
A SACRED VOICE IS CALLING

Personal Vocation and Social Conscience

John Neafsey

ORBIS  BOOKS
Maryknoll, New York 10545

INTRODUCTION

Personal Vocation and Social Conscience

The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.

—Frederick Buechner¹

For me the Voice of God, of Conscience, of Truth, or the Inner Voice or "the Still Small Voice" mean one and the same thing.

—Gandhi²

VOCATION is not only about "me" and my personal fulfillment, but about "us" and the common good. In Buechner's words, our callings are found in the places where our "deep gladness" and the "world's deep hunger" meet, on the holy ground where our heart's desire comes together with what the world most needs *from* us. Authentic vocational discernment, therefore, seeks a proper balance between inward listening *to* our hearts and outward, socially engaged listening *with* our hearts to the realities of the world in which we live. These come together in our heart's response to the needs and sufferings of the world. "What matters," writes José Garcia, "is that the world should touch the heart and that the heart should go out towards the world."³

In this chapter I will sketch out a broad, interdisciplinary, ecumenical view of vocation as a foundation for the book. Along the way, I will explore a number of key psychological

and spiritual dimensions of the inner voice that are relevant to vocational discernment. Social conscience will be understood as an essential component of this sacred voice that calls us to both personal authenticity and social responsibility.

MEANINGS OF VOCATION

The word *vocation* has different meanings and associations for different people. When I talk to classes or groups of people about vocation, the first thing I do is ask the question: "What comes to mind when you hear the word *vocation*?"

People commonly associate vocation either with the call to ordained ministry or vowed religious life or with the popular secular understanding of vocation as being synonymous with a job, occupation, or career. These are valid, but incomplete, understandings of vocation. Some people do have special callings to priesthood or ministry or religious life, but most don't. This does not mean that these others don't have a vocation, but rather that God has another purpose in mind for them, something else for them to do or be. Similarly, though the kind of work we do is an important dimension of our calling, it is important not to define the rich, complex phenomenon of vocation too narrowly or exclusively in terms of job or profession.

Although finding meaningful work that matches our God-given interests and talents is an important component of vocational discernment, there is more to life than work, and vocation is much bigger than what we do to earn a living. American obsessions with productivity, career achievement, and upward mobility are hazardous to our emotional, spiritual, and moral health. "The trouble with the rat race," goes the saying, "is that even if you win, you're still a rat." In my experience, the task of vocational discernment for driven, overworked, and harried people (a

category that often includes myself) requires stepping back from and taking a critical look at the particular ways in which our lives are out of balance. Sometimes careful listening reveals that our true calling is not to more work, or better work, or different work, but to a reordering of our priorities and a more balanced life.

Vocation potentially touches and encompasses *every* level and dimension of our lives. This includes our family life, our love life, our creative interests and pursuits, and our politics. Basically, *anything* we do with our time and talents and resources can be infused with a sense of vocation. Callings can also be experienced in relation to any or all of the multiple roles in which we find ourselves at any given time (e.g., friend, parent, daughter, son, sibling, spouse, partner, parishioner, co-worker, neighbor, citizen, etc.).

Callings in different areas or dimensions of our lives are often interrelated in complex and mysterious ways. For example, I experienced a profound sense of vocation when I fell in love with my wife and recognized that she was the one with whom I was meant to spend my life. We both wanted to have children, which we interpreted as a mutual calling to share the joys and responsibilities of parenthood together. As it turned out, our particular path to parenthood was through the process of international adoption—itsself a kind of calling. We eventually adopted two wonderful children from Guatemala.

As we have come to know and love our little son and daughter, we have also come to know and love their homeland in ways we never could have imagined. The heart connection to our children has opened us up to the heartbreak and desperation and traumatic history of their beautiful country. We find ourselves in an ongoing process of discerning our responsibilities as privileged North Americans in relation to our Latin American neighbors to the south, who are

now, in a very real sense, *family* to us. Among other things, this has prompted me to volunteer my services as a psychologist at a local program that serves survivors of torture from Central America and other areas of the world. And so, in these matters of the heart, one calling often seems to lead to another.

It is also possible to experience different callings at different times of our lives, or to experience multiple callings at any particular time of our life. Our dream of what a meaningful life looks like at age twenty may look very different at age forty. Persons approaching retirement are challenged to think of vocation in new ways as they contemplate what to do with their time and talents after their formal professional career is finished. A person whose identity has been primarily tied to work and career may feel a need to re-evaluate his or her priorities in the context of the competing demands and callings of family and parenting at a different stage of life.

Although some vocational decisions center around lifetime commitments in love or work that affect the fundamental direction of our lives, callings also come to us in response to very specific challenges or issues that present themselves at particular times of our individual or collective lives. For example, we may be called to find creative and courageous ways to cope with a personal emotional crisis, a death or serious illness in the family, the loss of a job, a personal addiction, caring for a child with special needs, or any other life situation that presents us with an opportunity for emotional or spiritual growth.

Circumstances in the life of our local or national or global communities can also call upon us to rise to the occasion, to take a stand, to take a risk, to do the right thing. On a local level, concerned parents might experience a calling to come together to figure out how to assertively respond to gang activity that is making the neighborhood playground unhealthy

and unsafe for their children. On a national or global level, individual citizens or churches might experience callings to discern their individual or collective response to the Iraq War, torture, capital punishment, poverty, abortion, racism, sexism, or any other important moral issue of our time.

It is also important to keep in mind that vocation is not only about what we *do* but about *who we are*. Evelyn and James Whitehead put it this way: "Vocation is a gradual revelation—of me to myself by God. . . . It is who we are, trying to happen."⁴ Our callings have to do with the *kind* of person we are called to be, the quality of our personhood, the values and attitudes we embody, the integrity and authenticity of our lives. From this vantage point, vocation is less about the particular things we do and more about the spirit with which we do them. "Character is not what you do," writes James Hillman, "it's the way you do it."⁵

"What does the LORD require of you," asks the prophet Micah, "but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"⁶ Whether we are a doctor or a minister, an artist or a taxi driver, a nanny or a teacher, our fundamental human vocation is to become just, loving, and humble persons during our short lives here on this earth. Conducting ourselves with justice, love, and humility always begins with how we treat our loved ones and the people in the circle of our everyday lives. As we consider our social responsibilities as citizens of our country and our world, though, our callings extend beyond our personal circle to an ever-expanding network of connection and solidarity with people both far and near.

THE VOICE

The Latin roots of the word *vocation* (*vocare*, "to call" and *vox*, "voice") center around the experience of hearing a call or voice. "The original meaning of 'to have a vocation,'" wrote

Carl Jung, "is 'to be addressed by a voice.'" But *who*, or *what*, is calling?

From a spiritual perspective, of course, *God* is the Caller. The voice of vocation is the Voice of God. A divine source of wisdom, mysteriously both beyond and within ourselves, guides us in the path of our true calling and summons us to our destiny. Thomas Kelly, writing from the Quaker tradition, says it beautifully:

Deep within us all, there is an amazing inner sanctuary of the soul, a holy place, a Divine Center, a speaking Voice, to which we may continuously return. Eternity is at our hearts, pressing upon our time-torn lives, warming us with intimations of an astounding destiny, calling us home unto itself.⁸

There are other ways to understand the Voice. From a psychological perspective, callings can be seen as originating in our deepest and most authentic self, our "true self." A popular self-help book calls it our "best self": "Listening to the call of your natural vocation requires the capacity to hear the voice of your own best self and the capacity to respond effectively to it."⁹ Jung named this deep center of authenticity the "Self," even going so far as to capitalize the first letter of the word to distinguish it from our everyday ego identity and to highlight its association with things deep and sacred.¹⁰

Jung, an unconventional psychological theorist with a deep interest in spiritual matters, understood the sense of vocation as an urge to self-realization originating in the deep, unconscious, inner self of the human person. From his perspective, the voice of vocation is the voice of our inmost self or conscience, which, for him, was the psychological equivalent of God.¹¹ The Self functions like an inner voice that calls and guides us through a life-long process of self-discovery and self-realization that Jung called *individuation*. This process

of becoming ourselves requires an ever-growing consciousness of the unfolding truth of who we are, along with ongoing efforts to live our lives in accord with it. According to Edward Whitmont, the Self "... generates the individuation drive, the urge to become what we are, as well as the genuine individual conscience, which, in its psychological significance, is likened to *vox Dei*, the 'voice of God.'"¹²

The notion of an essential inner self calling for recognition and expression has a rich history in Christianity and diverse other spiritual traditions of the world. Thomas Merton writes:

In Sufism, Zen Buddhism and in many other religious or spiritual traditions, emphasis is placed on the call to fulfill certain obscure yet urgent potentialities in the ground of one's being, to "become someone" that one already (potentially) is, the person one is truly meant to be. Zen calls this awakening a recognition of "your original face before you were born."¹³

Conscience is another expression of the Voice encountered across diverse cultures and spiritual traditions, and it also bridges the disciplines of theology and psychology. In the popular imagination, conscience is associated with the "little voice in our heads" that helps us recognize the difference between right and wrong. It is helpful to make a distinction between *personal* and *social* conscience. Although both are dimensions of the same inner voice, the former can be seen as applying primarily to matters of private, personal morality, while the latter is more concerned with public morality and the common good.

Theologically, it can be said that God *uses* the inclinations of our true self, the promptings of conscience, to help and guide and call us through decisions big and small toward the goal or purpose for which we were created. According to

Russell Connors and Patrick McCormick, the ultimate goal is an ever-deeper and fuller sense of humanity that can be likened to *sainthood*:

In that most secret core of our being we are haunted by a moral siren summoning us to become more and more fully human, to transform ourselves into increasingly loving and principled adults, indeed, to become saints.¹⁴

A striking example of a Voice experience is found in the life of Gandhi, a man widely regarded as one of the most saintly, loving, principled persons of modern times. At the time, he was jailed in India's Yeravda Central Prison on charges related to his nonviolent resistance to the oppression of the "untouchables" (the destitute underclass in India) by unjust attitudes and policies rooted in Hindu tradition and Indian society. On the night of April 28, 1933, Gandhi had the following experience:

One experience stands quite distinctly in my memory. It relates to my twenty-one days' fast for the removal of untouchability. At about twelve o'clock in the night something wakes me up suddenly and some voice—within me or without, I cannot say—whispers, "Thou must go on fast." "How many days?" I ask. "Twenty-one days." "When does it begin?" I ask. "You begin tomorrow." I went quietly off to sleep after making the decision. I did not tell anything to my companions until after the morning prayer. I placed into their hands a slip of paper announcing my decision and asking them not to argue with me as the decision was irrevocable. Well, the doctors thought that I would not survive the fast. But

something within me said I would and that I must go forward. That kind of experience has never in my life happened before or after that date.

The first question that has puzzled many is about the voice of God. What was it? What did I hear? Was there any person I saw? If not, how was the voice conveyed to me? These are pertinent questions.

I saw no form. I have never tried for it, for I have always believed God to be without form. But what I did hear was like a voice from afar and yet quite near. It was as unmistakable as some human voice, definitely speaking to me, and irresistible. I was not dreaming at the time I heard the voice. The hearing of the voice was preceded by a terrific struggle within me. Suddenly the voice came upon me. I listened, made certain it was the voice and the struggle ceased. I was calm. The determination was made accordingly, the date and hour of the fast fixed. Joy came over me. . . . I felt refreshed.

Could I give any further evidence that it was truly the voice I heard and that it was not an echo of my own heated imagination? I have no further evidence to convince the skeptic. He [or she] is free to say it was all self-delusion. It may well have been so. I can offer no proof to the contrary. But I can say this: that the unanimous verdict of the whole world against me could not shake me from my belief that what I heard was the true Voice of God.¹⁵

Gandhi's formidable intellect and familiarity with skeptical modern views of such experiences make his account all the more compelling. Freud, for example, would likely have reduced Gandhi's voice experience to a form of wishful thinking or fantasy. In modern psychiatry, the experience might suggest

a worrisome loss of contact with "reality" and be labeled an "auditory hallucination."

Gandhi himself, however, was quite sure that he was not confused or out of touch with reality. Rather, he was convinced that he had actually been *in touch* with a deeper, intangible, mysterious dimension of reality that is of an order different from our usual categories of rational thinking and perception. About such experiences, William James wrote: "There is in the human consciousness a sense of reality, a feeling of objective presence, a perception of what we may call 'something there,' more deep and more general than any of the special and particular senses by which the current psychology supposes existent realities to be originally revealed."¹⁶

Most of us, of course, are not blessed with the depth of experience or unshakable sense of certitude and clarity of great-souled people like Gandhi. This does not mean, however, that the Voice does not speak to average human beings. It just means we need to listen for it more carefully.

LEARNING TO LISTEN

The saints, mystics, shamans, and prophets in our midst are gifted with unusual capacities for hearing and perception. Most of the rest of us, though, can probably recognize ourselves in the category of people Jesus diagnosed as "hard of hearing":

With them indeed is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah that says: "You will indeed listen, but never understand, and you will indeed look, but never perceive. For this people's heart has grown dull, and their ears are hard of hearing, and they have shut their eyes; so that they might not look with their eyes, and listen

with their ears, and understand with their heart and turn—and I would heal them."¹⁷

It takes practice and hard work to develop "eyes to see" and "ears to hear." To do so, we must commit ourselves to cultivating the art and skill of what William Least Heat Moon has called "the god-awful difficulty of just paying attention."¹⁸ It is not easy to overcome our inclinations toward dullness and numbness and complacency, to cultivate a heart that is open and responsive to calls when they come to us. Saint Ignatius Loyola likened this process of learning new ways of seeing and hearing and feeling to an education or "schooling" of the heart.¹⁹

To make any progress at all in this kind of education, we must possess an appropriate sense of humility, which is only fitting for those who have a lot to learn. In the Zen Buddhist tradition, the recommended attitude is referred to as "beginner's mind."²⁰ In the words of Isaiah, we must learn to "listen as those who are taught":

Morning by morning he wakens—
wakens my ear
to listen as those who are taught.
The Lord God has opened my ear.²¹

Time-honored spiritual practices of prayer and meditation can be seen as techniques for developing our listening skills so that we are able to listen more consciously and intentionally for the inner voice of the Spirit. On a psychological level, prayer is a way of focusing attention on our inner experience so as to establish a dialogue or connection with our inner self, to listen for messages that come to us from within. A parallel between prayer and the dialogue with the inner self is found in the diary of Etty Hillesum, a deeply spiritual

young Jewish woman from the Netherlands who was sent to the death camps by the Nazis during the Holocaust: "When I pray," Etty wrote, "I hold a silly, naïve, or deadly serious dialogue with what is deepest inside me, which for the sake of convenience I call God."²²

The Voice, however, does not speak only from within ourselves; it calls to us through other human beings, and so we must also learn to listen carefully and respectfully to what other people have to say. Eduardo Galeano captures the inherent sacredness and dignity and value of the *human voice*:

When it is genuine, when it is born of the need to speak, no one can stop the human voice. When denied a mouth, it speaks with the hands or the eyes, or the pores, or anything at all. Because every single one of us has something to say to the others, something that deserves to be celebrated or forgiven by others.²³

"Perhaps the single most important skill that should be taught to all persons," says Wilson Van Dusen, "is the capacity to really see, hear, and understand others. Such a skill is useful in dealing with everyone—friends, relatives, strangers."²⁴ The capacity to really listen, to put aside our own concerns for the moment, to feel or imagine ourselves in the world of another person and then to communicate our empathic understanding to that person in such a way that he or she feels *heard* or *understood* is the foundation for all genuine relationship and solidarity between human beings. It is also the primary ingredient in the healing process of psychotherapy, which has been called the "talking cure." Learning to listen well to other people is itself a kind of spiritual practice or discipline.

Finally, and most pertinent to the issue of social conscience, listening to others is the first step in any authentic

commitment to social justice. Dan Hartnett, an American Jesuit who lived and worked among the poor in the slums of Lima, Peru, for twenty-three years, says such commitments can grow only out of direct personal contact with suffering people and the distressing social realities in which they live. We start by listening to the personal stories and experiences of the poor:

In the area of justice, the turn to experience has a specific meaning. It suggests that a commitment to justice does not begin with abstract concepts, as important as these may be, but with attention to concrete experiences of social suffering. In other words, we take the first step in the direction of justice by intentionally shifting our attention from ourselves and by focusing on the daily experiences of those who suffer injustice. . . . It begins with the effort to put ourselves in the shoes of the other, especially those in extreme poverty or who are enduring painful forms of social exclusion. . . . A true concern for justice never begins with definitions but with real faces of injustice. . . . Without this kind of direct contact with everyday suffering, without sustained attention to real histories of pain, justice will never become something a person truly cares about, something that constitutes a real priority, something to which one is willing to make a commitment.²⁵

LEARNING TO LIVE

Listening carefully helps us learn how to live in this world. It helps us cultivate the kind of emotional, spiritual, and moral intelligence we need to make life choices that are suited to

who we are and who we are called to become. In an essay entitled "Learning to Live," Thomas Merton writes:

Life consists in learning to live on one's own, spontaneous, freewheeling: to do this one must recognize what is one's own—be familiar and at home with oneself. This means basically learning who one is, and learning what one has to offer to the contemporary world, and then learning how to make that offering valid.²⁶

Interestingly, Merton goes on to make a link between the kind of experiential learning that leads to such self-knowledge and *salvation*. For him, discerning our personal calling seems to be equivalent to finding the path to salvation. This idea is as old as the Psalms: "Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation."²⁷

But what *is* the secret to salvation? What path leads there? Asking such questions, we find ourselves in the position of the rich young man in the gospels who asked Jesus: "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"²⁸ Although the man was apparently a solid citizen who kept out of trouble and followed all the rules, the story tells us that he went away sad because he was not prepared for the answer Jesus gave him: "Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." As the story goes, when the young man heard this, "he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions." The implications of Jesus' shocking prescription for salvation will be explored in later chapters.

There are many ways to understand salvation, to imagine *how* we are saved and what we need to be saved *from*. The Christian tradition holds that one thing all of us need to be

saved from is *sin*. In the context of this exploration of vocation, it is useful to think of sin very broadly as encompassing all of the various ways in which human beings say "No" to the call of God. If vocation, as biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann has put it, is "finding a purpose for being in the world which is related to the purposes of God," then sin is the pursuit of a personal purpose or agenda that is working at cross-purposes with God.²⁹ We end up living in ways that are at odds or out of tune with God's unique purpose or design for our lives.³⁰

The psychological parallel to the spiritual concept of sin is *egocentrism*. "Psychologically," says John Sanford, "the egocentric state corresponds to the religious notion of original sin, for it is a state of affairs from which we must be saved if we are to live creatively and know God."³¹ In general, ego-centered inclinations can be seen as self-serving, self-promoting, self-protective ways of thinking and feeling which incline us toward life directions that are out of tune in some way with the call of God. Unfortunately, our egos seem to be "hard-wired" with this stubborn tendency to get caught up in superficial, inauthentic, selfish ways of being in the world.³² In contrast, when we are in tune with God and with the rhythms and inclinations of our inmost self or conscience, our lives are characterized by a progressive overcoming and surrender of egocentric concerns, the fruits of which are evident in an ever-deepening capacity for mature, authentic, and generous love of God and other people.

According to Sanford, there are three kinds of life experiences that have the potential to save us by breaking down our egocentricity. We can be changed or transformed, he says, "through suffering, through the recognition of a power greater than our own will at work in our lives, and by coming to care for someone other than ourself."³³ One form of suffering is the kind of psychological pain and discomfort that often

accompanies any genuine process of emotional or spiritual growth. Becoming a conscious person, growing in self-knowledge, often requires that we find the courage to face uncomfortable, painful, or even embarrassing truths about ourselves that our fragile egos would prefer not to acknowledge or admit, even to ourselves.

Learning to love, becoming a loving person, also understandably stirs up considerable fear and resistance in our egos because opening ourselves to love is an inherently risky venture that makes us vulnerable to loss and hurt and disappointment. Mature love also often calls upon us to make the sacrifice of putting the needs of others before the needs and wishes of our own egos.

Finally, following the Voice ultimately requires that we let go of our own will or wishes in order to submit or surrender to the will of a power greater than our own ego—potentially at considerable personal cost. The most poignant example of this in the scriptures is Jesus' anguished prayer in the garden of Gethsemane: "Not my will, but yours be done."³⁴

Sin and egocentrism, however, are not just individual matters. There are also social dimensions of sin and salvation. There are, for example, numerous forms of *social sin*, collective manifestations of selfishness that are harmful to the human community and the common good. Merton suggests that our individual salvation is integrally bound up with our participation in a wider collective process of healing and redemption of this troubled world in which we live. In a provocative reflection on the potential for higher education to contribute to such saving efforts, he writes:

To put it in even more outrageous terms, the function of the university is to help men and women to save their souls and, in so doing, to save their society. From what? From the hell of meaninglessness, of obsession,

of complex artifice, of systematic lying, of criminal evasions and neglects, of self-destructive futilities.³⁵

It is not hard to think of contemporary examples of the various social ills or "hells" on Merton's list. My students, for example, frequently express dismay about the sense of meaninglessness and emptiness in much of American popular culture; they worry about being seduced into mindless ways of living and working that are at odds with their deeper values and convictions. "Obsession" can be seen in the unhealthy patterns of overwork and overconsumption in American culture. These have given rise to an epidemic of "influenza," which has been defined as "a painful, contagious, socially transmitted condition of overload, debt, anxiety, and waste resulting from the dogged pursuit of more."³⁶ Another American obsession is *national security*, which, especially since the 9/11 tragedy, has opened its own "Pandora's box" of complex artifice (trickery, pretense), systematic lying, criminal evasions and neglects, and self-destructive futilities in our country's conduct of the so-called "War on Terror." Some unique issues of conscience in the post-9/11 world will be examined in chapter 9.

In *Educating for Life: A Spiritual Vision for Every Teacher and Parent*, Thomas Groome suggests that we "consider the worthiest purpose of education as that learners might become fully alive human beings who help to create a society that serves the common good."³⁷ Any program or person in a position to teach or mentor young people can be of assistance in such "educating for life." In *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams*, Sharon Daloz Parks explores the potential for "mentoring communities" to help young adults grapple with the big questions of personal purpose, meaning, and social concern so that they may "discern a vision of the potential of life: the world as it ought to be and the self as it might become."³⁸ This type

of learning engages the whole person—not just the head but also the heart and soul of the learner. Thomas Moore calls it “deep education.”³⁹

“Education in this sense,” says Merton, “means more than learning, and for such education, one is awarded no degree. One graduates by rising from the dead.”⁴⁰ The kind of resurrection he is talking about, I think, is a process that potentially begins right here, right now, for each of us, while we are alive.

2

SACRED VOICES

Listen, So That You May Live

If reality speaks and God can speak in it, especially when it cries out, then listening to it is a necessary way of realizing our humanity.

—Jon Sobrino, *Where Is God?*¹

Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live.

—Isaiah 55:2–3

IN THE GOSPELS, there is often a great sense of urgency about Jesus and his message. It seems that Jesus wanted people to listen to him as if their very souls depended on it. In one memorable scene, he calls out to the crowd: “Let anyone with ears to hear *listen!*”² The people of first-century Galilee were blessed with the privilege of actually experiencing Jesus in person, and so his exhortation was quite straightforward: they were to incline their ears and hearts and minds in his direction and pay very careful attention, so as not to miss an incredible spiritual opportunity.

But what about us? Where do we listen for the Voice today? To what, or to whom, should we direct our attention? In this chapter I want to explore three fruitful places