

"A Burning Love Ignited:" The Experience of Call in Religious Life

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Abstract

This essay reflects on the experience of a call to religious life beginning with the current generations in religious life in the US describing the pervasiveness and depth of change in this life-form. It primarily explores contemporary understandings of vocation from the perspective of the ecology of self and community, self and God, and on vocational choices developing, expanding, and changing over time. There are at least three conversations going on: between self and God, within oneself with one self, and with self and community. An evolving approach to vocation is adopted drawing on the work of Fredrich Hudson on self-renewing adulthood. Particular attention is given to women's experience as often being conditioned by others and recognizes that discovering one's vocation from within may be more difficult because of these external pressures.

Sincretica: Spiritual Guide

Amma, great desert mother,
women gathered at your feet
listening.

"Amma, duc verbo."
Amma, give us a word. . .
to make us whole

And from your lips leapt
A sun so afire – flames of blinding light,
of burning love ignited

the darkest and coldest
 corners of self. A fire, we blazed
 into cathedrals, castles, the center of cities.
 (Kownacki 2001:86-70).

At the heart of a call to religious life is “a burning love igniting the darkest and coldest corners of self.” The life-form we have traditionally called religious life is at its core a call to welcome the embrace of a love beyond all telling and to manifest this abundance of life and this good news of God’s love to everyone and every creature without exception or exclusion. This is a life-form that beckons us, seduces us, captivates us, and transforms us from fragmentation to wholeness, from lack to abundance, from weakness to strength, from insignificance to making a difference in our world.

At this time in our history, we recognize the remarkably changed circumstances in which we live our religious lives—the theological and philosophical shifts of seismic proportion that obscure earlier meanings and reveal new possibilities. Women in religious life today represent at least three generations: those who lived the static and pre-modern view of religious life that prevailed from the 16th centuries to Vatican II, those who represent the Vatican II generation and grew up in religious life during and immediately after that council which tried to come to terms with conditions created by the modern world, and those who represent newer and younger members who are tired of hearing the Vatican II generation’s “before and after” stories. This third generation has absorbed post-modern sensibilities together with the cultural air they have always breathed. And although, women are generationally imprinted with our own moment in history, somehow we share across all of this difference a common passion, a shared life-form, and a call unique to each of us even as it somehow shares a family resemblance with everyone else’s. Across this generational and theological-philosophical difference, we still recognize a solid yet changing core constellated around the God-quest as the dominating passion of our lives and the most amazing transformations that have resulted from our pursuing that quest through multiple styles of religious living. I quite intentionally say “solid” yet “changing” core of our lives and commitment. One volume of oral history about religious life was titled, *Poverty, Chastity, and Change*.¹ Carole Garibaldi, viewing sisters from her perspective was overwhelmingly struck by the amount and depth of change women

¹ In 2011, Rogers republished the original narratives, updated all of them, and added new interviews in *Habits of Change: the Oral History of American Nuns*.

religious have experienced and embraced in the last forty plus years. Another observer quite simply said, "I just didn't know you'd been through all of that." I do not want to focus so much on the fact of change as to notice the depth of the change involved. The God-quest and the implications of that quest in terms of apostolic religious life have always involved service to the people of God.² We now understand that in profoundly relational terms as a mutuality of relatedness in love and interdependence with other life-forms within the universe story itself. The form of religious life most of us are living is rooted in contemplation and action - both solitary prayer and a solidarity of engagement, reaching out in compassion to the most vulnerable and envisioning prophetic alternative scenarios even as we name and reveal the links between our first world cultural and economic privilege and the suffering of others in our society and throughout the world. In the process of living into this life-form, our experience of who God is, of who we are, of what our mission is, and how we belong to Jesus and manifest through his incarnation in our flesh God's love in the world have all evolved for many of us.

Calling

Contemporary reflection on vocation recognizes that a calling is not a solitary experience or an isolated choice. How we experienced God "calling us" was mediated through the ecclesial community in which we heard this call and to which we responded. The inchoate desires, idealism, dreams of service, and possibilities of "making a difference" in other peoples' lives that God's Spirit stirred up in us were met by our religious congregations, our clerical supporters who made the connections between parish and religious community, and our sister friends or teachers. All invited further reflection, shaping our response toward joining them in this life-form. They were in the language of the new science, "strange attractors." For some, families welcomed this choice in a context in which they felt privilege or pride in having a religious in the family. For others, this choice confounded family and cultural expectations.

These basic choices we made and continue to make related to our most fundamental callings or mission in our lives, unfolds throughout our life-stories, evolving over time, responding to new circumstances and new understandings of self and community, self and world. Many have experienced new calls within our basic vocations, calls we never

² Sandra Schneiders more recently has described this life-form as mobile ministerial religious life. See *Prophets in Their Own Country*.

could have imagined at the beginning of our vocational stories. The spiritual category that addresses who I am as a person and what I am uniquely called to contribute to the human community is rooted in a profound ecology, as it were, of self and community, self and God, self and the cosmos itself. Changes in any ecological element tend to stimulate changes in the other.

The Quaker, Parker Palmer, suggests that when we learn about "the seed of the true self, that was planted when I was born, I also learn more about the ecosystem in which I am planted - the network of communal relations in which I am called to live responsively, accountably, and joyfully with beings of every sort. Only when I know both seed and system, self and community, can I embody the great commandment to love both my neighbor and myself" (2000:17).

Ecology of Life and Ministry

This metaphor of the ecology of life and ministry potentially invites reflection on our present experience of ourselves and the vocation to which we have felt called and dedicated our lives. As seasoned religious, we have already learned quite a lot about our most basic nature, gifts, talents and the larger purposes to which we responded. This is always a dialogical process of mutual influence. The Holy Mystery addresses us through all the particularities of our lives and we respond directly to this invitation to fully become ourselves and to be at the service of the human community in some quite specific way. The conversation goes in multiple directions at once - more than one conversation is going on at a time. There is a conversation between myself and God, the very ground of my life. There is a conversation going on within myself. There is a conversation going on with my personal history and family of origin. There is a conversation going on with the particular community in which I serve and to which I belong. There is a conversation going on within the church and its myriad faith communities. And there is a conversation going on with the larger context of the 21st century – a global, interconnected network, a diversity of cultures and religions, and a shared responsibility and concern for the well-being of the earth itself, our natal home.

The poet David Whyte gives a striking example of what he calls the ecology of belonging related to his family. At a moment of terrifying danger when he was working as a naturalist in the Galapagos Islands, just about as far away from his family as he could be, Whyte discovered his connection to his mother who was half a world away.

He also learned in other circumstances that his fighter uncle lived somewhere in himself. Whyte came to the conclusion that our ancestors, our people, our communities of belonging continue to influence in unexpected ways.

...[Mother] began to tell me about a vivid dream she had woken from during my time in the Galapagos, three years before.

Apparently, in the dream I had been standing on a black cliff with one other person, next to a fountain of water. A huge, frightening wave bore down on us in the dream. *The blowhole on Hood Island*. The hair stood up on the back of my neck as she spoke, describing in clear detail from her dream the exact circumstance of my near drowning. I had never so much as breathed a word of the incident, knowing how much she worried about me at the best of times, nor had I told my father or either of my sisters.

“You were standing on the cliff edge next to the strange fountain when a big wave came over the top and swept you away. You came floating back in all the turmoil but then another bigger wave came and you were being taken out to sea. I felt the blackness of the water waiting for you. In the dream I landed down from above and took hold of you by the back of the neck. I lifted you out and put you safely back on the cliff. When I woke I felt so happy that I had been able to save you” (2001:105). ...

“In the shock of hearing my mother tell me my closely held and secret trauma, I was given a sense of the intimate way everything is a brother and sister to everything else. Everything we see as private is somehow already out in the world. The singularity of existence is only half the story; all of our singularities are in conscious and unconscious conversation with everything else. The fierce ecologies of belonging I had witnessed in Galapagos extended in and through my own body, like a long wave-form passing right through my life. My uncle John was passing through my life, my mother was passing through my life, all my ancestors were still passing through my life. Sitting there in front of the fire of a damp Yorkshire evening, I felt as if these waves of revelation and belonging had at last come to claim me like the Pacific breakers had once tried” (2001: 107).

We might ask how our “ancestors” are passing through our lives? At a final vow ceremony in my community sometime ago, the baptismal waters were drawn from three sources – Kinsale, Dublin, and Burlingame. In her ceremony, Karen consciously named her community ancestors, our California founder, Baptist Russell from Kinsale, our Dublin founder, Catherine McAuley, our Dublin, and

the women of our community in the west. She clearly knew by the time of her perpetual profession who her people were, to whom she belonged. She also felt a great continuity with those she serves, frail elders in the Tenderloin of San Francisco. Her culturally diverse co-workers were at her ceremony making the connection between vows to God and service to and with the people of God far beyond institutional church boundaries in a Mercy Housing sponsored ministry. And her intimate and trusting relationship with Jesus was all of a piece.

Christian theology uses two theological categories for this phenomenon - that of vocation and that of charism or gift. Many would suggest that “calling” is the more fundamental category. Our vocation or calling is the larger story that creates a framework for developing and expressing the charisms each of us has received as part of our most basic inheritance. Vocation encompasses our wholeness in the many dimensions of our lives. Our most fundamental vocation is to become our real selves, fully individuated and responsive persons. So our uniqueness - our personalities, desires, histories, and gifts eventually, if we are discerning - catalyze into some discernible calling. When we embrace that calling and live it fully, we experience a surplus of meaning in our lives and a surpassing joy in our ministries. Because when all is said and done, nothing else can make us happy. We experience this happiness and meaning only if we are living our own lives and not another’s - expressing our own desires and capacities.

In this postmodern, third millennium of ecclesial life, a completely new situation confronts us for which we have no map. Our life-form continues to evolve from within and in response to our contexts. Every institution that structures and impinges on our lives is in a state of either renewal or disintegration - a return to a primordial chaos out of which a new creation often emerges. But it is often just as difficult to tell the difference between disintegration or renewal at the level of systems and institutions as it is at the level of personal development and evolution.

Evolving Vocations

In this time of radical change which includes a lengthening of our life-spans, each of us is engaged in continually repeated cycles of renewal according to some theorists. Frederick Hudson (1999) has characterized this feature of adult life as the challenge self-renewing cycles of adulthood. By this he means that highly educated adults

today are confronted with re-making themselves repeatedly across their life-cycles. The successful adult becomes adept at this art of self-renewal and learns neither to fear change nor to become paralyzed while negotiating the inevitable transitions of adult life.

According to Hudson (1999), Robert Furey (2000), and Parker Palmer (2000), if we have a clear sense of our true self and our fundamental mission in life, we have the critical self-knowledge that facilitates either mini-transitions (continuity with our core mission, essentially doing something similar in a new context) or a major transition in which we return to our core self and mission and actualize it again in a completely new form. Thus, it becomes clear that awareness of this core mission, and the contexts which best support it is crucial to our personal happiness and the well-being of those we serve.

Stories from the Tradition

Some stories and poetry from our Judeo-Christian tradition help make some of this musing on vocation more poignant and concrete. These teaching stories strongly support the process of individuation in the service of community. God's desires for us are to be found right within the roots of creation itself. God never asks us to be or do something that is beyond our limits or alien to our basic natures. The stories suggest that God offers more than one blessing and that God is pleased by multiple vocational responses. God creates wild diversity - no two acorns are alike let alone any two human beings. God wants us to be ourselves. Martin Buber renders an hasidic tale this way:

A disciple of the "Seer of Lublin" demanded: "Show me one general way to the service of God." The Zaddik replied: "It is impossible to tell people what way they should take. For one way to serve God is through learning, another through prayer, another through fasting, and still another through eating. All should carefully observe what way their hearts draw them to, and then choose this way with all their strength" (1976:15).

This story suggests we should reverence and learn from the service rendered by others, but not simply imitate it. Just as those before us innovated new forms of service according to their own characters and gifts, so too are we to do the same. Buber develops his reflection:

Every person born into this world represents something new, something that never existed before, something original and unique. It is the duty of every person in Israel to know and consider that we are unique in the world in our particular character and that there has never been anyone like us in the world, for if there

had been someone like us, there would have been no need for us to be in the world. All of us are a new thing in the world, and are called upon to fulfil our particularity in this world.... Our foremost task is the actualization of our unique, unprecedented and never-recurring potentialities, and not the repetition of something that another, and be it even the greatest, has already achieved. (1976: 16)

This insight is rendered even more poignantly by Rabbi Zusya, who shortly before his death said, "In the world to come I shall not be asked: 'Why were you not Moses?' I shall be asked: 'Why were you not Zusya?'" (17)

A similar insight is recorded in the Christian desert tradition. *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* records this version:

A brother asked an elder: "What thing is so good that I may do it and live by it?" And the elder says: "God alone knows what is good. Yet I have heard that one of the fathers asked the great Abba Nesteros, who was a friend of Abba Antony, and said to him, 'What good work shall I do?' Antony replied, 'Cannot all works please God equally? Scripture says, Abraham was hospitable and God was with him. And Elijah was quiet, and God was with him. And David was humble and God was with him. So whatever you find your soul wills in following God's will, do it, and keep your heart' (Chadwick 1958: 38-9.#10)

An inclusive rendering of this story might go something like this: A young woman asked her spiritual guide, "What is the best way to live my life?" And her guide said, "God alone knows what is uniquely good for you. Cannot all good works, good paths in life please God equally? Scripture tells us, Miriam was a prophet and leader of her community and God was pleased with her. And Judith was a woman of prayer and of courageous action on behalf of her people and God was pleased with her. And Martha and Mary were hospitable disciples and friends of Jesus, and God was pleased with them. So whatever you find your heart drawn to in following God's desire for you, do it, and keep your heart" (Ruffing 2003).

Theological Reflection

All of these stories ask a central question: How might I best please God and so fully live now and in the next life? The question arises in the context of the God quest. Do my choices matter to God? The desire is framed in the first conversation between oneself and God. In

Christian tradition and especially in vocations to vowed religious life, there is a Jesus focus. We have a fundamental desire to follow Jesus in some way. This is a Christological specification of vocation. Whatever our choice, it is Christic - rooted in the wisdom and teaching of Jesus and somehow patterned after his own life, for that is what discipleship means. What way am I to serve God? This intention is central. Serving God is what matters.

Historically, we have expressed this in many different ways: as the service of God, the glory of God, the honor of God, the love of God, union with God. If one of these is our intention, then the way our heart is drawn to a specific work or mission is our best guide. Already we experience the two conversations coming together. What do I want? To what am I drawn? This is the conversation with myself that is also a conversation with God. God seems to offer us a multiple-chance universe in discerning our heart's desire which will, in fact, lead us to God.

Within the life-form of apostolic religious life, many of us have served in more than one ministry. As religious life communally renews itself, new possibilities emerge that enable us to express our core calling to this consecrated life-form in new ways. Just as the life itself is transformed, so too are we transformed and we may find ourselves wanting to express our lives in entirely new ways. Our direction or mission statements create a larger framework within which to interpret and respond to transformations in our vocations wrought through new responses to changed circumstances.

According to Palmer, "Our deepest calling is to grow into our own authentic self-hood, whether or not it conforms to some image of who we ought to be. As we do so, we will not only find the joy that every human being seeks - we will also find our path of authentic service in the world. True vocation joins self and service, as Frederick Beuchner asserts when he defines vocation as 'the place where your deep gladness meets the world's deep need'" (2000:16).

According to this theology, "vocation begins - not in what the world needs (which is everything), but in the nature of the human self, in what brings the self deep joy knowing that we are here on earth to be the gifts that God created" (Palmer 2000:16-17). When we follow our joy, in this relational and interconnected ecology of life, we discover that we are gift and that our spontaneous response is to receive and reverence this gift we are even as we freely offer our gifts to others.

This is a very mature way of reflecting on vocation from the vantage point of a later perspective. When we are young and first responding to our call, we may not yet know who we are. We may not yet have discovered our basic natures. We may at that stage in our lives experience vocation as something appearing to us from outside ourselves rather than rising from within. We may have too easily identified God’s voice with that of other important authorities in our lives and, indeed, really tried to please them more than God. When we are young, we feel a greater need to perform, to please, to achieve, to test ourselves and our capabilities, to prove ourselves. It feels as if we are doing the work. We are on a grand mission we have decided more or less for ourselves. Sometimes, these initial intuitions and our movement toward them that allows us to achieve some form of mastery, test our gifts, and develop our skills are quite accurate. If so, we grow into a more strongly partnered conversation and mutuality of life and action with God. Sometimes, we have made major mistakes about ourselves, our gifts, and our motivations. To move toward greater authenticity and integrity of life requires courageous choice and action.

Vocational Transition

As we do so, we negotiate our first vocational transitions. Ending one phase of our lives and beginning another, our limits and our meanderings, our mistakes, and our successes begin to teach us that life is more mysterious than we imagined. It is never solely about ourselves. The question of identity opens up from “Who am I?” to “Whose am I?” For our sense of self is rooted in community. Buckminster Fuller discovered this truth when, on the verge of suicide, he heard a voice say, “You do not have the right to eliminate yourself. You do not belong to you. You belong to the universe” (Furey 2000:14-15). This creative genius made a lasting mark on the world when he embraced this mission. We only come to know most clearly who we are in dynamic interrelatedness with others and our world. Within the new cosmology we discover that we are indeed stardust emerging from the great fire-ball of the sun. We, do indeed, belong to the universe and each of us has a contribution to make to it.

So our task is to discover our calling. In the process of choosing a life-direction and living it deeply, we also discover our limits and perhaps our mistakes as we try to listen to our hearts’ deepest yearnings - try to listen to our own lives rather than blithely or painfully try to live another’s. “Everything has its own place and function. That applies to people, although many don’t seem to realize it, stuck as they are in

the wrong job, the wrong, marriage, the wrong house. (the wrong community, the wrong ministry, the wrong relationship). When you know and respect your inner nature, you know where you belong. You also know where you *don't* belong" (Furey 2000:17-18).

Insight for Women

In a poem, "Now I Become Myself," May Sarton offers two profound images that give some further light on this sense of personal vocation particularly for women.

Now I become myself. It's taken
Time, many years and places,
I have been dissolved and shaken,
Worn other people's faces.
.....
From wish to action, word to silence,
My work, my love, my time, my face
Gathered into one intense
Gesture of growing like a plant.
As slowly as the ripening fruit
Fertile, detached, and always spent,
Falls but does not exhaust the root,
So all the poem is, can give,
Grows in me to become the song,
Made so and rooted so by love (Sarton 1991: 28-29).

These portions of Sarton's poem highlight several aspects of this process. Many people, not only women, "have worn other people's faces" before we are able to become ourselves fully and wear our own face and no other. This journey takes "many years and places." We discover our true face, our true self often through a process of experimentation and imitation. We create masks for ourselves trying to meet the expectations of others, often unable to discover or trust our authentic self and its desires and gifts.

If our initial choice of life-style and ministry is someone else's face we've tried to wear, midlife offers a new opportunity to return to and claim our own faces. We may choose to change our ministry or basic life-style to encompass more of who we always were and have grown to be over time.

Sarton's poem draws on the imagery of "growing like a plant," and "ripening fruit" that "falls" but which does not exhaust "the root." For her as a poet, the poem, the fruit of her vocation and creativity, grows organically from her life. When she finally wears her own face,

accomplishes her own work, expresses her unique love and vision, the self-giving of all of this naturally ripens and falls from the tree without exhausting the root. When we are wearing our own face, living our own lives, we discover that according to Parker Palmer, vocation "comes from a voice 'in here' calling me to be the person I was born to be, to fulfill the original selfhood given me at birth by God" (2000: 10).

When we are living our lives in this way, vocation arrives not from outside ourselves but from inside ourselves. We discover over and over again: "Whose we are" and "To Whom we belong." When we let our own lives speak their deepest truth to us, we discover guidance often only step-by-step from within and without drawing us into living our own lives with passion and conviction. Vocation in this sense arrives as a gift along with the gift of our individuating and truest selves. Walter Brueggeman says vocation is "a purpose for being in the world that is related to the purpose of God." (Furey 2000:15)

Somehow each of us is here for a reason. But it is largely a reason, a purpose we create for ourselves out of our own history. If we do "not live out our calling, that calling will go forever unanswered. Then a singular crucial force in the development and improvement of humankind will be lost" (Furey 2000: 15).

Uncongenial Environments

If we fail to actualize our unique vocation which, I believe, unfolds over time just as we do, it is not always entirely our own fault. It is not necessarily straightforward or easy to care for my true self, to nurture it, to welcome it fully and robustly into existence. Sometimes we live in environments, even religious ones that do not appreciate our gifts and even encourage us to be untrue to ourselves.

When people discover their project, their mission, their purpose in life, they also usually experience energy, passion, and courage. In the metaphors of the first poem the word that makes us whole is "a sun so afire - flames of blinding light, of burning love ignited" that we are moved into creativity and mission. It is not enough to recognize our calling; we have to respond. We have to make courageous decisions that enable us to move step-by-step toward that fuller sense of our own vocation. This sense of our vocations may not always be entirely clear and we may not even be able to explain much of it to someone else. The conviction may even take a negative form in the face of this inarticulateness. The step or steps toward my calling become a

necessity. I find myself unable not to refuse. I find myself doing something I am unable not to do. In that doing, I discover whether my internal guidance was accurate or not, mistaken or misguided. But without taking that step I cannot know.

Some lack the courage to break with an uncongenial environment. Others first need to find the appropriate environment in which to grow and develop. Benjamin Bloom discovered in his study of extremely talented young adults that “when a child with a particular talent lives in an arena that values that gift, the talent grows. But should that child live in a context that devalues a special talent, it is likely that the talent will not survive” (Furey 2000: 64). Sometimes it is only as adults that we can search out the appropriate environment in which to explore and discover how important a neglected talent might still be in our lives. Likewise within religious life, we may choose to reaffirm our initial commitment precisely because it nourishes our capacity and desire to live our God-quest in this very focused and integral way. Many women struggle with the profoundly defensive patriarchal environment in which Catholic religious life is embedded.

For those who live in uncongenial environments or even hostile ones that “try to force them to live in a way untrue to who they are” (Palmer 2000, 31), it is very tempting to try to wear a mask. The social system creates its own rewards and punishments that encourage the false self and diminish the true self. In these circumstances it is incumbent for our own health and well-being either to change our environment or to refuse to “act as if I were less than the whole person I know myself inwardly to be” (Palmer 2000, 33).

According to Palmer, when people know they will be punished for living divided no more, they “have transformed the notion of punishment itself. They have come to understand that no punishment anyone might inflict on them could possibly be worse than the punishment they inflict on themselves by conspiring in their own diminishment” (2000:34). This transformation and resolve translates into resistance to institutional oppression in people like Rosa Parks who refused to give up her seat in the white section of the bus, or Gandhi’s salt boycott, or those who are willing to be incarcerated to close the School of the Americas, or sisters who have refused Vatican requests they felt violated their personal integrity.

These examples are rather dramatic and heroic ones. Many people live lives of quiet desperation within ministry environments or non-renewing communities that simply contradict a set of basic values. If

the financial "bottom line" is the ultimate value of the organization, then programs and services that are not profitable have no value. There can be incredible lack of creativity in the doing of the good within the constraints of limited resources. Service oriented organizations may betray themselves by the subtle ways they may have become self-serving or the ego-project of a founder or director. Sometimes altruistic organizations may be the hardest to work within because of a betrayal of supposedly shared values that under gird the work. These situations often require discernment and courageous decisions to offer one's gifts where they can come to fruition.

Conclusion

The conversation between self and society is an on-going one within our vocational discernments. Despite the prevailing myth of American life, we cannot just be anything we want to be. Within the ecosystem of which my basic nature is an integral reality, there are some roles and some situations in which I will not and cannot thrive. God's desires and God's dreams are shown to me in and through this dynamic relationship. It brings me to face my limits when I discover that I am not thriving, that I am becoming exceedingly depleted and burned out. Despite the good that may need to be done, and in which I may well believe, it may not need to be done by me. Within the context of a community of graced people, it requires the entire community to tend the common good.

As slowly as the ripening fruit
Fertile, detached, and always spent,
Falls but does not exhaust the root...

Sarton's organic images suggest as much. It takes time for the fruit to ripen, but when the fruit comes from one's true self, planted in the right ecosystem, the fruit "falls but does not exhaust the root."

This original selfhood, again according to Palmer, does not exist apart from:

The ecosystem in which I was planted - the network of mutuality and relatedness within my religious community and the other communities in which I function - in and through which I am called to live responsively, accountably and joyfully with beings of every sort. Only when I know both seed and system, self and community, can I embody the great commandment to love both my neighbor and myself (2000:17).

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