

Christ College Alumni Reading Groups
Chicago, Minneapolis/St. Paul, Indianapolis,
Saint Louis, Denver, Washington DC
Spring 2005

Vocation

Frederick Buechner once described vocation as “the place God calls you to . . . where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.” Five, ten, twenty, or more years out of Christ College, how many of us can say that we have experienced this intersection of personal satisfaction and service to others? If we have not, what conspires against us? And what are the effects of laboring against the grain of one’s calling?

The book of *Jonah* provides a case study in vocation that any one of us might identify with. Called against his will to prophesy at Nineveh, Jonah initially runs away to Tarshish, only to discover that he cannot escape his divine commission. A dramatic rescue at sea returns him to the work he sought to avoid. This time, Jonah accepts his lot and converts the wicked city; however, when he realizes that the God who forgave him his unfaithfulness also means to pardon Nineveh, he cannot stomach his own success: “O Lord! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing.”

Laboring mightily against the grain of his calling, Jonah looks to us like someone intent on self-sabotage—and yet, how human! How familiar his story is to those of us who have struggled with decisions about graduate school, about taking a job or changing a career, about getting married or starting a family. How resonant for those of us who wake up one day to find ourselves working in a field that we could not have even imagined five, ten, or twenty-plus years ago—or still working a job that was supposed to be temporary when we signed the contract fifteen years ago. In the months that follow, we will examine the idea of vocation through several different lenses, from the revolutionizing thought of Martin Luther to the musings of a Quaker pedagogue, the dramatization of an award-winning novel, the observations of a *New York Times* reporter, and the popular theory of a University of Chicago psychologist.

I.

*Before you tell your life what you intend to do with it,
listen for what it intends to do with you. Before you tell your life
what truths and values you have decided to live up to,
let your life tell you what truths you embody, what values you represent.*
(Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak*)

The first text in this course will be Parker Palmer’s *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*. Drawing on his own experience, Palmer meditates on the problem of authenticity

in vocation. Most of us live our lives from the “outside in,” he writes, seeing vocation in terms of professional goal-setting and making ourselves vulnerable to burnout and depression when we find that our choices do not fulfill us. Vocation, he urges, cannot be willed, no matter how noble our intentions, how admirable our models. To live authentically, we must live from the “inside out,” identifying the gifts we were born with and creatively using them in the world.

II.

The first demand on a carpenter's religion is that he makes good tables. What use is anything else if in the center of his life and occupation he is insulting God with bad carpentry? (Dorothy Sayers)

*God himself will milk the cows through him whose vocation that is.
(Gustav Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*)*

Valuing one's native gifts is a core concept in Luther's doctrine on vocation, although the reformer would have conceived of “gifts” in terms of an individual's given station (*Stand*) in life. When Luther insisted that all work holds equal value in the eyes of God, he elevated the humblest occupation (*Beruf*) to the level of a religious calling. Farmer, fisherman, servant—all are vocations when performed in the service of God and neighbor. Nor is the concept of vocation limited to paid work, but extends to one's relationships in the world, for we are also called to be parents, spouses, children, friends, and citizens. To this end, we each have multiple vocations. For whatever is good for the health of the community is good work for the Christian, through whom God continues His creative work.

These are liberating words, to be sure, and yet some have criticized Luther's doctrine on vocation as inadequate within the context of the modern, industrialized world, where poor working conditions and the effects of mechanized labor alienate and dehumanize workers. Surely not all types of work fit the definition of *Beruf* as Luther intended it in 1522. How, then, might we use his statements about vocation to understand the concept today? Gustaf Wingren's *Luther on Vocation*, first published in 1957, is still the definitive source for readers interested in what the man actually said.

III.

*When we are not living up to our true vocation,
thought deadens our life, or substitutes itself for life, or gives in to life
so that our life drowns out our thinking and stifles the voice of conscience.
When we find our vocation—thought and life are one.
(Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude*)*

*Persistent depression is only too clearly the sign that a [person] is living
contrary to his [or her] vocation. (Jose Ortega y Gasset, *The Dehumanization of Art*)*

Luther grants dignity and moral purpose to the roles of marriage and motherhood; and yet, because historically women have had so few vocational options, many have experienced these roles as limiting. If second wave feminism enabled women to pursue careers beyond the

domestic sphere, the third wave is enabling them to deliberately—and with less guilt—embrace “traditional” roles, such as full-time parenting, putting their professional development on hold for several years or more and hoping they will still have marketable skills when it comes time to dust off their resumes and re-enter the work force.

In the third part of this course, we examine the intersection of gender, vocation, and ambition, using as our texts the film adaptation of Michael Cunningham’s *The Hours* and an article by *New York Times* columnist Lisa Belkin, “**The Opt-Out Revolution.**”

The Hours faithfully brings to life Cunningham’s novel, weaving together the stories of three women from three different generations, each struggling to balance work and family, the need for privacy and the need for companionship, responsibility toward self and responsibility toward others. Belkin’s article considers similar tensions in a group of Princeton alumnae who find the call to full-time motherhood displacing their earlier commitment to professional goals.

IV.

*Work is not primarily a thing one does to live, but the thing one lives to do.
It is, or should be, the full expression of the worker’s faculties,
the thing in which he [or she] finds spiritual, mental, and bodily satisfaction.*
(Dorothy Sayers, *Unpopular Opinions*)

We conclude with Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s cult read, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, a book that challenges us to discover the satisfaction that comes from intentional, meaningful action in our work. Whatever our occupation, flow happens when we are “fully present and engaged” in what we are doing, “timelessly committed to the activity” of the moment (Audiofile reviews).

Belkin, Lisa. “The Opt-Out Revolution,” *New York Times Magazine*. October 26, 2003.
(Available online at www.chss.montclair.edu/~landwebj/ww/optout.htm).

Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. New York: Harper and Row, 1990.

The Hours. Dir. Stephen Daldry. Paramount Pictures and Miramax Films, 2002.

Palmer, Parker J. *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000.

Wingren, Gustaf. *Luther on Vocation*. Trans. Carl C. Rasmussen. Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2004 (1957).