

CALL: A Personal Story

It seems there are at least two ways we can understand our lives and our call. First, we can project into the future. We look at our interests, our natural instincts, the things that seem to satisfy us and predict what we will do with our lives.

Second, we can turn around and look behind us. We do a life-review and begin to see the patterns and shapes that have emerged in the life we have been living. For some people, these might be the same. They perceive the total consistency between what they first envisioned and what, in fact, they have actually lived.

STOP: Make a note to yourself. What was your earliest vision for your life (not fireman, policeman, or nurse, or actress, or the kinds of things a 5 year old might consider - my niece wanted to be a pretty woman wrestler, for example). Rather, what was the first thing you knew you were serious about as you were emerging into adolescence and young adulthood?

Parker Palmer, a Quaker, educator, and author wrote two books that are really worth the read if you haven't already. In The Courage to Teach and Let Your Life Speak, he offers a wonderful road map to understanding your life's call (vocation).

In Let Your Life Speak, Palmer reflects about how the meaning of our lives often emerges through the interactions and relationships, the detours we are sometimes forced to take simply because we don't live in isolation. Sometimes life opens up from behind - strange thought isn't it? What does he mean by that?

Two quotes from Let Your Life Speak might offer an insight into his meaning:

“Is the life I am living the same as the life that wants to live in me?”

“Before you tell your life what you intend to do with it, listen for what it intends to do with you. Before you tell your life what truths and values you have decided to live up to, let your life tell you what truths you embody and what values you represent.”

What I understand from Palmer is that our experience teaches us who we are. It is in the relationships that emerge throughout our lives and the various situations in which we find ourselves that we sometimes surprise ourselves and in which we discover our own meaning.

When I reflect on my own life, I begin to understand how I arrived at my current life-situation.

When I was a child, I was enamored by several of my teachers. Most of them were Sisters of the Congregation of Divine Providence. These women touched my heart. They cared about us. They invited us into relationship. They let us carry their books to and from the convent. We helped them clean the classroom, blackboards, and

erasers after school and as we did those things they talked to us like real people. I wanted to be like them. Sister Gertrude is an example. She was tall, stately, kind, and considerate and instilled a sense of discipline in us that made us want to do what was right. She was very influential in my burgeoning desire to be a teacher. But, of course, I couldn't be a nun! Being like them meant, for me, to be a teacher. The feeling I had with these women and the desire to be like them never left me.

I was born in the late 40's - just post World War II. I grew up in a Catholic ghetto in the 1950's. People shared great energy and a vision of possibility for the future. Men recently returning from the war were beginning their families and gave birth to the "Baby Boomer" generation. The experience of the war, the anticipation of a better future, a conservative political and religious agenda gave context to our lives. "I like IKE" and "The pope is infallible" were in some sense the clear boundaries for living a good life in those Catholic, white, ghetto days.

We belonged to our local church which ran our school. Like most young boys in that environment, I became an altar server and over time was influenced by the pastor of our parish who had a real gift for helping young people feel as though they belonged. He would frequently do things with groups of us like invite us to lunch or take us on short day trips to pick blackberries. Those were incredible moments of comradery with other youth of the church and gave my mom the raw material for delicious blackberry jam.

After my experience with the Sisters, I took off for La Salle High School. The Brothers of the Christian Schools opened La Salle the year before I entered it as a freshman. I was really scared to go to high school. It seemed like such a big deal. But, fortunately, I had two incredible teachers who transformed the fear to comfort. Brothers Florian and Ferdinand kept us rolling with laughter. They had incredible relational skills. They seemed happy, dedicated, and smart. They, like the Sisters, talked to us like they actually understood what we were experiencing. They were concerned about more than English and Math. They were concerned about us and instilled confidence in us and helped us develop life and relationship skills. In their own way, they found a space in my heart just as Sister Gertrude, Father Heider, and the other Sisters had.

This was further confirmation for me that I wanted to be a teacher but now like these guys. This was a group I could actually become part of - the Brothers.

Finally, after finishing high school, I joined the Brothers as a novice and spent a year in training. Following that year, we were sent to Memphis, TN for college at, what was then, Christian Brothers College. My experience in Memphis was startling. It was the first time I was exposed to this kind of overt segregation and discrimination. I encountered "white only" fountains. Separate entrances. I didn't know what to do with this and found myself very confused because it seemed so wrong. At the same time, the Vietnam War was raging. Student protests and the summer of love were constantly in the news. I watched the Vietnam body count daily. And these

experiences were accompanied by the British invasion in the world of music. Life, as I knew it, was thrown up-side-down. My comfortable Catholic ghetto was gone - forever.

The world of the disenfranchised, the marginalized, and the effects of discrimination broke into my life with force. I taught at the city prison, became aware of the emerging battle for civil rights that emerged at places like Fisk University in Nashville, TN - on the other side of the state. And then the garbage workers in Memphis went on strike to protest poor working conditions. Dr. King came to town and I was privileged to hear him speak. Marches were organized to support the garbage workers and the movement in general. Then the fatal day came when Dr. King was murdered. The city broke into flames as so many of our urban centers did. Here in Chicago's North Lawndale neighborhood it's possible to see, even today, empty lots - the places where buildings once stood but were burned down during the fight for equality.

This was definitely not the 1950's any longer. The culture was changing so fast and with such magnitude that people who grew up in a different time were running in fear. All the rules I had grown up with seemed to no longer apply. Everything I believed in came into question and I knew that I knew nothing. Like many people, I didn't have the tools I needed to do the kind of reflection necessary to reach a deep level required to understand what all of this meant - personally or socially.

I left Memphis on 1969 and moved to Omaha where I had been assigned to teach sophomore English and Religion at, what was then, Rummel High School. While I was there for the next four years, I was also working on my first Master Degree in education with a focus in school counseling.

When the degree was completed, I was asked to accompany young men who expressed an interest in becoming brothers. I did that for four years. And then, I moved to Kansas City where I worked as a counselor in an alternative school for court adjudicated youth. Then things went even further away from my earliest vision for my life. I hadn't been a classroom teacher for five years already. After a serious disagreement with the school administration about the culture and mission of the school, I was fired. I loved Kansas City and had developed some close friends there. I stayed in KC for 18 years. During that time I worked for the Diocese as director of the refugee resettlement program in which we taught Asian, Cuban, and Eastern European immigrants to navigate the basic systems of their new culture. I directed the family life office and trained the lead couples who accompanied young engaged couples on their way to marriage. Following that, I worked for the Center for Pastoral Life and Ministry and our team trained all the lay ministers for parishes.

Back to my calling. On one hand, when I looked forward, it was so clear to me who I wanted to be and what I knew I wanted to do with my life. But, on the other hand, when I look back, I realized my clarity was an illusion. Life intervened and changed me. There are certain threads that run through the fabric of my life - of course. I've

always been interested in and involved in some educational enterprise. But the cloth of which those threads are a part is vastly different from the one I had in mind as an adolescent and young adult.

So how do I understand my call now? When I projected forward into the future it was clear. Be a classroom teacher. Hindsight gives a much better view. Was I called to be a teacher as I had envisioned “teacher” and as I experienced teachers? I don’t think so. I have always, every step of the way, been engaged in some alternative model - even in Omaha where the school was experimenting with various curricular, teaching, and scheduling innovations. The journey took me from there to the alternative school for juvenile offenders, to the life and cultural skills training for refugees, to family education, to ministerial training for adults.

I moved to Chicago in 1995 and began what has been, up to 2018, a 23 year experience of additional alternative educational models including our San Miguel School and the creation of a faith-inspired Catalyst Charter School. There has been nothing “mainstream” in my experience.

In looking back, there were significant relationships that remain important and directive in my life: my family and the Catholic neighborhood in which I was raised Ms. Fering, my first grade teacher, Sister Gertrude, Father Heider, Brothers Florian and Ferdinand. What I received from them was the experience of being cared for, loved, and included. They went out of their way to touch my heart by their solicitude, passion, nurturance, understanding and listening stance. They knew how to create community. They taught me to have confidence in my own intuition, to take some risks, to view things from a different perspective.

In looking back, the experience of the war in Vietnam, the cultural transformation symbolized by the drug and music movement, the civil rights struggle of the 60’s initiated in part by young university students, hearing Dr. King speak, being confronted by the inequities of the social structure - all placed me in a world filled with ambiguity rather than certitude. Things are not always what they seem. Life is complex. It is important to look at life from many points of view and not be totally convinced of any one way of doing things.

My call was tied up in those relationships with significant adults in my life and the social movements that took us from the 50’s to our current moment in the progression of time. They shaped me, gave me thrust and lift and, I think, taught me that education takes many forms and not all of them take place in a traditional classroom. They taught me community is essential but doesn’t look the same in all contexts. I learned that the core of education is relationship - the appropriate care and love of a teacher for those entrusted to his or her care. The educator is one who understands persons uniquely, wants the best for them, sets the bar high and maintains great expectations. The educator is one who knows their students’ potential and who helps them discover their gifts - their identity. The educator helps students be reflective

about the meaning of their own life and helps them navigate the ambiguities that sometimes create an imbalance.

I learned that education is a life-long journey into meaning and that there are many ways to be an educator.

Now: Take a moment and reflect on the relationships and experiences at the heart of your own journey into meaning and purpose. How do they help you define your own call?