

THEOLOGICAL EXPLORATION OF VOCATION AT BUTLER UNIVERSITY

A MEDITATION ON CALLING

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Let me begin by thanking Judy Cebula and the Center for Faith and Vocation for this opportunity to speak to you tonight. As my wife Suzanne and I prepare for a new chapter in our lives at Ursinus College, I look back with deep gratification at the establishment nearly a decade ago of the Butler University Center for Faith and Vocation. It was a response to a felt campus need, but it also fulfilled my own heart's desire to support students, faculty, and staff in discerning how to make lives of purpose, in which individual flourishing is intertwined with the welfare of others.

I approach the presentation tonight with some trepidation. Over the years, I have spoken frequently on higher education, teaching and learning, Oscar Wilde, and even baseball! But consistent with the topic given previous speakers at these annual dinners, I've been asked to reflect on calling and vocation in my own life. My own cultural background does not encourage talking about myself, so a self-revelatory talk is a major departure from modes of discourse with which I'm most comfortable.

Nonetheless, I believe that the nature of calling and vocation is at the heart of the Center's work, and I am glad to speak about my own life in order to advance that work. I'd like to do so in such a way as to indicate how the unfolding of my life ultimately intersected with the narrative of Butler University and the Center for Faith and Vocation. I'd like to draw illustrative points about calling from the story of my life with the intent of tying them to what we seek at Butler for our students and ourselves.

There are two senses in which we may be called by God. The first is transformative, such as the summons to Abraham or Paul, where one finds a life directed to a new purpose. The second is a sense of being directed at a particular time and place to do something specific. For Abraham, the transformative call was to leave the city of Ur in response to God's promise to give him a new land from whence God would make a new nation. One instance of a specific call to Abraham was the directive to take his son Isaac and sacrifice him. For Paul, the revelation on the Damascus road turned his understanding, his values, and his life upside down. The call to cross over to Macedonia to preach was a specific call.

Launching off this distinction between transformative and specific calls, I want to make three points this evening. First, the two types of calling meld into each other, but I would suggest that specific calls, each having to do with a given time, place, and circumstance, are nestled under that larger transformative call that determines the shape and heft of one's life. Second, I would further suggest that the transformative call is less about what we are called to do than the kind of people we are to be. Finally, the confusion surrounding the word "vocation" stems from the fact that some people find a single lifelong work or ministry growing out of a transformative call, while others find that in different stages in their lives, they pursue different vocations that nonetheless have a common root in a transformative call that defines, at heart, who they are. Let me illustrate these points with some examples from my own life.

Scripture proclaims that God knows us before we know God. When I was six years old, the children in Chinatown were invited to Sunday School by an itinerant Chinese pastor who had begun holding church services in the basement of his home. I

was confronted with a dilemma. I wanted to find out what Sunday School was all about, but my favorite TV show, the Lone Ranger, came on at 11 am Sunday mornings! My decision to give Sunday School a try was a real sacrifice! It stemmed less from spirituality than curiosity, and yet after 55 years, I consider it a response to a specific call. The child Samuel heard a voice calling him, and he responded with “Here am I, Lord.” But only after Eli the priest taught him to answer, “Speak, Lord, for your servant hears,” did he discern that the voice was from God. I was invited to Sunday School, and yet only after I determined to find out what this was all about, even at the expense of missing the Lone Ranger, did I find myself open to spiritual transformation.

I became a Christian at age seven. I remember one day after Sunday School sitting in the kitchen of that pastor’s home, where his wife rehearsed the Gospel of God’s readiness to forgive sins for those who would accept Jesus into their hearts. An apple pie was baking in the oven. The theology was rudimentary, as was my sense of sin, and I took the trope of Jesus entering the heart literally. Nonetheless, this was my transformative call: to be God’s person in this world, whatever that would mean. The years have seen a deeper, more articulated, perhaps even more heterodox understanding of my faith and its traditions, but the essential commitment has remained. It was not dramatic, less like the call of Paul than of Abraham’s, but it claimed my life. Proverbs proclaims, “Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old, he will not depart from it.” I think that’s true for me, and apple is still my favorite pie.

Asian immigrants stereotypically want their children to study hard, go to college, and become doctors. So it was with my family. That ambition was buttressed by the sense that I could serve God as a medical missionary. I did well in school, worked as a hospital

volunteer, and, in my senior year, earned a full ride to Harvard. Yet, I did not feel ready to leave the Chinese Christian community. I wanted a better intellectual grasp of my faith, and so I decided to delay admission to Harvard, which cost me the full-ride scholarship, in order to enroll at the local Bible college.

My high school teachers were taken aback. One of them misunderstood my plans and expostulated, “Why would Bobby want to go to *barber* college?” But for many of my mentors, going to Bible college instead of Harvard seemed little better than going to a barber college. I was counseled not to throw away this opportunity, and feeling torn between my sense of what was right to do and the advice my teachers were giving drove me to tears. It was my first experience of going against the wisdom of elders. It was my first experience of needing to trust my own sense of what I was called to do rather than others’ sense of what was best for me.

So in the fall of 1968, my friends went off to Cal and Stanford, and I went to Bible college. Because there were no scholarships for me, I lived at home, working that summer at Goodwill Industries and 24 hours a week over that academic year at McDonald’s to make ends meet. I learned much. But the wisdom of my decision to stay home proved more poignant. Mom was diagnosed with cancer that December and died in February. Dad had passed when I was two, so my sisters and I were now parentless. If I had gone to Harvard that fall, I would have been 3,000 miles away when Mom took sick and died. Instead, I was home with her during her last days.

I did go to Harvard after that year, on a scholarship that was supplemented by work-study and social security benefits arising from my mother’s death. My decision to delay entrance had further consequences. America was convulsed by the Vietnam War,

and I was active in the anti-war movement, an advocacy that grew out of my developing sense of my faith. My draft lottery number was 77. Given my espoused opposition to the War, I was faced with the prospect of becoming a draft resistor if I was summoned for military duty after graduation. But I was granted a 4-D, or divinity, deferment for my year in Bible college, which left me four years of a 2-S, or student, deferment for my years at Harvard. Instead of graduating in 1972, I finished college in 1973, the year that the draft was abolished.

When I obeyed the call to go to Bible college, I had no sense of what lay before me, no inkling of the consequences of my choice. I can in retrospect tell you why the consequences of that decision were fortuitous, but at the time it seemed that I was taking bread and casting it on the waters. So it is with specific decisions in our lives: rational calculations of costs and benefits, of pros and cons, only go so far. In the end, the decision must come from a sense that it is right and consistent with one's own sense of values and destiny. Moreover, having a sense of values and destiny should precede such times of decision. It's very difficult to figure out what to do when one hasn't already some sense of who one is. My own specific experience emboldened me to trust the still small voice of the Spirit within.

At Harvard, I took courses required for a pre-med track. I had waived calculus and did well in physical chemistry, but in my sophomore year I encountered organic chemistry and met a subject that I could not master, that beat me. It precipitated a disjunction between what I believed God wanted me to do, to pursue a vocation as a medical missionary, and what a "D" in organic chemistry would permit. It was then that I

began to understand that the person God wanted me to be was independent of what I was called to do.

For the 18- to 22-year-old college student, vocation is often regarded as a matter of which occupation to pursue. But career aspirations can be daunted by lack of ability or passion, by physical disability, by economic and social circumstances. Are you any less God's person because circumstances prevented you from working in a particular field? Because a job is eliminated as a result of layoffs or antiquation?

In time past, people were defined by their work, which was passed down from generation to generation, hence the origins of last names like Smith and Cooper. People called to the clergy were ordained for life. No wonder that vocations were equated with lifetime callings. This is much less true today. The parents of our present students may have worked on an assembly line or in a firm for thirty years or more; the prospect is that our students will have as many as seven careers over their lifetimes. That's why we may want to unlink the strict equivalence between calling and vocation. In telling the story of your life, you may find that it consists of a series of specific calls to vocations particular to time, place, and circumstance. What unifies the story is the *Leitmotif* of a transformative call, the summons to be who you are.

Nonetheless, I was a working class kid at Harvard, anxious about how I was going to make a living after I graduated, without parents or financial resources to fall back on. Over the years at Butler I've stressed the importance of educating students not simply to make a living but to make a life. Let me say, however, that I've never treated lightly the importance of being prepared to make a living. Three-quarters of our students at Butler go into the workforce upon graduation. Parents repeatedly say to me, "We believe in the

power of liberal education, and so we've sent our children to Butler, but we can't afford to support them through graduate and professional study. After Butler, financially they're on their own."

But if I wasn't to be a doctor and medical missionary, what was I to do, and by what criteria was I to discern my vocational calling? At this point I received advice from a graduate student at the Kennedy School of Government who had returned to school after a decade as an Air Force officer. John Lawyer, his wife Lyn, and their three children were a haven for members of the Harvard-Radcliffe Christian Fellowship. He told me that a vocation grew out of answers to some larger questions: What do you enjoy doing for its own sake? What are you good at? I came to realize that reading, writing, and critical analysis came easily for me, and that I loved losing myself in books. That if I could quit asking what I needed to do to make a living—at least for a little while—I could revel in literary study. I transferred out of Organic Chem where I was disengaged and averaging a "D", enrolled in an English lit class six weeks into the semester, caught up on the readings and writing assignments, and aced the course. I became an English major.

Over the years, I've taken John's advice and refined it into a series of questions that were given this enunciation by the writer Sam Keen: 1) What are your gifts? 2) What gives you joy? 3) What is the intersection between your gifts and the needs of the world? At Butler I have told students that college was the invaluable opportunity to answer these three questions, which could serve as parameters to discover their own best selves. And at the end, what one does for a living grows out of a sense of how one ought to live.

And how one lives is integrally tied to one's relationships. It was at Harvard that I met two freshman roommates who are among my most trusted friends to this day. It was also there that I met Suzanne. I was a member of the Harvard-Radcliffe Christian Fellowship at a time in the University's history when there were five Harvard men for each Radcliffe woman. Not good odds for meeting girls. The Fellowship planned a retreat at Cape Cod, and we invited members of the Wellesley Christian Fellowship to join us. (Wellesley then and now is the country's pre-eminent women's college.) I was talking with a friend on the beach when this blonde came running past. In a deeply spiritual moment, I said, "Nice legs!" That's how we met.

Sue and I were married three years later. Because I had lost both my parents, John and Lyn Lawyer stood in as the parents of the groom, and a contingent from the Harvard-Radcliffe and Wellesley Christian Fellowships were in the wedding party and in the congregation. Their love surrounds us to this day. In a recent homily, Butler's Catholic chaplain Father Jeff Godecker noted, "Spirituality requires others for support and guidance." Discernment of calling and vocation often occurs in a community of supporters and mentors. I would daresay that such communities facilitate discernment, and they are well-nigh indispensable for the daily living out of one's vocation. A circle of loving friends and fellow believers provides strength for living, the perseverance to pursue one's calling. Abraham was surrounded by family, Paul by a circle of companions. The consolation of calling is that God does not ask us to go it alone. Marriage itself is both a specific call to lifelong commitment and an invitation to community and love. Ecclesiastes proclaims, "Two are better than one, for if either falls, the one will lift the other up." Thank you, Sue, for being my life's companion.

God's call often leads us to confound the expectations of others. Going to Bible college was one instance in my life when I did so. My marriage was another. It was the prerogative of individual states to forbid interracial marriage until 1967, when the Supreme Court in *Loving v. Virginia* struck down anti-miscegenation laws on the grounds that race-based distinctions violated the rights of citizens to equal protection. Sue and I married in 1974, when interracial marriage was legal but racial attitudes were still changing. Sue's parents asked what she would do if America went to war with China and I were put in an internment camp, as Japanese-Americans were in World War II. She said she would go with me. I was the only son of an only son, and my relatives were concerned about my marrying out. That tension has been greatly alleviated by the birth of two sons.

We married for love, but even such a quintessential human gesture was fraught because of the longstanding and widespread belief that people of different races should not mix. Sometimes the call to be God's people is as foundational as extending the hand of friendship and support to the "other," the different; the widow, the orphan, and the stranger; the immigrant, legal or illegal, or the same sex couple. It can reside in the simple acknowledgment of their humanity. Mildred Loving, whose suit against the state anti-miscegenation law led to *Loving v. Virginia*, died in 2008. One obituary noted, "A modest homemaker, Loving never thought she had done anything extraordinary. 'It wasn't my doing,' Loving told the Associated Press in a rare interview. 'It was God's work.'"

I received a Ph.D in English literature at UCLA, with a specialty in the poetry of Oscar Wilde. Unlike many of my fellow grad students on the job market who wanted to work at research universities, I was open to offers from liberal arts colleges where teaching had primacy. My years at Berea College confirmed for me the importance of personalized liberal education, where knowing students by name and face, and becoming involved in their developing narratives, formed the heart of the teacher's call. Let me not suggest that this confirmation was easily won. There were years in which I was restless, laboring away in what seemed at times an obscure orchard, wondering if what I did really mattered. Living out a calling takes as much faith as asking God what you are to do. Living out the answer day to day can be very hard.

Nonetheless, over eleven years I won through to happiness at Berea. But during a sabbatical year I met a mentor who said, "A professor controls the climate of teaching and learning in his own classroom; an administrator can influence the climate of teaching and learning across the campus." This was my Macedonian call. A year after my sabbatical, I was informed that a friend at Hope College had nominated me for the position of Dean for Arts and Humanities. I was not in the market but decided to let the candidacy go forward. Two months later, I was appointed to the position, and my vocation as an academic administrator began.

Faculty get to soar with students; an administrator flies a desk. But under an academic administrator's purview are the protocols and logistics that expedite teaching and learning. Turnover in faculty ranks proceeds at a rate of 5-8% a year, so that hiring, tenure, and promotion decisions can reshape faculty profiles and culture in a short span of

time. In the book of Acts, the apostles appointed deacons skilled in administration to oversee the daily needs of the community. Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians lists administration as a spiritual gift. At Hope I was able to be dean, teach each semester, and be a member of an evangelical Christian institution. It seemed like a perfect fit.

In my fifth year, however, we undertook a search for a faculty position. The finalist recommended by the search committee and department to me had met both the professional criteria and the profession of faith required at the college. But he was gay, something we knew only because his partner was already a member of the faculty. I was informed by the upper administration that given the theological orientation and denominational ties of the college, Hope would not be able to hire him.

Institutional leaders have to make decisions with which members of the community may not agree. But there may come a time when a decision seems so contrary to one's personal values that it would compromise oneself to go along. This was such a time for me. I believed that we were changing the rules of the search at the last minute to import a touchstone—sexual orientation—that was unfair. I was also a scholar of Oscar Wilde, a man who was disgraced, financially ruined, and imprisoned for being homosexual in Victorian England. I chose to resign in protest of the decision not to hire the candidate because he was gay. It was a way of keeping faith with Oscar. To do otherwise would have been a betrayal of literary friendship. It was a way of keeping faith with myself, to answer the question if I would be willing to walk away from a job if it demanded that I abandoned my scruples. And it was a way of keeping faith with God as I understood his specific call to me in that situation.

My decision was controversial at the college and in the local community. We lost relationships and reputation because of it. I also thought I was throwing away an administrative career that I loved when I did it. So that made it apparently foolhardy from a professional perspective. It strained my marriage. It hampered my ability to serve in leadership roles in evangelical colleges because I was on the wrong side of a vexed theological issue. The scars of that estrangement I carry to this day.

But if you know who you are, sometimes you're faced with choices that may be difficult but not ambiguous. In the movie *Chariots of Fire*, the Scottish athlete Eric Liddell decides on principle that he won't run on a Sunday and thus gives up a chance at Olympic glory. His friend asks him, do you have regrets? And his answer is, 'Regrets, yes – but no doubts.'

And that's what I wish for our students, that they develop, in Robert Bolt's words, "an adamant sense" of their own selves. My favorite book is Bolt's play, *A Man For All Seasons*. In his preface, Bolt observed of his protagonist Thomas More:

He knew where he began and left off, what area of himself he could yield to the encroachments of his enemies, and what to the encroachments of those he loved. It was a substantial area in both cases, for he had a proper sense of fear and was a busy lover. Since he was a clever man . . . he was able to retire from those areas in wonderfully good order, but at length, he was asked to retreat from that final area where he located his self. And there this supple, humorous, unassuming and sophisticated person set like metal, was overtaken by an absolutely primitive rigor, and could no more be budged than a cliff.

I have been blessed, as it turned out, to have had additional opportunities to serve as an academic administrator, at Hamilton College, at Butler University, and soon at Ursinus College. I've been able to come to these positions, however, with a sense that what I wanted for our students was what was given to me over the years: a sense of constancy and continuity.

One-third of our students will work at jobs that have yet to be invented. We want to impart skills, capacities, and dispositions that enable them to recast themselves for changing circumstances. Our grandparents were born in an era of horse drawn vehicles and lived to see men land on the moon. The pace of change will not flag. Yet there must be constants amid this change.

One constant is helping our students develop lives of integrity. The Scriptures point to a God Who makes the broken whole. One definition of integrity is "The state of being whole, entire, or undiminished." Beyond the suppleness to respond to changing situations, we want for our students a constancy of character. That, I think, is what Paul meant when he wrote in the letter to the Philippians, "Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things."

Tonight I've been asked to reflect on my own calling. I've responded with a recitation of incidents from my own life that coheres into a narrative. Our students need to see their own lives as narratives in the making, where rather than lurching from

circumstance to circumstance, they are able to impose meaning to the incidents of their lives by ordering what happens to them according to the values and character that give them purpose.

Another constant is to live lives of service to others. I came to Butler ten years ago to help the University address budget deficits, stagnant fundraising, and an uncertain future. Many of us labored, with success, to meet these challenges. But what enabled us to deal with discrete problems was the clear determination that we were at Butler to educate students. Serving them well became the touchstone of determining what we ought to do in specific instances. And inherent in educating our students was to pass the torch of service to the next generation. We at Butler have been called into a community of servant-leaders in order to educate the next generation of servant-leaders.

Sue and I are going to Ursinus because it is the next place we have been called to serve. We have been privileged to participate in and affirm the continuing tradition of service at this University. In closing, I want to recur to passages from my inaugural address in 2002 when I spoke about what I hoped for Butler. In retrospect, it represents what God's calling has blessed me to be and to do. In retrospect, what I wished for our Butler students is what was given me. I said on that occasion:

Our students need to be equipped for living in a world where moral decisions, in all their contingency and uncertainty, must be made. And in living, and in choosing, character counts. It is the rudder that determines whether knowledge, skills, vocational expertise, and networks of influence will be used for good or ill. How one earns a living should be an extension of values that illumine one's life, and

there should be continuity between personal values and societal engagement. I want Butler graduates to be people who honor and follow through on their word, who play by the rules but also know and respect the processes, political and social, by which they can change rules they deem unfair. I want our graduates to have the integrity to say “No” to practices that mislead and injure others, to have the moral compassion and empathy to address the misfortunes of others as if they were their own.

Although Butler was founded by members of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), it is not now a church-affiliated institution. This University must seek to enunciate an ideal of service rooted in values that may be shared across cultural, religious, and political boundaries. Such values include the solidarity of humankind, the efficacy of reason, the need for self-sacrifice; personal virtues such as integrity, diligence, and self-control; and social virtues such as justice, tolerance, and benevolence. Such virtues and their resulting behaviors are not grounded in a particular dogma, but they are markers of goodness to which people of various faiths, or no faith, can subscribe.

And yet, in our pursuit for what binds us as a common humanity, we can't forget that we cannot be human in general: we express our humanity in particular culturally-mediated ways. Language is a quintessential human capacity, but no one speaks “language,” one speaks English, or Chinese, or Swahili. Butler must both affirm the claims of universal humanity and uphold a commitment to cultural diversity. It must affirm equal opportunity and valuing individuals according to their achievement, but it must also strive to give place and voice to different races and

cultures, acknowledging that the very definitions of “success” and “happiness” are culturally mediated.

There is a necessary intellectual dimension to values: their study has a long and venerable history. But the study of values alone is insufficient to inspire. Wrote a young man on the eve of his execution by the Nazis, “I want you all to remember—that you must not dream yourselves back to the times before the war, but the dream of you all, young and old, must be to create an ideal of human decency, and not a narrow-minded and prejudiced one. That is the great gift our country hungers for.” Let us bring Nobel laureates to campus. Let us bring great artists and scientists and thinkers and peacemakers who have contributed to the bounty of human achievement to inspire students and give them examples to emulate. *[And this we have done over these years.]* Let us create programs and systems whereby our students discuss ethics, do public service, and consider how they might use their Butler education to be servant-leaders in the world. *[And this we have done over these years.]* But let us also remember that our students are watching us, and the lessons we dare to teach, and the visions we dare to espouse, obligate us to try and live them as well. *[And this, my friends gathered here tonight, you have done over these years.]*

As president of Butler University, I pledge this institution to the pursuit of academic excellence, but not simply for its own sake. I pledge that a Butler education will engender in students not only habits of mind but also, in de Tocqueville’s famous phrase, habits of the heart which will enable them not only to make a living but also to make lives that are personally fulfilling precisely because they are implicated in the well-being of others. Let Butler be what in the beginning

Butler was intended to be: a city on the hill that equips our students in knowledge, in skill, in character, and in hope to work to make a brighter future, to make a world more just, more tolerant, more compassionate, more inclusive than the world in which they were born.

That is my prayer for Butler in the years to come. Thank you very much.