

Evolution of a Lawyer

by Bill Graves

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I would like to talk this morning about “vocation.” And, as I warned you in the blurb I put in the newsletter that it’s also a lot about me. I mean I’m just going to share a little of my life experience with you. It’s what I know best and hopefully you will be able to find something in it that you can relate to your own life.

The vocational question is one of those core questions religion tries to tackle. What are we here for? Hopefully, it’s something more than eating cheeseburgers and escaping the question with marguerites, although I think a little of that from time to time in moderation may enrich the journey. In theology school it’s called the soteriological question: How are we saved--saved from lives of meaninglessness? If we don’t reflect on that it seems to me we forfeit what makes us most distinctively human; to be able to reflect on what has meaning, beauty, authenticity is the unbelievably precious gift we have been given, and excuse my traditional language, but if anything is a sin, I think squandering that gift must be it.

The question of vocation is there in front of us throughout our lives. So, you see, I’m using the word “vocation” broadly to encompass the total thrust of our lives, where we have chosen to commit our life energy whether we are young, elderly, or an unemployed volunteer. What is your vocation?

A provocative way of phrasing the vocational question might be: Shall we put the total response of all that we are at the disposal of self-enrichment, self-aggrandizement, or at the disposal of a higher cause in the service of neighbor, and the God that I think T.S. Eliot was referring to in “The Rock”, the piece I asked Marta and David to read a few minutes ago: I want to think of it as a humanist or Unitarian concept of God, simply a word symbolizing something like the source and center of all that has being and value, that ultimately intends justice, harmony and balance.

So, giving you the facts, just the facts ma’am as Joe Friday on dragnet used to say, it seems I have managed thus far to figuratively be the butcher, the baker and the candlestick maker. Actually, I have been a strawberry picker, cattle herder, newspaper boy, truck, tractor and wheat combine operator, dish washer, bill collector, telephone dispatcher, service station attendant, grease monkey, lab technician, periodical editor, military officer, civil rights lawyer, criminal prosecutor, divorce attorney, English as second language teacher, nature guide trainer, hospital chaplain. And, here I am this morning as a ministerial intern. And I shouldn’t neglect to say that I have been a husband twice, the father of two children and step-father of two others.

Along the way I have made good decisions and some very bad ones. A few of them caused me to suffer. I said yes more than once looking people in the eye with all of my insides streaming “No!”. Do I regret these decisions? I don’t get much mileage these days out of regretting what’s done. Like the rest of us, I blunder through my days, and hurt myself and sometimes hurt others as I go—but I suppose I do the best I know how to do at the time. I do my best to forgive myself and learn and do better the next time.

There is a wonderful poet who lived in Portland, Or, and for almost 50 years and virtually every morning he woke up and wrote a new poem. In this poem that I am going to ask our celebrant to deliver William Stafford speaks of a thread, a constant companion to him, a guide that leads him ultimately to where he needs to go:

It’s a thread you follow. It goes among
Things that change. But it doesn’t change.
People wonder about what you are pursuing.
You have to explain about the thread.
But it is hard for others to see.
While you hold it you can’t get lost.
Tragedies happen; people get hurt
Or die; and you suffer and get old.
Nothing you do can stop time’s unfolding.
You don’t ever let go of that thread.

I do believe that at the core of each of us is this something, a spirit, a wisdom that comes from inside or outside, or both, who knows. But it has been there for me at crisis times in my life and literally saved me, pulled me towards a safe shore, over and over. It is a guide that leads us to where we need to go but only if we stop and listen carefully to it. Metaphorically, I think it is the thread William Stafford is talking about. It is the thread that pulls us toward the holy work that is meant for each of us. It is the thread that inspiration travels along, that makes meaning spring from muddled confusion and the key puzzle piece fall into place.

It is also the source of conscience, this soul-place that, if we listen, somehow tells us what is the right thing to do. Specialist Joseph Darby was a 24 year old who first reported the abuses at the Abu Ghraib prison to the Criminal Investigations Division of the Army. Others, including doctors and medics, knew it was going on and didn't report it. Some senior military officers were implicitly condoning it. Only Darby went over the heads of his superiors. How did a 24 year old at the bottom of the chain of command come up with such courage? His answer to that very question was simply: "The Christ in me told me its wrong."

Almost all world religions use a similar metaphor for the "hidden wholeness" or "cosmic Christ" or "Buddha nature" --whatever you call the inner guide in each of us. Anne Cohen, or others in the psychology professions, might call it the authority of the "differentiated self", the self that knows who it is and respects itself as worthy. It seems that we most get into trouble when we fail to pay attention to the deep desires of that self or compromise that self away in the name of money or expedience or what we think is social respectability or even love.

One time in my life I know I did find my thread and paid attention and it was salvational to me in a sense. About 22 years ago my vocation was unemployed. I was frankly a burned-out lawyer. Somehow my thread pulled me into a lecture at a UU General Assembly in Rochester, N.Y. GA is sort of the annual convention of our denomination, the same one that was in Portland last summer. Anyway the lecture was by a Prof. John Lee Smith who was Dean of Students at Cornell Law School. Prof. Smith noted he was acutely aware of rumblings of dissatisfaction on the part of many young lawyers. This led him to conduct a survey of recent graduates of Cornell Law School and a finding that a majority of those young attorneys in big law firms, in government or corporate counsel work expressed in no uncertain terms that "lawyering wasn't working out for them."

Most of them were satisfied with the financial returns they were receiving. Even so, there appeared a quite desperation over the meaninglessness of their work, the depersonalization of legal practice, the incredible stress and time demands. Have you ever heard words that seemed to be aimed straight at your heart? Maybe that's what is called an epiphany.

Prof. Smith went on to relate that, historically, lawyers were one of the three so-called, "learned professions"; physicians and the clergy being the other two. All three were distinguished by long black robes, and by something else, an ingrained conviction that they had been "called" by higher authority to a life of service to their communities and to fellow humanity. The overriding obligation was to aid those who needed it; monetary reward was a secondary consideration, something of an unfortunate necessity.

And, how far we have come. Now, only ministers make use of the notion of being "called to service" and continue to wear robes (at least some of them do). Maybe it has something to do with ministers not yet figuring out how to make 6 digit incomes, the exception, of course, being televangelists. The legal world I inhabited had evolved to being another business where efficiency and the bottom line, rather than service, is the primary purpose for its practice. The God that many of my brethren worshipped was the almighty billable hour.

Several years ago one of the most prestigious Seattle law firms, Karr-Tuttle, summarily dismissed 14 of its attorneys. It was announced to be part of an effort to operate the firm on a more business-like manner. Those fired had in common that they lagged behind the firm's minimum expectation of 1700 billable hours per year, even though at least some of them excelled at compiling non-billable hours of public service.

The most intriguing part of Prof. Smith's lecture was yet to come. His survey found significantly lower levels of disillusionment among young lawyers in solo or small firm practice than he did in corporate, government or big firm practice. Whoa, that was interesting in my world because the solo and small firm practitioners are often thought of as the hacks of the profession, usually making less money and enjoying less prestige than their big firm counterparts. What they do have, though, that seemed to make the difference is

person-to-person contact on a daily basis, with clients who badly need help. The problems they work on are those of real people they know, rather than those of institutions, corporations, or of clients only dealt with personally by a senior partner.

Prof. Smith concluded his presentation with a challenge to those in the legal profession to take back the language of religion and reclaim a sense of “calling”. This a UU speaking and I don’t think he meant a voice from some personified deity on high. The call that I am talking about is the thread deep inside that only you can see when freed from false and shallow lures of dominant cultural incentives, expectations; what those of you taking my evening class on the Marcus Borg book will recognize as the difference between “conventional wisdom” and “the wisdom of God.”

The long and the short of this is that in less than six months after hearing this lecture I found myself in a three person law firm in Redmond, WA, and starting a specialty on Family Law that would last 18 years. I did that because for one of the first times in my life I knew, pretty clearly, that it was right. I did it because to me it seemed like a kind of ministry. I know that lawyers are the butts of a thousand lawyer jokes, and the profession does have a side it deserves. But I also met more than one lawyer that I knew was a closet minister. I do recall several telling me: “Maybe I should have gone into the ministry.” And, I would say, “I know what you mean.”

When you are a lawyer of the kind I was, clients literally hire you to take from them like a surrogate the agony of their deepest troubles and conflicts. It is an awesome and heavy trust. Many times I knew I had fulfilled that trust and clients paid their bills out of gratitude, not begrudgingly. Those were the clients that made it all worthwhile. Actually, one of them is women named Frances. On the whole I did have a ministry as a lawyer I’m proud of. My identity and self-image as an attorney that helped people was important to me. Yet, I would be less than candid if I suggested it was all roses and honey. The down side is true of any occupation, isn’t it? There are lawyers who really deserve the lawyer jokes, the ones whose ends were vindication rather than justice and whose means towards those ends pushed the limits of ethics. Opposing them was not my idea of fun. Before I stopped taking them I was involved in 8-10 child custody cases and I believe each took at least a year off my life. Anyway, the long and the short of it is that in 2004, my law partnership of 17 years was breaking up, Francie and I had escaped Amerika by moving to Whidbey Island, and I sensed that the thread inside was calling me to go deeper spiritually to try to get some grasp on ultimate meaning, frankly to finally get a grip on that word that had bugged me my whole life: “God.”

So I enrolled at Seattle U STM to do that, and with an objective of continuing a ministry of some kind, I knew not what, but unlikely as one of the ordained parish ministry variety—at my age, are you kidding? But then David Cohen came calling last Spring and I spoke to him and I spoke to Amanda, and within hours, I knew. I told them both, this is where I deeply desire be. It seems like the long thread of my life has led me here unerringly, and I am with you in humble gratitude. This ministry has a very different quality to it than the one before. If I died tomorrow my tombstone might summarize: “He divorced 300 and married 6.”

So now I covered two ministries I’ve found. Those of you that took the “Common Fire” class I led last Fall will be familiar with a definition of ministry I found helpful: Its when “The heart’s deep gladness meets the world’s deep hunger.” Now let’s open this dialogue for a few minutes. I’m surely not the only minister here. I’d like to invite several of you to name ministries you have found, in your work, in your lives, perhaps in serving this fellowship.

I want to leave you with the observation that a ministry does not necessarily require a change of occupation. But, it may mean that a shift in attitude is needed to create a new way of being in the same occupation. I’ll not forget these words by Joseph Campbell from the Bill Moyers interviews:

If you follow your bliss you put yourself on a kind of track. It has been there all the while waiting for you. And, the life that you ought to be living is the one you are living. When you can see that, you begin to greet people who are in the field of your bliss and they open the doors to you.

CLOSING WORDS:

Love, dependability, empathetic understanding, a generous spirit, the ability to experience

another as oneself, keeping one's word, the ability to affirm life fully even in the face of adversity. These are traits of a call to one's vocation, to a ministry, from a will that gives the self-mastery to say: "Thy will be done." Let our hearts and minds be open to receive that gift.