

Discussing Vocation as a Part of a Senior Capstone Class

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Abstract

Many of us in Christian higher education are seeking ways to help our students discern their own sense of call. At the 2007 ACMS meeting Greg Crow and I participated in a panel on vocation and published a related paper in the Journal of the ACMS. This current paper discusses what has been learned from incorporating some of our ideas into our department's senior capstone course. This has been very meaningful for both the students and the faculty involved.

Introduction

For a number of years the faculty members in the Mathematical, Information and Computer Sciences Department and Point Loma Nazarene University (PLNU) have been intentional in helping students to identify a career that is suited to their interests and abilities, but this is just one component of an individual's vocation. Discussions of "whole life" vocational issues have been informal and "happenstance" often occurring in a faculty member's office in response to a student's question or crisis about "what to do with my life after graduation."

We have attempted to help our students in their vocational discernment in a variety of ways:

- Holding periodic discussions in classes.
- Having faculty and alumni share their own process of vocational discernment as part of our department chapels (our school sets aside two chapels each semester where the students and faculty gather by department).
- Hosting a series of Junior/Senior Career Dinners where students can hear from alumni and others about a variety of career options (we hold four to five of these each year).
- Requiring each student to participate in an "integrative experience" in their senior year (a few students do it in their junior year). Each student must be involved in a year-long service learning project, a year-long honors research project or an internship that requires them to use information and skills gained in a variety of their classes.

Details about many of these programs can be found in *Helping Students to Think about Vocation and the "Ordinary Christian"* (Crow and Zack, 2008).

In the summer of 2006, the Wesleyan Center for Twenty-First Century Studies at PLNU (<http://www.pointloma.edu/WesleyanCenter.htm>) funded a grant to develop a seminar for seniors on vocation. This support along with departmental resources provided funding to hire four students to read a wide variety of books on vocation and respond to the readings. This was a very useful exercise because it highlighted the fact that age and life experience have a significant impact on how texts on vocation are perceived. Many of the books that faculty members thought were helpful were confusing to the students. For example, Parker Palmer's *Let Your Life Speak, Listening for the Voice of Vocation* is a much loved text on vocation among the faculty in my department, yet our students didn't find the book helpful or informative. Much of what Palmer describes is based on many years of living and informed by his struggle with depression. The students had difficulty in applying what Palmer was saying to their own life experience.

At the end of a summer of reading (I read all of the texts that I gave to the students), two books were identified as being meaningful and helpful. These books are:

- *Forgetting Ourselves on Purpose* by Brian Mahan (Mahan, 2002): Mahan is a philosopher who is a William James expert and has taught in a variety of institutions. His text asks many intriguing questions and provides guidance on how to seek answers, but offers very few. Mahan is Roman Catholic and brings a “big picture” perspective to the notion of “calling.”
- *Living Your Heart’s Desire* by Gregory Clapper (Clapper, 2005): Clapper is a Wesleyan theologian who is the director of the Lantz Center for Christian Vocations at the University of Indianapolis. This book is more “concrete” with a large number of scriptural references. It was a good starting point for conversations of the nature “Do you agree or disagree with his point of view?”

Using these books as texts and consulting additional information available through Lilly Theological Exploration of Vocation website (<http://www.ptev.org>), a pilot seminar for seniors was designed and hosted by the Wesleyan Center in the spring of 2007. This “trial run” was a seminar for a self-selected group of seniors from a wide variety of majors and provided an excellent opportunity to explore formats for framing conversations with students about vocation (for details see (Crow and Zack, 2008)).

Incorporating Vocation into the Senior Seminar

The Senior Seminar in the Mathematical, Information and Computer Sciences Department is designed to be a capstone course that is also part of our assessment plan. All seniors from all of the majors taught in our department (Computer Science, Information Systems and Mathematics) are together in one section of this course. Each student in the class is required to prepare a paper and present a talk about a topic in their discipline that they find interesting. The basic knowledge for these presentations comes from either:

- The student’s “integrative experience” (year-long service learning project, year-long research project or an internship); or
- The study of a new topic in their discipline selected in consultation with a faculty member.

Each student is provided with a time line and has a faculty mentor who works with them as they prepare the paper and the oral presentation. The students are graded by a panel of department faculty on the quality of their oral and written work with attention to how close it comes to what is expected of early career professionals or first year graduate students.

In addition, students in this course work on cover letters and resumes. We also bring in alumni and others who hire entry level employees to talk about techniques for searching for jobs, what managers look for in resumes and what to expect in an interview. Over the last several years, the students have responded very positively to this practical help but we all realized that we were not doing a good job of addressing their larger questions about “life after college.”

Using what Greg Crow and I learned in running the one-time seminar on vocation for PLNU’s Wesleyan Center, a collection of readings and reflection questions were developed to be used as the starting point for weekly conversations about vocation during the first fifteen to thirty minutes of our senior seminar. Each week the students were required to read one chapter from one of the course texts and respond to a series of three to four questions about the reading (the responses were a total of one page per person). The students submitted their responses via email the day before the class and those responses framed the in class conversation. The original intent

of the reflections was to keep students accountable for doing the reading, but it had a very important unintended consequence, it allowed me to carry on a “private” dialog with the students in the class. The students would often write things for me to read that they might not say in front of other students and I was able to respond during class time to the issues that they discussed in their reflections.

The Key Topics Addressed

The course discussions were built around a collection of themes. We returned to each theme multiple times and looked at them from different angles and through the lenses of both text books as the discussions progressed. The core themes are listed below.

Fear:

For many of my students facing graduation, the idea of “vocation” or “calling” produces significant levels of anxiety. There is a growing body of literature on a trend that has been called “emerging adulthood.” Jeffrey Arnett in his book *Emerging Adulthood, the Winding Road from the Late Teens through the Twenties* says (Arnett, 2004, p 3):

For today’s young people, the road to adulthood is a long one. They leave home at age 18 or 19, but most do not marry, become parents, and find a long-term job until at least their late twenties. From their late teens to their late twenties they explore the possibilities available to them in love and work, and move gradually toward making enduring choices. Such freedom is exciting, and this period is a time of high hopes and big dreams. However, it is also a time of anxiety and uncertainty, because the lives of young people are so unsettled, and many of them have no idea where their explorations will lead... To be a young American today is to experience both excitement and uncertainty, wide-open possibility and confusion, new freedoms and new fears.

Some of the seniors in my department are eager to assume “adult responsibility” quickly and while other of our students see their twenties as a time of exploration. Most of them have some level of anxiety about their future that is further complicated by a somewhat narrow understanding of Christian calling. For many of them that definition of vocation is identifying an “absolute best fit for a person in the world... this is the job that they are destined for” (Student Reflections, 2009). Students who believe that they are seeking the one and only perfect job that God has for them are deeply afraid of making an incorrect choice and thus “ruining” their life. Another student said “My problem in thinking about jobs and vocation is that I think that once I make a decision, I am locked into that forever” (Student Reflections, 2009). So for some students to make no choice seems better than making the wrong choice.

In addition, there is fear that the call might be to something awful or impossible. One student said “sometimes I fear what God might want of me is something I would not want to do... but if he knows what is best for me then I should have no problem trusting him... but I do” (Student Reflections, 2009).

Mahan suggests that we often rationalize decisions that take us away from our calling. One student said “because we don’t want to get hurt or even potentially get hurt we don’t try many things.” Another said “I’ve used logic to talk myself out of learning things that I longed to do but that seemed like things I would fail at or seemed to have little practical use” (Student Reflections, 2009). These reflections lead to some class discussion about fear, the use of reason and the role of a faith community in helping us to discern what we should do. One of the conclusions of the group was that fear is not necessarily a sign that a particular path should be

avoided. As I said to one student in my office “being an adult means being afraid and doing it anyway.”

What does it mean to be called?

I began the class with a discussion of Buechner’s well known definition of vocation (Buechner, 1993, p 118-119):

It comes from the Latin vocare, to call, and means the work a person is called to by God.

There are all different kinds of voices calling you to all different kinds of work, and the problem is to find out which is the voice of God rather than of Society, say, or the Superego, or Self-Interest.

By and large a good rule for finding out is this: The kind of work God usually calls you to is the kind of work (a) that you need most to do and (b) that the world needs most needs to have done. If you really get a kick out of your work, you’ve presumably met requirement (a), but if your work is writing cigarette ads, the chances are that you’ve missed requirement (b). On the other hand, if your work is being a doctor in a leper colony, you have probably met requirement (b), but if most of your time you are bored and depressed by it, the chances are you have bypassed (a), but probably aren’t helping your patients much either.

Neither the hair shirt nor the soft berth will do. The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.

Much of the first class conversation about vocation centered on the idea that we are called to a life not just to a job. Clapper says “Christians are not called primarily to *do something* or *go somewhere*; we are called to *Someone*” (Clapper, 2005, p 21). Wrestling with that idea was perspective altering for students. We also discussed Søren Kierkegaard’s comment that “purity of heart is to will one thing” (Clapper, 2005, p 26) and the importance of being “single minded” and letting Christ be the primary focus of your life. Students found that idea both frightening and encouraging “How on earth can I will one thing? It is impossible. But the thing that I can will... is to follow God with all my heart, soul and mind.” Another student wrote “My calling is to Him, and then to whatever he wants me to do. When I first started looking for jobs I was getting really discouraged because most positions require some experience, which I don’t have any... reading these books has really helped me to not get so discouraged because I know that God has a hand in my life” (Student Reflections, 2009).

In many ways students expressed relief that calling didn’t perhaps work in the way that they had imagined. One student wrote (Student Reflections, 2009):

I have heard many times people say exactly what God wants them to do, whether it is a job at a company, or attending some school or even doing mission work overseas. It has always made me wonder why I haven’t heard a voice tell me my career path. We have free will to choose whatever career we want (as long as it is used to honor God), and God can use us where we choose. People make it seem if we don’t work at the place that God has planned for us or marry the person God has picked out himself that is a sin. I believe that God gives us freedom.

Clapper reformulates the notion of vocation and says “We *must* ask if the life we are living is a worthy expression of gratitude for what God has done for us” (Clapper, 2005, p 44). This was an understanding of vocation that was freeing to students. One said “For me, it will

mean doing my best to use the talents I have for God.” Others said that gratitude was “investing myself in those around me,” “loving others,” “using my skills and talents... rather than squandering or ignoring them,” and “a worthy response is to show trust [in God] not panic” (Student Reflections, 2009). As we began to talk about vocation as something God directed and about all of life, the students began to see that there are many ways to express their calling but that the focus is God and other directed, not self-directed.

There are many “scripts” for our lives.

Mahan spends time talking about the number of “scripts” that others have for our lives. Buechner puts this very clearly in the quotation above “There are all different kinds of voices calling you to all different kinds of work, and the problem is to find out which is the voice of God rather than of Society, say, or the Superego, or Self-Interest” (Buechner, 1993, p 118). Throughout the weeks of the course we had extensive conversations about the sources of the “scripts” for success in our lives that includes family, friends, society, scripture, and our own need for affirmation. Mahan uses several helpful illustrations to talk about American culture and the development of our scripts. He says (Mahan, 2002, p 91-93):

In American society, in part because of our accent on egalitarianism and our antipathy toward inherited class structure, individual achievement is supremely important.... The trouble is that it becomes difficult to assess achievement and monitor happiness without surrendering to the impulse to adopt invidious comparison as a prime measure of individual worth... What are we thinking when we set out in hot pursuit of some socially scripted, envisioned self?

The students acknowledged that there are many external scripts that they are hearing as they contemplate what to do after graduation and feel the pressure to do the “right” thing. They feel these pressures: “Those who love and care about you want you to get a good start on this common image of success, and you therefore feel like you have to achieve the perfect job right out of the gate.” Another wrote “After graduation I am expected to make something of this expensive college degree and there is a great pressure for myself and others to find a career... before we envisioned our college graduation but now we have to start envisioning what career to pursue and then later getting ahead in the career field” (Student Reflections, 2009).

The students also acknowledge that the pressure is internal. “We put a time table on everything... and say ‘in x amount of years, I will have achieved this and I will be completely happy and free of want.’ I feel this pressures me to grow up and conform to some ideal self that seems safe and secure.... This bothers me because I both want and despise that.” Another said “We think that there is some scenario in which we will be happy, not simply content, but I think that while we strive for this idyllic life which we may never reach, we do not allow ourselves to be happy with where we are currently in life” (Student Reflections, 2009).

Finally there was concern that giving in to either the need for affirmation or to the expectations of others will limit options. One student said “I find myself reluctant to pursue volunteer/mission work options after graduation because so much of the definition of adulthood that I have picked up is related to supporting oneself financially independently” and raising support for a being a missionary is not being financially independent. A second student said “I think that we feel the pressure to ‘succeed:’ to make enough money to survive on our own, to have everything together, to be real adults. In the process, we feel a pressure to just jump to the

end result, rather than enjoy the process of working toward something, or even letting the process be the goal.”

We spent weeks coming back to the idea of scripts and the many different voices calling to them. As you can see from the quotations above, it is a significant source of concern because the students desire to please those who love them, honor God, be considered “good” people and yet develop as independent individuals. This led to many conversations about the importance of being part of a faith community and the role of Christian community in the discernment processes.

Making use of many types of information in discerning vocation.

A student’s discernment of vocation is typically begins with their own natural talents, educational experiences and the many scripts in their lives. Mahan talks about another source of information: “an epiphany of recruitment.” He says (Mahan, 2002, p 20):

An epiphany of recruitment is a significant experience, often remembered and sometimes repressed. It is not merely a sentimental reaction or the product of emotional manipulation. The experience is often interpreted as an invitation to see things differently, to live a different kind of life, to embrace one’s unique vocation. The events that give rise to these experiences are ordinary enough. They are more often than not, described as “no big deal.”

These epiphanies come to us in many different forms and often when we least expect it. It is the pleasure that comes from helping a friend with homework, the chance encounter with a child while on a mission trip in Africa, the discovery of deep satisfaction when the computer code complies and runs, or the sense that something about Italian culture touched deeply at your core while on a study abroad trip. Most of us can think through particular people and events that had a deep influence on our life choices, even if we didn’t recognize the depth of at the time of the encounter.

Students expressed the frustration that comes from experiencing those moments of recruitment. One said “I usually wish that I could do something right away, but it is very rarely possible.” A second student said “I often beat myself up when I feel moved by something but am not able to act on it fully in a new way” (Student Reflections, 2009).

What I encourage students to do is to notice the event, idea, feelings and to make peace with the fact that they may not understand its meaning right now, but that is no reason to ignore the information. It was interesting to see the evolution in their thinking. One compared these moments to “a pebble in your shoe that is constantly reminding you to move forward. I know from experience, that these come and go and are usually somewhat ignored or pushed to the side rather than immediately acted on, but the moments are there to light a fire under you to get you moving” (Student Reflections, 2009).

The path of life and vocation is neither straight nor clear.

As is evident in the students’ comments on the various voices speaking into their lives, they feel a tremendous amount of pressure to have their whole life “figured out.” One of the challenges is to help them see that they are not required to have their entire life mapped out and that in fact any map that they construct will undoubtedly not work out as they have planned. Near the end of his book Clapper shares his own wandering vocational journey. He says (Clapper, 2005, p 107):

I share my story because in all my experience in helping people sort out God's call in their lives, it is more typical than not that frustrations, dead-ends and U-turns mark the way. That has certainly been true for me. It is my hope that sharing my experience may illustrate how, in responding to God's initiating and forgiving love, our freedom can serve the honor of God.

Clapper's journey is one of several false starts and it illustrates the importance of storytelling in sharing wisdom and offering encouragement. Our students need to hear that their professors don't have it all figured out and that our own discernment of vocation is a journey of discovery and surprises that never ends and it is not a straight line towards a single goal.

One of the concerns of students that Clapper addresses is the desire for "signs and markers." I asked the students to reflect on Clapper's statement "...in the truly complex landscape in which we live out our calling [it] becomes clear that not every obstacle, stumbling block, or blind alley arises from God's direct action" (Clapper, 2005, p 61). The students found the idea unsettling saying that "it seems to bring more anxiety than peace" and one student said "I am afraid that I'll never figure out what God really wants me to do." But on the whole the students came to the conclusion that "sometimes circumstances are God closing doors, and sometimes they are challenges God helps one to overcome" and that "we cannot let the obstacle make us give up on our calling." As one student put it "sometimes 'stuff' just happens" (Student Reflections, 2009). This observation led to an involved conversation about the role of the community of faith in discerning our call. How do we determine if an obstacle is an indication of movement in the wrong direction or something to be overcome? We talked about tapping into the wisdom of mature Christians and I asked each of them to make a plan for how they would make sure that they were actively connected with a church community after they graduated.

What did you learn?

Clapper begins his book with an image from the movie *Star Wars*. This is how he describes the scene (Clapper, 2005, p 12):

A number of the laser-rifle-carrying rebel warriors are waiting, weapons ready, for a space station door to open. When that door opens, Darth Vader's troops will come pouring in, intent on the destruction of the rebel troops, Princess Leia, and the whole freedom-loving rebellion. The picture stands like a freeze-frame in my mind: the troops are ready for a challenge, both physically and mentally; they know an unknown summons to action lies on the other side of the door about to open....and they relish the confrontation.

At the end of the book Clapper reminds his readers that "nothing on the other side of that door can separate you from the love of God" (Clapper, 2005, p 121). At the end of class I asked my students what was one lesson about vocation that they didn't want to forget. Here is some of what they said (Student Reflections, 2009):

I usually think about graduation as an ending, but I need to start thinking about it as a beginning.

It is comforting to be reminded that vocation is a winding but exciting path, and that no one has it all figured out from the start.

Even when we are pursuing our calling, there will be bumpy spots along the way...I too often think that if I have chosen the right path, it will not require me to adapt my plans in

the future. Clapper reminds us that vocation is a continual process of renewed perspective.

Clapper says “sometimes our vocational choices are not between good and bad options.” Whenever I have a choice of direction to make, I do not have to think one is right and one is wrong or bad. There can be many viable options that can lead to positive outcomes. That is a much more freeing way to look at things.

God is never done working in your life. There is a good chance that God will call you to serve in many different places in your life.

It is possible for us to learn the most about our vocational calling at times that we might consider to be failures or disappointments.

I need to keep reminding myself that all I can do is put one foot in front of the other to the best of my ability.

God might open some crazy doors in the next twelve months, and I need to be ready to walk through them knowing God has prepared me for this time.

Conclusion

This small investment of time was a significant capstone to the vocational discussions that we have interlaced throughout the program in our department. Even given the depth of the community created between faculty and students in our department, I was a bit surprised at how honest students were about these difficult issues. I believe that there is deep hunger in our students for meaningful conversations about calling in the context of recognizing that no one has it all worked out.

As we plan for next year, a few of the reflection questions will be modified and the time for in-class conversation will be expanded slightly (we may add 5-10 minutes to the class period).

If you would like further details about the reflection questions and the content of the in class discussions please contact the author via email (mzack@pointloma.edu).

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