

Vocation – January 26, 2014

by **David Green**

In the big picture of human history, it's only been relatively recently that a child would be asked the question, "What do you want to be when you grow up?"

To ask, what do you want to "be," of course, means "what kind of occupation do you envision for yourself as an adult?"

We've all been asked that question. I continue to have people – family members especially – asking me that very thing.

But not too long ago, a child simply grew into the kind of work life their parents did, whether that was farming or herding or carpentry. Or, if you were in that tiny part of the population belonging to the landed gentry, managing a big estate.

Your apprenticeship began as soon as you could pick up a tool. If you struck out on your own and did something different than what your father had done, you were the exception. And even then, that was if you were a male.

If you were female, you probably had no choice at all. Society was dominated by men. You might not have a say in whom you chose as a mate, and the roles of women were understood to be domestic.

So, the question, "What do you want to be?" is relatively modern.

But if you think about it, asking what anyone wants to "be" is kind of silly.

I doubt many would ever say, "I want to 'be' depressed. Or unfulfilled. Or for my life to have no meaning." Most of us want to be just the opposite: happy and healthy, feeling as if life has purpose and meaning and promise.

So, being is actually quite a different thing than doing.

They can certainly relate to each other. We can be miserable in our work or in our life situation. But we also know if we take two people performing the exact same work who have similar life circumstances, they can each have vastly different outlooks on how they are "being."

One can be feeling awful much of the time, while the other is happy as a clam at high tide.

There's never any one element that can account for those differences. We're all made up of a unique blend of family histories and personal experiences and expectations about what defines happiness and wholeness and contentment.

Especially in our culture, we're taught from an early age to value other people and ourselves through an economic lens. What we do for a living (or what we've done if we're retired), how much we earn or how much we're worth financially, the education we've attained, the kind of place we live in, what we drive, the kind of clothes we wear, if we're well-connected, if we're well-known (in a good way): all of that permeates our attitudes about how much we value one another and ourselves.

That's economic value. It's so deeply ingrained we make snap judgments of others – and ourselves by comparison – often without even realizing we're processing things that way. And it can make a huge difference to our self-esteem.

That's why in many religious traditions any clues about a person's economic status are stripped away. The *Haj* is the great pilgrimage Muslims from around the world, from all walks of life, make to the ancient city of Mecca at least once in their lives. On the *Haj*, everyone wears the exact same simple white robe.

I've been to monasteries where the priests all look and dress pretty much alike. In some of those places they've taken a vow of poverty or they share everything in common. In others, some of those holy men are making a pretty darn good living selling wine or other goods, while the younger and newer monks are dirt poor. But you'd never know the difference by their outward appearance.

In the world you and I navigate, though, we usually have a pretty good idea, and generally, we can size up a person's economic worth in a matter of seconds.

We are simply *that* tuned into the perspective of value. And again, whether we like it or not, it makes a big difference for a lot of people in terms of how they are regarded by others, and how they feel about themselves.

That's why it's so unique – and even seems odd – when we encounter someone who is economically poor and yet perfectly content. We can even be angry with that person. We can assume they're somehow a sponge on society or they're not fulfilling their full human potential. They are slackers. Because true happiness and fulfillment – we've been taught and we've bought into – is in proportion to a person's economic or social status.

That's nothing new. Some have believed that so deeply – that's the primary lens through which they view things – they see their very lives as worthless if their bank account is overdrawn, to the extent they might even take their own life if that happens.

We're all familiar with stories of stock market investors leaping out of skyscrapers whenever there's an economic crash. Sadly, they confused the worth of what they "do" with the worth of their "being."

Losing your sense of worth is also a common occurrence when someone reaches retirement. Several years ago Jack Nicholson starred in the movie "About Schmidt." He plays an insurance company actuary who retires. He's been an insurance guy for so long, and his whole identity and sense of self suddenly vanishes.

He's metaphorically lost, so he embarks on a long road trip to reconnect with his family and rediscover meaning and purpose in his life. It's actually a funny film, but it points to a serious phenomenon, where what you "do" has become your "being."

In the Seven Principles of Unitarian Universalism, the first principle affirms the inherent worth and dignity of everyone.

There's nothing in there about any economic value. In fact, the word "inherent" is a huge piece of vocabulary since it completely negates any distinctions of race, gender, the kind of occupation you have, how much money you have in the bank, if you're gay or straight, where you live, what religion you follow (if any), your physical or cognitive

condition, if you fit a certain cultural standard of attractiveness, how many degrees you have tacked to the wall, or if you've ever been a finalist on "America's Got Talent."

(Or ever worn a hat saying I just won the Super Bowl. Which the Denver Broncos will all be wearing next Sunday. Peyton Manning gives me hope for aging obsessive-compulsive people everywhere, and that's why he's *the man*.) You name it, "inherent" means we are valuable simply because we are human, and that's it. It's unconditional. As far as religions go, I'm suspicious of any faith that places a lot of value conditions on you in order to belong. They're essentially saying, "You're only truly worthy *if*...you speak these words or follow this ritual or abide by this doctrine. Do this, and you'll be deemed valuable enough as a person."

And yet while you and I can talk a big game about valuing everyone no matter what – and it *is* important for us to affirm that – we have to acknowledge that we live in a world that rarely sees things that way.

That means while we're here with each other we do our best to live out the "inherent value principle" and we try to make it real in how we treat everyone else, we still have to live with the reality that so many of us, and so many of our neighbors, still ask some essential questions:

Does my life matter? Does it have meaning and purpose? How can I be content, fulfilled, thrive, and feel complete? Who am I?

Well....to answer all that sounds like a six-week series of sermons, but then we'd probably wonder why no one is showing up anymore, so I'll cut to the chase.

The over-arching answer – I believe – can be found pretty simply in the concept of *vocation*. Vocation comes from the Latin word "vocatio," which means a call, or a summons.

The idea of vocation was jumped on very early by Christianity. Figuring out your vocation has long been an essential part of Christian spirituality.

It can specifically refer to having a calling to serve the church, like being a priest or a nun. I've run into a lot of ministers of every stripe and when I've asked them how they got into this line of work, they correct me. They'll say, "It's not 'work.' God 'called' me to do this." I usually keep my mouth shut but I'm always tempted to ask if they've saved God's number in their phone. There are a few things I'd like to ask. Or at least, send a text.

In a broader sense, both Catholics and Protestants believe vocation applies to everyone: the "vocatio universalis," or universal vocation.

In other words, God has given every person particular gifts and talents to be used for a specific purpose and to live a certain way. That's regardless of your day job. Your task, as one of the faithful, is to discover your true vocation, and live it.

From a traditional Christian standpoint, your ultimate vocation is to love and obey God, and love other people in everything you do.

It sounds simple enough. But in a lot of cases, people have gone to priests or ministers for help in attempting to find their true calling. They've asked themselves some of those essential questions about the meaning of their lives and how they can find peace and wholeness.

And far too often they've been told by that authority figure they trust that God is calling them to submit to their abusive husband, or give their life savings to build a church parking lot. It's a shocking revelation, I know, but vocation has often been misused.

But that shouldn't turn us off to the concept of vocation. We ought to be wary of people interpreting for us what our calling might be.

But as long as we understand that vocation goes beyond any one religious tradition, and that over our lifespan, our vocation might change (and that's okay), that none of us are statues cast in stone but flexible and creative and ever-growing, then finding and answering our calling is a perfectly great pursuit.

It does require some work. Some intentionality. Taking time to reflect. And that can be done – most definitely – in a spiritual setting.

My friend Sharri Fisher leads a “centering prayer” gathering every Tuesday night over at Chalice Abbey, and for a lot of people that's a wonderful avenue for keeping their ears open for vocation.

It can be found in other meditative practices, like our own Buddhist Covenant group.

If you do meditate with a group or by yourself, clearing your mind and focusing on breathing in, breathing out, and just being in the moment, you've probably had the wonderful experience of things coming to you afterward like pieces of a puzzle falling into place.

Or realizing that you've been working on the wrong puzzle. Or understanding that puzzles just aren't your thing and you'd be happier learning how to cook the perfect Italian cream cake. (And bringing it to the next potluck).

But however you find that quiet center, however you can step outside yourself, do that. Observe a vexing problem, and instead of obsessing over a solution, ask, “Why is this a problem for me in the first place? Am I making a conflict out of something where no conflict needs to exist?” Find that time.

I'm a visual thinker and it always helps me to imagine what is – or how I perceive reality – and then picture how I would feel at a very deep and basic level – a gut feeling level – if the picture was different. What is the image that brings the greatest fulfillment, the most sense of meaning, and purpose, pure bliss?

So, I'm suggesting that finding your own sense of vocation may not come to you immediately. We expect instant gratification, but this isn't the sort of thing that can usually be discovered in one dramatic “aha” moment.

The best ministers I've known have really struggled with their sense of calling. It's the preachers who hear God talking to them directly along with a blinding flash of light that I worry about.

But for all of us, I'm convinced we *are* called. First, to be happy and whole, and to discover from among the elements of life, from all the choices we have, how to find *our* unique way of being. And to understand that "being" is distinct from whatever it is we happen to be "doing."

Someone over here is a lawyer. And this person over there is a therapist. And he works on cars. And she's a student. He's married. She's single. He's gay. She's straight. She's a grandparent. He's a recovering fundamentalist. She can run like the wind. But his legs won't support his own weight. He has a net worth of a million dollars. And she lives paycheck to paycheck.

But none of that ever needs to define us, or ever limit us. Remember, we have *inherent* worth and dignity.

Our ultimate vocation is to realize that about ourselves and one another. And when we do that, we find our meaning and purpose is to love without limits. Together, we'll continue answering that call.

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