

Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation

Parker J. Palmer

Summary by Jim O'Neill, Ed.D.

“Is the life I am living the same as the life that wants to live in me?” Palmer opens with the searching question. The title’s Quaker admonition, “Let your life speak” is usually interpreted to mean “Let the highest truths and values guide everything you do.” Palmer, from his own search for authentic selfhood writes: “Before you tell your life what you intend to do with it, listen for what it intends to do with you. Before you tell your life what truths and values you have decided to live up to, let your life tell you what truths you embody, what values you represent.”

Vocation does not come from willfulness, no matter how noble one’s intentions. It comes from listening to and accepting “true self” with its limits as well as its potentials. For Palmer vocation is not a goal to be achieved but a gift to be received. “As we live more deeply in to the selfhood that is our birthright gift, we find not only personal fulfillment. We find communion with others and ways of serving the world’s deepest needs.” Cover

Palmer shares his own personal searching, those waking up in the middle of the night with dread and foreboding times, when he began to discover that the “life I am living is not the same as the life that wants to live in me.” His true life was a hidden river under the ice of accumulating wealth, holding power, winning and securing a career. “There is a great gulf between what my ego wants with its protective masks and self-serving fictions, and my true self. Trying to live someone else’s life, or to live by an abstract norm, will invariably fail – and may even do great damage.” Yet school teaches about everyone else, we take copious notes about what everyone else says; listening for guidance from everywhere except from within.

“The soul is like a wild animal – tough, resilient, savvy, self-sufficient, and yet exceedingly shy.” You can’t find it by loudly crashing into the woods calling for it. “But if we are willing to walk quietly into the woods and sit silently for an hour or two at the base of a tree, the creature we are waiting for may well emerge, and out of the corner of an eye we will catch a glimpse of the precious wildness we seek.”

Distortions of vocation: a calling from external voice, a voice of moral demand that requires us to be someone different, better, beyond our reach. This notion is rooted in a deep distrust of selfhood, that we will always be selfish rather than the truth that 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. This does not mean that accepting the gift of vocation will be easy; it is often more demanding than attempting to become someone else. Disabused of our original giftedness in the first half of life, we spend the second half trying to recover and reclaim the gift we once possessed.

Parker recalls that his first **ambitions were about “wearing other people’s faces.”** Even those masks if studied carefully can reveal clues of real vocation, sometimes paradoxically what we need to do is the opposite or shadow of what we ambitiously

sought. Each person has gifts and limitations, trying to override one's nature, to be some image of what we ought to be, will always fail if it does not fit Frederick Buechner's assertion that true vocation is "the place where your deep gladness meets the world's deep need."

Journey into Darkness Most of us arrive at true sense of self after a long difficult pilgrimage – "A transformative journey to a sacred center full of hardships, darkness and peril." We have to travel ego's paths or the path of pleasing others until those run out or run amuck and we find ourselves lost in a deep dark woods and have to face that vocation at its most profound is "something I can't not do" even if I can't understand it or explain it fully.

Self-care is never a selfish act – "it is simply good stewardship of the only gift I have, the gift I was put on earth to offer to others. Anytime we can listen to true self and give it the care it requires, we do so not only for ourselves but for the many others whose lives we touch." Otherwise, as Rumi put it, "If you are here unfaithfully with us, you're causing terrible damage." We will make promises we don't keep, build on sand, weave dreams that turn into nightmares – and others will suffer from our falsehood. Rosa Parks sat down in the front of the bus because her soul was tired, her heart was tired, her whole being was tired of playing by racist rules, of denying her soul's claim to selfhood. Jesus did not give up his life for us, He insisted on being true to whom He really was even if it meant dying for being His true self. Vocation is not about going where fear would take us or where paralyzing fear would prevent us from going.

When way closes, way will open – When life, limitations, failures, and/or burnout close a door, after the ego protests, listen for the relief of the soul. Depression is the ultimate state of disconnection – cut off from our deepest truest self, living someone else's life, we run out of energy of course because we are an empty shell without our inner compass. Or as Palmer's therapist put it: "You seem to look upon depression as the hand of an enemy trying to crush you. Do you think you could see it instead as the hand of a friend, pressing you down to ground on which it is safe to stand?" Often the way to God is down.

Leading from within – "Go far enough on the inner journey – past ego toward true self – and you end up not lost in narcissism but returning to the world, bearing more gracefully the responsibilities that come with being human." Then we can be authentic leaders – liberators of the heart in ourselves and in others, so its powers can liberate the world. A leader has the power to project either shadow or light, e.g. some teachers shine light that allows new growth to flourish, some cast a shadow under which seedlings die. We must eat a little of our shadow everyday or it will darken those around us. Shadow monsters like insecurity about identity and worth, or the belief that the universe is hostile to humans, or that it's all up to us, leaving no room for God's providence, or simply fear of the natural chaos of life which we cannot control.

Inner Work in Community – Hold up the importance of "inner work", employ methods of community discernment and support one another in the face of fear. As Jesus put it while calming the storm: "Fear is useless, what is needed is trust."