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Death and the Transformational Power of Vocation

RICHARD T. HUGHES

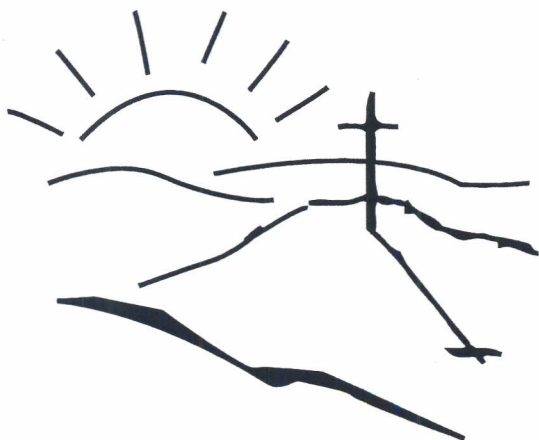
The Lilly Endowment recently made a \$2 million grant to Pepperdine University, along with similar grants to many other church-related institutions, to help us help our students focus on the questions of calling, service, and vocation, rather than on the question of how much money could be made in a lucrative career following graduation.

That grant has prompted us to ask, “How can we achieve this objective? How can we present our students with the questions of service and vocation in ways that will be meaningful and compelling?”

How, indeed? This question hit me right between the eyes during the 1995-1996 academic year when I was teaching in Pepperdine’s London program. Because I am a church historian, not a biblical scholar, I had never taught a course in biblical studies in my entire career. But because our international programs specialize in general education, I was required to teach an Old Testament course in the fall and a New Testament course in the spring.

Given my lack of formal training in the field, I agonized over how best to approach those two courses. I finally decided that, at the very least, I could expose the students to what I view as the central themes in the biblical text.

For the New Testament course in the spring, I selected as my secondary text Donald Kraybill’s wonderful book, *The Upside Down Kingdom*. This book is a study of the gospels, written from a distinctly Anabaptist perspective. This means that Kraybill takes seriously the radical teachings of Jesus. When Jesus tells the rich young ruler, for example, to “sell your goods and give to the poor,” or when he tells his disciples that they must lose their lives in order to save them, Kraybill refuses to take the conventional approach that essentially dismisses texts like these with the smug assumption that, “Well, Jesus really doesn’t mean what he appears to say here. He must mean something else.” Instead, Kraybill takes these texts at face value, and his book, *The Upside Down Kingdom*, calls on each of us to embrace a life of radical discipleship as our Christian vocation.



One day, when my students and I were working our way through one of these New Testament texts, a student raised his hand and said quite bluntly, “If this is what Jesus is all about, forget it. I’m not interested.”

It struck me then with enormous force—though I had known this all along—that we *do* have students who are not particularly concerned with the grand and lofty questions of personal transformation and service. And some—like this student I taught in

London—view their college experiences and their baccalaureate degrees as little more than tickets to the good life—to the world of money and self-indulgence.

This story lends credence to a word of caution raised by one of my current graduate students when he learned of the Pepperdine Voyage, as we call the “vocation” project at Pepperdine. “How,” he asked, “can we prevent this project from simply catering to self-indulgence?”

His point, I think, is well-taken. If we ask our students to simply “listen for the voice of vocation,” as Parker Palmer has aptly turned the phrase, if we ask them to pay close attention to their gifts, their talents, and even to the voice of God that may be calling them in a particular direction—if we do nothing more than this, is it not possible that we might simply reinforce their preoccupation with self?

This point becomes all the more pressing when we realize—as my graduate student pointed out—that many people in the world, especially the poor and the dispossessed, don’t have the luxury of thinking about vocation. They simply do what they must to survive.

How then, can we make certain that these projects on “the theological exploration of vocation” don’t simply take children of privilege to ever-deeper levels of self-absorption? Put in more positive terms, how can we make certain that these projects on vocation actually encourage students to step outside of themselves and to envision their lives and careers in terms much larger than self-interest, self-indulgence, and self-absorption?

THE TWO SOURCES OF VOCATIONAL DISCERNMENT

To answer that question, we must recognize, first, that there are two legitimate sources for vocational discernment.

First, it is certainly appropriate to ask our students, as Parker Palmer does so eloquently, to “let their life speak” and, in that way, to “listen for the voice of vocation,” for Palmer speaks truth when he writes,

Vocation does not come from willfulness. It comes from listening. I must listen to my life and try to understand what it is truly about—quite apart from what I would like it to be about—or my life will never represent anything real in the world, no matter how earnest my intentions.¹

But there is another side to this story, and that is the fact that, if we are Christians, we must know that the king of the universe has already defined our vocation to a very significant degree. The truth is, long before we begin to “listen for the voice of vocation,” we must know that God has already called us to lives that are radically transformed and that reach out in loving service to other human beings. Any vocation that we might embrace must therefore conform to this biblical vision.

Yet many of the recent books that explore the question of vocation accentuate the need for inward self-understanding but ignore or reject the call to radical transformation that comes from outside of ourselves.

This is why I have found a book by Lee Hardy, a philosophy professor at Calvin College, so helpful. In that book, *The Fabric of This World*, Hardy writes,

To those of us who are familiar with the language of the Bible, there is something odd about the phrase “choosing a vocation.” For in the New Testament the primary, if not exclusive, meaning of the term “vocation”—or calling (*klesis*)—pertains to the call of the gospel, pure and simple. We are called to repentance and faith (Acts 2:38); we are called into fellowship with Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 1:9); we are called out of the darkness and into the light (1 Pet. 1:15, 1 Cor. 1:2); indeed, we are called to be saints (Rom. 1:7). Here we are not being asked to choose from a variety of callings, to decide which one is “right” for us. Rather, one call goes out to all—the call of discipleship.²

Building on that premise, Hardy notes that “job satisfaction” cannot “serve as an infallible guide to the right occupation.” Thus, he writes,

Much is made these days of self-fulfillment. We must to our own selves be true. When it comes to work, we are inclined to think that jobs exist primarily for our sake, to assist us in the realization of ourselves. ... The Christian understanding of work does not deny that job satisfaction is a good and valuable thing. But job satisfaction cannot, for the Christian, serve as the sole or even primary criterion by which a job is evaluated. For an occupation must be first considered in terms of how it provides a fitting place for the exercise of one’s gifts in the service of others.³

The witness of Scripture is consistent on this point. Thus, when Jesus defined his own vocation, he did so in terms of radical service to the poor, the prisoners, the blind, and the oppressed. According to Luke:

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” (4:18-21)

Not only did Jesus define his own vocation in terms of radical service, he also took great pains to explain the nature of the vocation his followers should embrace. Rick Marrs, chair of the Religion Division at Pepperdine University, tells this story well and notes along the way how ironic it was that

while on his way to Jerusalem to give his life for humanity, Jesus’ own followers argue about their ‘vocation’ in the coming kingdom of God. ... They talk in terms of self-promotion and appropriate reward for work rendered. They are consumed with what honor, benefits, and security will come to them for the successful accomplishment of their tasks. In that context, Jesus responds:

You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many. (Mark 10:42-45)⁴

The point, I think, is clear. Those of us who work with students must encourage those students to “listen for the voice of vocation,” for each of our students has been blessed with unique gifts, unique talents, and special interests. But before we ask them to “listen for the voice of vocation,” we must make sure that they understand that there is a call that claims their lives and that takes priority over all other calls. The call of which I speak is the call to serve as a transformed human being who reaches out in service to a world in need. This call is writ large in the biblical text and manifested even more profoundly in the life and death of Jesus the Christ. For those with eyes to see and ears to hear, this call is an inescapable summons.

THE INNER CALL: DEATH AND THE TRANSFORMATIONAL POWER OF VOCATION

And yet, this outer call, to which a Christian must pay such close attention, finally has much in common with the inner call. To make this point, I want now to explore the dynamics of that inward aspect of voca-

tional discernment to which Parker Palmer calls our attention—the notion that each of us must “listen for the voice of vocation.” What could that possibly mean?

To begin this exploration, we might well observe that “listening for the voice of vocation” is a profoundly religious exercise. And religion—as Paul Tillich has taught us—is always a response to ultimate questions that human beings inevitably raise. Put another way, human beings cannot help but ask about fate and death, emptiness and meaninglessness, and guilt and condemnation. And people respond to religious teachings when they find themselves asking one or more of these ultimate questions in a serious and meaningful way.

Of all the ultimate questions, the one most critical for our discussion here is the question of meaning—a question that all of our students inevitably ask. The question of meaning is crucial in this context for one simple reason: an affirmation of vocation is finally a response to the question of meaning.

In this regard, Sharon Daloz Parks offers the best definition of vocation that I have seen.

Vocation, she writes, is simply the “awareness of living one’s life aligned with a larger frame of purpose and significance.”⁵ This means that we hear the voice of vocation when we discover those tasks that fill our lives with meaning or, as Parks puts it, those tasks that fill our lives with “a larger frame of purpose and significance.”

But now we must move our discussion to a deeper level still, for the question of meaning is finally dependent on the reality of death. We ask about the meaning of life because the fact of death makes our lives seem so absurd. Put another way, the fact that we will inevitably die forces each of us to ask if there is meaning in the midst of such apparent meaninglessness.

I do not mean to suggest that we do not find meaning in those activities that give us joy and peace and contentment. That would be absurd. But I do mean to suggest, whether we realize it or not, that we always experience joy, peace, and contentment against the backdrop of our radical finitude. How could it be otherwise? The ultimate meaning of vocation therefore lies in the answer to the question, how would I act and what would I do if I knew that my own death was imminent?

It is true that our students, for the most part, cannot experience the absolute threat of their own personal deaths as profoundly as those of us who are older. Yet, like all other human beings, they inevitably experience the relative threat of death in the form of suffering, tragedy, broken relationships, divorce, and the deaths of friends and relatives. And precisely in those events, they may discover both the meaning of life and the meaning of vocation. Parker Palmer illustrates this point beautifully, for Palmer finally discovered his own vocation through the lens of a debilitating bout with depression.⁶

We might describe this tragic dimension of human life with the simple word “finitude.” God is infinite. We are finite. Put another way, we are creatures afflicted by profound limitations. We don’t have to live long to make that startling discovery, and most of our students know this all too well. This means that our students are fully prepared to deal with the question of meaning—and therefore with the question of vocation—at a level far deeper than we might imagine.

Earlier, I suggested that the outer call to service and radical transformation finally has much in common with the inner call, and we need now to make that connection explicit. One who takes seriously his or her finitude and who recognizes his or her brokenness is far more likely to minister to the brokenness of others than the person who imagines that he or she stands apart from the common lot of humankind. And the person who recognizes her or his own emptiness and who, out of that emptiness, ministers to the emptiness of others, will find in that act the deepest possible sense of meaning. Put another way, the two paths to

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vocational discernment can finally converge in a single call—a call to find meaning and purpose by losing ourselves in service to other human beings.

This is precisely the point that Jesus made when he said, “Those who try to make their life secure will lose it, but those who lose their life will keep it” (Luke 17:32). On another occasion, he couched this truth in terms of discipleship. “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:26-27).

And what does it mean to be a disciple of Jesus? What does it mean to save our lives by losing them? What does it mean to find meaning and vocation in the face of death? Hear his own words:

When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous. (Luke 14:12-14)

ON SHARING THIS VISION WITH STUDENTS

While all this may sound good theoretically, is it possible to ask students to consider the issue of vocation by reflecting on questions of brokenness, suffering, and death? There are some who would say that our students are too young, that their minimal life experiences simply have not prepared them to cope with these kinds of issues. For this reason, they claim, we must find some other place—a happier place—to begin this discussion.

In response to this objection, let me offer a story.

I never thought I had much of a story to tell until I suffered a heart attack and congestive heart failure in the summer of 1998. That experience convinced me that I *did* have a story to tell, and it also convinced me of the power that lies in our own personal stories.

That next fall, I was scheduled to teach a freshman seminar, and after the heart attack, I decided to focus the seminar on the theme, “Learning to Tell Our Stories.” My concern was to help my students discover those stories in their lives that have genuine substance and to learn to tell them well.

Because I am convinced that stories of genuine substance are often grounded in suffering and tragedy, I began the class by asking the students to read a number of books that would force them to think about suffering, tragedy, and death. We read, for example, *Tuesdays with Morrie*, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, Nick Wolterstorff’s *Lament for a Son*, and Frederick Buechner’s *Sacred Journey*. After we had read and discussed these books together, I then said, “Now, I want you to tell your stories—stories that are grounded in the depth dimension of your lives.”

And the stories they told! Oh, my! One student told of the pain of immigrating from Japan to America as a very small child and leaving behind a beloved grandfather, then of the joy of reuniting with her grandfather when he finally moved to the United States. One student told how he had progressively lost his vision and now faced the prospect of total blindness in the not-too-distant future. One student told of the rape of her sister. Another told of the death of a parent. And another told of the pain he felt when a serious injury terminated his high school football career, but not before he completed a magnificent 60-yard pass to help his team win their final game of the season. And still another told of his parents’ painful separation and how, after his mother later became pregnant, he had to take on a role he never dreamt would be his: special responsibility for his new baby brother because there was no longer a father in the house.

Don’t tell me that our students have not experienced tragedy, loss, and suffering. They have, indeed, and these are precisely the experiences—if we can get our students to share these stories—that can open up a revealing exploration of the questions of meaning and vocation.

My only regret about that class is that I didn't capitalize on those stories to raise the issue of vocation. But that was a time before the notion of vocation stood at the center of our thinking, as it does today.

CONCLUSIONS

Now, at last, we must ask, What conclusions have we reached? There are several.

First, if we are Christians, there are two paths to vocational discernment, not just one. The first of those paths is offered by the Christian gospel that provides us with an inescapable summons to lose ourselves in service to other human beings. Within the context of that primary call, we then hear the secondary call—the call we hear when we “let our lives speak,” as Parker Palmer has put it.

The second conclusion is this: The call we hear when we “let our lives speak” is really the call we hear when we pay close attention to our gifts, our talents, and our interests. But most of all, this is the call we hear when we live our lives in the context of “a larger frame of purpose and significance.”

The third conclusion is the fact that we always discover that “larger frame of meaning and significance” against the backdrop of our finitude—that is, against the backdrop of tragedy, suffering, and death. Those who deny their finitude and spend their lives searching for infinite fame, infinite wealth, and infinite power and status are those who seldom discover the “larger frame of purpose and significance” that is crucial to a sense of vocation. Conversely, those who learn to embrace their finitude—to take upon themselves the realities of tragedy, suffering, and death—are those who develop the greatest sensitivity to tragedy, suffering, and death in the lives of other human beings and are the ones who inevitably discover that “larger frame of purpose and significance.” As we noted earlier, this is at least part of what Jesus meant when he told us that we find our lives only when we lose them.

And finally, although we have explored two very different paths to vocational discernment—one outer and one inner—these two paths should converge into a single call—the call to lose ourselves in service to other human beings. When that happens, we discover the true meaning of vocation.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 4.
- 2 Lee Hardy, *The Fabric of This World: Inquiries into Calling, Career Choice, and the Design of Human Work* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 80.
- 3 Ibid., 98.
- 4 Rick R. Marrs, “Calling or Career: Toward a Theology of Vocation,” *The Pepperdine Voyage*, 26.
- 5 Sharon Daloz Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Young Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 26.
- 6 Palmer, 56-57, observes that he finally saw “how pivotal that passage [into depression] had been on my pilgrimage toward selfhood and vocation. ... Depression compelled me to find the river of life hidden beneath the ice.”

