter, what the world needs from me (though, rightly understood, both questions have an important part in discerning a calling).

Finally, the call is important because it serves God’s ultimate purpose of gathering the whole human family home for celebration without end. We sense that, as small or ordinary as our call may be, it is the most important thing for us to do, and if done, then we can be at peace.

We are persons who are called by God individually and collectively. The right way to look at life is to see it as a calling. Since God is real, to consider life in light of His call is the truest picture of our reality. A calling is in turns thrilling, annoying, comforting, and daunting. Thrilling: imagine the president calling you up to say he has a job that only you can do. Annoying: recall the prophet Jonah who wanted no part in God’s plan to bring the Ninevites to repentance. Comforting: it is a relief to know that our life has a purpose. Daunting: consider how David may have felt when he first saw Goliath, or sympathize with Jeremiah, who, when called to be a prophet, replies “O Lord, I am too young.”

Can a vocation be missed or ignored? It probably happens frequently and for all sorts of reasons. We get involved in trying to make our way in the world; we put off the question; we would rather that our call not be our call. The experience of a “mid-life crisis,” popularized by Gail Sheehy’s 1976 book Passages, is perhaps a secular recognition of this reality.

Our calling may seem like the last thing we want to do. Yet, our faith is that, deep in our heart, it is this call that will best satisfy our heart’s deepest desires. The good news is that it is never too late to respond in this life. We may not be sure just what our calling is, but we can be sure that a desire to do God’s will is part of our calling.

In order to reach a Christian understanding of vocation, we naturally turn to the Bible, which is full of examples of God calling an individual to fulfill a particular part of His plan. Abraham is called away from his home to become the father of a new nation. Moses is called to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. David is called away from his sheep to be a shepherd for all Israel. Isaiah is called to console the Israelites in exile and Jeremiah is called to prophesy a rebuke.

In the Bible there is also evidence of a less dramatic call. It is a common Christian belief that the God who has numbered the hairs on our head also has a part for each of us to play in His plan. “Vocations” are not for the few but for “all who have ears to hear.”

The simplest structure occurring in vocations is a simple two-step dynamic: you need to come close to go far. The structure of a calling shows two basic parts: the first is a call to draw close and learn; the second is a call to go forth. This reflects the experience of the apostles with Jesus; first, Jesus calls them to spend time with him, to learn from him; secondly, he asks them to go out on mission.

The first part of a calling is not hard to discern, it is in a sense the same for all. It can be hard to accept since it involves surrendering our self-centeredness and putting God first in our life. We may well know people who have taken this step of coming to Jesus; yet, there is an ongoing need in Christian life to continually renew this commitment.
The second part of our calling, the going out, is different for each of us and creates a need for discernment. This explains why even people who pray struggle to understand what God is calling them to do. God is clear but also respectful; he wants to invite us, not force us. Often there is a period of “spiritual dialogue” with God that becomes clear only in retrospect.

A second characteristic of this same simple dynamic structure, which is often remarked on by writers on vocation, is that our vocation begins with the universal and moves toward the particular. There is a universal call to holiness that is at the center of every vocation; then there are aspects of our vocation that we share with others, e.g., a call to married life or to a profession; finally there are those aspects that are uniquely our call from God.

While each call is unique, I think there are three aspects common to every vocation. They are to nurture and guard life, to serve the common good by the work of our hands, and to enter upon a spiritual journey. This can be considered a structure or foundation common to every vocation. In short, we are all called to be guardians, gardeners, and pilgrims; in other words, to nurture life, to serve with our work, and to not settle here. As the author of the Letter to the Hebrews reminds us “here we have no lasting city.” (Hebrews 13:14)

The first aspect of vocation for all of us is to nurture life. The most fundamental instance of this is the bearing and raising of children. This is the first “call” of God to Adam and Eve in Genesis; “God blessed them, and God said to them ‘be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth’ . . . ” (Gen. 1:28). It is fitting that this first vocation is part of the creation story, for by parenting we cooperate with God in the most profound act of creation.

For most people, parenting is the most meaningful thing they do. Even people in powerful or glamorous professions, usually discover that raising children is the most rewarding thing they will do. It is an awesome responsibility to love, protect, educate, and liberate a child. It is the source of our greatest joys and deepest sorrows. The call to nurture life, however, is not only fulfilled by being parents, but also as aunts and uncles, friends and neighbors, brothers and sisters, teachers and nurses.

The second aspect of vocation also is found in the early chapters of Genesis. It involves the work of our hands. In Genesis, Chapter 2, it says that God settles Adam in the Garden of Eden to “cultivate and care for it” (Gen. 2:15). By referring to this aspect of vocation with the traditional phrase “the work of our hands,” I intend to include all the work we do with our hands, head, and back. We are called to be the stewards of creation, the caretakers in God’s garden. We have the responsibility to maintain a fit habitation for the human family and to even make improvements with the patience shown by a good farmer.

This same aspect of vocation is what most of us think of, when we think about a calling in life, and it encompasses all the different careers that serve the common good. There is a bewildering number; consider not only the butcher, baker, and candlestick maker, but also the physicist and pharmacist, riverboat captain and airline pilot, the bell captain and zoo keeper. All these serve the common good and make this world a more fit place for the human family.

The third aspect of vocation is to enter upon a spiritual journey, which is succinctly expressed in the simple invitation of Jesus: “Come follow me.” The main way to progress on this pilgrimage is to help others on their spiritual journey. It is the paradoxical logic of the gospel that we only advance on our spiritual journey by helping someone else on theirs; we find our life by losing it, and we reach heaven only by helping others reach heaven.
We all have a vocation to say, as Socrates did to the jury, that it is more important to care for the health of our soul than for the health of our body. We all share in the vocation of Moses, who God called to lead His people out of bondage in Egypt and into the Promised Land. What Moses did in a human way foreshadowed what Jesus would do in an eternal way. Jesus leads us from the city of man to the City of God.

The temptation will always be to mistake this life as the place to build our lasting city. We are tempted but mistaken to think that a fortune here is better than pennies in heaven. This aspect of vocation is exemplified by the priests, ministers, rabbis, and lay ministers who dedicate their lives to helping the rest of us on our spiritual journey.

There are several advantages to understanding every vocation as having three aspects. First, this division puts vocation in balance by including the calls to nurture and spiritual journey. It is an imbalance to think of vocation only in terms of career. This is a common mistake, especially in the professional education environment where the focus is on career.

A calling should not simply be equated with career. It is a particular temptation in higher education to think of calling strictly in terms of doctor, lawyer, banker, and such. In God’s eyes, the primary calling of a lawyer or doctor may be as a parent or spouse and the public career secondary.

Second, this balanced view of vocation helps to show that “having a vocation” does not mean we must imitate Mother Theresa’s vocation. Her service to the poor is remarkable but it is not the vocation of most people. Consider that our society needs insurance salesmen, bankers, teachers, nurses, auto mechanics, and a thousand other services. Would that we all had Mother Theresa’s compassion, but if we all had her vocation, who would mend our bones or fix our car?

Third, this view allows one aspect of vocation to be understood as primary without dismissing the other two parts. This is our usual experience and helps us to understand our lives. One’s vocation may be primarily to be a parent, while also involving a call to serve the common good and enter upon a spiritual journey. Another person’s vocation may be primarily to make the world a healthier place, which is the second aspect of vocation. They might do this through providing safe drinking water for the many that lack it, or discovering a cure for cancer. Each of us has one aspect as primary; all of us have the third aspect (following Christ) as fundamental.

These advantages allow me to answer the objection of the alumnus, who doubted that everyone has a vocation. Recall that, in his experience, he did not believe he had a call to sell insurance. This salesman, now retired, has a successful marriage and is a father and grandfather of well-adjusted children. The family has been generous to a number of good causes. His mistake was to think of vocation only in terms of career. I suspect his primary calling was to be a good husband and father, that the job he did was a secondary aspect of his calling and might have been satisfied as well by a different job. He also had the calling to help others on life’s spiritual journey. I suspect he and his wife did this first and foremost with their children and then in other ways with family, friends, and clients. In his retirement he has used his time and savings to support a number of charities.

Another advantage of seeing our calling having these three aspects is to understand how the first two find their full importance in the third. Thus our call to nurture life, and work for the common good, find their ultimate purpose in the goal of our pilgrimage, the good of everlasting light and life in community with our Father in heaven.
The final part of our reflection on vocation is to answer the question: Why is it so hard to know what God wants? If God wants to tell me something, why doesn’t He do so clearly? Why must I work so hard to know my calling?

There are two reasons for this seeming contradiction. First, God does speak clearly but has chosen to do so softly so as not to overwhelm us. Second, we may have never kept still long enough to listen.

It is God’s usual *modus operandi* to speak softly so as to invite our response out of love and not out of fear or awe. Consider the humility of Jesus’ birth or the fact that His miracles are careful to teach and not to overwhelm. He accepts death on a cross and asks faith in His resurrection.

God’s word comes more often like a gentle breeze than a thunder clap. This approach respects our freedom. God does not want to force a response by His might, but to invite a free response. When you love someone, you only want them to say “yes” out of love, not out of fear or obligation.

That raises the question of how willing am I to listen? How often am I quiet and wanting to listen? How many times do I even drive without the radio? Maybe I want to hear something else? Naturally enough, I want to go where I want to go. Yet, even a desire to know His will, is itself, a first response to His invitation.

In sum, God should not be omitted from our understanding of vocation to satisfy contemporary sensibilities, since it is that God is calling that makes it important. Every vocation has a basic pattern in which God calls us first to come close and learn from Him that He may later send us on mission. Every vocation also has aspects of the three basic calls in Scripture: 1) to nurture life, 2) to serve the common good, 3) to seek God and thus enter upon our spiritual journey.

Although a vocation is deeply personal and can only be answered by the one called, the community benefits from the discussion of such a possibility. We could all benefit, I believe, by reflecting on how we are called to be a guardian, a gardener, and a pilgrim. I look forward to helping you, and being helped by you, along our pilgrim way.