

Discovering Vocation

how to recognize it

what to do about it

where to learn more

Vocation, says Frederick Buechner, is "the kind of work

(a) that you need most to do, and

(b) the world most needs to have done."

Buechner explains: "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." (Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC, pp 118-119.)

Simply put, vocation is work – you may or may not get paid for it - that makes your heart sing. Vocation is what you are driven to do, that thing that energizes you even while you are exhausted, that frustrates you even while you are fulfilled, that calls you out of yourself.

Vocation is the outward and visible sign of a sacramental partnership with God - the result of our reckless/audacious/unselfconscious offering of our embodied resources in service and submission to the divine. Though many people speak of having a vocation as something limited to clergy alone, the truth is that each and every person is created by God to live into a role that no other person can fulfill. In finding that place we live into the dream God has for our lives.

How do we discern what we have to offer, and how and where God might be calling us to put it into practice? Discernment of vocation is a lifelong task, a day-by-day process that is experienced much more as a journey than as a destination. Clarity about vocation can mean finding, at least for a time, a sense of deep and rewarding partnership with God. But almost certainly, over time that clear understanding will grow hazy as God calls us out of our comfort zone and back into a renewed process of discernment.

Finding our vocation begins with a restlessness that sends us in search of wholeness. It's not a simple or linear process. Along the way, four fundamental practices can advance the process:

deepening our relationship with God;

growing in self-understanding;

developing supportive partnerships in community; and

engaging in an intentional cycle of action and reflection.

These four fundamentals - rewarding in themselves - combine to lead us into a partnership with God that enriches and gives meaning to our lives.

Deepening our relationship with God can lead us to a deeper understanding of the dream God has for us and provide a foundation for discernment.

Start with forming a rule of life - a personal pattern of worship, private prayer, study and reflection - that you observe with consistency. Discipline yourself to pay attention to the times and circumstances where you see God in action. Develop the habit of giving thanks, what Alcoholics Anonymous calls "an attitude of gratitude." Reflect on how you can ally yourself with God's action. Increasing our self-understanding enables us to recognize our own strengths and limitations, equipping us for a "reality check" against our own ego and the illusion of self-sufficiency. Various tests and assessments, coupled with feedback from friends and colleagues, help keep this process honest.

Take an assessment of your spiritual gifts, remembering that our spiritual gifts point to what we are uniquely equipped to do, rather than what we can't do. Discover your personality strengths. There are many instruments available to help with this process, which can help clarify your working relationships with others. Understand what issues, groups, and causes inspire and energize you. This can indicate where you are called to serve. Consider your style - your innate preferences and traits. Are you an introvert or an extrovert, a lark or an owl, an equipper or a server, an initiator or a sustainer? This can help you understand how you can best work with others.

Cultivate the habit of self-awareness. Be observant of when you find yourself energized and joyful, and when you're drained by what you are doing. When you engage your vocation, you experience God's power working in and through you.

Developing supportive partnerships in community is the essence of the Christian life. Small groups, prayer partners, spiritual directors, ministry teams all help nurture our partnerships with God and with others and support our process of discerning vocation.

Understand and appreciate the gifts of others. Learn to recognize and celebrate their strengths and God's call in their lives. Build community. Share stories, share chores, share meals. Listen to the insights your community can offer in your discernment process. Clarity about vocation is the fruit of relationships, not of tasks. If you're called to lead, remember your key function is to equip the ministries of others. If you're called to serve, remember that your key function is meeting the needs of others.

Make the effort to partner with someone else in your ministry. Jesus never sent the apostles out one-by-one. Practice "two-by-two."

Be mindful of your congregation's or your community's vocation. It can enhance or frustrate your own.

Engaging in an intentional process of action and reflection is the proving ground for vocation, where we enact our faith and authenticate our theology. Loren Mead reminds us that we all engage in a never-ending cycle of discipleship (being formed as a Christian) followed by apostleship (going out to share the Good News of God in Christ) and back to discipleship. Even if you're uncertain of your calling, engage your faith in action. Do

something in service to God and to others. The process may lead you toward your vocation, or it may show you where you're definitely not called. Either way, your discernment process benefits.

Both alone and in a group, reflect on what you've learned through your action, particularly about yourself, your motivations, your opportunities for growth. Where is God leading you? Keep a journal, make notes, or in some other way capture the insights from your discernment process. Reading or recalling your progress on the journey provides encouragement when further growth seems impossible.

These fundamentals for discernment can be useful both for individuals and for congregations or communities seeking to claim their vocations. The process calls for deep listening, intentional action, and, sometimes, faithful waiting. In living into our vocations we experience a partnership with God, empowered to serve as co-creators, ministers, and icons.

Demi Prentiss