

## “The Heart of Vocation” by Kate Harris

It is hard to go very far in conversations about vocation without very quickly getting tripped up on language. Discussion about a person’s longing to better understand, to make sense of, to more fully attain his or her calling inevitably covers some semantic ground: What is “vocation” anyway?

In the tiny sliver of the universe where I work we have made our peace with etymology. Vocation is derived from the Latin word “vox” or “voice” (translated into Greek as “call”) and so we take the broadest view of things: Vocation is one’s entire life lived in response to God’s voice, God’s call.

Our various occupations – those activities, efforts, relationships, and responsibilities that quite literally “occupy” us day-by-day and season-by-season comprise how we see and make sense of our unique vocation as it is lived into over a lifetime. From time to time we may be in the habit of referring to these occupations as what I call “little c callings” or “little v – vocations”, such as being “called” to marriage or to the medical profession, or to a city. And while this is a sensible way to put expression to our various efforts and intentions, we should recognize these singular explanations are never sufficiently account for the fullness of our complex identities made in the image of a complex Trinitarian God. A God whose innate character is dimensional, whose own interests—the creeds tell us—encompass “all things seen and unseen.”

Compartmentalizing our calling into a role or title or skillset keeps it tidy, generally accessible, and comprehensible. But it then fails to account for the quirks and odd fascinations, the unusual seasons, distinct circumstances, or searing wounds that often shape our lives and our sense of self. Vocation is a word that seeks to account for everything: our entire life lived in response to God’s call. As such, “vocation” is a big word, an inclusive word, and at times a cumbersome and

clunky word. So, we should understandably grapple with it, fumble with it, perhaps even become frustrated by its unmanageability.

Still, when it comes down to it, most of our chatter about vocation tends to devolve into a conversation about titles and roles, skills and contributions, jobs and careers. We don’t want to grapple with the overwhelming dimensionality of our calling so instead we apply language that helps us wrap our heads around it. But our head only gets us so far.

Nelson Mandela, the great liberator and leader, once observed, “If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart.” He is speaking quite literally about dialects, but I find the same principle is true when it comes to our vocational lexicon. When we engage individuals on the level of their skills and interest but don’t touch their motivations, their hopes, their longings, we miss a huge part of the vocational puzzle. If we want to understand vocation we have to acknowledge that our heart is vitally implicated, and we need better language to account for it.

In his essay *Men without Chests*, C.S. Lewis observes, “The head rules the belly through the chest—the seat...of emotions organized by trained habit into stable sentiments.” And while Lewis is talking quite explicitly about moral absolutes and human virtue in this passage, his understanding that the rationality of our minds and the passions of our belly are moderated and organized through our heart – where love stably governs a middle way between reason and appetite – is deeply relevant to how we understand our vocation. While passion and ability can tell us a lot about what we need to know, in order to make sense of our vocation, we need to understand how skill and interest connect through our heart.

In practice this comes down to asking better questions and listening for answers that push beyond mere occupational function. Instead of approaching conversations about vocation from the standpoint of what a person can do, what might they do, what they ought to do—each has its rightful place in a process of discernment—a better question is to ask about an instance where a person felt proud of their contribution, and why? Or perhaps you might ask what a person wishes their work would accomplish if it could be done fully and rightly, without impediments. Questions exploring what makes a person feel valued or alive or satisfied or productive tend to evoke different answers than asking what a person enjoys. I always like to know when a person takes up his or her work purposefully, how is it that they think about what it is they are doing?

This line of questioning inevitably leads to a different conversation. If I talk to my banker friend about his job he can explain many reasons why this role suits him. He can recount circumstances that guided him to this particular role (i.e. “I was good at math”), and he can attribute where God offered direction at key points in his life. If I push further and ask how he thinks about banking in light of God’s kingdom, he can make true and valuable connections about how his work contributes to the common good, how the proper influx of capital revitalizes communities, equips entrepreneurs to create and contribute goods and services people need, how his leadership style may be an encouragement to others around him. Yet when I ask about an instance when he felt proud of his work, why he felt proud about it, he will tell me a different story altogether.

When I ask him about a moment when he felt proud about being a banker, he tells me about times when he has exerted intentional effort to understand the truth of a situation, to see people and circumstances as they really are so he can offer them both practical and effective help.

Whether talking about delinquent borrowers who have run into trouble and need a different arrangement to manage their debt, or a potential client who may be blowing smoke to get a larger line of credit, he feels best about his contribution when he can effectively seek out the truth and then do his best to meet the practical needs of that situation.

And here is the thing: seeking truth and providing practical help are likely threads that weave throughout his whole life, whereas accounting and lending – i.e. banking proper– are likely somewhat confined to his office role. “Making an effort to see things honestly”, “Identifying and meeting practical needs”, these are artery-type motivations and contributions that pump through his life whether or not he is fully conscious of them. More likely than not, they are an articulation of vocation; themes woven through his various occupations as a banker, a boy scout leader, a church treasurer, a parent, a mentor, and so forth.

In fact, these callings would likely manifest themselves whether or not he is a banker at all. If he were to lose his job, if he had pursued real estate or social work instead of banking, if he decided to change careers in mid-life—in any of these instances it is possible his desire to seek truth and provide practical help to others could be offered just as effectively. Our vocations tend to manifest in certain occupations because of our natural abilities and skills and circumstances, but grace lets us realize we are not dependent on our job to make sense of our calling.

Another friend of mine paints portraits. Raised in a family of artists she can walk you through how she came to be an artist herself, how certain decisions, moments, circumstances guided her to the role she is in today. Likewise, as a thoughtful, committed, mature Christian she can tell you about the importance of beauty and expression for the common good and the role of the artist as both prophet and bellwether of culture. Still, if I ask her what it is she is hoping to do when she is painting

at her best, painting with purpose and without impediment, she will talk about how much she longs to bestow dignity on her subjects, to let them know they have been noticed, been seen, that they have unique worth and value. Her explanation of why she paints – what motivates her – echoes of vocation more than occupation, of a posture she likely carries with her into all aspects of life.

Interestingly, as I listened to this friend describe how she felt about portraiture I was struck by how closely it resonated with a story my younger sister shared when she was just starting out as a Clinical Nursing Aide (CNA) several years ago. During one clinical trial the students were asked to help change and clean a severely mentally challenged young woman with stage 4 colon cancer who was, from all accounts, a literal mess:

Our nurse trainer warned us we might not be able to handle the smell in the room. Some of my cohort got sick and had to leave immediately, but I forced myself to make eye contact with her [the patient], to ask about movies that she liked and the stuffed animals she had on her table because even though everything that was happening in and around her was so awful and embarrassing, I did not want to steal her dignity, I wanted her to know she was a person, that I saw her, that she had value.

It is striking, I think, that someone who paints high-end portraits and someone who changes bedpans would describe their calling the same way – to bestow dignity, to see people, to let someone know they have value. Their function is quite different, yet their calling is similar. And this is where vocation is very different, if closely related, to occupation. Changing bedpans serves the common good, it cares for people in a specific way just as beautiful art can be encouraging and capital helps restore neighborhoods.

As important as it is for us recognize all of our work matters to God, how it creates and redeems aspects of our fallen creation—mattering for the

new heavens and new earth—we must also readily acknowledge how our occupations are manifestations of our vocation, rather than complete or final expressions of it. Conversely, our vocations—the motivations, the longings, the loves, the compelling rationale undergirding our efforts—is what reveals the piece(s) of God’s heart he has set in us to love and promote and pursue rigorously, skillfully, creatively and with great joy. This broad view of vocation frees us to trust, so we can take up this calling across the varied dimensions of life and season. The artist who longs to see people will carry that same approach into friendships, into marriage, into how she engages with her grocery store clerk. The banker seeking out truth is likely a practical adviser amidst understanding people and communities and meeting needs in a variety of circumstances.

For these individuals and for us living in response to God’s call is more than we know how to wrap our heads around. Our temptation is to make our categories small and tidy enough to comprehend them. But when we do this we often miss God’s voice, misunderstand his hollering as a reprimand or his rebuke as a cheer. God longs for us to take up his character, take up his work, take up the skills and the pleasures he has so generously offered. Resultantly, we need a richer, more inclusive, more robust understanding of all that he is willing to share with us in every aspect of our lives and circumstances and efforts. By broadening our language and concepts and categories of vocation beyond the confines of work, occupation, roles or titles, we take a giant step closer to the God who doesn’t merely whisper, but who calls with clear voice, with full lungs joyfully beckoning us in to see and do more of what he has for us.

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