

All Souls Church Unitarian

February 2015 Covenant Group Guide

## Vocation

If you are looking for a simple definition of a vocation, the literal meaning of the word is a “call.” But a vocation is more than an ordinary call. A vocation is a call from God, and anyone who has felt God’s call knows that the process is anything but simple.

Excerpted from online post, “What Is a Vocation?”  
Roman Catholic Diocese, Melbourne, Australia

Everyone has his own specific vocation or mission in life; everyone must carry out a concrete assignment that demands fulfillment. Therein he cannot be replaced, nor can his life be repeated, thus, everyone’s task is unique as his specific opportunity to implement it.

Viktor E. Frankl

You can't really know what you want to do by thinking about it. You have to do it and see how it fits. You have to let the work take you over until it becomes you and you become it; then you have to decide whether to embrace it or to abandon it. And few have the courage to abandon something that defines their security and prosperity.

Kent Nerburn, *Letters to My Son: A Father's Wisdom on Manhood, Life, and Love*

... longing for our idealized images of life separates us from our true selves and from our true callings.

Stephen Cope

The Rabbi of Kotzk asks: “What is the meaning of the commandment ‘Do not steal’?” His disciples reply, “That's obvious: it means ‘Do not rob your neighbor.’”

“No,” responds the Rabbi. “It means ‘Do not rob yourself.’”

Rabbi Nilton Bondar

## Vocation as Giftedness

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, to fulfill the original selfhood given me at birth by God.

It is a strange gift, this birthright gift of self. Accepting it turns out to be even more demanding than attempting to become someone else! I have sometimes responded to that demand by ignoring the gift, or hiding it, or fleeing from it, or squandering it — and I think I am not alone. There is a Hasidic tale that reveals, with amazing brevity, both the universal tendency to want to be someone else and the ultimate importance of becoming one's self: Rabbi Zusya, when he was an old man, said, "In the coming world, they will not ask me: 'Why were you not Moses?' They will ask me: 'Why were you not Zusya?'"

If you doubt that we all arrive in this world with gifts and as a gift, pay attention to an infant or a very young child. A few years ago, my daughter and her newborn baby came to live with me for a while. Watching my granddaughter from her earliest days on earth, I was able, in my early fifties, to see something that had eluded me as a twenty-something parent: my granddaughter arrived in the world as *this* kind of person rather than *that*, or *that*, or *that*.

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. Biblical faith calls it the image of God in which we are all created. Thomas Merton calls it true self. Quakers call it the inner light, or 'that of God' in every person. The humanist tradition calls it identity and integrity. No matter what you call it, it is a pearl of great price.

In those early days of my granddaughter's life, I began observing the inclinations and proclivities that were planted in her at birth. I noticed, and I still notice, what she likes and dislikes, what she is drawn toward and repelled by, how she moves, what she does, what she says.

I am gathering my observations in a letter. When my granddaughter reaches her late teens or early twenties, I will make sure that my letter finds its way to her, with a preface something like this: "Here is a sketch of who you were from your earliest days in this world. It is not a definitive picture — only you can draw that. But it was sketched by a person who loves you very much. Perhaps these notes will help you do sooner something your grandfather did only later: remember who you were when you first arrived and reclaim the gift of true self."

We arrive in this world with birthright gifts — then we spend the first half of our lives abandoning them or letting others disabuse use 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. In families, schools, workplaces, and religious communities, we are trained away from true self toward images of acceptability; under social pressures like racism and sexism our original shape is deformed beyond recognition; and we ourselves, driven by fear, too often betray true self to gain the approval of others.

We are disabused of original giftedness in the first half of our lives. Then — if we are awake, aware, and able to admit our loss — we spend the second half trying to recover and reclaim the gift we once possessed.

Parker J. Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening For The Voice of Vocation*

## **Our Vocations May Change**

Vocation is lived in a wide variety of ways; there are many different pathways even in one faithful life.

Yet you know how easy it is to settle into life, to stop listening for that still small voice. The busy-ness of your daily activities consumes your time and attention. You run from one serious responsibility to another, one important event to another. Your mind is full of plans and concerns. You live with 'surround-sound' and unrelenting instantaneous communication.

Stop. Create the space to listen. Allow yourself the time to hear what God is saying in your life. Be still enough to see, really see, what is going on in the world and to ask how you might respond, how you might participate in the healing of the world, and thereby your own healing.

Believe that yours is a call to the fullness of life. Allow that reality to infuse every corner of your being: your spirituality, your values, what you care about, how you use your time and resources, your relationships, your work.

No matter where you are or what your calling, try to deepen your reflections on your vocation. Pray for the guidance of the Spirit. Fill the canvas of your life with new possibilities. Enrich what you are already doing by making it conform more intentionally to the gospel. Shape your decisions about life more deliberately by a commitment to the New Creation.

Remember that you can discover a new vocation at any time of your life. You can respond to more than one call at a time. Vocation is about the totality of how we live the gospel in these times.

Think of all the places where you might hear God's voice more clearly and make sure you go there regularly.

Our God is full of surprises. Over and over again, she invites us to follow in ways that we don't expect or understand into places we had not planned to go. We have many opportunities to catch the cadence of her voice.

Look very carefully at the reality of the world into which we are sent, with all its hopes and fears, joys and sorrows, which, if you are open to them, will soon become your own. Have the courage to ask why the brokenness you see is so pervasive, why the beauty is so rarely seen. Ready yourself to be changed, converted, to find God as you are called and respond to new vocations. You will begin to recognize the cadence of God's call and it will begin to make sense to you in ways you never thought possible.

Open yourself to a dialogue of the heart with those who are hurting or marginalized, violated or forgotten. The reality they live may help you hear God more clearly or give you the courage to respond. A Christian vocation will often lead us to the margins: 'Whatever you do to the least of these. . .' But what to do when we get there can be the question. Listen there to the inner voice. Ask how you can be present to those who are hurt or forgotten. Integrate a response to their needs and work for social justice with them or on their behalf in what you are already doing or what you are called now to do. How will your next steps make their next steps easier, less painful, less frustrating?

Discern in community God's call for you. Remember always that you live in a global community, but also be or become part of a community closer to home, a community that shares your faith and values. Whether your primary community is your family or your parish or a circle of friends or an intentional community that lives together, sharing life day by day, or a worshiping community that journeys together from a bit more distance, lean on your community as you listen for God's call.

Tune your soul also to God's song in creation. The groaning of creation in our times is in tune with the rhythm of God's call. Listening to the cry of the earth sharpens our capacity to hear God's voice. Allow the harmony you begin to discern in creation to open your heart to new challenges in life.

You know in your soul whether or not you are living faithfully the vocation or vocations to which you have been called. Take the next right step. God is calling — through loved ones and community, through a broken and hungry world, through the beauty or the cry of creation.

"You are invited to the fullness of life. By stopping to listen, by nurturing right relationships, by moving to the margins, by ensconcing ourselves in communities committed to faithful discipleship, by living in harmony with the rest of creation — perhaps, just perhaps, we will catch the cadence of God's voice and hear the call or calls that are ours."

Marie Dennis, *Diversity of Vocations*

## **Vocation Can Require Sacrifice**

Yogis believed that every human being is born with a special gift. This gift, for each of us, is the doorway to a fulfilled life. It is the doorway to our own particular path, our vocation, our calling--our sacred duty . . . The full flowering of the gift is usually paired with a sacrifice. For most of us, fully choosing the gift will mean giving up something else. Maybe even giving up something that seems very important--maybe even something of apparent good in our lives. In order to be brought to maturity, we must decide not only for the gift but also against other things--and not just "bad" other things but also "good" other things. It is useful to remind ourselves that the word "decision" comes from the Latin "decidere," which means to cut off. Full devotion to the gift may require us to cut off other paths -- to focus our energy and passion in a most one-pointed way.

Stephen Cope, *The Gift: Living a Life of Purpose and Meaning* (in The Huffington Post).

## **Questions for Reflection and Discussion**

1. Is there something in the readings that especially rang true or false or stood out as an idea you want to reflect on or share with others?
2. Do you feel you have a vocation, a calling, a special gift that leads to fulfillment? How do you know this? Have your actual calling and the feeling of having been called been a constant in your life?
3. Are you faithful to your calling? Is this an easy question to answer? Have you helped other be faithful to their own callings? What gets in the way of discerning vocation and acting on that knowledge?
4. Has your participation at All Souls had an impact on your ability to discern vocation/calling and act on it in your own life? How so?

By Mary Beth Hatem for All Souls Covenant Groups