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KATHERINE TURPIN

One Life, Many Callings: Vocation Across the Lifespan



In Lutheran and other colleges and universities, discerning vocation has been a task associated primarily with older adolescents and younger adults. Because these populations are preparing to enter the work force full time and are making major decisions about how they will spend their

energy and engage in the world, the practice of discerning vocation is particularly vibrant at this stage of life, and perhaps deserves special attention in institutions with traditional college-aged students. However, universities and colleges are intergenerational communities with staff, administrators, faculty, students, alumni, and donors spanning all ages of adulthood each with their own experiences of ongoing vocational discernment and needs for vocational support.

Some years ago now, I entered a three-year collaborative research venture hosted by the Ecumenical Institute at St. John's University in Collegeville, Minnesota. A group of interdisciplinary scholars gathered to explore how vocation is experienced differently across the ages and stages of the human lifespan. Together we wrote a book out of our research, *Calling All Years Good: Christian*

Vocation Throughout Life's Seasons (eds. Cahalan and Miller-McLemore), which I would recommend for a fuller treatment of these issues.¹ We read existing social science and practical theological literature on vocation and lifespan theory, reflected together on our experiences of calling at various points in the lifespan, and interviewed persons at stages in life that we had not yet experienced. Through our conversations, we began to identify other points during the lifespan when vocational discernment becomes particularly vibrant.

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In this essay I will explore some things that change about vocation when one considers its life cycle beyond the era of young adulthood. While our research considered

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vocation from infancy to elders, because this journal is focused primarily on higher education, I will begin with adolescence and work through older adulthood noting major features of vocation for many people during that phase, indicating vocational needs that are present, and naming the markers of transition to another phase.

Rarely do people experience one steady calling expressed in one context across their lifetime, except for the most general sense of Christian vocation. Rather, a sense of vocation is particular, changes over time, and is bound within the contexts and relationships and body that is available at that moment. This means that expression of vocation, even the callings that we are able to hear, are shaped by things like economic situations, cultural narratives about what is possible for us, our embodied capacities, our sense of the expansiveness of the timeline in which we can respond, and the duties and obligations of our social roles and responsibilities. As theologian Miguel Diaz notes, "The songs that God sings are not universal songs capable of being heard by a universally conceived hearer. Rather, the songs contain the specific lyrics, rhythms, and melodies associated with concrete human subjects" (Diaz 24).

This recognition of the particularity and limits of human life causes us to reimagine our theological understanding of vocation in important ways. For those whose stories are interpreted within the Christian tradition, biblical call stories may have a particular weight in how we understand the call of God upon our lives. We have many dramatic call stories in the biblical tradition, such as Moses hearing the voice of God from a burning bush sending him to Pharaoh, or the disciples being called to leave their nets and become, instead, fishers of people. These stories have a compelling and definitive narrative force, a certainty about the call from God and the needed response that most people do not experience in their lifetime.

When researchers on our team talked to lay persons in communities of faith, most could not identify one particular, pivotal experience of calling. Many lay persons suspect that a dramatic call from God is something only experienced by those who enter fulltime ministry or a religious order. Psychologist Matt Bloom, a researcher on this project, finds that for most people any sense of calling or experience of vocation was only evident through what he calls "retrospective sense-making" (Cahalan and Miller-McLemore 3). In

other words, as people told the stories of their lives, they were able sometimes in retrospect to describe how they saw the Spirit of God leading and moving in the decisions and commitments that they had made, but did not always sense it as it was happening. Many people desire to have a grounded sense of how their lives might be an expression of response to God's purposes in the world as they move forward in time. But to do so, they must often leave behind the hopes for dramatic certainty in what they are meant to do with their lives, and reframe vocation as an experience of ongoing discernment of the calling of God and responsiveness within the particular contexts and relationships of their lives. What this process looks like varies based at different points in the life span.

Adolescence

Adolescence is marked with the emergence of a dramatically new adult body, which comes with attending social expectations for increased maturity. Less visible to the naked eye, but equally as important, adolescent brain development allows for an increased awareness of their performance of self within a social audience and an improved capacity for taking the self as an object of reflection. These biological transformations lead to important vocational developments. Where once the situatedness of one's self within the circles of school and family was experienced as a given, adolescents begin experimenting with possible selves based on the important narratives of being

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and value offered to them by their environment. They begin to develop a sense that who they are matters and can be malleable based on their decisions and commitments. This experimentation can be a form of vocational discernment, as young people try on social groups, commitments, and styles of being to see what fits.

During the brain restructuring that happens in puberty, a fair amount of emotional processing shifts temporarily to the amygdala. Because frontal-lobe functioning is transitioning, primal fight or flight emotional responses are more dominant in everyday interactions creating what we commonly call “drama” in adolescent social life (Strauch 206). Depending on the amygdala, the same process also creates a capacity for awe, wonder, and emotional sensitivity unique to this stage of life. Youthful brains are more emotionally capable of deep encounters with love, beauty, and suffering that are central to spiritual experience. This emotional receptivity means that many narratives of awakening to a sense of particular vocation begin during adolescence. Encounters with something awe-inspiring, whether deeply beautiful or terrible, can change the way an adolescent sees the world and their particular role in it.

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As this project’s authors and collaborators gathered and talked about our experiences of calling in our adolescent years, we recognized the ways in which experiences of suffering and grief also shaped our callings over a lifetime. Often we think of vocational clarity as a joyful response to inspirational moments, but it can also be a compassionate or determined response to darkness and sorrow. For some adolescents, experiences of personal illness or disability, experiences of war or cultural conflict, or experiences of hunger and poverty inform their commitments to participation in healing and justice work. Learning difficulties or cultural dismissal in school may lead to commitments to be better teachers to the next generation. Suffering during adolescence may forge a sense of the needs of the world; a passion to end the conditions that led to such suffering may be the cornerstone of a calling across the lifespan.

Attentiveness to these experiences of grief and loss may be an important vocational discernment practice for older adolescents as they start into college.

Often young people jump into the fray of curating a resume for college applications before they have a chance to ask what is really valuable in the world and what they have to contribute to it. They need trusted adults to recognize, validate, and encourage them in the form of “interactive mirrors” rather than “didactic evaluators,” sharing their own experiences not as exemplars, but as “empathic possibilities designed to connect with them” (Nakkula and Toshalis 34). Adults who resist offering quick interpretation or answers, but instead listen carefully over time as an informal practice of spiritual direction, offer critical space for conversation, reflection, and connection.

This increasing capacity for an interior life and new recognition of others’ corresponding interiority makes young people especially interested in hearing about the vocational experiences of other people, particularly heroic narratives against which young people test the validity of their own perceptions, either by contrast or by confirmation. Educational theorist Kieran Egan describes the way that adolescents seem particularly primed to respond to the heroic stories of transcendence and resistance in everyday persons (Egan 71). They are particularly responsive to persons who respond to callings in ways that are extraordinary, courageous, and ideologically consistent. In later young adulthood, people turn to vocational exemplars who tend to be more realistic, everyday persons in a young adult’s social circle who model vocational possibilities for them (Bloom et al. 24).

As adolescents draw nearer to the end of adolescence, for some corresponding to their early years in college, they begin to take on responsibility for meeting their own survival needs, and begin to meet increased social demands to perform adulthood. Often this transition is marked by moving out of restrictive environments controlled by others into settings in which they are decision-makers and contributors. A key marker of this transition is a dawning vocational recognition that the self is not infinitely malleable, but expresses a particular instance of creation with human limitations and capabilities generated by the accumulation of life experiences.

Younger Adulthood

As adolescence winds to a close, the people who matter to emerging adults begin to expect them to make decisions and take steps that firm up the shape of their adult identity and livelihood. Things become serious in terms of performing adult identity, and young people step directly into life's deepest vocational questions. For older adults looking back across the lifespan in retrospect, younger adulthood is often the period of time most closely associated with vocational decision-making. However, from within the lived experience of this phase of life, vocational discernment can feel elusive, experimental, and even chaotic to the emerging adults who wrestle with it.

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With the phase of younger adulthood, we begin to see that the length of time spent in each period of life can vary greatly based on the life experiences, bodily limitations, and social and economic opportunities available to each person. For some, younger adulthood can extend for more than a decade, filled with vocational experimentation and an extended process of growing into various roles and callings. For others, a series of early commitments to long-term relationships, forced economic independence, childrearing, or pre-scripted professional tracks can shorten what we are calling younger adulthood and thrust people into the vocational experiences of middle adulthood much sooner.

Economic and social changes have meant that more young adults are struggling to meet the classic sociological markers of adulthood in their twenties and thirties, such as becoming economically independent, making commitment to socially permanent relationships, or establishing their own household (Wuthnow 28). Research from the Pew Center indicates that more intergenerational households exist in the United States now than

have existed since 1981, with many young adults moving back into their parents' or other relatives' homes while working for economic independence, or living with a series of roommates while chasing steady employment. These structural changes mean that adulthood can seem like an elusive identity marker that may or may not be viably achieved and maintained. The inability to demonstrate competency and full social recognition as an adult can cause spiritual anxiety about one's fundamental worth, a significant vocational problem in this time of life.

As young adults begin to compose a life through choices about where to live, with whom to relate, and where to give their energies, one vocational characteristic common to many younger adults is the temporary nature or impermanence of their life choices. An extended period of impermanence can have an impact on a younger adult's sense that they are in the process of responding to God's callings upon their life, which leaves them with the sense of multiple, chaotic, and transitory experiences that are not building to anything in particular. Sometimes what is characterized as flakiness or lack of commitment by parents or grandparents, or a failure to successfully discern and live into a calling by the young adult, can be a rational response to economic challenges that delay establishing a household and securing permanent employment.

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Many young adults watch middle-aged adults closely, seeking exemplars of vocational integration, people who have been able to live into multiple callings in their lives. Social psychologist Matt Bloom discusses the importance of exemplars in the early discernment stages of those called into the professions, but exemplars are needed for all who navigate multiple callings to love and to work: "Exemplars were important because they were real, salient models of individuals who appear to be living their

own calling in and through their work. Informants used exemplars to gauge whether their own true self elements might fit a particular professional role—an identity work task we called mapping” (Bloom et al. 24). For example, as a young adult doctoral student, I was actively seeking successful female academics who also managed to have a satisfactory relational and home life. This was a rare combination some decades ago, and finding exemplars who were blending these vocational callings was very important to me as I completed my doctorate.

In the midst of all of these transitions, some vocational discernment may occur through intentional, introspective practice, through conversation with trusted family members and friends, or through mentors in professional settings. Much of it occurs through trial and error. With exposure to exemplars and the introspective space to imagine oneself into a variety of roles, vocational discernment can occur through a reflective process in which they compare realistic self-knowledge against vocational possibilities with wise guidance from elders (Bloom et al. 27). In the absence of these guided, reflective opportunities, many younger adults engage vocational discernment through an embodied process of trial and error.

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Employers, long-term volunteer opportunities, and faith communities can meet young adults and help them with exploratory modes of vocational discernment when they offer worthy work in this experimental phase. Work that gives younger adults a chance for taking risks, for being in charge of decisions that matter, and for making a contribution to something bigger than themselves is essential to the process of discernment of vocation. However, offering a place to test the emerging strengths of younger adults is complicated for workplaces and other institutions who

long for the energy and passion of young adulthood, but also desire loyalty and stability of presence that can be unrealistic given the sociological and economic factors that make young adults the most mobile stage of life. Finding places of employment that aren’t mere exploitation of their energies, but rather communities that provide opportunities to take on significant roles and responsibilities can be a difficult quest for younger adults.

As young adults begin taking on the care not only of themselves but increasingly of community, institutions, and family through work and care for others, they begin to transition into middle adulthood. The probing commitments begin to solidify as young adults make multiple enduring commitments, such as investment in long-term employment or education or giving birth to children that are affirmed by others and difficult to reverse.

Middle Adulthood

One of the markers of middle adulthood is that it is a stage of heightened responsibility. Positively, middle adults move into the stage of life where they have the potential to shape and to carry the life of institutions, to create households and raise the next generation while often simultaneously caring for aging parents, to positively impact the well-being of others through responsive vocational expression. So many faithful callings can converge at this one moment in the life span. The struggle of this era for many people is an experience of multiple competing vocations, such as a work life and a family life, that can make contending demands on the person and have conflicting standards of success.

Middle adults seek vocational satisfaction through integration between the day-to-day details of living, expression of their core commitments through the way they spend their time, and a sense that their work and caregiving requires their unique capabilities. Is life just “one damn thing after another,” or are they contributing their gifts and time to things that really matter to them? Is there alignment in the give and take of the day-to-day? They need opportunities for vocational discernment between “positive” and “negative” self-sacrifice in the giving of themselves to something larger than themselves, help with naming whether their vocational experiences of work and caregiving are life-giving or life-depleting. The

space and time to wrestle with the difficulties of competing vocational demands are hard to come by because of the number of responsibilities that many middle adults carry.

College campuses have many middle adults working as staff, faculty, and administrators, as well as students who have returned to higher education at this stage in their life as part of vocational discernment. Middle adults can experience competition between their calls to integrate their unique capacities and values in their work life, to provide loving care for younger and older generations in

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their families, and to build and sustain relationships of mutual value with friends and partners. Conversations with exemplars and wise guides who are a little further down the path of life experience can be helpful in this time period, as it can be difficult for middle adults to get their heads above the fray of this active and fruitful period in life, to have a sense of perspective on all of the vocational response that may be happening.

Two difficult vocational moments that perhaps indicate the range of vocational expression in this age are the “is this all there is?” moments and the “letting all the balls drop” moments. The question of “is this all there is?” may come from successful navigation of the requirements of a career or building a family, only to find that the place where one has arrived does not seem to be integrating one’s unique passions and skills with something larger than oneself that has significance. We heard stories of major career and life structure shifts in middle adulthood in response to experiences of vocational dissatisfaction. These upheavals on the vocational journey come about when one has finally moved into fully authorized adult social roles, only to find that these roles and activities do not express alignment with one’s deepest sense of calling.

Another common vocational experience of middle adulthood is the grief of juggling so many important

callings that one feels unable to be fully faithful to any of them. Whether one’s desire to invest in emotionally satisfactory relationships is thwarted by one’s desire to excel in the workplace, or whether the demands of caregiving make giving one’s full attention to building and sustaining meaningful work, the competing demands of middle adulthood can cause vocational angst.

Whether middle adults are struggling with a life that does not seem to be responsive to calling, or whether they struggle with the conflicts and demands of many callings, social support for integrating love and work is essential as part of vocational discernment in middle adulthood. As Matt Bloom notes, “What they do not need are people who ‘had it all,’ but rather people who led real, complex lives and who navigated and negotiated, and succeeded and failed their way through the joys and sorrows of middle adulthood” (Cahalan and Miller-McLemore 141). Spaces to express experiences of frustration and struggle with living into the competing responsibilities of middle adulthood, to be vulnerable about the lack of satisfaction and integration one is experiencing, and to not have to express competency and control over all areas of life are welcome spaces for ongoing vocational discernment.

Over time, middle adults gain an increasing awareness of their own mortality, whether through bodily changes or through members of one’s own generation who are experiencing chronic or even fatal illness. The death of the older generations in one’s family, the nest that empties as young adult children make their way into the world, or the loss of a life-partner through divorce or death can all raise vocational questions about how one will spend the rest of one’s active adult life.

Late Adulthood

One of the surprises in our research of vocation across the lifespan was how many different vocational moments arise throughout the period of life we sometimes treat as one lump “working adult” stage. While research team member Jack Fortin had convinced us through his work that retirement was often a point of vocational crisis and increased need for discernment about what faithful responsiveness to calling in our life looks like beyond paid employment, we also began to recognize multiple significant moments

of vocational discernment and clarity that are important to honor throughout the middle and late years of adulthood.

While in many ways, the period we named late adulthood is simply an extension of the competing demands of active middle adulthood, there is an important “turning” that happens as the years pass by (Cahalan and Miller-McLemore 150). One important point that we named seemed to come as working people recognize they only have a limited period of paid work left. The sense arises that there will be an end to the time of productivity and active responsibility, and a rising vocational clarity emerges in response to the sense of limitation in time. Whereas younger adults have a sense of a long life span stretching out before them, late adulthood is marked by a sense of a shortened timeline and the need to give prudently of one’s remaining energies and capacities.

At this moment of late adulthood, many experience an intensified sense of the importance of spending their time wisely, and not just allowing oneself to be tossed about by the demands of the institutions and systems in which one participates. Among late adults, one sees a clearer sense of motivation and intentions in their work and relational expressions, and a desire not to waste time on activities and situations that are not integrative of one’s gifts and the higher purposes to which one aspires. We can see this in faculty members not willing to engage in one more round of committee work in an area that does not align with their

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commitments, or administrators letting go of high-demand programs that do not reflect their deepest visions for their work to focus on nurturing smaller programs more aligned with their commitments. While this increased vocational clarity can come across as entitlement, such as “I did my time on the personnel committee, and now it

is not my problem,” it could be fruitful for institutions and colleagues to recognize this as an essential moment of vocational discernment that contributes to the generativity of persons in late adulthood (Fowler 99-102).

While late adulthood is often marked by a shift in the amount or location of vocationally-expressive work, the importance of meaningful expression remains. Older adults feel the need to be the wise guide to younger generations, while handing some of the heavy lifting over to middle and younger adults. While this is an important moment to make a difference in the younger generation as grandparent or mentor, it is also a time where late adults are making sense of losses, coming to terms with their own limitations and failures, and reconciling themselves with self, others, God, and their own sense of mortality (Cahalan and McLemore 159-61). The vocational clarity that can emerge in this last phase of active adulthood can be a gift to other generations of wisdom, of self-honesty, of the recognitions of human limitation and creativity that we all would do well to keep in mind.

Older Adulthood

Late adulthood can last well into retirement for those who do not experience major changes in health. For others, chronic illness or life-altering injury can thrust them into the stage of older adulthood much earlier. At some point, the increasing need for accommodation in order to move about in the world begins to make its mark on the activity of older adults. Many find themselves ending previously vocationally meaningful and pleasurable activities because of bodily limitations, such as volunteering, hiking, travel, quilting, or caring for grandchildren. They find themselves experiencing an increasing dependence on others to take care of their basic needs because of significant limitations on mobility, and the slowing down that comes with aging bodies (Cahalan and Miller-McLemore 182).

For some, this time of becoming care-receivers instead of caregivers can be a moment of vocational crisis. When we interviewed many friends and colleagues in their eighties and nineties, we found that none were afraid of dying, but many feared the stage of becoming dependent on others for care. The activities and roles that

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give us a sense of contribution to the communities in which we take part can cause deep grief when they are no longer possible for us.

The stage of older adulthood challenges an easy collapse of human vocation into productivity within the human community. As time becomes existentially short, and death a close companion amongst friends of one's own generation, vocational needs shift. While humans continue to seek ways to express core values/beliefs in meaningful ways, even if in modified form, other vocational tasks rise to the fore. For some, there is a lightening of attachment to physical objects, persons, and spaces, sometimes labeled “gerotranscendence” (Tornstam 55). Attention to the potential grief, loneliness, and isolation of this stage of life requires commitment from the community to maintain connection with older adults once mobility becomes limited. Older adults require people willing to slow down and be present to their new realities, and opportunities to seek reconciliation, to name gratitude, and to say goodbye.

Conclusion

When I presented this research at the Vocation of a Lutheran College conference last summer, I had a full professor come up to me after my talk to say: “I've been coming to these conferences about vocation for years, and that is the first time anybody ever talked about vocation in a way that was relevant to me.” Our focus on vocational discernment as a one-time event related to entry of the work force in young adulthood limits the capacity of people at other moments of the lifespan to wrestle with and seek alignment with their deepest sense of vocation.

By attending to the interaction of embodiment, cultural context, sense of time, and relationships that impact the discernment and expression of vocation throughout a lifetime, other central struggles and watershed moments in the life of vocation come to the fore.

Endnotes

1. In this highly collaborative research project, I was responsible for writing the chapters on adolescence and young adulthood. In this article, I am drawing heavily on the insights of colleagues (Kathleen Cahalan, Jane Patterson, Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, Matt Bloom, Joyce Ann Mercer, John Neafsey, Jack Fortin, and Laura Fanucci) who wrote about the other phases of life whose more nuanced work can be found in the book.

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