

Vocation: A Response-ability

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Second in the series, "The Communities That Call Us"

A look at the communities that speak to us, calling us to act.

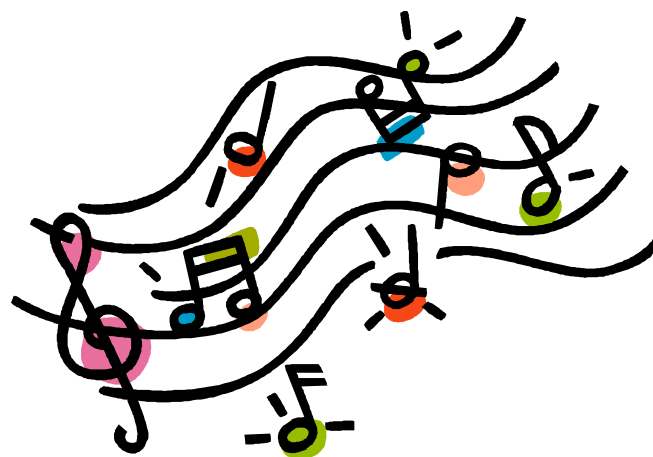
Is a vocation something that *I have*, or something that has me? In a world where it is difficult to obtain a secure job with good benefits or establish a career path with the promise of longevity and growth, it is difficult to know how to answer this question. Yes, vocation means more than a job or occupation. It involves something that outpaces monetary reward and goes far beyond security and stature. Why so? Because it is not mine.

I would like to reflect for a moment on how, rather than being something that I choose, a vocation chooses me. In fact, the term connotes a "call," an appeal that beckons from outside and elicits a response. Such a calling kindles personal energy, directs core life-activities, and consequently radiates meaning, rising in the shape of a vision or sense of purpose that connects up with my own interests, passions, and talents.

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and others.*

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relationships that compose my life."*

However, most of us do not experience vocation as a compelling, higher charge that takes over as if we are "meant" for this or that task. At least I have never felt an assuredness about my destiny or life-script. My sense of vocation has emerged only slowly and with uncertainty, more a factor of relationships and circumstances than deliberate choices. In fact, it has primarily come from *others* and their unique ways of *calling* me into new territory, not from discovering my own hidden interests or latent talents. And this has had the effect of drawing me beyond myself, often with surprising and enriching consequences.



I have come to think of vocation not as something that is my own, as property to be possessed, nor even a matter of what I am interested in or have a passion for, but rather something "to which" I respond. My interests and talents took shape and were lured down certain pathways because of other people in my life. It has been the relationships that have made the difference. Vocation has a relational character.

What do I mean by this? First, I believe vocation *happens* to us. It is not merely the product of my own preferences, wishes, and passions. But this does not mean it depends solely upon others for authentication, as if they hold the keys, binding me to a set of obligations. For, second, vocation happens *in between* self and others. It rises like a melody within the counterpoint of the relationships that compose my life. These are the relationships of care and responsibility that make me who I am, even though they don't always follow predictable patterns or play out as expected. Let me be a bit autobiographical, if I may, to illustrate the point.

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I have always been the kind of person who is interested in too many different things. And this has made me somewhat schizophrenic. For awhile my passion was astronomy, then camping and camp directing, then counseling, then philosophy, then world religions, then theology. And all along, almost unnoticed, the passion for music grew. After college, not quite sure that I wished to pursue graduate work in religion or theology, I embarked with college friends to play music in Nashville, TN, until I “figured things out.”

Shortly after landing in Nashville, I was completely surprised by a woman who brought immense joy into my life. I fell in love and got married. This relationship was the deepest event of my life. It changed my life. In the context of marriage, everything looked different. Professional music became a chore because it took me away from home and lured me into priorities that seemed to conflict with marriage—long days, late nights, smoky bars, and weeks at a time “on the road.” Plus, I did not enjoy the music I was playing or many of people with whom I was playing.

So I pursued graduate work in religion, initially with the intent to be a pastoral counselor. But, again, I was surprised. I fell in love with theology. And more, I realized the important influence religious traditions have in our now global context, for both good and ill. My faith deepened through the friendships that emerged here. I was surrounded by a community of people dedicated to making a difference in the world. Theology mattered; peace and justice mattered. Five years later, I was almost finished with a Ph.D. in Theology and History of Christian Thought.

However, in the meantime, our two children had been born. This made an income necessary. Because music was ready at hand, I jumped back into the musical scene and was met with greater success than before—better music, deeper friendships. Suddenly, I fell back in love with

music, even more than before. So many opportunities came to the fore, and the subsequent income allowed my family to live quite well. And, much to my delight, I was even able to find a gentle balance between family life and music life. We were happy, though my Ph.D. work remained incomplete. Four more years passed by and the music grew.

In time, however, family life became difficult. Our oldest child needed special attention, and the stress this placed on my wife and youngest child took a greater toll by the week. It seemed tragically unnatural for me to call home after having performed

great music before a sellout crowd at the House of Blues in Los Angeles, sharing my joy while hearing tales of struggle from her end of the line. Again, it was time to make a change. Larger voices were calling, and I was listening. The life of the professional musician was not conducive to what I knew in my heart was most important, being a spouse and parent. Home was where the deepest currents flowed. Home was the primary place for me.

I applied for a teaching position at SNC. And before I could gather myself, we had moved to Green Bay and I was teaching theology, finishing up my Ph.D. dissertation in the process. My musician friends in Nashville were placing bets that I would return within two years. And part of me wondered whether they were right. But they were wrong.

Yes, music is deep in my soul. I can't shake it from me. Yet here at SNC and in North East Wisconsin new possibilities emerged. How so? Among relationships. Paying attention to new voices—students, faculty and musician friends, and church members alike—helped open up a bigger picture. Not only am I available at home more, which is good for my family, I have also found a passion to teach and do what I can to encourage serious reflection about matters of faith. And I am the richer for it.

So as I sit here today and write this essay, it seems that listening to the voices around me has proved basic to my growing sense of vocation. Yes, I have unique passions and talents that move

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me certain ways. But these alone have not shaped me. For they have emerged within and been cultivated by relationships with others. My vocation is not mine; it is a call that comes from being positioned in interpersonal circumstances that invite me to respond. It happens along the way with others, in between them and myself. This means it takes weird twists and turns in the road, still in the process of unfolding. And there is always the possibility of surprise.

So what is vocation? It is the discernment that comes from being placed with and for others in a certain way, a way that enlarges the self by calling it into something more than itself. This is why I believe vocation is a responsibility—a responsibility. It enlivens us to others and invites us to serve. Can we hear what others are saying? Are there needs in the world that call us? Or are we

only listening to our own lives, the desires of the moment or the craving for future security and predictability?

It might seem strange that a theology professor has not mentioned God up to this point. Does God even fit into this picture? Yes! In fact, everything I have said shimmers with religious possibility. But perhaps the divine is something found not pie-in-the-sky, but in and through each other. Perhaps another's call to us is where the stuff of faith begins, where our response to transcendent mystery becomes real. This might be stated simply: loving God and loving neighbor are dual moments of the same event. Openness to others is openness to the transcendent mystery that rushes through all things and lures us into love. Perhaps this marks the fullest sense of vocation.

The Human Family Calls Me
Brian Wiehr '06, ALIVE Team Member
Second student article in the series, "The Communities That Call Us"

"We should not be afraid to put our love into action. We should not be afraid to pray, to work, and to make our work a prayer."
 -- Mother Teresa


two during the holidays. But St. Norbert challenged me to take action on a whole new level. I found myself signing up for a weeklong service trip my freshman year to Jackson, Mississippi. At the time, I didn't really know what to expect, but after that

"We are called to act with justice, we are called to love tenderly, we are called to serve one another, to walk humbly with God."

I'll never forget the first time I heard that song, a few years back during Common Prayer. It just hit me, each word so meaningful, so true. The song, which upon further research is based on the Biblical passage Micah 6:8, articulated everything I believed; it put in simple terms what I'd discovered about faith, about Christianity, and about vocation while here at St. Norbert College.

From little on, I've felt called to care about people who are experiencing hardship and oppression. Growing up in Milwaukee, I witnessed the effects of poverty, racism, and injustice on a daily basis. Maybe it was my parents or Catholic grade school or just some innate sense of justice from within, but I always felt compelled to challenge this status quo and ask why the world could allow this. More importantly, what could I do about it?

As a kid, the answer might have been putting some of my allowance in the collection basket at church or donating old toys to Goodwill. As I got older, it meant more direct service like working at the soup kitchens and shelters for an afternoon or



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The editor invites your comments, suggestions, and contributions.

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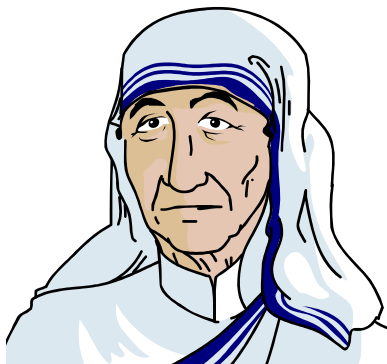
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week of meeting people from all walks of life, hearing their stories, sharing hopes and dreams, struggles and frustrations, I would walk away changed forever. Widespread poverty was no accident; it



was the result of years of neglect and ignorance on the part of those who had the power to do something about it. And, sadly, I was one of those people. What was I doing to make the world a better, fairer, more beautiful place?

I continued to go on service trips, and to do service in the local community. I committed myself to the Zambia Project, the campus fundraising group for community schools in Zambia. I found a job working at the Peace and Justice Center, through the ALIVE Team, which was an awesome opportunity to be an advocate and activist for issues of social justice on a daily basis. I initially thought this work was rooted in my interest in politics and international affairs, but it turned out to be much greater than that. The calling to the work of promoting social justice was not just about being a nice person, or being a bleeding-heart guilty-conscience. I was called to this directly from God, as evidenced by the example Jesus set for us in his time here on Earth.

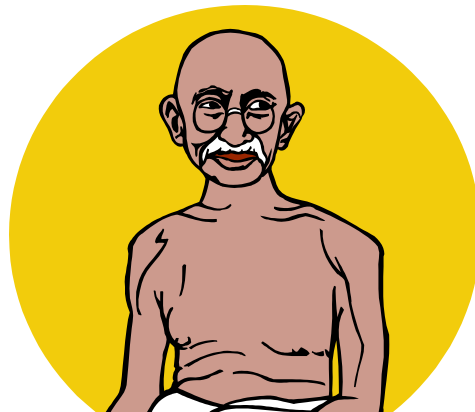
Even the most basic understanding of Jesus' life story should reveal that Christ was clearly on the side of the poor and marginalized. He cared for the outcast, healed the sick, and diligently worked to build community, understanding, and peace among all people he met and ministered to. Jesus wanted to change the world. And without a doubt, he called on us to do the same. We were not only called to live the Beatitudes, the "Be Attitudes," as we called them in Catholic grade school, but were blessed for doing so. Jesus had given us, through the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5) and the Golden Rule, a guide for, as Gandhi says, "being the change we wish to see in the world."

For a long time, I viewed the Sermon on the Mount and the Golden Rule as merely an obvious code of ethics, if not for the sake of being nice then at least for practical reasons. Of course, we should treat others as we would want to be treated. Duh! Who would want to be treated poorly? But, upon further investigation, I found Jesus' message was not that simple, not as tit-for-tat as I'd made it out to be. He was encouraging us to do this not just for each other, but for the sake of God. In Matthew 25:40, Jesus tells us in a parable that "whatever

you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me." That means that the poor, the sick, the homeless and oppressed, are not just people to feel sorry for. They are not just our fellow man. They are our brothers (and sisters), and they are the face of God.

It took a long time for me to get this. I had always been skeptical of those who did service in the name of religion. But after much thought, great guidance from professors and peers, and some very eye-opening experiences this winter on the Philadelphia trip, I realized this conception of service, service to our brother (and in turn, service to God) was far more powerful and far more authentic than just serving meals and putting a dollar in the basket without a second thought. There is a reason some of the greatest peacemakers and advocates of social justice in our time have been people of faith. The Martin Luther Kings and Mother Teresas and Oscar Romeros of the world probably couldn't have done the amazing things they did without a rock-solid faith in a God that sustained them and gave their work meaning and purpose. Our non-Christian friends, from the Dalai Lama to Mahatma Gandhi, show us this as well; we are more than just human beings helping each other when we engage in service and social justice work. We are connecting to a higher power, a deeper connection, that binds the entire human race together.

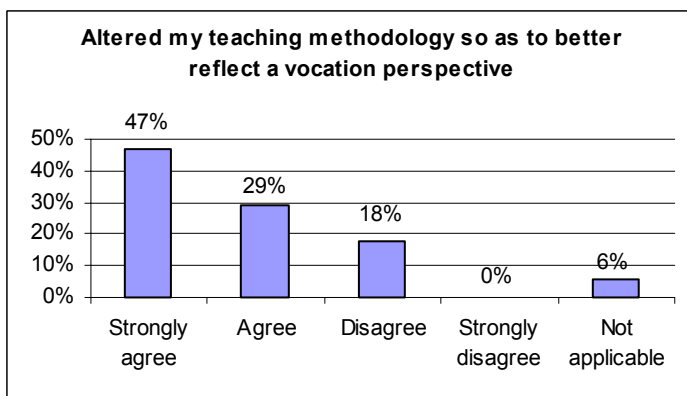
It is through their example, and Christ's, that I am proud to say the human family is the community that calls me; all of us, no matter where we live, how much money we have, the color of our skin, or what religion (if any) we believe in. That which divides us matters not in the eyes of the Lord. All we can hope to do is base our work on this unconditional love. In the Middle Ages, St. Francis prayed to the Lord: "Make me an instrument of Your peace," and a few years ago the Christian rock band Audio Adrenaline sang "I want to be Your hands and feet." My prayer is the same. I am called, we are called, to act with justice, to love tenderly, to serve one another, and to walk humbly with God.



Giving Shape to Community *Considering the Impact of the Retreat-Seminar on Vocation* *Julie Massey, Program Director*

In the spring of 2005 we were hard at work developing our newest proposal to the Lilly Endowment, Inc., a proposal aimed at supporting this Program (FLV) in its next phase. It was our sense that the annual Retreat-Seminar on Vocation was an important facet of our work; one that merited continuation. However, we wanted to give more substance to that sense. We knew there was interest in the Retreat. In each of its first four years we accepted more than the targeted 15 participants. We were also aware that the pre-test/post-test used with participants each summer showed modest but positive growth in participants' understanding of vocation and application of vocation to their lives and work. Further, each year's evaluations contained helpful suggestions, but were nearly universally positive.

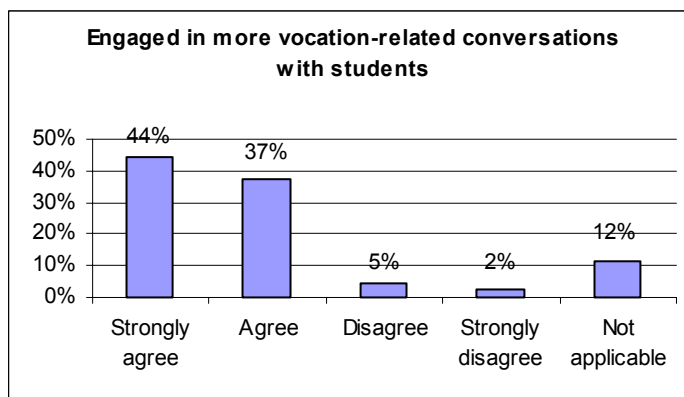
We knew we were running a quality event. The question that lurked, the kind of question proposal-writing surfaces, was, "What's our impact over time on the Retreat-Seminar participants and the College community overall?" We made progress in answering that question by surveying the 57 colleagues who had participated in the first four years of the Retreat-Seminar and were presently working at the college. Working with the Office of Institutional Effectiveness we sent a brief on-line survey to these colleagues. We were very pleased when 75% of those we surveyed responded. Some highlights from their responses include:



- 47% of all faculty respondents told us they incorporated new, vocation-related readings into one or more courses.
- 76% of all faculty respondents agreed that they had altered their teaching methodology to better reflect a vocation perspective

- 82% of all respondents indicated they more actively encourage students to seek and live out their vocations.
- 98% of all participants believe the Retreat-Seminar deepened their understanding of vocation as it relates to their professional lives, and 100% agreed the experience deepened their understanding of vocation as it relates to their personal lives.
- 98% of all participants concurred that the Retreat-Seminar deepened their appreciation of St. Norbert College as a positive community.

In the only open-ended question included in the survey we asked respondents to name the greatest impact of the Retreat-Seminar. The responses reveal a deep experience of connection and community that is sometimes missed in the midst of the demanding schedule of the academic year. A small sampling of these comments includes:



- The summer retreat enabled me to connect with other colleagues across campus, generating a stronger sense of collegiality/community with others who work with a similar sense of vocational drive...The retreat was one of the most significant and positive experiences I have had as a new faculty member at SNC.
- It renewed my faith that this community consists of good people who ultimately mean well, but at times struggle. (Faculty member)
- It brought me to realize the deep passion I have for teaching, and how this is played out in community. The relationship dimension is crucial; it is what fuels my continued interest in SNC.

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- Enhancing the sense of community on campus, of living out my vocation in all of my interactions with colleagues, and realizing that what I do has a role in how well people feel about themselves. (Administrator)
- Came away from the Summer Retreat-Seminar with a deeper, more positive understanding of my values and my vocation here at St. Norbert College and an enhanced sense of community and collegiality here..." (Staff member)
- Seeing myself as a part of a larger community engaged in very important and meaningful questions and discussions. (Staff member)

If you have not yet had the opportunity to attend the Retreat-Seminar, we encourage you to apply. More information is on our website and printed below!



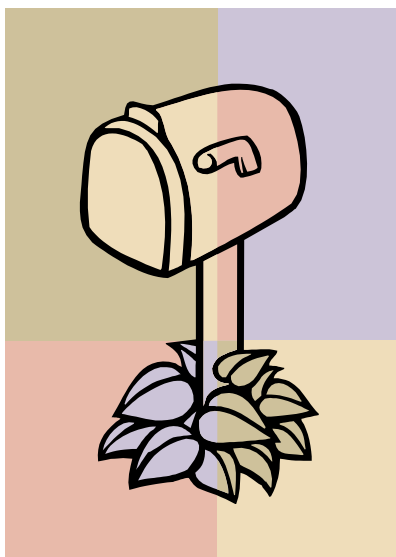
Deirdre Egan and Howard 'Ebert relax at Summer Retreat Seminar '05

Upcoming Events

Summer Retreat-Seminar on Vocation - May 23-26, 2006 - Norbertine Center for Spirituality. This Retreat-Seminar is designed for faculty, staff, and administrators. This four-day event is an in-depth opportunity to explore vocation within the context of the St. Norbert College mission. The aim of the Retreat-Seminar is twofold: (1) to help individuals understand and appreciate the concept of vocation as it relates to each of us, and (2) to explore how to integrate vocation into our roles within the college community. Please call Ext. 3155 or register online at <http://www.snc.edu/vocation/sumsemapp.doc> Applications are due by March 31, 2006



Course Development Support - Stipends are available to develop a new course related to vocation or to revise an existing course adding a vocation component. Please apply at <http://www.snc.edu/vocation/courseapply.html> Applications are accepted anytime.



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