



Vocation Connections

“Vocation is a gradual revelation—of me to myself by God...It is who we are, trying to happen.”

Evelyn and James Whitehead

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Editor’s note: We are happy to share this brief excerpt written by our own Paul Wadell taken from a newly released volume exploring vocation in higher education. This essay explores our shared call to help our students grow as virtuous human beings.

Virtue as Vocation: Called to a Good Life

By Paul Wadell

The past several decades have witnessed a renewed interest in the virtues. During the Enlightenment, the focus of ethics had shifted away from the language of goodness and virtue and character to concerns about moral autonomy, freedom, and conscience; about moral rules, principles, duties, and obligations; and especially about strategies for resolving nettlesome moral dilemmas. These are obviously important concerns, but focusing on them too exclusively tended to sever morality from a more fundamental matter: "the planning of human life so that it could be lived as well as possible." Put differently, if the moral life is largely learning how to navigate our way through difficult decisions, what do we do on those days when no troublesome dilemma confronts us? How should we live on those ordinary days—days when we are not being stymied by problems that fill the pages of a typical ethics textbook?

A singular focus on rules, principles, and dilemmas also overlooks an important fact: the ways that we approach these matters, and even what we are able to recognize as a moral rule or a moral dilemma, will depend on our character—the kind of persons we have become. The turn to virtue ethics acknowledged that the choices and decisions of our lives (as well as our attitudes, perceptions, desires, and emotions) can only be properly understood in light of our character, which is determined by our most deeply ingrained habits and practices.

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This is exactly what the virtues are: they are habitual ways of being and acting that shape our character and therefore affect every dimension of our lives.

But perhaps what most fueled the renewal of virtue ethics was the realization that the heart of the moral life-and the heart of human existence-requires an ongoing process of change and transformation. We are called to become more than we already are; we are not yet who we need to become. Such transformations occur through the virtues because they are habits-characteristic ways of being and acting-that form persons in courage, justice, truthfulness, compassion, and other expressions of goodness. Instead of picturing habits as routines we unthinkingly fall into, the virtues remind us that habits develop over time through consistent ways of being and acting. Virtue is what results from being changed by good ways of being and acting, so much so that they become second nature to us. Furthermore, growing into particular virtues often means growing out of their corresponding vices. Thus, as the philosopher Edmund Pincoffs summarizes, giving adequate attention to the virtues will mean that moral quandaries and dilemmas "are given their due but are by no means stage-center. The question is not so much how we should resolve perplexities as how we should live."

Thus, the question that should drive ethical reflection (and vocational discernment as well) is not only "What should I do?" but "How can I live my life as well as possible?" These are foundational questions that those of us in higher education should regularly pose to our students. Regardless of what each student's particular calling might be, it should enable the living of a good and beautiful life-a life of substance, purpose, and moral achievement. The philosopher and theologian Herbert McCabe wrote that one studies ethics in order to learn "how to be good at being human." And McCabe insisted that the business of ethics is not simply to teach people how "to talk about being good," but, more importantly, "to make people good as well." Educating for vocation must share this goal; its fundamental objective is not to guide our students to promising careers or lucrative professions, but to enable them to become "good at being human." That is the basic vocation every human being shares: the calling to discover and achieve what it would mean to live a good life.

Wadell, Paul J., "An itinerary of Hope: Called to a Magnanimous Way of Life," in *At This Time and In This Place: Vocation and Higher Education*, (Oxford University Press, 2016).

Upcoming Events

The excerpt on pages one and two of this newsletter are from a newly released text, *At This Time and in This Place: Vocation and Higher Education*. The Council of Independent Colleges and its Network for Vocation in Undergraduate Education (NetVUE) compiled scholarly writings from a variety of disciplines for this text which offers vocational reflections and perspectives on how to “engage students in actively reflecting on questions of meaning and purpose through classroom conversations, co-curricular activities, and programs for community engagement...”

The Program of Faith, Learning & Vocation is considering a staff and faculty book discussion in the spring semester. If you would be interested in such an offering contact DeEtte, Becky, or Julie.

Stories of Calling

Bridget O'Connor
October 29 at 12:00pm
Michels Ballroom

Lunch is provided at no charge.
Registration is required by **October 22** at x3155 or snc.edu/vocation.



Vocation Reflections

What can one gain by exploring vocation more deeply? We asked participants of our June Day of Reflection and our year-long Vocation Study Group and here's what they had to say:

- ◆ “My idea of vocation has changed to include the idea of being called within community as opposed to the idea of vocation being private or singular.”
- ◆ “I gained many insights from the day but the one I keep coming back to is the idea that callings can change over the course of a life.”
- ◆ “I started the group with the more pop-culture idea of vocation as picking a career that ‘plays to your strengths’ as an individual. Our readings and discussions helped me to consider the spiritual aspect of vocation, that it should be based on some idea of service to the community and not just on personal fulfillment.”
- ◆ “The idea that a person can have and successfully manage and follow multiple callings.”
- ◆ “Vocations change as we move on in life. Our needs and working with others make us more aware of where our vocation should be going or even changing our vocations.”

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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The Layers

By Stanley Kunitz

I have walked through many lives,
some of them my own,
and I am not who I was,
though some principle of being
abides, from which I struggle
not to stray.

When I look behind,
as I am compelled to look
before I can gather strength
to proceed on my journey,
I see the milestones dwindling
toward the horizon
and the slow fires trailing
from the abandoned camp-sites,
over which scavenger angels
wheel on heavy wings.

Oh, I have made myself a tribe
out of my true affections,
and my tribe is scattered!
How shall the heart be reconciled
to its feast of losses?

In a rising wind
the manic dust of my friends,
those who fell along the way,
bitterly stings my face.

Yet I turn, I turn,
exulting somewhat,
with my will intact to go
wherever I need to go,
and every stone on the road
precious to me.

In my darkest night,
when the moon was covered
and I roamed through wreckage,
a nimbus-clouded voice
directed me:

“Live in the layers,
not on the litter.”

Though I lack the art
to decipher it,
no doubt the next chapter
in my book of transformations
is already written.

I am not done with my changes.