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# Necessary Disruptions: Centering Vocation in the Common Good



I've always loved Mary Oliver's poem "Wild Geese" because it points us repeatedly to the call of the world—"harsh and exciting"—and imagines the "family of things" in which we each have a place. Oliver's depiction of pilgrimage, repentance, and love alongside the expanse of landscapes

envisions our collective movements. It offers, I would suggest, a way to explore the links between individual and communal callings.

That vocation is best realized when serving the common good—acknowledging our interdependence—is the core argument of the forthcoming volume *Called Beyond Our Selves: Vocation and the Common Good* (Oxford University Press), the next volume in the series by NetVUE (Network for Vocation in Undergraduate Education). The contributors probe the ways that "vocation" and "common" and "good" need to be disrupted and expanded, so that we might arrive at a wider sense of individual purpose and collective well-being.

The "harsh and exciting" aspects of the world capture in some ways what it means to account for the limitations and possibilities of the common good. We acknowledge

the ways that the concept of the common good has been used to create normative notions of "common" and "good" and have excluded and harmed many. We therefore use the language of a common good, the commons, goods, and the uncommon good, alongside the common good. We also use language such as the flourishing of all, the good life, collective well-being, and communal wellness. By examining the multiple sides of the common good—how it obstructs and how it encourages flourishing, what prevents its achievement and what fosters it—we can better consider what we might name as the world's hungers and needs in ways that become more complex and textured. Jeremiah Purdy emphasizes a shift away from a zero-sum understanding in such efforts, favoring instead "the creation of new kinds of solidarity, new ways to feel that your good life is part of my good life, and an injury to you is an injury to me."<sup>1</sup>

Such disruption of the concept of the common good also invites a disruption of vocational paradigms, calling us to reckon with significant injustices and challenging realities as part of our vocations. As we work with students to explore individual purpose, we must put a greater emphasis on the place of call—spiritual, familial, ecological, social, or communal—examining what it means to be part of a shared place. Colleges and universities are uniquely situated to model what it means to be a common

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good place (as Robert J. Pampel argues in the volume), leveraging our various resources and cultivating opportunities which build capacities for contributing to collective well-being.

Moving towards a more radical and reformed imagining of the good life for all can help undergraduates live into vocations of advocacy as well as expanding one's circle of concern to include causes that are not our own and people we may never meet (Michelle Hayford and Jonathan Golden explore these concepts in the collection). Disruption can produce action in our vocations in meaningful and impactful ways. Vocational exploration in the context of the common good means not only thoughtful reflection but also steps towards breaking down structures that keep others and our environments from flourishing. Addressing institutional racism, climate change, gun violence, LGBTQ+ rights, and economic disparities are part of what it means to be called beyond our selves.

Inviting students into this work is a shift of narrative, a shift from the dominant narratives of success, careerism, and individual pursuit. It is instead an invitation into the narratives of mutuality and membership (as Christine Jeske argues). Shifting the narratives recognizes our interdependence in ways that help us see that such disruption can bring forth deeper connection. Thus, the volume attends to the ways that the uncommon, specifically the queering of vocation, can help dislocate normative notions of the common good to not only tolerate the uncommon, but celebrate and see it as necessary for our communal well-being (as explored by Geoffrey W. Bateman).

We wrote this volume over the course of a year marked by multiple pandemics. The volume's linking of vocation to trauma, burnout, and reaching across difference is palpable and intentional. The connection of vocation to sadness and making space for collective lament (argued by Deanna A. Thompson) insists on a recognition of individual and communal trauma as we consider the flourishing for all. The call to our campuses to consider how institutional mission reflects a commitment to the common good, specifically through engagement with diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice (as explored by Monica M. Smith) further allows us to consider what flourishing for all means. As we prepare students to deal with burnout as they prepare for lives of serving the common good,

compassionate pedagogy can provide pathways to foster skills for the long-haul work of sustaining such vocational callings (detailed in Meghan Slining's chapter, which draws specifically from models of public health).

Furthermore, in this expanded vocational response to others, we suggest that sustained teaching of dialogue and deliberation can create pathways in fostering a common good (David Timmerman discusses these approaches). Disrupting tendencies towards polarized thinking about difficult topics is exactly the sort of vocational invitation to serve the common good that we aim for in the volume. These challenging vocational moments are part of the liminality of the call of the common good, part of this toggling between the world and the self that involves an untraveling so that rebuilding can happen for the benefit of all.

We also explore the importance of interpreting texts—including the historical, the literary, the cultural, and the sacred. The callings from history allow for significant disruptions of the ways we might tell the story of communal or individual calls. The engagement with public monuments (and their removal) alongside the complicated histories of our own institutional canons that might involve slave-owning pasts and indigenous land rights are important pieces of vocational discernment for the common good (Martin Holt Dotterweich and I explore these topics in separate chapters). The teaching of history and memory, along with reading for the common good, provide vital skills for students in their discernment.

Vocation as an obligation to another—the antithesis of individual freedom—can be fostered through the college experience. This is a disruption that challenges educators across all disciplines and programs (as discussed by Charles Mathewes). What if our institutions invited the community back into campus spaces and classrooms with regularity, allowing a more intentional learning together and from each other? What if we disrupted structures enough to feature vocational exploration as formation for all ages? At the beginning of each section of the volume, we offer questions like these for educators across campus to use in professional development settings, classrooms, retreats, and book groups. Here is a further sampling that might help prompt reflection on the ways we can explore vocation and the common good at our institutions:

- What reframing (disrupting) do educators need to do of the underlying culturally inflected narratives and structures that shape our understanding and experiences of vocation?
- Who is shaping the definitions and understandings of vocation and the common good? What barriers prevent representation in these spaces and conversations? What can we do to be more inclusive and equitable?
- How can our discussions of vocation challenge educators and students alike to think beyond themselves? How can the college or university think of the institutional call as a call to contribute to the world's needs, the common good?
- How does the notion of the common good change when we pay attention to difference and privilege?
- Where can we connect the college experience to the workplace and community for students so they can cultivate skills of advocacy and compassion for causes that are not their own?
- How can our practices and pedagogies cultivate sustainability in our vocations, so that we might repeatedly confront difficulty, suffering, and injustice?
- How would you describe the campus ecology—the connections between environment and participants—of your institution? What sort of formation does it offer students and educators?
- What do we gain by learning about the past that can help us understand our present purpose and responsibility to others? How can that help us look to the future?
- How do educators across campus encourage students to think about their obligations to others?

The volume's epilogue features an exploration of key features of the ecology of the common good—specifically the principles of “deep ecology,” the overlap between economy and ecology, the cultivation of a home place, and the role of community gardens and gardeners. The contributors illustrate the myriad relationships within ecosystems and communities throughout the volume, helping us see our connections in dwelling together.

When we prioritize the commons as the start of our consideration of what good looks like, we can significantly shift our vocational calls. Here, the common good is the heartbeat of vocational discernment, a disruption of old frameworks of the good life so to better integrate individual and communal concerns. Our common purpose in writing this volume is to call others into the work of vocational exploration that emphasizes the importance of collective well-being. Situating vocation within the context of the common good deserves our committed focus as we prepare students to embrace challenges and calls from their communities (David Mazko McCarthy opens the volume with this premise).

While centering vocation in the common good most surely involves confronting the “harsh” as well as the “exciting,” it is necessary for all of us to keep exploring the calls beyond self, considering the needs and hopes of others. This is a disruption that can prompt us to heed Oliver's invitation to not have to be “good” but instead dialogue about “despair,” responding to the world and each other as we find purpose in this shared life.

## Endnotes

1. Jedediah Purdy, *This Land is Our Land: The Struggle for a New Commonwealth* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019), 26.