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Old and New Ideas of the Liberal Arts: A Review of *Claiming Our Callings*

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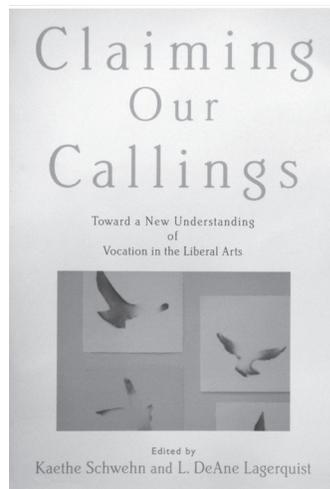
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DAVID CROWE and KATIE HANSON

Old and New Ideas of the Liberal Arts: A Review of *Claiming Our Callings*

Claiming Our Callings: Toward a New Understanding of Vocation in the Liberal Arts (Oxford University Press, 2014) is a new collection of essays edited by Kaethe Schwehn and L. DeAne Lagerquist of St. Olaf College. The book is a valuable contribution to the national conversation about vocation and liberal education. It will be a particularly useful resource for faculty and administrative leaders working at Lutheran colleges, or at other colleges with dynamic and evolving religious affiliations and openness to faith, as they attempt to explain the complexity and depth of their missions to new faculty and other curious people.

The thirteen essays, all written by men and women teaching or otherwise serving at St. Olaf, illustrate the ways that faculty members of varying generations and disciplines have come to know their callings, and attempt to live them authentically every day, especially in the company of interested students. As professors of English and Education at another Lutheran college, Augustana College (Rock Island), and a married couple with the habit of talking shop at dinnertime, we find ourselves wanting to enter into discussion or even debate with some of these writers. Yet, at bottom, we would be thrilled to see our own college-age kids enrolling in any of these professors'



classes. We wish we could take a few of their classes ourselves. All of the essays in this book, including Schwehn's Introduction and Lagerquist's Afterword (which she co-authored with the late James Farrell) are thoughtful, sincere, and learned without being pretentious. All of the essays demonstrate a deep commitment to excellent teaching.

Many of the essays justify the book's promise to journey "toward a *new* understanding of vocation" (our emphasis).

The idea of vocation or calling is very old. So is Luther's widening of the idea when he declared that all believers, not just prospective priests and nuns, need to listen for God's call to their work and other daily joys. What is new for every generation is the creative task of loving the world and healing its wounds, even as that world changes, sometimes (as now) very rapidly. *Claiming Our Callings* reflects a changing curriculum, showing how consumerism, sustainability ethics, Buddhist meditation techniques, Eastern philosophies of peace and justice, and other non-traditional or non-Western ideas have now become typical and compelling issues in college classrooms. More established ideas get attention too. Donna McMillan (Psychology) reminds us that in discerning our vocations we can be challenged by our own powers of

Katie Hanson and **David Crowe**, who met at their alma mater, Luther College, are long-term members of the faculty at Augustana College, Rock Island, Illinois, she in Education and he in English. Along with their teaching and tending of the college's Lutheran liberal arts identity, together they take students on study abroad trips to Norway, and lead a reading group called Faithful Readers at St. Paul Lutheran Church in Davenport, Iowa.

psychological denial. John Barbour (Religion) suggests that professors might help students to reflect on their faith lives by speaking about our own in non-coercive ways. He describes compellingly how this careful balancing act is possible for the willing professor.

Hovering over the book is a real worry: Are the liberal arts losing viability in an economy creating few attractive jobs? Is the never-ending tension on our campuses between idealistic mission and urgent marketing needs tipping the wrong way? Are we beginning to tell our students and their families half-truths about our commitment to their professional skills only, over-selling our assistance in helping them to secure remunerative jobs? These are not entirely new worries. As Schwehn writes in her introduction, even in the nineteenth century, "some Protestant schools maintained a traditional focus on contemplation, character-building, and coherence across disciplines" while "other schools chose to emphasize knowledge over character, specialization over synthesis, and individual advancement over communal service." This book is mostly about faculty tending the idealistic mission, St. Olaf's commitment to the phrase, "life is not a livelihood." Economist Mark Pernecky reminds us that you have to make money before you can give it away, but most of the essayists place more emphasis on students making meaning in all aspects of their lives.

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Most of the essayists hope that we all might turn away from comfortable models of success in the consumer society to models that are more demanding and difficult and even dissenting, and that our careers will be seamlessly connected to our faith (in whatever God or meaning-making system) and other deep commitments.

DeAne Lagerquist (Religion), the book's co-editor, lays the foundation for the book's Lutheran and interfaith

character. She sees her teaching and understanding of vocation emerging from Luther's and Bonhoeffer's theologies, especially their paradoxical claim that we die to ourselves in order to love the neighbor. Her essay might be read annually by leaders on every Lutheran campus, as a reminder of the reasons that we foster theological literacy, "not," she reminds us, "as an effort to change students' beliefs, but rather as a long-term goal that entails being articulate about one's own deepest commitments, being in compassionate conversation with others, and collaborating for the good of the world, even with those whose commitments are different from one's own."

Our other favorite essays were those that read more like published memoirs and impersonal histories. We particularly enjoyed reports of actual interactions with students, where teaching ideas and philosophies were tested. Anthropologist Thomas Williamson writes elegantly, his essay describing lively class discussions. He helps his students to learn, through illustrative stories about his friends' professional and personal journeys, how little the college majors we choose have to do with leading meaningful lives. (We had thought that the "major as destiny" myth was mostly an Augustana problem, and now not only feel better, but have Williamson's methods to imitate as well.) Biologist Kathleen L. Shea opens with sincere generalities about "ecological science and ... sustainable use of our environmental resources," but then vividly describes the various ways that Oles (readers are obliged to learn the local jargon) change campus ecologies. They learn how to plant and tend thriving trees, lead elementary school groups through the St. Olaf Natural Lands, protect seedling trees from marauding deer, build dikes and dig up drain tile to restore wetlands, and grow and sell produce to the food service provider. Some encounter life-changing realities in Costa Rica, but most learn to love the natural world right on campus.

Historian Jim Farrell's essay is a fitting memorial to his good work and good life. As his essay reports, he helped students to understand that consuming goods and services is heavy, taxing work. He argues that we may choose this work, or, in the interest of a damaged planet and the unemployed and poorly housed, we may choose to limit consuming in our lives. "You don't need to be religious to consume less," Farrell writes, "as the

number of 'downshifters' in American culture shows, but most of the world's religions also provide frames in which less consumption involves more meaning." Through his essay and other effects of his life, Farrell's good teaching continues.

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The Afterword suggests that *Claiming Our Callings* is "not merely a local [book] about parochial particulars," but there is a parochial flavor to any book composed exclusively by faculty of one college. The faculty's pride in their college is often on display, and local traditions and locutions sprinkle the essays. That strikes us as justified—we are notorious for noisily loving our college too—but

perhaps it does wrongly hint to readers that the book's concerns are not widely relevant.

Clearly, Oxford University Press believes that this book has a wide audience, that it is no St. Olaf *festchrift*. We agree. We see ourselves pulling the book down from the shelf from time to time, to suggest an essay to a new colleague, or to try out a good teaching idea. Since our colleges are often better at acculturating new faculty into momentary campus disputes than to our enduring missions, this book would be excellent reading for new faculty at similar colleges. But really, anyone on a liberal arts campus can benefit from the book. As our college leaders struggle with demographic and economic realities, they have to respond to those who exert career-minded pressure, from parents to boards to campus colleagues. Here is a book that speaks another message we all need to hear, with force and in detail. The essayists in *Claiming Our Callings* remind us that we learn alongside the students, that we care about the whole lives that they will lead, that we know our world cries out for justice and healthy change. We and our students get to be agents of that change, even as we attempt to live out the old idea of the liberal arts.

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Vocation of a Lutheran College Conference

"Vocation and the Common Good"

July 20-22
Augsburg College, Minneapolis

Registrations are due June 5, 2015

Please contact your campus representative or Melinda Valverde, melinda.valverde@elca.org, 773-380-2874.

See also page 22 for details about a pre-conference gathering about women and leadership.

Sessions and Speakers:

"Vocation and the Mission of Lutheran Higher Education," Mark Wilhelm, Program Director for Schools, ELCA

"The Common Good in Society Today," Rahuldeep Gill, California Lutheran University

"The Lutheran Tradition and the Common Good," Samuel Torvend, Pacific Lutheran University

"ELCA Colleges and Universities Contribute to the Common Good," Laurie Joyner, President of Wittenberg University

Plus: "Cultivating the Common Good on Campus"—a session devoted to developing action plans among college and university cohorts