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# The "V" Word: Different Dimensions of Vocation in a Religiously Diverse Classroom

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# The “V” Word: Different Dimensions of Vocation in a Religiously Diverse Classroom

## The “V” Word

It was in the title of the course, “Religion, Vocation, and the Search for Meaning.” The course was required. Students had to be there, and they reflected the demographics of the university racially, economically, and religiously.<sup>1</sup> From the way students self-identified religiously in an introductory exercise, I knew there were Lutherans, Catholics, Muslims, Buddhists, a Jew, a woman whose father practiced Hinduism and mother was Catholic, practitioners of Hmong shamanism, and “nones.”

“I had to learn from the people in front of me and the traditions they claimed what metaphors best expressed their own questions of meaning and purpose.”

Like most college-age students, they would be discovering and testing their values. What better course to develop a language in which to articulate those values? Like most post-millennials, they wanted to change the

world (Masback). What better course to explore what they yearned for? Yet, when I used the word “vocation,” I met a sea of blank stares. Clearly, before we searched for meaning or anything else, we had to find common ground.

Vocation or calling has particular traction in my own Lutheran tradition. As a former seminary professor, I was adept at unpacking its significance to Lutheran audiences, where I could assume a common language, common texts, and a set of common theological presumptions. For my Catholic students, I distinguished between “vocation,” the calling of the laity, and “vocations,” a calling to the priesthood. But the display of faiths, commitments, and practices in the class would not allow that kind of familiarity. Instead, I had to learn from the people in front of me and the traditions they claimed what metaphors best expressed their own questions of meaning and purpose.

What emerges is neither a single definition nor the lowest common denominator or watered down “vocation



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lite” expression of “vocation,” but rather a series of metaphors that point to different dimensions of vocation across the world’s religions.<sup>2</sup> Colleagues across the university have found these metaphors useful in animating conversations about meaning and purpose, values and commitments. I label the metaphors: *place, path, relationship, lens, and story*.

Like most typologies, this one has its limitations. Individual religious traditions are themselves not monolithic; different voices argue within them. Nor does any tradition “own” a single metaphor. Multiple metaphors inhabit any one tradition. But in the main, each metaphor represents a signature insight from a particular tradition. Finally, there may be additional metaphors to add; there may be better metaphors for the ideas and stories presented here.

I offer these as tools that help unpack different dimensions of this rich concept of vocation. I flesh them out with examples from the classroom; then, I locate each metaphor in a particular tradition. Finally, I suggest concretely how students might incorporate that particular metaphor into a resume or portfolio. Taken together, these metaphors of vocation give them ways to “show up” in the workplace and in the world.

## Vocation as Place

This dimension of vocation reflects the sense that “I’m in the right place.”

The metaphor of place speaks to the importance of roles we inhabit and the responsibilities and privileges that are attached to those roles. I am simultaneously a teacher, a consultant, a daughter, a partner, and a friend. I invite students to think about the roles they inhabit and the responsibilities that come along with those roles.

For example, as she talked about her sense of being in the right place, a student said: “I really want to be a mother and raise a family.” A marketing major, she also wanted to work in advertising, another role with a different set of responsibilities. She was clear about her priorities; being a mother came first. That would give her a sense of place.

Another student felt called to be a hockey player, and he knew he wasn’t good enough to be Division I, so he came to Augsburg where he was pretty sure he could play on a

Division III team. He brought leadership to the team, not only in playing but in serving as its captain. He’d found the right place.

“The metaphor of place is most at home in the Lutheran tradition, reflecting Martin Luther’s revolutionary insight that God equally values all roles—that of parent as well as priest, that of shoemaker, brewer, or baker as well as monk or nun.”

The metaphor of place is most at home in the Lutheran tradition, reflecting Martin Luther’s (1483-1546) revolutionary insight that God equally values all roles—that of parent as well as priest, that of shoemaker, brewer, or baker as well as monk or nun.<sup>3</sup> Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) described “places of responsibility,” in which people serve the neighbor (Bonhoeffer 291). In language that powerfully informs the “vocation” movement in higher education today, Frederick Buechner (1926- ) updated this metaphor by defining vocation as “the place God calls you to be is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet” (Buechner 119).

Again, the metaphor of “place” underscores the importance of *roles* that one inhabits, along with their attendant responsibilities. Understanding this dimension of vocation cultivates the sense that “I’m in the right place.” Concretely, a student sees this dimension of vocation in a resume that lists past or present jobs or work/volunteer opportunities alongside the duties they entail.

## Vocation as Path

This dimension of vocation reflects the sense that “I’m on the right path.”

Here the journey is as important as the destination, which may be unclear or even a distraction from the work immediately in front of someone. At the end of over three decades of teaching, I don’t know what retirement brings. I don’t know where I’m headed, but I know I’ll get there, one step at a time.

A self-identified “none” who probably affiliated more with gaming than with any institutional religious tradition confessed to being overwhelmed with choosing a major, much less determining what kind of work he might pursue upon graduation. “All I want to do right now is pass this class,” he said. I could have told him that being a student was his calling, summoning the dimension of vocation as place, but he wasn’t sure being a student at a Lutheran university was the right place for him anyway. Most immediately, he needed to know that he was on the right track. I assured him that passing the class was a worthy short-term goal. I also gave him the freedom to explore the ancient Norse religions as one of his assignments.

Though it is not as prominent in mainstream Protestant discussions of vocation, which highlight vocation as place, other Christian traditions highlight the dimension of vocation as path. After all, if Jesus is “the Way,” disciples want to be on it. North African bishop Augustine of Hippo (354-430) regarded the whole of the Christian life as pilgrimage (*peregrinatio*). Founder of the Society of Jesus Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556) integrated the metaphor of pilgrimage into his religious order, the Jesuits. Ignatius designed the *Spiritual Exercises* as a way of imaginatively placing disciples on the journey with Jesus. He expected them to “catch the rhyme” between their own experience and the one whom they followed.

“The metaphor of path surfaces prominently in Islam, where pilgrimage is one of the five pillars of the faith.”

The metaphor of path surfaces prominently in Islam, where pilgrimage is one of the five pillars of the faith, the *hajj*. Commended to every Muslim once in the course of her lifetime, the *hajj* retraces the journeys of Hajar, Ishmail, and Ibrahim (Hagar, Ishmael, and Abraham). Deepening the metaphor of calling as path, Muslims refer to the “way of the Prophet,” the *sunnah*, a summary of the teachings of Mohammed (c. 570-632), as a way of life for his followers.

The metaphor of path values taking the next steps as much as reaching the journey’s end. Vocation as path emphasizes the importance of *goals*—short-term,

mid-range, and long-term goals. Understanding this dimension of vocation nurtures the sense that “I’m on the right path.” Concretely, a student sees this dimension of vocation expressed in a series of short-term, mid-range, and long-term goals, as well as the strategies in place to implement these goals.

## Vocation as Relationships

To consider vocation in terms of relationships expresses the sense that “If you’re with me, I can be my best self.”

The metaphor attends to complex relationship between individuals and communities. What communities do we claim? And what communities claim us? I belong to the university in which I teach, and that claim entails certain attitudes, dispositions, and practices. I belong differently to family, professional colleagues, and the tribes of friends and fellow travelers. Each of those relationships is marked by a different set of attitudes, dispositions, and practices.

An Asian-American student spoke of her deep sense of belonging to the Hmong community.<sup>4</sup> Whatever she did—whatever her place and wherever her path—she wanted to work with that community. When she started her sophomore year, she wanted to be a lawyer specializing in human rights. By year’s end, however, her major changed to business, and she focused on working with street vendors in the vibrant Hmong Village in St. Paul. If her sole metaphor for calling had been “place,” this young woman might have worried about changing, even forsaking, that calling. Calling in the sense of belonging to a particular community was more inviting to her. The commitment to her community anchored this young woman, even as her career and professional goals shifted.

“The commitment to her community anchored this young woman, even as her career and professional goals shifted.”

This metaphor of relationships is at home in a Confucian worldview, where it exists at the interface between the twin virtues of *ren* and *li*. Combining the two Chinese characters for “two” and “person,” *ren* describes five

relationships that composed ancient Confucian culture: relationships between parent and child, older and younger siblings, husband and wife, older and younger friend, ruler and subject.

*Li* is the virtue that describes “right relationship” in each of these contexts: kindness in the parent and filial piety in the child, gentility in the older sibling and respect in the younger; affectionate behavior

in the husband and sincerity in the wife; consideration in the older friend and deference in the younger, benevolence in ruler and loyalty in subjects. Together, these two virtues shape Confucian society.

The metaphor of relationships refers to the groups or communities that claim us, as well as the communities that we claim. It invites reflection on the conduct appropriate in these reciprocal relationships. This metaphor invites students to name the communities or relationships of which they are a part, identifying how these bring out facets of their “best selves.” These could be relationships with family members, advisors, faculty, mentors, bosses, coaches, or guides; they could include non-human relationships as well, senses of belonging to a particular place or to the planet we call home. Concretely, naming these relationships creates for students a *network* for potential professional or personal growth, as well as a list of *contacts* for recommendations or networking.

## Vocation as Lens

This dimension of vocation underscores the sense that “This is who I am and where I stand; this is how I see the world.”

The metaphor of lens underscores the importance of the interface between identity and the values or core commitments that animate how we want to show up in the world. My point of view is that of a first-gen, white, overly-educated, feminist Christian. Just as those adjectives modify the noun, being a “Christian” or disciple of Jesus Christ orients my



Augsburg University Interfaith Scholars, 2018-2019, from left to right: Eh Soe Dwe, Savannah Stevens, Dralandra Larkins, Jordyne Robarge, Alexa Anderson, Hodo Dahir, Janet Nguyen, Akrem Hagos, Madhi Rahamni.

life. I have a particular point of view from which I can see something, perhaps not everything, but certainly not nothing. I’m ready to stand up for what I see, even as my vision is expanded by the perspectives of others.<sup>5</sup>

A Somali-Muslim student readily identified one of his core values as education. He stood out in a roomful of students who had chosen leadership, family, faith, financial security,

even wealth. He explained the significance of his commitment to education. He’d grown up in a refugee camp in Kenya, and his parents pushed him to take full advantage of the meager schooling available to him there. The family came to Minnesota when he was in his early teens, and he learned English quickly and became an eager and bright student. Yet, his memories of grade school feature his mother: “She went to every PTA meeting, even though she couldn’t understand a word of English, because she believed so deeply in education.”

I continue to write recommendations for Abdulkadir, as he continues to pursue his education around the world. Last year he went on a Boren Scholarship to Kenya to study Swahili so that “I can be fluent in the languages of North Africa, English, Arabic, and Swahili.” This summer he was invited to join a travel-study trip to Israel and Palestine sponsored by a Jewish organization, so that he can better understand a political reality influencing countries on the eastern and southern Mediterranean Sea. He sees everything through the lens of that core commitment to education.

“The *Bhagavadgita* stresses the ‘fit’ (*svabhava*) between identity and action, that is, between ‘who I am’ and ‘what I do.’”

The metaphor of lens might be more at home in Hindu and Buddhist worldviews, which underscore the point of view one has on the world. Hinduism offers a bi-focal angle

of vision, bringing both individual and cosmos into view. The *Bhagavadgita* stresses the “fit” (*svabhava*) between identity and action, that is, between “who I am” and “what I do.” At the same time, the *Gita* speaks of the “fit” between the individual and larger networks of belonging: the family, society, the earth, even the cosmos (*svadharma*). Disciples train their eyes to see from both perspectives simultaneously.

Buddhism offers the lens of compassion as a means of transformation. The Dalai Lama (1935- ) often notes that “to change the world, you need to change the way you *look* at the world.” The Noble Eightfold Path functions as a series of exercises for right understanding, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right action, right effort, mindfulness, and contemplation, which together train disciples in compassion for all beings. Through the lens of compassion, one awakens to the interdependence and inter-being of the whole of life.

This metaphor emphasizes *identity* or angle-of-vision, asking the candidate to reflect on where she stands, what she stands for, what she’s good at. Understanding this dimension of vocation cultivates the sense that, “This is who I am; this is what I stand for; this is who I stand with; these are my gifts.” Concretely, this dimension of vocation surfaces in a student’s Personal Mission Statement, set of Core Values and Commitments, even a list of strengths and skills.

## Vocation as Story

The final dimension of vocation underscores the sense that everyone has a story to tell. There is a narrative arc to each life, and that story has a beginning, middle, and end. This sense of vocation as a story invites students to author their own story and, in the telling, claim a certain agency. “In the beginning, I...” or “Once upon a time, I....”

To illustrate the dimension of vocation as story, I assign stories and invite students to tell their own. One of those assigned stories is from Elie Wiesel’s (1928-2016) book, *The Gates of the Forest*, itself an old Hasidic tale about the great Rabbi Israel Baal Shem-Tov. When the rabbi saw misfortune threatening the Jews, he would go to a certain part of the forest to meditate. There he would light a fire, say a special prayer, and the misfortune would be averted. Later, another rabbi found his community under threat, and he went to

the same place in the forest. He confessed that he did not know how to light the fire, but he said the prayer, and again misfortune was averted. Still later, another rabbi confronted disaster, but he did not know how to light the fire, nor did he know the special prayer. He knew only the special place in

“This sense of vocation as a story invites students to author their own story and, in the telling, claim a certain agency.”

the forest. He went there, and the misfortune was averted. Finally, “it fell to Rabbi Israel of Rizhyn to overcome misfortune. Sitting in his armchair, his head in his hands, he spoke to God: ‘I am unable to light the fire and I do not know the prayer; I cannot even find the place in the forest. All I can do is to tell the story, and this must be sufficient.’ And it was sufficient.” Wiesel concludes: “God made man because he loves stories.”

An Afghani Muslim student was so moved by this story and the power of story-telling in general that she began to craft the story of her own community, also a community under threat. Her family had fled Afghanistan only a few years before, leaving behind family, friends, and a region wracked by war. In a digital “vocational portfolio,” she began to tell the stories of the country she’d left behind. She told the story of a group of children who had been killed on their way to school by a buried land mine. She found images of the countryside; she supplied photos of children with their distinctive Afghan school bags. In blogposts she incorporated their story into her own, talking about the crowdfunding campaign for school supplies she and her sisters started, and adding to the blog as the family returns to Afghanistan this summer. As a biology major, she confessed, “I never get to write like this—and I love it.” She discovered she too had a story to tell.

The metaphor of story plays into the narrative arc of many traditions. “In the beginning, God...” begins the first creation story in the Hebrew Bible. The Torah goes on to narrate the covenants between God and God’s people, covenants with Noah, Abraham, and Moses. Alongside laws governing relationships to God and humans (*halakah*),

"Remembering this story of liberation, Jews are re-membered into a community of promise."

Jews have stories (*haggadah*), literally, "the telling." In absence of a stable homeland, Jews locate themselves in stories. The story of the exodus from Egypt is re-told and re-enacted every year at Passover around a meal. Remembering this story of liberation, Jews are re-membered into a community of promise.

Understanding this dimension of vocation offers an invitation to take agency and be the author of one's own story. To do that, people must first discover they have a story to tell. Authoring one's own public leadership narrative creates *agency*. It comes at the intersection of three stories: the story of self, the story of us, and the story of "the fierce urgency of now" (Martin Luther King Jr).<sup>6</sup> Concretely, this dimension of story surfaces in a student's resume or vocational portfolio as a leadership narrative or introduction to who I am, where I've been, why I want to lead.

## Conclusion

Place, path, people, lens, and story. No one of these metaphors captures the thick language of calling embedded in these traditions, but they find a home in the religiously diverse classroom in two ways. First, these metaphors help students appropriate different perspectives on meaning and purpose, whether they come from a tradition that uses the "V" word or not. More important, these metaphors help students understand the different dimensions of calling in their own lives.

Through the metaphor of *place*, they can explore their various roles and the responsibilities that attend each of them.

Through the metaphor of *path*, they can think about their lives as journeys, identify where they've been and where they hope to go, and name next steps in terms of short- and long-term goals.

Through the metaphor of *relationships*, they consider the network of people and communities who've called them to be their best selves.

Through the metaphor of *lens*, they name their own unique point of view, where they stand and what they stand for.

Finally, through the metaphor of *story*, they bring these various dimensions of vocation together to bear on a story, which they can then begin to author.

But don't take my word for this. Try the metaphors out on your own life, wherever you find yourself in the story.

## Endnotes

1. According to a survey of Augsburg University's day student undergraduate population in Fall, 2018, 50 percent of the students identified as being "of color" (American Indian/Native Alaskan, Asian, Black/African American, Hispanic/Latinx, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, bi-racial). The same population identified as 30 percent Lutheran/ELCA, 16 percent Catholic, 19 percent other Christian, 6 percent non-Christian, 5 percent no religious affiliation, with 24 percent non-reporting or unknown.

2. For a different approach, see Cahalan and Schuurman below. Most of the contributors of that volume write from the tradition they write about, addressing how that tradition does—or doesn't—speak of general and specific callings.

3. See for example Luther's comments on I Corinthians 7:20 ("Everyone should remain in the state in which he was called") and notice the stationary, place-based sense of *station*, *state*, or *estate*: "How is it possible that you are not called? You have always been in some state or station; you have always been a husband or wife, boy or girl, or servant. Picture before you the humblest estate. Are you a husband, and you think you have not enough to do in that sphere to govern your wife, children, domestics and property so that all may be obedient to God and you do no one any harm? Yea, if you had five heads and ten hands, even then you would be too weak for your task, so that you would never dare to think of making a pilgrimage or doing any kind of saintly work." Luther, *The Precious*, Vol. 10, p. 242.

4. The Hmong people are an ethnic community that has lived in East and Southeast Asia for thousands of years. Although they have never had a nation of their own, they formed an independent culture in small, mountainous farming villages in the mountains of Laos, Vietnam, and southwestern China. Many Hmong fought alongside the Americans in the Vietnam War, as the Americans needed people who knew the terrain. When the Americans pulled out of Vietnam in 1975, the Vietnamese Communists and the Communist Pathet Lao began retaliating against the Hmong for their assistance to the Americans. Many Hmong fled to Thailand; many sought asylum in the United States. Currently, Minnesota has the second-highest population of Hmong in the United States. Hmong people have worshiped



ancestors and natural spirits, engaging in rituals that call for a shaman or intercessor with the spirit world.

5. I am drawing here on H. Richard Niebuhr's way of naming "my point of view and my perspective," along with his observation that "every philosopher also has a standpoint, which he often fails to name" (43-45).

6. I have found Marshall Ganz's work and workshops helpful in developing these three narratives. See for example, Ganz, "Why Stories Matter," below.

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