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"Wanted: Burning Bush"— A Personal Story of Vocation

EZRA PLANK

It was like a ritual, and I could count on it happening every Sunday. Church services would end, my parents and their friends would visit in the foyer, I would come in to ask if I could spend the day at a friend's house, and then an adult would lean over with an all-knowing grin and pop the question. "So, Ezra, what do you want to be when you grow up?"

Although I knew this lighthearted inquiry about my career choice was merely for entertainment, it really wasn't funny—this was life we were talking about! I would politely and passionately state my intentions, "I am going to be a preacher and a carpenter." (Good professional choices ... wasn't there someone from Galilee in similar trades?) I was not old enough to tie my own shoes, but I knew where I was going in life, and I suppose that was what so amused everyone.

My father was a preacher and carpenter, and I always emulated him. If he was a man of the Bible and the hammer, then I would be as well. Throughout the years, however, I gave little deep thought to my future. To be perfectly honest, I did not dream great dreams; I was content with life and satisfied to live each day as it came.

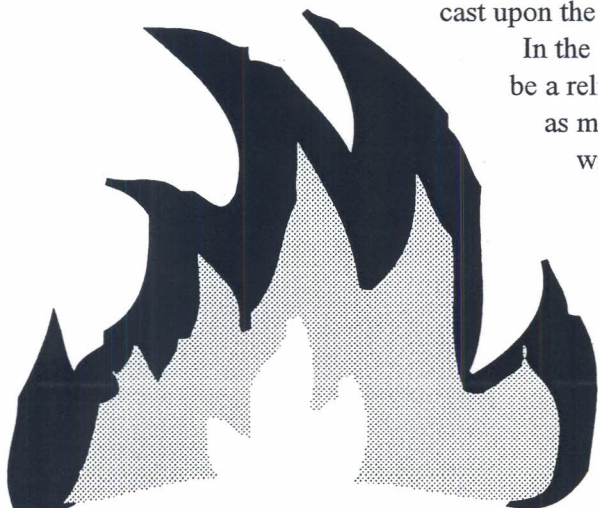
Through junior high and high school, I worked with my father and learned how to build houses, furniture, and cabinets. Before I left home for college, my brother and I built our family a home. My father also imparted his other skills, teaching me about ministry and crafting sermons.

However, while I was in high school, my family went through a traumatic experience. Our home congregation turned its back on my father despite his years of faithful service. That hurt me deeply, although it would be many years before I realized the full impact of this event on my life. I went through a period of disillusionment when I questioned whether I wanted to be associated with the church. I then secretly vowed

I would never allow myself to work in the church so I could never be cast upon the heaps of used, abused, and unappreciated ministers.

In the fall of 1996, I left home for Pepperdine University to be a religion major, as clueless about life, vocation, and career as most freshmen. I determined to give my life a foundation with religion courses and then advance to law school for career training. One experience I needed but did not receive from my religion classes was a "burning bush" to affirm my career selection. In my heart, I was not set on law school; I only had a desire to help people, and law seemed to be a field where much could be done.

I needed a nudge, a voice, a dream—anything. Thinking about my future was becoming increasingly difficult because I was thriving in my major and finding the practical applications of ministry exhilarat-



ing. Often I had to remind myself that I was *really* preparing for a law career. During my senior year, I was accepted to the law school of my choice, but I began to question the decision to attend. I wanted to give God a fair chance to impress law school on my heart, and so I requested and received a yearlong deferment. In the meantime, Pepperdine hired me as the student ministries coordinator. I began a master of divinity degree, thinking the classes would keep my mind sharp for law school.

During the first few months of my job, something mystical transpired in my life. I came alive in a way that was unexplainable. My job of organizing chapel services, working with students to create ministries, and training students in practical ministry on campus gave me deep fulfillment. It was a joy to come to work day after day and I wanted to shout,

"This is what you made me for, Lord!" Finally, after three months in my job, the evidence was undeniable. Although some thought it was foolish to pass up such an incredible opportunity, I called the law school and told them I would not be attending in the fall. I had given in. I did not understand why, but I knew this was what I must do.

Renowned educator and author Parker Palmer claims, "Vocation at its deepest level is, 'This is something I can't not do, for reasons I'm unable to explain to anyone else and don't fully comprehend myself but that are nonetheless compelling.'"¹ That day, something died within me. I did not have words to express it, but when I decided against law school, I never looked back, never regretted it, and never gave it a second thought.

I worked as the student ministries coordinator for three years, which allowed me to be deeply involved in the lives of students. The years were a time of self-discovery for me, a time when I was able to identify two of my passions in life: people and ministry. As I invested in people, helped them develop, and worked with them in cultivating their ability to minister, I realized I had found my "vocation."

In the summer of 2000, another significant event occurred: I began the Spiritual Life Advisor (SLA) ministry at Pepperdine. The SLA program is a resident-hall ministry with an approach that differs from most college ministries. Nearly all the ministries on our campus are *passive*: Programs and events are carefully planned so students who attend are changed and strengthened. The SLA program utilizes an *active* approach toward ministry: Students are trained as resident-hall chaplains to seek out their peers where they live, minister to them in their rooms, enter their world and meet them there. When the program began, I knew it was exactly what our students needed.

Little did I know that I was practicing *incarnational ministry*, based on the model of Jesus. He gave his followers an example thousands of years ago when he put on flesh, entered our world, and met us there.

The first year, I began with 15 students, preparing and training them for peer ministry. The following year, there were 27 SLAs, who were trained by me along with Pepperdine faculty, staff, and administrators. Now, in the third year of the program, there are 40 SLAs, with at least one in every living area on campus and including two in Pepperdine's London program.

The joy that I receive from working with these students is immeasurable. It is a miracle to watch students come into the SLA role with passion and great dreams. Like the process of refining gold, the process of serving and ministering to a student's living area is purifying and challenging. After a year, many have

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spent themselves. They have given all, but in the process, have grown to know the one who did the same for all of humankind.

It was midway through the formation of the SLA program that I began learning about vocation—the concept that God has uniquely created us and called us to serve the world with our gifts. Upon learning about vocation, my life purpose began to crystallize, and I began to take on a new perspective. Framing my life in terms of vocation expressed a reality that I had felt but lacked the conceptual constructs to interpret. It is said, “You don’t see what you’re not looking for.” In the context of calling, I would say, “You don’t hear what you’re not listening for.” I began to realize that by giving me a design, God had been seeking me out; he had buried a purpose within me, and I would glorify him to the extent I was faithful to his call.

I have heard the principle, “You choose a career; a calling chooses you” and now have seen it at work in my life. Although I didn’t fully understand it at the time, I was directed away from my chosen *career* and toward my life *calling*. In the past, I might have become indignant at a book titled “Why You Can’t Be Anything You Want to Be,” but now this idea intrigues me. God has made me a unique individual, and if I were to invest in a career for which I were not intended, I would end up exhausted, frustrated, and unfulfilled. Life and faith began to blossom in me when I started to realize how deep were God’s purposes for me. I wanted to exclaim with the Psalmist:

O Lord, you have searched me and known me. . . . For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you for I am fearfully and wonderfully made, wonderful are your works; that I know very well. My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed. (139:1, 13-16)

Viewing my past through this new lens, I could see the hand of God had been guiding me. God had been preparing me for certain purposes, and as my heart became sensitive, I recognized his work. Lee Hardy writes,

Discovering God’s will for one’s life is not so much a matter of seeking out miraculous signs and wonders as it is being attentive to who and where we are. It is not as if our abilities, concerns, and interests are just there, as an accident of nature, and then God has to intervene in some special way in order to make His will known to us in a completely unrelated manner . . . God himself gives us whatever legitimate abilities, concerns, and interests we in fact possess. These are his gifts, and for that very reason they can serve as indicators of his will for our lives.²

I had known all along that I do not function well in a cutthroat environment, that I do not enjoy intense research, and that I take life at a slower pace, yet, I had intended to become a lawyer! The law profession did not fit me—why had I been so drawn to it?

Vocation demands introspection and honesty, and I came to realize my motives were not wholesome. I had thought that I desired to attend law school to help the helpless—I *did* hurt for unrepresented people whose rights were denied. But law was not my passion, and my gifts certainly did not lie there (maybe God does use things such as entrance exam scores to speak to us!). I admitted to myself that I had chosen a field to serve others *as a means to serve myself*. Still affected by negative childhood experiences with the church, I sought a career that afforded security. I wanted to live a comfortable and independent life as I tried to help others. Additionally, I was seeking the approval of my father. Although he told me on numerous occasions that he would be proud of me regardless of my occupation, I felt entering the law field would gain me greater approval.

My path is still unclear, but this is not disheartening. I now view my life and calling as a process, a gradual understanding, a search—not a destination. I know “I was placed here for a purpose, and that purpose is one which I am, in part, to discover, not invent,”³ and I am patiently allowing God to unfold that purpose.

Although the Jonah in me wants sometimes to run from the call of God, I find myself returning yet again. I still love to work with my hands and build; I renovated my friends’ house recently. With the SLA program, I find myself entrenched in meaningful and gratifying ministry because I am utilizing the gifts and passions God placed within me. I have also continued in the master of divinity program. The classes keep me focused and deepen my foundation for ministry.

My life now is not what I envisioned it would be when I was in college. But perhaps those visions were created while I was ignoring what was always in my heart: “I am going to be a preacher and a carpenter.”

EZRA PLANK

Mr. Plank is pursuing a master of divinity degree at Pepperdine University, in Malibu, California, where he serves as the director of community living.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Parker J. Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2000), 25.
- 2 Lee Hardy, *The Fabric of This World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 92.
- 3 Ibid., 83

