



TAKING OFF OUR MASKS

LEARNING to LIVE into VOCATIONS of LOVE

by **CHRISTY YATES**



INTRODUCTION

As a college student at the white-pillared, Jefferson-storied University of Virginia (UVA) in the late 1990s, I pinpointed the locus of my understanding and imagination around vocation through one quote: Frederick Buechner's now ubiquitous saying, "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." I would see the quote everywhere, earnestly tacked to dorm room doors, walls, and mirrors, usually alongside Philippians 4:13: "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." Each time I read it, the words would summon all the romantic and idealistic hopes and dreams of my young faith. Coming from a white, middle-class background like most of my Christian friends, this statement also affirmed the architecture of our childhoods. We could seemingly be or do anything, not just through our own grit and determination, but through the structures of our education, social networks, and accumulated wealth. All the marketing slogans birthed at the time—Nike's Just Do it; the Army's, Be all that you can be—sustained a vision of vocation that was endlessly hopeful, all possibility.

Poor Buechner likely never intended that sort of hermeneutic extrapolation. He was a writer who knew suffering and cared deeply about honesty. But, as I've lived a life beyond the confines of UVA, working with college students in diverse urban centers from Anacostia, DC to Lynn, Massachusetts, from Vancouver, British Columbia to Memphis, Tennessee, and now full circle back to Charlottesville, Virginia, I've come to see vocation in a much more complex and expansive way—a way that engages the paradoxes of the particular and the universal, acknowledges strengths as well as sufferings, constraints alongside freedoms, calling us all to live in light of our dying.

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I. PRACTICES

Horizons Fellows: Vocational Discernment through Relational Discipleship

For over 25 years, Theological Horizons, a non-profit ministry based at the Bonhoeffer House in Charlottesville, Virginia, has offered hospitality and community to those inside and outside the academy desiring to connect faith, thought, and life. Founded by author and speaker Karen Wright Marsh and her husband, Civil Rights and Bonhoeffer scholar Charles Marsh, Theological Horizons has been a convener both on the grounds of the University of Virginia (UVA) as well as throughout the country of preeminent scholars, activists, artists, and thought leaders. Sensing a need to offer a space of reflection for students before they graduated, Karen and Charles Marsh started the Horizons Fellows Program. Through an application process, up to 12 students are selected to journey together, alongside community mentors, as a cohort.

Some of the hallmarks of the program include:

- > A 24-hour fall retreat at Corhaven Retreat Farm where we simply share our stories and hear from Rev. Bill Haley on a theology of vocation
- > Monthly conversations, often with a local guest speaker, around issues of faith and calling (see curriculum overview below)
- > Monthly meetings with a matched community mentor in their field of interest
- > Creation of a reflective blog post for online publication through Theological Horizons
- > Creation of a "personal faith & calling statement" at the end of the year

The program is open to anyone—those grounded in a strong Christian faith, seekers, and those questioning it all. We've almost always had a beautiful blend of theological leanings, gender, ethnicities, and sexual orientations. But what marks all our students is an earnest desire to consider how a generously Orthodox Christian faith speaks to their current moment and what it means to live a faithful life well.

Our curriculum flows from the internal to the external, from gazing inward to looking outward. At our fall retreat, Rev. Bill Haley reminds us that the first of the four vocations that come to us all (whether or not you are paid) is to "Be in relationship with God." While knowing ourselves is always elusive and a bit of mystery, we feel that it's important to begin asking questions: What narratives have shaped my understanding of who I am and what my vocation looks like? Of what it means to love God with my whole being? We consider our deepest longings and how our attentions shape them. Then we explore the narratives of race and privilege, acknowledging that to be a Christian in America involves taking a hard, honest look at our patterns of white supremacy and how, contrary to Scripture, Black and Brown lives haven't mattered to dominant culture.

In the spring, we turn our gaze outward, shifting from the first to the second commandment: What does it mean to love our neighbor as ourselves? How do we do that in the places we choose to live? Amidst deep differences? And, given all that is wrong and broken in the world, how do we love our neighbors with hope? Rev. Haley explains to us that after our first calling to be in relationship to God, are the calls to "Be the presence of Christ in the World" and to "Bring the Kingdom of God (shalom) to the world." Finally, he challenges us to follow Saint Therese of Lisieux's passionate proclamation: "My vocation is love!"

While your vocation can change in different seasons, these callings to be in relationship with God, to live out the love of Christ to our neighbors and help bring about shalom—full creational flourishing—are always our vocation. Our deep desire is that students leave this intimate and quiet space for reflection during their final year of college with a greater understanding of their particular calling, yes, but especially of these general callings that come to us all as Christ-followers each day.

Perkins Fellows: Vocational Discernment through Community Engagement

When I joined the community of Theological Horizons, my task was to shepherd and develop the Horizons Fellows program. Given my background in service-learning with college students, I wondered how to also offer students of faith an opportunity to connect their vocational discernment with community engagement. At that time, service was primarily coordinated for all UVA students through Madison House, a non-profit that partners with the University. For students of faith, one-week or one-day service trips were the primary way to practice and reflect upon loving our neighbor as ourselves.

What seemed to be missing was a highly relational, mutual, and reflective experience where students could partner with one service organization in the city for the entire academic year. Given our mutual love for the life and vision of Dr. John and Vera Mae Perkins, Karen and Charles Marsh were delighted to offer a space to host a new program that would actively embed student learning within the community. The Perkins Fellows program pairs students with local non-profits where they regularly serve each week. Aspects of the program include:

- > Perkins Plunge – a trek around the city at the beginning of the year that involves hearing stories from our community partners, learning the city’s history, eating its flavors, and praying for a year of engaged learning ahead
- > At least three hours a week of service at various community organizations like Habitat for Humanity, The Haven (day shelter for those without homes), Abundant Life Ministries (holistic ministry to residents of the Prospect Neighborhood), New City Arts (ecumenical community arts organization & gallery), etc.
- > Monthly book discussion and reflection on service. Books have included *The Justice Calling: Where Passions Meets Perseverance*; *Austin Channing Brown’s, I’m Still Here: Black Dignity in a World Made for Whiteness*; *Welcoming Justice: God’s Movement Toward Beloved Community*, and more.
- > Attendance at the annual Christian Community Development Association conference
- > January mini retreat at Richmond Hill, an urban retreat center in Richmond, Virginia
- > Creation of a reflective blog post for online publication through Theological Horizons
- > Creation of a “personal faith & calling statement” at the end of the year

II. EMERGING PHILOSOPHIES

Naming the Narratives

»»» *“Love takes off the masks we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within...We are very cruelly trapped between what we would like to be and what we actually are.” James Baldwin*

“Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.” Apostle Paul, Romans 12:2 (NIV)

Narratives are the stories we live in. As meaning-making people, we can’t exist without them. Ask any survivor of trauma and you will likely learn that their final step in healing and moving forward came from making meaning out of the experience, of folding the pain into a sense-making narrative of their life. Narratives shape our views and habits of everything—not only our vision of vocation, but also our very vision of who we are in relation to God, creation, and others.

Before we go too far in our journey together, we must begin by telling our stories. Our Fellows always start the year sharing their stories which involves, as James Baldwin claimed in an interview with Mavis Nicholson in 1987, “tak[ing] off the masks we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within...”. For 24 hours, I take our group of students, many of them strangers, to a beautiful, remote farm. Our agenda is simple: we each take whatever time we need to share our stories of how we ended up at that very retreat in whatever way we feel comfortable sharing. What always amazes me is how quickly we take off our masks. One Fellow writes:

»»» *Our stories did not have to conform to a specific length or format, which I found so freeing. Growing up, I thought my story had to mirror what I had*

come to know as the archetype for a Christian testimony: a rip-roaring turn of events eclipsed by the earth shattering aha moment where ‘everything clicked.’ Instead, I heard beautifully honest impressions on life and how people have come into relationship with their Creator over time. I heard people share things they have never before shared for fear of being judged or written off. More importantly, I saw people respond to these stories with kindness and an openness to learn. —Zach

Alongside sharing our personal stories, it’s equally important to affirm the Biblical one. And so, at the beginning of the year, we remind ourselves that we are created by the Trinitarian God to be in relationship with God, with the creation and with one another. And then we remember that all creation is fallen—each one of us as individuals as well as collectively, because our systems and structures are made up of many individuals. Walter Wink, in his trilogy of books on the *Powers* explains that what the Bible refers to as *the principalities and the powers* can be seen today in the power of our social systems and structures.²⁴ Sin affects us both individually and institutionally, both physically and spiritually. But, as Christians, we believe that while all of us live with individual and systemic brokenness, we paradoxically live with the alternative reality of God’s redeeming and restorative work through Jesus, the crucified and risen Christ.

Christians, especially white Protestant Christians from my experience, have tended to emphasize the individual over the collective, the spiritual over the physical. As these tendencies have played out in our narratives, the exultation of personal strengths and successes seems to have dominated our understanding of vocational discernment. Our faith has been an overly spiritualized self-actualization tool rather than an incarnational daily reality rooted in community. And this has shaped our views of vocation.

VOCATION (OR CALLING) GOES FAR BEYOND FINDING A COMPATIBLE CAREER PATH.

In my understanding, vocation (or calling) goes far beyond finding a compatible career path. But some, like my college cohort in the 90’s, developed a narrative that fed into Western autonomy and self-fulfillment. Meyers-Briggs and other strengths tests certainly have their value, but they often idealize our prospects for getting paid to do something we are deeply passionate about and confine us to rigid views of ourselves and others. In a *New Republic* article entitled, “Don’t Search for ‘Purpose.’ You will Fail,” John Malesic, a Theological Horizons alumnus and UVA PhD, writes:

»»» *We would be better off if we liberated work from the moral weight of ‘purpose.’ There is dignity in the struggle just to get the objective [the world needs it, and I can get paid for it] and subjective [I’m good at it, and I love it] elements of our work closer to each other. If we’re lucky, then we will be exploited for what we are good at, and we will meet someone else’s need through our own exhaustion. There is cause for celebration in that.²⁵*

Malesic’s insights highlight the hubristic danger of pushing ourselves to hold out for that far-off perfect time when our passions, talents, the world’s needs, and a salary all come together—often summed up in that Buechner quote.

Along with this, I believe, comes the destructive corresponding narrative of shame. From social scientist Brené Brown to psychiatrist Curt Thompson, our cultural milieu, mixed with harmful theological notions, has done a good job of making us feel that we are not valued or worthy of love. If your narrative of what it means to live a good life focuses

only on what you alone can achieve with your uniquely packaged array of strengths and passions, the hidden failures and set-backs, griefs and constraints can really add to one's feeling of worthlessness and shame. Our sisters and brothers of color have perhaps felt this even more deeply as the micro and macro traumas of living while Black or Brown are born out in their bodies each day.

Freeing ourselves from these false narratives is a lifelong endeavor, but hopefully it begins to release us to pursue a more honest way. Acknowledging our *belovedness* in God, we can walk humbly each day to love God alongside loving our neighbor as ourselves. This is a vision of vocation that is accessible to all of us, each and every day.

As I've approached vocational discernment with students, naming the narratives up front that have shaped our understandings, not only of vocation, but of what it means to be a Christian and a human being, is so crucial. Those young adults hailing from more privilege often must first acknowledge the narrative of success that has trapped them and name places of weakness and constraint. Those joining us from more challenged backgrounds often must first dismantle narratives of injustice and shame and claim their strengths and possibilities. It's an ongoing process and one that always requires humility to question one's own views as well as patience to listen and attend to the Biblical narrative alongside the stories of our sisters and brothers.

»» It is not a bad thing—in fact, it is a beautiful thing—that we all get a testimony, a 'gospel according to...', but it can be an uncomfortable thing. That is not bad either. It seems to me that, perhaps more than ever, we need to get comfortable being uncomfortable and get better at listening to others' stories. My gospel story may step on your toes. Yours may force me to confront my blind-spots and privilege. Someone else's may convince me that I try too hard to put the Holy Spirit in a box, that actually the Spirit is a reckless, mysterious force my rational mind cannot always comprehend.

As I listened to the others' stories, I noticed a lot of common themes—mercy, justice, love, humility, serving our neighbors—but there was also quite a diversity of thoughts. Some people placed a heavier emphasis on social justice, others on learning to accept and love the person God made them to be. We had a lot of the same beliefs, and we also had different beliefs. In the words of Rachel Held Evans, 'the church is not a group of people who believe all the same things; the church is a group of people caught up in the same story, with Jesus at the center.'²⁶

God did not make us to have identical faith statements and testimonies. Or for our own to remain stagnant. If I were to re-write my faith statement even a year from now, it would likely look quite different. I am not here to question, change, or judge your—or anyone else's—'gospel according to...' And I don't need to feel threatened by it. Because I trust that God is working to bring together our individual stories into the larger, sweeping story of Jesus Christ, I can stop trying to put a lid on it, to contain it or define its contours. I get to listen and learn from others' gospel stories instead.

Maybe the best way to understand the Gospel is to return to story and metaphor: think of the Gospel as a clear light that is refracted in the hearts of believers to create a kaleidoscope of color. Or, think of the Gospel as a beautiful, chaotic, messy quilt of all God's people's stories (past and present). They intertwine, tangle, and fray at the seams. Ultimately, our stories are all sewn together with the same thread: Jesus Christ. Different as they are, our stories all come back to Jesus—and Jesus changes everything. —Sarah, alumna

Constraints, Griefs, & Death

To be human is to be constrained. We are fragile and vulnerable and headed toward death daily. Yet, we were created for a life of flourishing; everything in us screams out to live. Ernest Becker received the Pulitzer Prize in 1974 for his work, *The Denial of Death*, where he famously calls humans the "gods who [expletive deleted]."²⁷ We live within the tension of being capable of transcendent and beautiful thinking, yet our bodies daily decay until our last breath. Our dominant and still mostly white culture wants to turn a blind eye toward our limits and suffering. Our whole capitalistic system, in fact, is based on the idea of scarcity and the fear of not having enough. The negative narrative gets spun that there is not enough to go around so even when we have what we need, we feel it's not enough. As long as we live in the sinful hierarchical structures we create, there will always be a sense that we don't have enough, alongside the reality that many actually don't have enough.

In her response to Anne-Marie Slaughter's *Atlantic Monthly* cover article about women having it all, author Kate Harris pushes into the idea that considering our constraints could help define the shape of our calling.²⁸ As followers of Christ, we can be inspired through the Incarnation because:

»» We see a God who constrained himself in flesh, in history, in time and place, and was made man. He consented to this as an act of will—not effort, mind you—to demonstrate that His love is unbounded, but also to highlight the bounds of what it is to be human. By taking on bone and blood, He gave our human constraints dignity and purpose, and He also tells us something fundamentally true about our circumstance. We are not—in this life at least—infinite beings. We cannot do, or have, or accomplish, all that we want by our own humble means.²⁹

Whether it's by constraints to a particular place, as Wendell Berry might encourage, or to the limits of a terminal illness, an ailing parent, a spouse's job, or parenting children—noting the limits of our lives can paradoxically offer us a more focused and purposed understanding of our vocation.

Sometimes, those constraints are deeply unjust and must be lamented and pushed against collectively. Sometimes, they are simply random and unexplainable like Kate Bowler's cancer diagnosis that she discusses in her book, *Everything Happens for a Reason and Other Lies I've Loved*.³⁰ Death remains our largest looming constraint. One of the things we all know for certain about our vocation is that we are all living toward death. How can such knowledge free us to live more fully in the present?

I can still remember having this conversation with a dozen 22-year-olds gathered on the campus of the University of Virginia one fall. We turned this idea of death around and around as the reveling and partying of their peers echoed outside. But something beautiful was happening in that space, and they sensed a deeper connection with themselves and the other Fellows as we acknowledged our mortality. There is a creeping entitlement that, as Bowler points out in her book, is a kind of prosperity gospel. If we're honest, we think that if we've played the rules of the game well, we shouldn't have to suffer. And, death, the greatest suffering, will almost always take us by surprise.

Many in this country really do face death daily, however, whether they are struggling to evade bullets as Patrick B. Reyes writes of his childhood, our friends of color who negotiate living while Black, or perhaps those facing addiction or a cancer diagnosis behind a manicured lawn with a padded 401K. This is where our individual stories are so important to listen to and generalizations fall short. Some of our young adults may

need a vocational call to just stay alive, to survive, as Reyes, puts it. These folks might not need to be reminded about the realities of death, constraints, or grief when they are in their faces daily; they might, instead, need to be offered a renewed vision to live.³¹ The Black church in particular has been a tremendously underused resource to the broader, whiter church on how to experience hope amidst deep and unjust suffering (see Esau McCauley's work, *Reading While Black: African American Biblical Interpretation as an Exercise of Hope*).³² Former Dean of the Chapel at Boston University and beloved mystical theologian Howard Thurman gives us this prayer for courage that is a powerful call to live for our young adults who face big and small deaths all too regularly:

Give me the courage to live! Really live—not merely exist.
 Live dangerously.
 Scorning risk!
 Live honestly.
 Daring the truth—
 Particularly the truth of myself.
 Live resiliently—
 Ever changing, ever growing, ever adapting.
 Enduring the pain of change.
 As though 'twere the travail of birth.
 Give me the courage to live,
 Give me the strength to be free
 And endure the burden of freedom
 And the loneliness of those without chains;
 Let me not be trapped by success
 Nor by failure, nor pleasure, nor grief,
 Nor malice, nor praise, nor remorse!
 Give me the courage to go on!
 Facing all that waits on the trail -
 Going eagerly, joyously on,
 Without anger or fear or regret
 Taking what life gives,
 Spending myself to the full,
 Head high, spirit winged, ...
 Gracious God, hear my prayer;
 Give me the courage to live.³³

As a visual artist, I often think about the negative space around an object I'm painting as equally important to its essence. Perhaps we should give equal attention to those constraints and injustices that shape who we are, naming them, rather than just focusing our vision on our strengths. As people of incarnational faith, our vocations, too, are embodied—defects, limits, and all. What might it look like for us to consider and name, out loud, the griefs, constraints, injustices, and death that shape our lives? How might that free us to love God and our neighbors as ourselves more fully and honestly?

»»» *My Fellows experience was unconventional, I think, in that my mentor found out she had cancer partway through our first semester together. At the time, I was briefly worried that interacting with someone so sick would put me in a position I was not prepared to handle, would have the potential to set me up for grief and helplessness should something unexpected happen to her. But the truth is that the Fellows program and God's faithfulness in granting me time with this no-nonsense, wise, whimsical soul, showed me that support can and should go both ways. Our brief times together became almost call-and-response interactions where the melodies of conversation and exchange were constantly evolving, and consistently fruitful. There is no way, I now realize,*

to grow deeper in relationship with someone in a different life stage from you and not feel the bleeding over of experiences, lessons learned, battles of the soul. The Fellows program taught me that vocational mentoring, and any mentoring relationship, need not be an unequal exchange, but instead can act as a conduit for mutual care and connection. —Elena, Alumna

Embracing Doubt & Delight

DOUBT

I would say [the Horizons Fellows Program] was one of the first spaces that modeled for me that it is ok to not be ok, that life is indeed not as clear as we sometimes think it ought to be, and that God uses community to keep us sane through all the mystery. —Cameron, Horizons Fellow Alumna



Like a warm, soft blanket, there is such an allure to certainty. To be sure about something takes so much less effort than to do the hard work of constant questioning and listening. America's culture wars and our growing polarization are fueled in part by certainty. Can you imagine fighting so aggressively for something you have lingering doubts about?

I take very seriously Jesus' final prayer for believers in John 17 that we all be one, just as Jesus and the Creator are one. While the certainty of your belovedness by God is vital, what if humility and openness to doubt were more ingrained in our spiritual practices? Perhaps our splits and schisms might lessen.

The poet, John Keats, once proposed in a letter written to his brother in 1817 that perhaps the greatest achievement in writing was the ability (he called it a "negative capability") to live into "uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason." Perhaps this is true with vocation too. One Fellow writes:

»»» *The Fellows program for me was one of the first places where I felt welcomed in my questioning and doubt. The first place where being a follower of Jesus never had to mean that I had my faith figured out or my life plans nailed down. The first place where my mind was encouraged to engage fully—not selectively—with biblical truths and their implications. I am SO immensely grateful for the safety, the haven, that it provided me. I don't know how else to describe my year preceding the Fellows program other than an immense abyss. I was terrified, to the point of panic attacks and psychiatric intervention, as I felt my feeble faith crumble around me in the wake of death, break ups, and the classic UVA over-commitment to extracurriculars. Theological Horizons was my stopgap and my refuge in the year following. My year in the Fellows program didn't answer all my questions or solve all my problems. But it was a year of being seen, being known, and being deeply loved by my fellow Fellows, my mentors, and Christy in spite of what she knew about me. —Courtney, Alumna*

Another Fellow helps explain the value of embracing doubt within our religious communities:

»» *This question raising and doubting is sacred work. It is also human work. To doubt, to struggle, to ask questions about the world around us—this is how we better understand each other and God, broaden our horizons, and develop empathy. This work is not only what makes us essentially human, but also what makes us fundamentally humane. Journalist and civil rights activist Eugene Patterson said, ‘We don’t become more spiritual by becoming less human.’ What I learned in my classrooms helped me cultivate and develop my humanity in a way that made me dive deeper spiritually.*

In the last four years at UVA, I’ve asked and doubted, and I’ll doubt and ask some more. It is risky to ask questions. I can’t expect to wrestle with God and walk away unscathed. Jacob certainly didn’t; he limped the rest of his life from the wounds he acquired in his fight with God. I may just lose my faith if I keep pressing to understand why certain Biblical stories make God seem just fine with the Israelites annihilating entire Indigenous tribes in Canaan, for example. But I will certainly lose my faith, even if quietly and without fanfare, if I silence and ignore my qualms and questions.

Rachel Held Evans argues that the ‘hardest part of religious doubt’ is not feeling isolated from God but from your community. What a revelation, and one that has given me overwhelming cause for gratitude. Thank you to the mentors, friends, and communities that gave me the freedom, encouragement, and courage to doubt my faith. Thank you for not isolating me when I asked, ‘But why?’ when I demanded more, when I insisted, like doubting Thomas, on touching Jesus’ hands for the nail marks, for pressing my hand to His side to feel the wound left by the soldier who pierced him. They could have isolated me—told me my doubts were dangerous—but they welcomed my doubting self with grace and humility instead. The graceful spirit of these people and organizations watered my soul when it thirsted and showed me the light when I was enveloped in darkness. They helped me to grow. Because of this posture of openness, because of the communities and individuals who allowed me to brashly and unabashedly spit my questions in God’s face, I have come out of college exclaiming, like the father of the boy Jesus healed of an impure spirit, ‘I do believe; help me with my unbelief!’ (Mark 9:24). —Sarah, Alumna

DELIGHT

*‘There must be always remaining in every life, some place for the singing of angels, some place for that which in itself is breathless and beautiful...’
—Howard Thurman*



There is something in delight that connects with doubt. Where doubt seems scary in the abstract face of faith, delight seems frivolous in the concrete realities of injustice, a “royal waste of time” as Marva Dawn puts it in her book.³⁴ There was a time when I considered my own love for drawing and painting in this suspicious way. Experiencing

the injustices of race and poverty in inner-city Boston and Kenya during my early years, I cultivated a passion for social justice work while pushing aside artmaking. What could art do to help put things right? In graduate school, art helped me expand my limited vision. I allowed myself to return to art and to beauty. There, I cultivated a Christian imagination alongside building Christian communities, painting the landscape alongside urban anthropology and missions. And I was introduced to others who were connecting the seemingly disparate worlds of justice and beauty.

A community of shalom, for one thing, is a responsible community: where shalom exists, there we enact our responsibilities to one another, to God, and to nature. But shalom is more than that. It is fully present only where there is delight and joy in those relationships. Delight, you might say, is active participation in our God-given vocation to love. Furthermore, if we are made in the image of God and our introduction to God’s being in Scriptures is that God created and then God went on to deem the creation good (or, put another way, God enjoyed the result!), it seems we should pay attention to this delight modeled by the Source of all life.

Dorothy Day, the untiring and inspiring social justice worker, is a beautiful example of this delight. Day’s biographer Robert Ellsberg captures this in an introduction to *By Little and By Little*, her selected writings:

»» *She knew what needed to be taken seriously. But she was never too serious to forget what Ruskin called ‘the duty of delight.’ In the face of desperate suffering in the world, she felt we had a special obligation to attend to life’s joys and beauties. ‘We would be contributing to the misery of the world if we failed to rejoice in the sun, the moon, and the stars, in the rivers which surround this island on which we live, in the cool breezes of the bay.’ Frequently, in her column, she cited Dostoevsky’s words: ‘The world will be saved by beauty.’*

Ellsberg goes on to recount a story of Day giving a diamond ring that had been donated to the Catholic Worker to a poor, lonely old woman. When someone argued that the ring could have paid for her rent for a year, she responded that the woman had her dignity and could use it for rent or for a trip to the Bahamas! Day posed, “Do you suppose God created diamonds only for the rich?”³⁵

And so, beauty, delight, art, and play are all vital parts of our vocation. As I encourage students to welcome doubt into their lives, I equally encourage its cousin, delight. While sometimes scary and surprising, they both help us live into our fuller humanity. Professor of practical theology Angela Gorrell writes on joy and delight in her book *The Gravity of Joy: A Story of Being Lost and Found*. Explaining joy’s importance, even amidst, especially amidst, deep grief, she writes, “Joy doesn’t obliterate grief...Instead, joy has a mysterious capacity to be felt alongside sorrow and even—sometimes most especially—in the midst of suffering.”³⁶

As we end our Fellows year, I ask students to offer some sort of summary of their vocational understanding at that point in time. Many write what might seem like a mission statement. Some take the bold leap to alternative and playful forms like this spoken word poem below:

*Maybe She speaks through sisters, through friends, through strangers.
Maybe She sometimes sounds like mom.
Maybe Their voice is a collective of my neighbors’ gestures. The song the choir seems
to sing back to me.
Maybe I ask too decidedly, too unwillingly, with doubt disguised as hope.
Maybe He speaks through the rain or through my green tea.*

Maybe He speaks through the croaking green toads at the bank of the pond next to me.
 Maybe He speaks through my father's tone after asking permission, telling me to be careful when I think I already know.
 Maybe She speaks with a cold touch, good taste, or warm wind.
 I never thought He'd sound like a simple "Sure" or an uncomfortable, unexpected "Have you thought of this?"
 I'm certain They speak through the stars and through my pastor. Through the Bible I can't seem to bring myself to understand.
 I'm certain They speak through close calls and euphoric sensations.
 I'm convinced They speak to everyone else but me.
 But maybe I've gotten used to those things, those sounds, those feelings.
 Or maybe I don't know them well enough at all.
 Maybe She is much bigger than the things I know or am used to.
 And maybe She is exactly what I am used to.
 Maybe She speaks through my mom and friends' affirmations.
 Maybe He speaks through my poems or the guys I used to like.
 Convincing me I get what I ask for. That's how it goes, right?
 Well, I must've been asking wrong without knowing because I live in lack of response.
 Or maybe I wasn't being honest.
 And She knew all along, like fathers always do, like strangers always sense.
 And She spoke through them replying with what I asked for, and what I didn't.
 And She spoke through the trees, too, just for fun.
 And continues to speak through the choir on Sunday mornings.
 Convincing me that maybe She listens.
 Convincing me that maybe They've already spoken and are speaking as we speak.
 Because maybe a little is enough, especially when I know I am weak.
 —Dominique, Perkins Fellow

The Promise of Paradox

» I see that the world is jolted by events that are wonderful and terrible, gorgeous and tragic. I can't reconcile the contradiction, except that I am beginning to believe that these opposites do not cancel each other out. Life is so beautiful, and life is so hard. —Kate Bowler, *Everything Happens for a Reason*, 2018

I'm married to a philosopher and when he started his first teaching job, he took himself to the nearest tattoo parlor and commissioned a tattoo on his forearm that states in Greek: "the one and the many." Since then, I think I've referred more to his tattoo than he has himself. What I love about that phrase (which, as he explains it, is the original philosophical problem), is that it sums up the contradiction that always seems to be at the heart of our existence: is everything connected or is everything separate? At the center of our faith, we have the Trinity, God, three-in-one, and moving outward we have our own selves, fragmented but connected. How do we exist as individuals within a collective? In a family or marriage? In a nation? These are never-ending, irreconcilable questions, brain teasers of the very worst kind, because they can never, ever be settled. And yet, everything in us wants to place life neatly into categories.

The inability to hold irreconcilable tensions has contributed to so many of the divisions we see in ourselves and with others and leads to the plague of fundamentalisms of many kinds. Our pastor said in a sermon once, "This is the problem with fundamentalism—not a particular set of beliefs but rather a way of being in the world. I've told you my own story. Conservatives are rife with fundamentalism...but I'll be honest with you, progressives can be as fundamentalist as anybody." Fundamentalism of any kind is a way of being in the world that denies paradox, eludes doubt, and erases mystery.

While we want young adults to be certain they are loved by the Creator of the universe and that they are called to love their neighbors as themselves, how do we encourage students to be un-fundamentalist young adults? How do we encourage them to live into paradox?

» I think that the Fellows program has encouraged me to have a more nuanced understanding of how Christianity interacts with contemporary social issues. I don't have any concrete examples, but I think many of the thoughts I developed in college about what it means to love someone as a Christian were influenced by our discussions in *Theological Horizons*.

My conversations with my mentor as well were thought provoking and helped me get through that last year of school. He challenged my understanding of what it means to live a Christian life. While before, my worldview was black and white, I think that I am now open to different ideas and applications of Scripture. That nuanced understanding of the Bible and loving others has helped me currently living in a different country that is very sensitive to and wary of people who espouse black and white systems of belief. —Matthew, *Horizons Alumnus*

FUNDAMENTALISM OF ANY KIND IS A WAY OF BEING IN THE WORLD THAT DENIES PARADOX, ELUDES DOUBT, AND ERASES MYSTERY.

We Make the Way by Walking...& Worshipping

» If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us walk together. —Lilla Watson, *Aboriginal activist*

» If you want to see where you are, you will have to get out of your spaceship, out of your car, off your horse, and walk over the ground. On foot you will find that the earth is still satisfyingly large and full of beguiling nooks and crannies. —Wendell Berry

» The things we undertake in the rest of our lives need to be tethered to and nourished by the practices of Christian worship. —James K. A. Smith

As I've worked with students for nearly 20 years, I have become more and more convinced that our critical understanding and moral imaginations can be deepened best within the context of a particular place and relationships. Our knowledge of God, or any other subject, doesn't come simply through our minds; it involves our whole being—senses, spirit, emotion, intellect. Consequently, understanding political theory, economic systems, or painting is not simply something to be learned but something to be experienced. And if we take it as a given that we are made in the image of God, that this Trinitarian God exists as a relationship and that our full humanity is only understood in the context of relationships, then the task of vocational discernment should also take place within relationships—to God, to others, and to the created world. In our desire to help form the moral imagination of students, to generate faithful global citizens who are agents of shalom in this world, we should keep in mind that college students make these decisions in real time.

What has sometimes happened in Western education, however, is the abstraction of learning from real contexts and relationships. Paulo Freire's work as a Brazilian educator and community activist has been an important corrective. In his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, he asserts:

» *Apart from inquiry, apart from the praxis, individuals cannot be truly human. Knowledge emerges only through invention and reinvention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other.*³⁷

In other words, when students become critical co-investigators in dialogue with us and, by extension, with the community, there are greater opportunities for deep learning, or as the American theologian Nicholas Wolterstorff might say, education for shalom.

Furthermore, the community in this process should not be seen as an object to be studied and dissected, because place-based vocational discernment is not merely a pedagogical technique but a whole framework for discerning within community. The community must be brought into the process of learning—students in the community, the community involved in our conversations, both acting as students and learners simultaneously in dialogue with one another.

One problem with our desire to educate students to become faithful global citizens is that any global, or even national affections taught within our closed doors are only done so metaphorically. If we desire to educate students to be caring global citizens, perhaps our greatest role is to help them become rooted in a caring local community that is service-oriented and kenotic, one that places them in contexts where they are forced to reckon with and empty themselves out to the other just as they are being served and filled with new understandings. As Freire argues, purely academic knowledge can sometimes lead toward objectification of the other or of the knowledge being obtained. If students are taught only about global issues without experiencing this reality in a particular place—be it here or overseas—layered by social, economic, political, psychological, and spiritual realities, their knowledge might remain impotent to generate authentic compassion (*suffering with*) for communities suffering on the other side of the globe, let alone their own neighbors.

Now more than ever, Christians are becoming aware of how their daily, local consumer choices are related to the suffering on a coffee plantation in Guatemala, in a refugee camp in Kenya, or in an oil community in Pakistan. And because the world is moving to our own neighborhoods, the consequences become more easily visible and accessible. You don't have to travel the globe to understand and experience this suffering and injustice. Through our Perkins Fellows program, for example, students are helping translate confusing citizenship forms; they are tutoring adults and youth pushed here by poverty or civil war in their home countries; they are gardening in soil recently cleansed of contamination by industrial practices in far off places; they are helping youth visit galleries and creating art where such "luxuries" have too often become rarities.

PLACE-BASED VOCATIONAL DISCERNMENT IS NOT MERELY A PEDAGOGICAL TECHNIQUE BUT A WHOLE FRAMEWORK FOR DISCERNING WITHIN COMMUNITY.

It's crucial that we don't separate our learning from our praxis, from our walking. As we seek to be about the work of *shalom* in our world and to develop faithful young adults, we should encourage our students to get off their phones, off their campus, and into the community. The strength of the Perkins Fellows program is that it was conceived out of an experience within and thus an affection and a hope for a particular place and people. From the start, our partnerships with various community organizations arose out of friendship and trust. Out of this commitment, a genuine care for and engagement with the community has preceded the growing involvement of both students and community members. And out of this particular care has grown a compassionate cohort of students inspired within the global melting pot of Charlottesville to go out into the world—teaching English to refugees in France, becoming a hospital chaplain in Seattle (and ministering to some of the first Covid-19 patients there), joining Teach for America in New Orleans, or pursuing the Peace Corps in Senegal.

As we make the way by walking, we must also acknowledge the direction we're walking in. "How we spend our days is, in fact, how we spend our lives," writes Annie Dillard.³⁸ And how we spend our days revolves around what we worship. Now a published book, author David Foster Wallace suggested in his 2005 commencement speech at Kenyon College:

» *There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what we worship. And the compelling reason for maybe choosing some sort of god or spiritual-type thing to worship...is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive.*³⁹

If constraints are the more reactive forces that give focused shape to our calling, then commitments and practices could be seen as the more proactive actions we are compelled to follow. What do you pay attention to each day? What is it that you do with your hours and minutes each day? Rather than abstractly dreaming how passions might find some distant future alignment within a particular vocation, we should see our callings as unfolding through our daily commitments and habits, quotidian choices and spiritual practices that add up to a life. Like the incremental degrees of an airplane's trajectory, the smallest daily habits create a life's vocation and having the continual calibration of Christian community is crucial.

One temptation in making the way by walking is believing the outcomes rest on our shoulders. Making peace with the limits of our way-making, making peace with what author Steve Garber has called "proximate justice" is key to resisting the idolatry of activism (both social justice and evangelism) and eventual burn out.⁴⁰ Archbishop Oscar Romero who worked for the liberation of the poor in El Salvador and was later murdered while celebrating the Eucharist, knew full well the tensions between fighting for the kingdom of God to show up and the reality that it will not fully be realized without Jesus' return. A prayer I read each year with students which was crafted to honor his martyrdom is a humbling reminder of the limits of our vocations:

...WE SHOULD SEE OUR CALLINGS AS UNFOLDING THROUGH OUR DAILY COMMITMENTS AND HABITS, QUOTIDIAN CHOICES AND SPIRITUAL PRACTICES THAT ADD UP TO A LIFE.

A Prayer for Oscar Romero

It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view.
 The Kingdom is not only beyond our efforts,
 it is even beyond our vision.
 We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction
 of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work.
 Nothing we do is complete,
 which is a way of saying that the Kingdom always lies beyond us.
 No statement says all that could be said.
 No prayer fully expresses our faith.
 No confession brings perfection.
 No pastoral visit brings wholeness.
 No program accomplishes the Church's mission.
 No set of goals and objectives includes everything.
 This is what we are about.
 We plant the seeds that one day will grow.
 We water seeds already planted,
 knowing that they hold future promise.
 We lay foundations that will need further development.
 We provide yeast that produces effects far beyond our capabilities.
 We cannot do everything,
 and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.
 This enables us to do something,
 and to do it very well.
 It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way,
 an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.
 We may never see the end results,
 but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker.
 We are workers, not master builders;
 ministers, not messiahs.
 We are prophets of a future that is not our own. Amen.
 (written by Father Ken Untener in memory of Oscar Romero, 1979)

»»» *The Perkins Fellows Program was an incredibly important part of my college experience, and more importantly, a transformative experience in my faith development. During the program, I loved our monthly meetings to debrief the book or article Christy had assigned. I always left our meetings with renewed hope and passion. I'm the type of person who can be pessimistic about the state of the world, but it was always so encouraging to be surrounded by other people who, in all corners of Charlottesville, were working in different ways to bring about the Kingdom of God on earth. I can't think of any other place at UVA where student community volunteers are intentionally brought together; the Perkins Fellows program is totally unique.*

My time with Abundant Life was completely transformational. My co-Fellow and I, SK, are still best friends, and actually now both work in NYC working with the homeless population in different capacities. We loved our high schoolers who we led so much that we continued to lead the group even past our Perkins Fellows year...We are so proud of them; two of them are in their first year of college! —Megan, Horizons & Perkins Fellow Alumna

»»» *As a Horizons Fellow, we discussed how as followers of Christ we all have a shared mission. One community leader told us that community comes from mission, not the other way around. In other words, something has to be important to everyone before they can be bonded to each other. I'd experienced this firsthand: I had tried to make people care about the very particular mission of racial reconciliation that concerned me, and I felt alone.*

The American Church has very real and deep wounds surrounding race and justice, but in order to begin to heal them, we must first recognize them. Ta-Nehisi Coates says it this way: we must be 'conscious citizens of this terrible and beautiful world.'⁴¹ That consciousness begins with a reflection of the ways in which we have privilege, and the ways in which we are impoverished. The Lord is redeeming my community in ways I never thought possible. My temptation is to point out that there is much work to be done, but as fate would have it, redemption occurs on His timeline, not mine. But I do know that 'colorblindness' is not the solution. After all, God wasn't colorblind when he knit me together as a Black girl.

The solution, if I can even call it that, is to witness. To contemplate our privilege and our poverty. To ask questions. To listen. To humbly share our perspective, our hopes, our fears and ask others to do the same, because you can't love your neighbor if you don't know them. —Cameron, Horizons Fellow Alumna

CONCLUSION

So many times, I have told my students, your vocation starts right now. It is not a far-off, dreamy, distant place (neither is Heaven for that matter). What you do this minute and the next and the next lays the path for who you will be tomorrow and the day after and 40 years from now. Do you want to be a good spouse? Say "thank you" each day. Do you want to be a good lawyer? Be a good listener and communicate clearly with people. An artist? Start noticing beauty, and tell about it. Jesus summed up our common vocation when He summed up the law and the prophets: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind; And, love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12: 30-31). That Love is both the most deeply intimate and personal relationship as well as an actively kenotic and expressive way of life that can only be realized in mutuality with one another.

Our current culture extols infinite individual choices, yet demands achievement based upon a narrowly defined future of economic success. We take a different view. As Christians, we hold that by noticing and living through our constraints and commitments, by embracing doubt as well as delight, by not shying away from the paradoxes within this life, we may experience the true freedom of God's call today within the magnificent struggle. For our conservative young adults, may they see the upside-down justice call to care for the least of these with the hands and feet of Jesus. For our progressive young adults, may they experience the passionate nurture and guidance of the Lover of their souls. For those living a life of privilege and ease, may they sense the liberating call to die to self. For those struggling to survive amidst crushing grief or pernicious oppression, may they sense the resurrecting call to live anew with hope. If we can offer our young adults entry into this sort of authentic, loving community, and if they can, after all is stripped away, encounter Jesus and His redeeming Way, then thanks be to God.

»»» *As someone who calls themselves a Christian, I feel the deepest sense of duty to understand the history of my tradition, especially the ways in which it has been complicit in the oppression and domination of too many groups to begin to name here. To be perfectly frank, when I contemplate these aspects*

Taking Off Our Masks

of the Church and its history, I often feel disoriented and disheartened in a way that threatens to tear the last remaining threads of my faith from my shaky, uncertain grasp. The prophet Amos wrote, "But let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (5:24). I join the ranks of the weary and the downtrodden, feeling their cries in the deepest parts of my being, "But how long, O Lord?" How long must we wait?

On [my] final day of the Bartimaeus Kinsler Institute (BKI—a community continuously attempting to discern what a decolonized Christian tradition looks like and if there is any hope for such a thing), I sat at breakfast with an Indigenous elder and seminarian, and exasperatedly asked, 'What's left once you dissolve Christianity from its Western, white, patriarchal, and colonial trappings?' She responded gently and generously with, 'The gospel. Jesus is what's left.'

Jesus—an indigenous man Himself—was a native Jew who began His movement in the midst of the oppressive Roman Empire. That's the Jesus I want to learn from. —Isabella, Perkins Fellow alumna



SOUND OF THE GENUINE



with Georgia State Senator Rev. Kim Jackson

I enrolled in Furman University in Greenville, South Carolina, with the intentions of someday being a teacher. While I was there, in the course of my freshman year of college, my chaplain came to me and said, "I think you have the gift for ministry." And I told him very boldly, "That's not possible. I'm a girl." And, I'll never forget this. He says, "I think I can show you better than I can tell you." And so we drove around Greenville, South Carolina, and he introduced me to women who were pastors. He introduced me to white women who were United Methodist pastors, and it was a lot of white women at first. And then finally I said, "I think I need to see somebody who looks like me."

He introduced me to this woman. I don't know how old she was, but in my 18-year-old mind, she had to have been like 95 years old. She was an old Black woman. I just remember staring at her. And in retrospect, I think that I might've even been rude in that I didn't have words because looking at her was like seeing a miracle. It was seeing something that I did not believe was possible. I think that was just such a pivotal moment in my own life—seeing this Black woman who was a Baptist pastor and had been pastoring a church for many, many years. And realizing that this calling was real and authentic and was possible for me in the future.