

Vocation

by [L. Gregory Jones](#) in the [July 14, 1999](#) issue

During my first year of teaching, I learned the hazards of asking college seniors their postgraduation plans. I had mistakenly thought that a good way of getting to know the senior students in my spring seminar would be to ask them about their future. Instead of hearing about plans, I received anxious and concerned looks combined with tentatively spoken hopes and uncertainties. Only a couple of the students were clear about what they would be doing.

As I witness more and more high school, college and seminary graduation exercises, I find that the theme of jobs and vocation keeps recurring. Many students are still uncertain about their vocations. While this is understandably true of high school graduates, it is also true of many college graduates and even of some graduating from professional school. The clearest exceptions are those "second-career" students who have returned to school in order to pursue another vocation.

Is the uncertainty a sign of our changing economic culture? Does it reflect the opening of more opportunities to groups of people who had previously been denied access? Does it indicate a breakdown of communities that provided a clearer "calling" to people? Or some combination of these factors?

Regardless of the causes, many people are searching for guidance in discerning what they ought to do with their lives. In part, the question of vocation has to do with a job. But it also raises important and related issues about marriage and parenting, about the communities and traditions to which we feel accountable in some measure, and about the ways we seek to understand the contingent events of our lives, events that often transform—if not transmute—our plans and our understanding.

How do I discern my vocation over time? We find some guidance from a character in Gail Godwin's *Evensong* who, in affirming the vocation of a woman Episcopal priest, tells her: "Something's your vocation if it keeps making more of you." Part of what distinguishes vocation from simply tasks or work that needs to be done is the conviction that the activity is an ingredient in a faithful, flourishing life. We aim for

commitments that generate and discipline our passion, and thereby continually make more of us than if we failed to participate in that way of life.

Conversely, we ought to avoid those vocations that are likely to make "less" of us, especially if in them we are likely to be shriveled by one or another form of sin. We can be made "less" by our own temptations, by a particular mismatch between what we are doing and the gifts we have been given by God, by contingent events that overwhelm the possibilities of continuing a specific vocation, or by the corrupting practices or institutions that currently shape our vocation.

Godwin's phrase helps orient us toward vocations that encourage a flourishing life. But that phrase "more of you" can be coopted by a seductive culture of self-fulfillment. To avoid that, we need the specificity of Christian communities to guide us in discerning how our vocation is consistent with Christian discipleship. In this sense, Godwin's phrase needs to be placed next to Dietrich Bonhoeffer's claim in *The Cost of Discipleship* that "when Christ calls [someone], He bids him come and die."

After all, even as we recognize the potential for fulfillment and abundant living, Christians recognize that the God whom we worship tells us that only those who lose their life will find it. Further, Christ died on a cross, and Christians have long recognized martyrdom as a sign of faithfulness and sanctity. Littleton's teenager Cassie Bernal discovered a vocation that "made more" of her precisely through death, as did Bonhoeffer a half-century earlier.

Christians ought to be wary of a life in which one finds opportunities or external rewards continually expanding without entailing any personal sacrifice—especially when those rewards come at the expense of others.

Hence, we need to help one another discover vocations in which more will be made of us, enabling us to find fulfillment, even as we also recognize the significant sacrifice involved in faithful Christian discipleship. In this way, we seek to discern and live out vocations that enable people to match their gifts and talents with fidelity to the God of Jesus Christ and particular communities of people.

But how do we engage in such ongoing discernment? How do we live with the tensions of our own faithful and sinful desires, the constraints and opportunities we discover in specific communities and institutions, the twists and turns of our own lives as well as the lives of those we love? We need some clarity of direction as well

as an awareness that God often leads us to places we did not plan to go. A familiar joke puts it: "Want to make God laugh? Tell God your plans."

Can we sustain ourselves with a sense of direction oriented by God's inbreaking reign and providential care, enabling us to move forward in our vocational journey with a sense of direction but without a set of predetermined plans? In her wonderful new memoir, *Dance Lessons*, Catherine Wallace insightfully and humorously recalls her discovery of an expansive vocation in relation to God only through the frustrations of unjust academic institutions and the complexities of family life.

Such lessons are more easily narrated retrospectively than they are communicated to graduates and others who are seeking assurance that they are making wise vocational choices. Yet we, their friends, families and Christian communities, are called to help provide them with perspective—with direction shaped by our commitment to God, and with an ironic sense of humor as we discover the surprises that God has in store for us all.