

# YOUR CALLING

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# HERE

# AND

# NOW

MAKING SENSE  
OF VOCATION



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## AT THIS TIME AND IN THIS PLACE

**VOCATION IS ALWAYS PARTICULAR:** this person, at this time, and in this place.<sup>1</sup> Vocation is never discerned in a historical vacuum; it is always in the specifics of the world in which we live. It is always about the *here and now*—and, as needs to be stressed, it is the here and now as it comes to us, as it presents itself, not as we wish it to be. We get beyond wishful thinking, and we name reality and discern calling in the light of and in the midst of this time and this place—*this* situation.

Therefore, we ask, at this time and in this place, who and what are we called to be and do? What does it mean to steward our lives in light of our economic circumstances, marital status and family situation, age, and personal health? What does it mean to be attentive to what we bring to the table in a way that takes full account of our social and cultural context, as well as the economic and political situation in which we are living, locally and globally?

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Vocation and calling are about much more than our occupation or job or career. It certainly includes the work for which we are responsible—whether waged or volunteer or managing a home with the whole range of domestic activities so vital to what it means to call a place “home.” But it also includes the network of social and family connections that are an essential part of our lives. And so, within the midst of all we are and all we are responsible for and those we are responsible to, we ask the question, What am I being called to say and do?

This applies to us both individually and collectively. An organization or business or development agency or school is always needing to ask, What are we called to be and do now, at this time and in this place? A college or university will ask what it means to be invested in higher education in this season of the life of a country or city or community—in this time and in this place. A church—collectively—will ask what it means to be this faith community at this time and in this location—this neighborhood, this chapter in the history of this community and, in the intersection of this time and this place, to be this church. We do not have the luxury of imagining another set of circumstances: it is always at this time and in this place that we make sense of the identity and mission of the organizations of which we are a part.

While this principle applies to both organizations and individuals, the focus here will be more on the individual. This

is not to discount the shared responsibilities we have. It is merely a matter of focus and the need to not lose the grace and power of the individual in the matrix of time and space and within the confluence and complexities of our organizations and collective concerns. What comes here is an appeal: for each person to ask of themselves, In this time and in this place, how am I being called to speak and act? To be more specific, this is a call to name our situation on the assumption that calling is always—always—for this time and for this place. It is always a calling to and in this particular set of circumstances.

Sometimes the circumstances we face are thrust upon us. Those of us who serve in higher education in North America will for many years remember the weekend of March 13-14, 2020. Everything changed—and dramatically so—when we realized the coronavirus pandemic meant, quite simply, it would not be business as usual. We needed to make a call: In this time and in this place, what does it mean for us to do what needs to be done? No more, but most assuredly no less. For many of us, we were taken by surprise. Perhaps we should have seen this coming, having watched the outbreak in China and northern Italy. Perhaps, indeed, we should have had a contingency plan in place. But as it happened, the decision had to be made very quickly to move to an alternate form of fulfilling our mission as a university. And in the process, many organizations, churches, and agencies were using the same word—it was heard again and again—“pivot.” We shifted, adapted, responded, and did all we could to sustain our work and mission in response to dramatically changing circumstances.

More often than not, the recognition of vocation typically emerges more slowly, over time. As we come to a gradual realization of the particulars of our lives and of our situations, we begin to process what this means and how we are necessarily being called to read these situations as we come to clarity about what it is we are being called to do: in this time and in this place.

### **NO MORE AND NO LESS**

The genius of getting this right is appreciating not only this intersection—of this person at this time and in this place—but very specifically accepting and embracing this situation and our role or calling within it. Clarity of vocation means knowing what we do but also what we do not need to do. We accept that some things will not be our focus or our responsibility. But more, it is also about what we say—where and how we speak—as well as what we leave unsaid. To say what needs to be said and to say no more. No less, certainly, but no more. To know when it is best that a thought or impression or conviction is left unsaid. And, further, to know what needs to be done—at this time and in this place—and what can and must be left undone. We do not need to live with any compulsion to speak or act beyond what is called for in the particulars of this time and place. Wise women and men do not over-speak, but rather say what needs to be said with courage and grace, doing what is essential and needful. We do not live frenetically trying to be and do as much as possible, but rather have a sense of time and place, what we need to be and do, together with a peace and settledness of heart regarding what is not needful.

In part, this is true because there is growth beyond the felt need to be a hero, to be constantly fixing things, or to be affirmed for all we have done or accomplished or contributed. We are content to do no more than what it is we have been called to do. This includes that which is done in obscurity—where the work we do is simply done because it needs to be done, whether or not we are thanked or affirmed for it. Whether as president of the United States or the homemaker who knows the laundry needs to be done today, in each vocation, we live in the grace of doing what needs to be done. No more and no less.

**CLARITY OF VOCATION  
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This means we do what we have been called to do. In so doing, we realize many people are involved in running an organization and that within the whole—this organization, this church, this agency—we need clarity about the specifics of what we are called to contribute. And so, we can ask: What, within the economy of lives and responsibilities, is necessary on my to-do list? Vocation is about doing what is needful, what falls to us to do as our work and sphere of responsibility. It is either myself or a sibling who will care for my mother in her senior years. Either I do the laundry, or it does not get done. As president of this college, I cannot deflect or demur or equivocate; I need to do what this organization needs from the president. Either the president does it or it does not get done. As pastor of this congregation, as manager of this department store, I need to do what I need to do.

When we speak about this time and this place, it also means we have come to accept what some speak of as the poverty of time. Many seem to live with the constant battle of wishing they had more time, routinely missing deadlines on assignments or responsibilities, having to apologize for delays in this or that or the other. Yes, of course, there will be times in our lives when we feel the impossibility of it all and wish time would do us just a simple favor and stand still so we could catch up. There is a health crisis in the family at the time a major business negotiation is on the table—so we make a quick trip to drop in on an aging parent, confirm they are okay, and we are back to the office working late to finalize the terms of the deal, grateful we did not get caught in a major traffic jam in our comings and goings. Or we are running late for a flight, not because of bad planning or foresight, but merely because something came up with our teenager that meant we were not going to leave the house without first being present to this young person and their concern or “crisis”—and yes, I put crisis in quotations fully recognizing that what this teen is going to wear that day may not qualify as a crisis(!) against the possibility that you would miss your flight. But you know *this* matters more right now, and so in the end you are caught in the security line wondering why the agent needs to take so long to check each ID.

But those times can and must be the exception. In the normal flow of our lives, vocational thinking and acting means there is a *leisured* pace to our lives. We are not constantly at war against the limits of hours, trying to be more and to accomplish more than we are called to be and



do. We learn what it means to live in the fullness of time, with time as friend, and grace-filled space for life and work and relationships rather than always complaining time is not on our side.

If two assignments are due at the same time, we learn to do today what needs to be done today so the deadline down the road is met. A young person might be living in the moment and only tackle an assignment on the day prior to when it is due, thus facing a personal crisis when they suddenly realize they have two assignments due on the same day. But as we mature and learn to live in time, we see what is on the horizon and do today what needs to be done today so that we are ready for tomorrow.

I will grant that thinking this way is a luxury. For the majority of humans, they have thrust upon them tasks and responsibilities about which they have no choice. They are in survival mode. But for those who can step back and reflect—for most of those who will have a copy of this book in their hands—we can approach this question by asking what it means to be good stewards of our time and place in the flow of history and the circumstances of our lives. Do not underestimate your options here; even if your life circumstances seem all consuming, do read with a thought to where there might be the option for attending to the margins of your life that might open up space for doing something that matters to you.

## **BEYOND WISHFUL THINKING AND REGRETS**

When we speak about the here and now, we do so with a frank and honest read of our time and our situation. We face

our reality. There is no effective capacity to discern and embrace vocation unless and until we name our reality; vocation is always—always—about the here and now. In *this* time, in *this* place.

It is so very easy to say “if only”—if only this or that or the other had not occurred. If only this had not happened to us as a child or in our teen years. If only we had not been fired from our job. If only this illness or accident had not come our way. But the problem is that in so doing, we live looking back rather than facing and living within our current

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reality and accepting that this is now our new reality. And it makes no difference if what has happened is a result of our own

doing: we mishandled our job or a relationship or very simply did something inappropriate and now are living with the consequences. Or, if the situation we are facing is due to something another person did—however wrong it was or continues to be. In both instances, one is a victim, either of one’s own foolishness or the misdeeds of others. And yet, regardless of the original cause, this is now our reality. Discerning vocation is a matter of getting beyond the “if only,” which leads to wasted emotional and intellectual energy.

We also learn to get beyond nostalgia—the propensity to look back fondly or wistfully to an earlier time. We turn from longing for a previous time and ask about the *here and now*: this time, this place. This is not a matter of fatalistic resignation; rather, we do this in hope. We ask, What can

and must be done now in light of what is *actually* the case rather than what we wish was the case? This is not because we are only living for today; it is merely that today is all we have and so, looking to today and down the road, we choose where and how we will act. Here and now.

And in this, it is important to remember we cannot map out the rest of our lives. We choose and discern in light of today, and we know the rest of our lives will be lived out one day at a time, one step at a time. We are merely affirming and embracing what we are called to do today—with hope and grace and courage.

When I became a university president, I came into a situation where the institution was carrying an inordinate amount of debt. And sure, once or twice I bemoaned the situation and wondered what factors might have led to this challenging situation. In other words, there might be a space for a little raging and ranting, if you must. Perhaps go out to a quiet spot on the beach and yell and scream. Fine. But then, turn, and rather than say “if only,” consider what must be said and what must be done in light of what is *actually* the case rather than what we wish was the case. In my case, it meant that as the president, it was my job to help the institution move to a stronger level of financial sustainability. And I needed to do this while keeping the university on mission. Sure, it was not what I would have chosen, but that is not the point. This was the situation that presented itself, and this was the situation in which I had been called to speak and to act.

Sometimes, this is a particularly difficult pill to swallow. The way before us is closed. Our position is terminated. We

were denied admission to a college or university. The publisher turned down our book proposal. We feel the sting of this setback. But now we are asking, in light of not what we wish was the case but what is actually the case: How do we choose to act and move forward, one step at a time?

### **TENDING TO WHAT MATTERS**

The here and now is also about tending to what *matters*—what is essential, pivotal, and crucial to this place and this time. To use the language of Jesus in his encounter with Martha, speaking about her sister Mary (Luke 10:38-42), we ask of ourselves: What is the one thing needful? What do I need to tend to today? What do I need to say? And what can be left unsaid? What do I need to do? And what can be left for another day? There may be an imperative as simple and uncomplicated as, this is recycling day on our street, so I need to set out the bins for the trucks that come through to collect our discarded bottles. Or it may be that there is a board meeting on the horizon, and so today I need to be doing the first draft of my report to the board. Or, if you are a gardener, if you are going to harvest in the fall, you need to plant in the spring. If we are going to travel on such and such a date, then we need to book our flights today.

We are always tending to both: what needs to be done this day, today; and what needs to be tended to now, today, because the deadline or due date is on the horizon. I intentionally mention recycling day to highlight there is both the work of chairing an important board meeting or being ready for a speaking engagement as well as the ordinary, the mundane,

the routine of domestic duties that are simply part of what it means to be human. We tend to both.

But then, when we speak of what matters, we recognize this is not always a simple question. As we all know, it can be quite complicated because life is so frequently filled with uncertainty and ambiguity. As such, it is helpful to think in terms of what we might appropriately speak of as *principled pragmatism*. We live constantly in the dynamic of the here and now where we name our reality, face the circumstances, and get beyond regret and nostalgia; but just as assuredly, we are attentive to what *can* happen and how our ideals, our hopes and aspirations, our principles *can* inform a situation.

If we are in a leadership role within a business or an organization or civic agency or church, we likely have a conviction about what this organization should be like and what it should be doing and what should be happening. We live with this vision or ideal as a constant in our minds. We would not be in leadership if this were not the case: that as individuals of deep-felt conviction and principle, we have a vision for what it means to be the church as a pastor, or to be a university if we are in leadership within academia, or in politics if we are seeking to foster legislation leading to good and fruitful outcomes. But we also live with and work with significant limitations: financial, political, and circumstantial.

In our personal lives, we do this all the time. We think, *This is what an ideal house would look like for us*. And we also recognize, *However, this is what we can afford—this house is close to work or school or church*. That is, we are not purists or idealists or mere dreamers. We know how to live and work within the limitations of our actual circumstances.

Acting in the here and now, though, also means we live by the principle of *gradual incrementalism*: the perspective that we can take small steps, incremental steps, that move us toward a long-term vision or ideal outcome. We do today what needs to be done today to move us to where we need to be tomorrow. Sometimes this is a building project or an art project that is completed one small step at a time. But then also, this requires a long-term vision imbued with patience in that we are taking small steps in the face of unjust systems, or a less than ideal organizational culture or society, or a major project.

And yet the bottom line remains: in the here and now, in these life circumstances, we ask what we need to be saying and doing. What needs to be done just because it needs to be done? And more, in what ways, and specifically through what *incremental* steps, can we, with principled pragmatism, move our organizations and our living situation and our relationships, at home and at work, one step at a time in the direction we need to be going?

#### **FOUR ESSENTIAL CAPACITIES**

Living well and working well, in the here and now, in this time and in this place—coming to the present where we do and say no more and no less than we are called to do and say—means we are fully present and able to discern our calling. Doing this requires, at the very least, four indispensable capacities: focus, courage, connectedness, and patience.

*Focus* is a challenge in that we are seeking to make sense of calling in the midst of what has aptly been called an age of distraction. We are so easily and thus so constantly

interrupted by this or that expectation or demand—the assumption that we are always “on” and always available to respond to a text or email message as our devices prompt us to tend to whoever or whatever is calling for our attention. In what follows, the assumption all along will be that discerning vocation, by its very nature, is a slow and deliberative process. We come to clarity out of a focused reflection represented, perhaps, by the leisured walk on the beach—alone, with no device in hand—such that head and heart are moving at the pace we are walking.

Focus also means we come to terms with the myriad expectations others have of us—whether within our family system, within our religious subculture, or within the organizations where we work or serve as volunteers. The expectations of others should not be dismissed; they may well be legitimate in that some expectations are the rightful requirements of what it means to be married or what it means to have a job that includes doing and accomplishing certain things. Or we signed up for a course and the professor understandably expects a level of engagement in the class activities and the assignments outlined in the syllabus. We do not disregard legitimate expectations. But that is why focus is so very important: that with it, we are able to set aside those expectations that are a weight rather than a genuine form of accountability. In this regard, we can always assume there will inevitably be those who are not happy with us or our work. Vocational thinking and acting are not about being popular; it is about saying what needs to be said and doing what needs doing. Yes, we need to be accountable, but we will always have those who do not

affirm us. And for this, we need *focus*—a settled heart and mind.

Focus also means we set aside the immediately gratifying, that which brings a quick emotional high—the immediate thanks or affirmation or recognition or even, literally, the quick payback in terms of cash in hand. Focus means deferred gratification and, as we need to stress again and again, the capacity to work in obscurity—quietly and persistently doing what needs to be done, far from the distracting gaze of others, with either their critique or their affirmation or adulation.

In an age of distraction, we are only present to the here and now if we grow in our capacity for focus.

Ask yourself what you can do to foster this capacity for focus—for seeing and feeling the here and the now with clarity. For some of us, it comes through the extended walk—perhaps as a daily exercise or routine: alone, without a cell phone, without interruption, to walk a country road

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long enough to come to a measured appreciation of the particulars of your situation. Slowly, at the rate of a steady and purposeful pace, to gain a purchase on one's own thoughts and feelings and be able to weigh alternatives.

Second, we also ask for *courage* in what has aptly been called an age of anxiety. When such a high percentage of those we live and work with are caught up in a cycle of fretfulness and worry, the grace we seek is the simple but



compelling courage to not only see what needs to be said and done but then also the will to do it—the courage to say the uncomfortable word, the difficult word, and the courage to do what needs to be done. We not only recognize what is required; we *act*. Crucial here, though, is that we recognize the courage needed to keep silent when a word is not appropriate or necessary. And also, it means we can be at peace to let something be, to let it go, because whatever it is, it is either the right time or the right place or not ultimately our responsibility. We have peace—read *courage*—to not act, for whatever reason, when there might be pressure or expectation or some compulsion to act.

And courage is, of course, the antithesis to fear. Those who choose well—vocationally—are not so much those who have no fears as rather those who actually recognize their fears and anxieties and have learned what it means, even in the face of those fears, to do what needs to be done. They have that level of self-awareness and as such the capacity to act even in the midst of the swirl of anxiety that is all around them.

Third, those who choose well—in this time and in this place—are, inevitably, *connected* with significant friends and co-discerners. We live in what might be called—for the sake of parallel with the age of distraction and the age of anxiety—an age of disconnection. So many live staggeringly lonely lives. They do not have the capacity or opportunity (or both) for grace-filled conversation with another where, with freedom and without fear, they can speak about themselves and their lives and their choices and challenges.

The point that needs to be made over and over is that no one else can discern your vocation for you. It is for you to go

alone to your “garden of Gethsemane,” for you to have your own meeting with the angel Gabriel, for you to have your own burning bush encounter with the one who beckons you to be what you are being called to be.<sup>2</sup> No one can do this for you. But you cannot do it if you are only alone. We make sense of what it means to know and hear God when we are alone; we each must learn the grace of solitude. But solitude—the lonely extended walk, perhaps—only brings clarity and the courage to act if we are in community, if we are connected. On the one hand this is so because all of our choices and actions involve others—spouse, friends, and colleagues. We need to be genuinely responsive to the needs and expectations of others. We do not live in our personal bubble. We need to ask, What does spouse, child, parent, colleague, neighbor—my country, my church, my workplace—need from me? Yes, we can and must speak about misguided generosity, where our whole lives are lived responsive to the needs of others—when we are not sufficiently attentive to what we are called to do. But we are in community; we do live interconnectedly with the needs—the genuine needs—of others.

Further, we need community and connectedness as well because we each have a remarkable capacity for self-deception. We cannot simply presume that every impression, every longing, ambition, or aspiration is from God. Our longings, fears, and inclinations need the check and confirmation that comes from gracious and frank conversations with those who know us well, will not flatter us, will speak truth to us, and will call us to account for the ways in which either a misguided ambition will lead us pell-mell over a cliff,

or provide reassurance when our fears and anxieties keep us from doing what we need to do. We need those in our lives who can simply say “no, that is not you; let that dream go,” and who can also nudge us to do what our fear of failure is keeping us from embracing. But more, we need encouragement. We need conversations with those who will affirm but not flatter us, who will challenge us when preconceived notions or presumed agendas are blinding us about something we should perhaps be doing or saying. We need those in our lives who will say the words we need to hear, such as “you are a poet,” “you need to write,” “you can and should perhaps go back to school,” or whatever it might be they say to us that we need to hear so we can embrace this time and this place.

And then, fourth, we need patience. In a time and culture where patience is almost viewed as a weakness, we urgently need to recover the ancient spiritual wisdom that patience is a virtue and that we can only be truly present in this time and this place if we are patient, able to wait, able to let things unfold in a timely manner. In a social environment consumed by haste, we embrace a leisured approach to life and work, seeking to do what is timely rather than being consumed with frenetic busyness. We will learn the grace of patience: we will have the courage to do now what needs to be done and the courage to know when to wait and let other things—however important—happen in due time.

What all of this speaks to is that we do not live on autopilot, and we are not only driven or determined by our circumstances. We choose and we act. We recognize that in this time and in this place, we need to be intentional in

taking the time for solitude, for attention to our circumstances, for time and space to name our fears and anxieties, and for intentional conversation with those who come alongside as we discern vocational questions—questions about how we live out the call of God on our lives, in the here and now.

### **QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION**

1. What is your situation, your “at this time and in this place”? As you read this chapter, what came to mind about the particulars of your circumstances? What does it mean for you to name your reality?
2. In your situation, what is imperative—it simply has to be done?
3. What is your greatest need in order for you to be present in the here and now? Focus? Courage? Connectedness with others? Patience?

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