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Listening to a Vocation

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Teaching in Order to Nurture a Vocation

In March 2004 the eight Jesuit colleges and universities which were among the many religiously-oriented colleges and universities that had received generous grants from the Lilly Endowment Fund for Theological Education, which challenged them to devise curricula and programs which promoted “vocations” among their students, met in Chicago for three days to compare notes on their progress.

The articles in this section stem from those conversations. Stephanie Russell reminds us to listen, Mark Ravizza and Chris Boscia describe the role of the learning community, and six of the schools offer practical descriptions of just what they are doing, with the hope that other schools may attempt similar experiments. Finally, in the book review section, we review John Haughey, S.J.,’s edited volume on the vocation’s theological aspects.

A central idea of the discussion: the term “vocation” does not apply narrowly to the religious life but to the calling every young person has to use his or her God-given talents for the good of others.

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LISTENING TO A VOCATION

Uncovering their deepest desires

By Stephanie Russell

When my oldest son was sixteen, our family was invited to go to the home of his confirmation sponsor for a leisurely dinner. At the end of the meal, as dessert plates were passed, the sponsor took one of his customary forays into my son’s life.

“So,” he said, “what kind of work do you think you might want to do when you grow up?” David didn’t hesitate. He looked at his sponsor and said, matter-of-factly, “I want to be a bankruptcy attorney.”

Forks lowered. A pall of silence fell over the room. It felt as though the pie I had been swallowing might just make a permanent home in my esophagus.

“A bankruptcy attorney?” I said in a tight, rising tone. My husband rearranged himself in his chair. You could tell he was vacillating between an extended lecture and a hasty escape. We were both flushed with embarrassment, ready to

spring on our son for such a foolish, selfish response – and in front of his spiritual mentor, yet.

“Interesting,” said the sponsor. “Why do you want to be a bankruptcy attorney?”

“Because they make a lot of money,” said Dave.

“And why do you want to make a lot of money?”

“To be comfortable—you know – happy.”

The sponsor calmly persisted. “Oh, so you’re going to buy happiness?”

David paused. “Well it isn’t exactly that. I just want to be able to do things for myself and other people.”

“So it’s the people you’re more concerned about than

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the money. That's good. What do you want to be able to do for them?"

"Well, I want to have enough to take care of my parents and grandparents."

"Take care of them?"

"Yeah. I want to be able to afford apartments for them at Buena Vista."

It was everything I could do to keep from laughing. Buena Vista was an assisted living facility in which David's great-grandmother resided, and somehow through a complicated series of leaps in logic, he had decided that the shortest distance to his long-term goal was along the straight line of repossession and foreclosure. Though the means were questionable at best, his motives were touching and generous. And, as my husband noted later, "Thank goodness someone around here has a retirement plan."

As a person privileged to witness the vocational development of young adults, I believe that the "bankruptcy story," as this has come to be known in our family, offers some important lessons about how we at Jesuit universities help our students to uncover their deepest desires and act on them with spiritual integrity and responsiveness to the needs of the world around them.

Listening

What becomes abundantly clear in the story is that listening is the single most important quality for faculty and staff who might happen across the seeds of vocational discernment in students. To my ears, my son's comments contained nothing even remotely connected to a career, much less a vocation. My parental relationship with him made it difficult for me to hear what he was really saying about his desires to care for his family. But the confirmation sponsor could do something that my husband and I could not. In his own pushy, Socratic style, the sponsor could peel away the less attractive layers of desire until he got to the core of the matter. Similarly, the role of faculty and staff in helping students notice and articulate their desires is immensely valuable. We are deeply concerned about the lives of our students, but we are also blessed with a certain detachment with respect to their choices. In this way, we are not merely surrogate parents in a student's vocational journey, but rather mentors and guides with a role all our own.



A dance class at Santa Clara University.

A Developmental Process

The second lesson of the story is that vocational discernment is developmental. Most of us did not wake up one morning, suddenly clear about our ultimate meaning and purpose. In fact, the realization and confirmation of one's vocation is a circuitous, lifelong process, and it is not uncommon for individuals to say that they have "finally discovered what it means to be a teacher (or parent or Christian)" well into their senior years. What we teach our students about vocation, then, are not the skills to discover the quintessential job or some particularly elusive insight before graduation. Rather, we offer them a supportive environment in which to develop a prayerful, discerning spirit that will serve them the rest of their lives. The dining room table of our family friend was just such an environment. It was a

place where discussion about vocation was occurring in spades, though the language was unpolished and, on the surface, not very religious. The freedom, faith, and genuine care implied in the questions were not lost on my son.

In helping students to think about their calling, we faculty and staff members need to remain flexible in our approaches. Some of our students have engaged in a great deal of reflection on their life experience and the trajectory that it has taken thus far. It is easy to talk with them about their dreams and desires, and to introduce them to Ignatian discernment as a means of dialogue with God about their unfolding futures. Others have not had opportunities in this regard and may be less able to see any pattern in their lives. They may need to grow in self-confidence or a sense of personal identity before seriously engaging questions of vocation – or it may help them to hear the vocational stories of others, enabling them to frame their lives in a different way and inspiring them toward greater openness in their search. When we bring to our colleges and universities speakers who have led lives of commitment or when we sponsor such things as freshman reading programs that highlight the biographies of individuals whose work witnesses to their faith, we are doing “vocation work” for a broad group of students who, by recognizing patterns and choices in the stories of others, will be better prepared to do so in their own lives.

Cultivating Solidarity

The oft-quoted line of Frederick Buechner, “The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet,” is among the noblest definitions of vocation. The idea of “deep gladness” (or what we in the Ignatian tradition might call “deep desires”) keeps us from thinking of vocation as a career or a personal whim — and an abiding concern for “the world’s deep hunger” reminds us that the exploration of one’s vocation is not simply a voyage into narcissistic self-fulfillment. Inherent in the search for one’s vocation is the relationship of the discernor to God and the needs of God’s people or, as Father Michael Himes puts it in Boston College’s fine video for college students, *Three Key Questions*, “What gives you joy? Are you good at it? Does anyone need you to do it?” None of us discerns his or her vocation in isolation.

But Buechner’s poignant definition also implies an ability to see and identify with the most profound needs

of the human community before placing one’s gifts and talents in the service of others. It is this disposition of solidarity with God’s beloved people, especially the poor and marginalized, that can be overlooked in our efforts to help students hear their vocational call. In the “bankruptcy story,” my young son was responding to the needs that he could distinguish through a small window on the world, a window framed by the concerns of his immediate family. His confirmation sponsor drew the best out of him by helping him notice that some of his goals were driven by the needs of others. But the real challenge for us and for our students lies in widening the window itself.

It is difficult for students to respond to the world’s deep hunger without having seen it or, more importantly, having cared about it as a result of relationships with people in need. The popularity of service learning, cultural immersion experiences, service trips, and volunteer efforts among this generation of college students certainly allows for greater exposure to the economic, social, and political wounds of the world. But it is in the context of vocational discernment that these activities are transformed from consciousness-raising experiences to moments of solidarity and friendship with the poor. Faculty and staff are uniquely placed to help students ask the question, “What does this experience, this relationship mean for my life?” and reflect on the claims that God’s people have on the student’s choices.

Now a graduating senior in college, my son no longer aspires to be a bankruptcy attorney, though I suspect this article may occasion a few letters from principled people in that profession, assuring me that such a choice might have led to a fruitful and generous life. His vocational story continues to unfold through coursework, retreats, reflection, and relationships, especially relationships with people who are at the margins of society and whose gifts surprise and impress him. The idea of someday being a husband and father has found its way into his vocational desires, and he seems to think as much about the person he is becoming as what precisely he will contribute through his work. I delight in his journey and will be forever grateful for the many faculty members, friends, and of course the confirmation sponsor who have helped him widen his window on the world and his amazing capacity to love.