



Vocation Connections

Vocation:

“It is easy to get impatient along the way. Do not despair, just pay attention. What you long for is continually offering itself in moments of love embodied, presenting itself in every unexpected kindness. It flashes daily at the corner of your eye, and fills our hearts when we need it most. What you are looking for, is looking for you.”

Carrie Newcomer

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The Task Within The Tasks: A Spirituality of Work—and Non-Work

by Fr. Richard Rohr, OFM

Work is about self assertion, self identity, creativity, practicality, and helpfulness. The secret is to keep these five in some kind of balance. When one takes over, our work will eventually do us in, but if any of them are totally denied or rejected, we will also suffer the consequences.

- 1) Self assertion – The need to expend energy.
- 2) Self identity – The need to find myself by expressing myself.
- 3) Creativity – The need to expand my energy, for myself, others, or both.
- 4) Practicality – The need to accomplish goals and get things done.
- 5) Helpfulness – The need to serve and help others.

First of all, I hope these five points make it clear that practical work is good and necessary for many reasons. For much more than just paying the bills. Without it, there is no way for people to find themselves, offer themselves, accomplish their life goals, or connect in society. If we are intrinsically relational beings, like the Trinity itself, work is mostly about relationship—with myself, with others, with the world. “My father goes on working, and so do I,” says Jesus (John 5:18). And he says this to justify “working” or helping a sick person on the Sabbath! Religion itself cannot be used to avoid spiritual work and service.

A complete leisure class existence, without any work, would normally produce a rather narcissistic and drone-like existence, where one would have little self-knowledge and little connection with others at any depth. One would be outside of meaningful relationships of service, camaraderie, expressiveness, and leadership. Even monks were expected to do physical work for their own enlightenment, both in Christianity and in Buddhism.

Yet, I would also add that the final fruitfulness of work is actually found by choosing and living its exact opposite—the cessation from work—or the Sabbath rest. Unless approximately “1/7th” of life is also ceasing to work, putting spaces, paragraphs, and parentheses around my efforts, work always becomes compulsive, addictive, driven, unconscious, and actually counter productive for the self and for those around us. We also need not to work. (Which implies that I first of all do work, of course!)

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The secular word for such a cessation from work is our concept of a “vacation,” which comes from the same root as vacuum (*vacuus*, Latin for empty). Unfortunately, most of us are so driven to produce and perform that we do not really know how to be empty, idle, goal-less, and open. Which actually means we will not know how to pray! Most vacations are, therefore, much more diversionary tactics than real vacations. They tend to be filled with more experiences, rather than a cessation from experiences to taste, enjoy, suffer, and process the ones I have already had. Adding more unprocessed experiences will normally lead to some degree of unconsciousness, or life on cruise control. A spirituality of work must be balanced by a spirituality of Sabbath rest.

So I need to express, expend, expand, and offer my energy for myself and for others. If it is all for myself, my energy becomes constipated. And if you do not mind me using such scatological metaphors, the opposite would be diarrhea. If all my energy flows through me without intentionality, focus, and inner freedom, my work is equally fruitless, and even flushed away! We get to the end of our lives, as may people do, and say “What did it all mean?” This happens if my work is merely a way to survive and solve immediate problems, but not a way to express my deepest self and my self for others. My jobs never became vocations. I am afraid that is true for a very high percentage of people—sadly so, for many poor people on this earth who have no choice. Maybe that is the worst evil of desperate poverty.

Let me offer the prophet Jonah as a summary example of a life that God tries to move from work as career to work as vocation. One could say that Jonah finally, but grudgingly, tries out all aspects of job and work, but only after being thrown in the water by his friends, being swallowed by a whale, and vomited up on a shore that he was trying to avoid. I think such trials are invariably the price of such integration. None of us start with all five purposes in balance, but hopefully we move gradually in that direction. That is the clear goal. Jonah even ends up enjoying a Sabbath rest under the “castor bean plant” (4:3ff), and is angry when it is taken away.

In short, Jonah begins his trip to Nineveh from a rather self-centered perspective, where the possibility of his own failure plus the success of others makes him “run to Tarshish” in the very first verses of the text (1:3). He is into self assertion, practicality, and the protection of self identity, but he does not have much sense of creativity (which is always a spiritual insight) or any helpfulness toward others. In fact, he does not even care about the good of the Ninevites, to the point of resenting their own transformation (4:1). He is into successful job performance but not work as a spiritual expression of his True Self. He has not found his full self yet, and one might say that is the very goal of all of our work, jobs, and occupations—to find our full self and then to give that full self away. It is not certain from the text that poor Jonah ever really gets there.

“...one might say that is the very goal of all our work, jobs, and occupations—to find our full self and then to give that full self away.”

The hero of the story is, of course, only Yahweh, whom Jonah recognizes as “a God of tenderness and compassion, slow to anger, rich in graciousness, and relenting from punishment” (4:2). Jonah ends on stage right, an anti-hero of sorts, but we still call him a “prophet” and, like all of us, he is reluctantly led toward his real vocation (“the task within the task”) by struggling with his job, his work, and his occupation. The movement toward integrating all five purposes of work is in the struggle itself; whether it is ever perfectly achieved is not the point.

Just know all tasks are there, they are all needed, they are all found in God and in your deepest You, and you will not waste too much time running toward Tarshish, in the mouths of useless whales, or protecting your little castor bean plants. You will have achieved the real task within all of the other tasks.

Fr. Richard Robr is a Franciscan of the New Mexico Province and founder of the Center for Action and Contemplation in Albuquerque, N.M.

Upcoming Events

Thursday, October 23: 12:00-1:00pm

Stories of Calling with Sr. Sally Ann Brickner



A St. Norbert College graduate, Sr. Sally Ann served the College as a faculty member and administrator between 1970 and 2010. Her visit to Nicaragua in the 70s awakened consciousness of deep economic, political and social divisions between developing and developed countries. Thus was born in her a passion to augment charitable work with the transformation of unjust structures. At the present time she coordinates the Office of Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation for the Sisters of St. Agnes in Fond du Lac.

Complimentary lunch is included. RSVP by **October 17** at snc.edu/vocation/staffdevelopment or x3155.



Thursday, February 18: 7:00pm

Room at the Table: Carrie Newcomer in Concert



“Carrie Newcomer is the most insightful and lyrical singer-songwriter I know—always attuned to the still, small voice of the soul that’s so often muffled by the noise of the world.” ~ Parker Palmer

Join us as we welcome acclaimed singer-songwriter, Carrie Newcomer, back to St. Norbert College for a campus concert. A master at seeing the sacred in everyday life and someone deeply in tune with the lived experience of vocation, Newcomer’s lyrics and quotations have often appeared here in our newsletter.

The concert will be held in Dudley Birder Hall. Admission is free, but tickets will be required. A free-will donation will be accepted in support of St. John Evangelist Homeless Shelter. Stay tuned for more information. You won’t want to miss this!

For more information on Carrie and to hear tracks from her new album, *A Permeable Life*, and other albums, visit carriewcomer.com



Wednesday, June 3: 8:00am-6:00pm

A Day of Reflection



Take some time to reflect on your own personal calling and how you support the callings of others in this one-day experience of vocation exploration for SNC faculty and staff.

There will be no cost for this event and food will be provided throughout the day.

Stay tuned for information on how to register for this new offering.

Are you reading this?

Help us gauge the breadth of our readership.

Simply email vocation@snc.edu and tell us that you read this newsletter to be entered into a drawing for \$10 to Luna Cafe!



Stirrings

By: Edwina Gateley

There is a strange,
Untouchable, unseeable
Thing in me.
It hungers,
Grasps, strains
For something
I do now know,
Far beyond—

It stirs,
Turns, disturbs.
It brings with it
Unknown things,
Unidentified longings.
It reveals a vision hazy,
Far, far,
Very far away.

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Vocation Connections is an occasional newsletter published by the Program of Faith, Learning & Vocation.
We invite your comments, suggestions, and contributions.

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