

On January 16, 2005 I had the privilege of addressing Seton Hall University's Masters in Corporate Communications graduates. It was an occasion to reflect on the common elements of our individual vocations. The following is an edited version of the talk.

The Structure of Our Vocations

1. I believe our lives are more like Tom Hanks in *Saving Private Ryan* than like Kramer, Jerry Seinfeld's neighbor; more like Frodo Baggins, in *Lord of the Rings*, than like Elaine or George.

In *Saving Private Ryan*, Tom Hanks is sent by his commanders on a mission to save the last remaining Ryan brother on D-Day plus one. In ***Lord of the Rings*** the diminutive hobbit, Frodo Baggins, is given the mission of carrying the one ring that could bind all rings to its destruction lest it be captured by the Dark Lord of Mordor. I am not suggesting that our lives could or should have an equal number of battles, but I do believe that like them we have been given a mission, that our lives serve a higher purpose, and that, like the hobbits, there is more to us than meets the eye. At some point in life we also experience a sense of being called, of being bidden to do a task for the great king. If it does not happen, we begin to wonder if we have missed our call.

2. What our calling "is" is an ongoing question, even for those who have just earned their Masters degree. Since I became the first director of Seton Hall's ***Center for Vocation and Servant Leadership***, I have done some thinking about what it means to have a vocation. I would like to share some of my conclusions that may help you with your own discernment of your calling.

3. Allow me to start my explanation with a question posed to me. Shortly after becoming the Director of the Center, I had the occasion to explain to a group of prominent alums that our Center made students more aware that each of them had a personal vocation. Afterwards, one of them took me aside to object: he had had a successful career selling insurance, yet he did not feel that he had a calling to that. Moreover it seemed fatalistic or at least an infringement on free will to have such a life assignment. At the time, I did not have a good answer for him; I think I have a better one now that I will share with you.

4. First, a definition: by vocation I mean each person's invitation from God to play a part in His plan for a lasting Kingdom. Vocation by this definition

has four aspects. First, it is an invitation or call. “To call” is the literal meaning of the Latin word *Vocatio*. The English “calling” is an appropriate synonym. Now a “calling” implies two persons and that gives us the next two parts of our definition.

The second aspect is the person who is called. A vocation entails a personal call to each of us individually. Even the Blues Brothers in a comical way took this seriously.

The third aspect is the One who calls. A vocation is a call from the one who above all has the right to call us, Our Father in heaven. It is rarely a dramatic experience like that of St. Paul or Joan of Arc. It often comes from a small inner voice or is recognized only in retrospect. Yet, we recognize it as something being asked of us and not simply equal to what we want. This is only true, however, until we discover our deepest desires and realize that God’s call is consistent with our deepest desires.

Finally, the call is important because it serves God’s ultimate purpose of gathering the whole human family home for celebration without end. We sense that, as small or ordinary as our call may be, it is the most important thing for us to do, and if done, then we can be at peace.

5. While each call is unique, I think there are three aspects common to every vocation. They are to nurture and guard life, to serve the common good by the work of our hands, and to enter upon a spiritual journey. This can be considered a structure or foundation common to every vocation. In short, we are all called to be guardians, gardeners, and pilgrims: to nurture life, to serve with our work, and to not settle here.

6. The first aspect of vocation for all of us is to nurture life. The most fundamental instance of this is the bearing and raising of children. This is the first “call” of God to Adam and Eve in Genesis; “God blessed them, and God said to them ‘be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth . . .’” (Gen. 1:28). It is fitting that this first vocation is part of the creation story, for by parenting we cooperate with God in the most profound act of creation.

For most people, parenting is the most meaningful thing they do. Even people in powerful or glamorous professions, usually discover that raising children is the most rewarding thing they will do. It is an awesome responsibility to love, protect, educate, and liberate a child. It is the source

of our greatest joys and deepest sorrows. The call to nurture life, however, is not only fulfilled by being parents, but also as aunts and uncles, friends and neighbors, brothers and sisters, teachers and nurses. Hilary is right, the proverb is fitting: it takes a village.

7. The second aspect of vocation involves the work of our hands. In Genesis, Chapter 2, it says that God settles Adam in the Garden of Eden to “cultivate and care for it” (Gen. 2:15). By referring to this aspect of vocation with the traditional phrase “the work of our hands” I intend to include all the work we do with our hands, head, and back. We are called to be the stewards of creation, the caretakers in God’s garden. We have the responsibility to maintain a fit habitation for the human family and to even make improvements with the patience shown by a good farmer.

This second aspect of vocation is what most of us think of, when we think about a calling in life. This aspect of vocation encompasses all the different careers that serve the common good. There is a bewildering number; consider not only the butcher, baker, and candlestick maker, but also the astrophysicist and genome decoder, riverboat captain and airline pilot, the bell captain and zoo keeper, nor should we overlook the Master of Communications. All these serve the common good and make this world a more fit place for the human family.

8. The third aspect of vocation is to enter upon a spiritual journey. The main way to progress on this pilgrimage is to help others on their spiritual journey. It is the paradoxical logic of the gospel that we only advance on our spiritual journey by helping someone else on theirs, we find our life by losing it, we reach heaven only by helping others reach heaven.

We all have a vocation to say as Socrates did to the jury, that it is more important to care for the health of our soul than for the health of our body. We all share in the vocation of Moses, who God called to lead His people out of bondage in Egypt and into the Promised Land. What Moses did in a human way foreshadowed what Jesus would do in an eternal way. Jesus leads us from the city of man to the City of God.

The temptation will always be to mistake this life as the place to build our lasting city. We are tempted but mistaken to think that a fortune here is better than pennies in heaven.

This aspect of vocation is exemplified by the priests, ministers, rabbis, and lay ministers who dedicate their lives to helping the rest of us on our spiritual journey.

9. There are several advantages to understanding every vocation as having three aspects. First, this division puts vocation in balance by including the calls to nurture and spiritual journey. It is an imbalance to think of vocation only in terms of career. This is a common mistake, especially in the professional education environment where the focus is on career.

10. Second, this balanced view of vocation helps to show that “having a vocation” does not mean we must imitate Mother Theresa vocation. Her service to the poor is remarkable but it is not the vocation of most people. Consider that our society needs insurance salesmen, bankers, teachers, nurses, auto mechanics, and a thousand other services. Would that we all had Mother Theresa’s compassion, but if we all had her vocation, who would mend our bones, not to mention fix our car.

11. Third, this view allows one aspect of vocation to be understood as primary without dismissing the other two parts. This is our usual experience and helps us to understand our lives. One’s vocation may be primarily to be a parent (I think my mother rightly understands her life that way), while also involving a call to serve the common good and enter upon a spiritual journey.

Another person’s vocation may be primarily to make the world a healthier place, which is the second aspect of vocation. They might do this through providing safe drinking water for the many that lack it, or discovering a cure for AIDS.

12. These advantages allows me to answer the question of the alumnus, who wondered in what sense everyone has a vocation. Recall that in his experience he did not think he had a call to sell insurance. This salesman, now retired, has a successful marriage and is a father and grandfather of well adjusted children. The family has been generous to a number of good causes. His mistake was to think of vocation only in terms of career. I suspect his primary calling was to be a good husband and father, that the job he did was a secondary aspect of his calling and might have been satisfied as well by a different job. He also had the calling to help others on life’s spiritual journey. I suspect he and his wife did this first and foremost with their

children and then in other ways with family, friends, and clients. In his retirement he has used his time and savings to support a number of charities.

13. A final advantage of seeing our callings in these three aspects is to understand how the first two find their full importance in the third. Thus our call to nurture life, and work for the common good, find their ultimate purpose in the goal of our pilgrimage, the good of everlasting light and life in community with our Father in heaven.

Although a vocation is deeply personal and can only be answered by the one called, the community benefits from the discussion of such a possibility. We could all benefit, I believe, by reflecting on how we are called to be a guardian, a gardener, and a pilgrim. I look forward to seeing you, and being helped by you, along our pilgrim way.