

True purpose

by [Barbara Brown Taylor](#) in the [February 21, 2001](#) issue

I have always envied people with a spectacular sense of call. I once had a job that involved reading applications for admission to a Methodist seminary. One of the questions on the standard form was, "Why are you applying to this school of theology?" The answers were often fantastic, many of them involving car wrecks in which the applicant's narrow escape resulted in a call to preach.

There was one man who enclosed a photo of himself as a child evangelist, all decked out in a white suit with spit-combed blond hair. Someone else had a vision in which Jesus reached out and took her by the hand. But the best was the guy who got out of prison to come for an interview. He had been convicted of armed robbery in Alabama and became a Christian while serving his sentence. Along the way he gained a reputation as a jailhouse preacher, whom a local church adopted and pledged to send to school. If the seminary would let him in, he told us, then the parole board would let him out.

In the course of the interview he told us about his crime. It took place at a convenience store. He was just a stupid kid, he said, who had almost changed his mind when a policeman came into the store and saw what was going on. Everyone panicked. Shots rang out and the would-be thief was hit. It had been years ago, but he clearly still relished the tale. Sitting there at that polished oak conference table with a bunch of pasty-faced seminary types, he pulled up his shirt to show us where the bullet had gone in his belly and out his back. "That was my burning bush," he said with a big grin on his face.

Sometimes I think that those spectacular call stories in the Bible do more harm than good. At the very least, I suppose, they are good reminders that the call of God tends to take you apart before it puts you back together again, but they also set the bar on divine calling so high that most people walk around feeling short.

Right this minute I cannot think of half a dozen people who believe that they are doing exactly what God has called them to do. Instead, they are waiting to find out what their true purpose is, or else they are waiting until circumstances improve

enough for them to do a better job of fulfilling it. Things will be different once school is over, once there has been time to get more experience, once the right job comes along, once the children are grown and the house is paid off. Until then, one thing is for sure: this is not it—this present life, under these present circumstances—this cannot possibly be what God had in mind.

Now that is sad, but it is also useful, since it is all the permission most of us need to postpone full immersion in our lives. If this life is not yet your real life, then why give it all you have? Stay in the baby pool, where no one expects too much of you. If anyone asks what you are up to these days, say that you are still practicing. Keep dismissing what you do every day—keep discounting who you are—because it does not match your fantasy of what you, dedicated to your life's true purpose, are supposed to look like.

The church used to supply people with purpose, but I am afraid that we are going through a little slump right now. Some of our old purposes have run out of steam, such as conquering the world under the banner of Christ or even keeping the Christ in Christmas. If you walk into the average Christian church to explore your purpose, chances are that you will come out with an invitation to join the choir or volunteer at the soup kitchen on Tuesdays. It is almost enough to make you envy the guy with the bullet hole.

But don't blame the clergy, anymore than you blame yourself, because the discovery of true purpose is not any one person's job. It is the job of the gathered community—God's called-out ones—who exist, among other things, to remind one another that the lives God is calling us to are the ones that we are living right here, right now, under these present circumstances. Whether you are a sophomore trying to decide on a major or a brain surgeon at the top of your profession, you have everything you need to respond to your divine call. You have what each of us has: one whole life to live on this earth, with tasks in it that we may choose to do well or poorly, and with people in it whom we may lift up by our presence with them or put down by our absence from them, even though we are standing right in front of them.

Every night when we lie down to sleep, there is either more life in the world because of us or there is less life in the world because of us, and this remains true whether or not we have ever seen a burning bush. Our purpose, for God's sake, is to increase the abundance of life in this world.

Who knows? Maybe God really does have something else in mind for you, but if you won't live *this* life to the full, then why should God think up something more challenging for you? You can still abandon the baby pool. You can still put out into the deep water, let down your nets for a catch, and see what happens next. Whatever it is, you can bet that you have already been caught, or you wouldn't be reading this. You have already been called, both to live and to magnify the abundant life of God.