REVITALIZING THE IDEA OF VOCATION IN TEACHING

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The idea of vocation has an ancient lineage. Its Latin root, vocare, means “to call.” It denotes a summons or bidding to a particular form of service. It has been used to describe both secular and religious commitments. Some persons have felt called or “inspired” to join a religious order and serve faithfully a given community. Others have felt impelled to serve not divine purposes but rather social ones. They have felt called to human society with its manifold needs and possibilities. Many nurses, doctors, politicians, teachers, have felt the kind of magnetic pull toward a life of service exemplified in the idea of vocation.

Yet these general claims, if true, raise the question why the concept “vocation” is not more widely used in discussions of work and life. According to Gustafson, even in ecclesiastical institutions, which have perhaps the longest tradition of employing the term, it is fading from use. 1 The neglect of the term in education is equally remarkable, given how consistently teachers and persons preparing to teach report that an ideal of service is what draws them to the work in the first place. The sheer number who espouse the language of service suggests a widespread vocational inclination within the profession. But why, then, is the concept not employed more often in considerations of teaching? 2

One obvious reason is that the basic terms of teaching are often cast in occupational rather than moral language, reflecting the focus of extensive research on the work. Sociologists and political scientists have looked at labor and organizational issues; psychologists have examined career patterns and the like. These lines of inquiry have addressed teaching as a job and as an occupation nestled within a broader system of social institutions. This perspective also reflects widespread public assumptions about education. Public talk about education often associates it with preparing for jobs, an assumption embodied in the familiar term “vocational education.” That term describes programs to train practical skills and capacities with the intent of preparing people for specific forms of wage-based employment.

In the face of these widespread trends, the original service-oriented meanings of the concept vocation are hard to keep in view. They may even strike some as pretentious when applied to teaching, in effect romanticizing a job whose basic purposes, so the argument might go, are functional and instrumental. Such critics may contend that vocation is an acceptable term for describing those teachers who dramatically transform lives, just as they might say it is an apt way to describe the likes of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. or Mother Teresa. But, they might go on to contend, the concept is too freighted with spiritual connotations, and too refined with its images of selfless devotion, to be applicable to the practical work of most teachers at most levels of education.

There are doubtless other reasons for the disuse of the term. However, the few touched on thus far seem suggestive enough in their own right. I take seriously their implication that far more than mere semantics are at stake in weighing the terms one uses to describe teaching. As Hacking emphasizes,

people are affected by what we call them and, more importantly, by the available
classifications within which they can describe their own actions and make their own
constrained choices. People act and decide under descriptions, and as new possibilities for
description emerge, so do new kinds of action. In this paper, I outline a case for revitalizing the idea of vocation in teaching. I describe
what an interest in teaching might comprise if it is understood or felt to be a vocation. I
show how the concept takes seriously individual ideals of service while also
acknowledging the public, and often prosaic, requirements of the work. Far from denoting
something esoteric, restricted to a dedicated or enlightened few, the idea of teaching as a
vocation embraces personal and moral dimensions of the practice that draw persons to it
from the start, and that keep many of them successful within it despite adversity and
difficulty. The idiom of vocation not only keeps attention focused on individuals — and the
role of teaching is nothing if it is not occupied meaningfully by individuals — but also
sheds light on why teaching remains a compelling practice to many today.

The Nature of Vocation

The sense of vocation finds its expression at the crossroads of public obligation and
personal fulfillment. It takes shape through involvement in work that has social meaning
and value. This means that a great many occupations can have a vocational dimension.
Medicine, law, and teaching come immediately to mind as examples. However, other
activities such as athletics and gardening can be vocations, too, provided that practitioners
have in view more than their own self-satisfaction. In many societies, athletics involve
considerable teamwork and social loyalty and are often treated as helping to sustain a
community’s sense of identity. In Japanese culture, among others, gardening often
embodies an important public meaning that takes it well beyond the realm of personal
hobby. But if a gardener’s work was never shared with others, or was never intended for
others, then, according to the argument here, the activity would not be considered
vocational (although it would still be gardening). The activity must have more than a purely
personal significance. For it to be a vocation, it must be educative, edifying, helpful to
others in some characteristic way.

However, vocation does not imply a one-way subordination of the person to the practice.
Vocation describes work that is fulfilling and meaningful to the individual, such that it
helps provide a sense of self, of personal identity. Again, this means that many activities
can qualify as vocational, provided that they continue to meet the criterion of being of social
value. However, being a teacher, a minister, a doctor, a nurse, would not be vocational if
the individual kept the practice at arm’s length, divorced from his or her sense of identity,
and treated it, in effect, as one among many indistinguishable occupations. In such a case,
the person would be merely an occupant of a role. This is not to say the person would
conceive the activity as meaningless. He or she might regard it as strictly a job, as a
necessity one must accept, perhaps in order to secure the time or resources to do something
else. Thus, in addition to being of social value, an activity must yield a sense of personal
fulfillment in its own right in order to be a vocation.

Two points are worth clarifying here. First, certain occupations are ruled out of
consideration entirely, regardless of the personal meaning they may provide. Being a
professional thief, for example, or a drug-dealer are instances. Shakespeare’s Falstaff is
off-base when he asserts, in Henry IV, Part I, “Why, Hal, ’tis my vocation, Hal; ’tis no sin
for a man to labour in his vocation.” As Falstaff well knows, it is a “sin” if the “vocation”
is stealing from others. Such a practice characteristically has no redeeming social value.

Second, the idea of vocation denotes more than a purely psychological state. It does
presume a hopeful, outward-looking sentiment, a feeling of wanting to engage the world in
some substantive way. It presupposes an “inner urge,” as Emmet puts it, to “venture and devote oneself in working in a first-hand kind of way.” Those terms are carefully chosen. To “venture” forth raises the image of an adventure, a plunge into an activity whose outcome will be, at least to some extent, uncertain and unpredictable. To “devote” oneself in the doing of it recalls one of the original meanings of the term vocation — to commit oneself in an enduring way to a particular social practice. These internal motivations are important, but they are only part of the story. A social practice is the other part, one in which to bring these motivations to life, in the literal sense of those terms. As conceived here, the sense of vocation is not something the person “possesses,” and can “choose” to “apply” to a particular kind of work, or across many different kinds of work. Rather, it is a set of impulses that are outward-looking, outward-moving, focused on what is “calling” one to act — impulses that derive from awareness of social practices themselves. In brief, the sense of being impelled from within is coterminous with a sense of being called by something without.

Teaching and the Sense of Vocation

Teaching is a social practice whose importance is unquestioned, even if what makes it important remains the subject of continued debate. Teachers work in public spheres, under the scrutiny of their students, their peers, their administrators, parents, and other concerned adults. Though much of their work may be conducted within the confines of the classroom, what goes on there is rarely left at the door. It becomes part of the lives of individual students, part of the life of the school, and often a central part of the life of the teacher him- or herself. Teachers can play a significant role in what young people learn, and in how they learn to learn, in how they come to view learning itself. They can influence young people’s personal dispositions toward others, and toward their own futures. Their influence, for good or for ill, can extend well beyond the duration of schooling, as anyone who remembers teachers they have had can readily attest.

In light of these understandings, what does it mean to say that a teacher, or a person who wants to teach, has a sense of vocation? What does it mean to say that a person has a strong and persistent desire to teach? In everyday terms, one might describe this as a “career decision,” as an “occupational choice,” as “specializing,” as entering a “field of expertise.” Each of those descriptors conveys a particular image of teaching. How might one describe such a course of action through the lens of vocation?

For one thing, to do so suggests that the person regards teaching as more than simply a choice among the array of jobs available in society. It may even mean for such a person that there is something false about describing the desire to teach as a choice at all. An individual who is strongly inclined toward teaching seems to be a person who is not debating whether to teach but rather is contemplating how or under what circumstances to do so. He or she may be considering teaching in schools, in institutions of higher education, or in one of many other social settings in which teaching can occur. He or she may work for some time in other lines of endeavor — business, law, parenting, the medical field — before the right conditions materialize.

To describe the inclination to teach as a budding vocation also calls attention to the person’s sense of agency. It implies that he or she knows something about him- or herself, something important, valuable, worth acting upon. One may have been drawn to teaching because of one’s own teachers or as a result of other outside influences. Still, the fact remains that now one has taken on that interest oneself. The idea of teaching “occupies” the person’s thoughts and imagination — an image that contrasts with the more familiar one of a person occupying an institutional role. Again, this suggests that one conceives teaching as more than a job — more than a way to earn an income — although this consideration is
obviously relevant. Rather, one believes teaching to be potentially meaningful, as the way to instantiate one’s desire to contribute to, and engage with, the world.

That stance presupposes, in turn, that one assumes human striving itself to be worthwhile. It takes for granted that the person presumes that he or she has something to offer — something, perhaps, that no one else can provide. Writing about religious novices, Lesage contends that each should behave “as if he felt that he was selected for a task that no one else could perform.” Only by assuming this posture, Lesage claims, can novices throw themselves into the work of service and devotion and, thereby, experience the fullness of faith. According to Emmet, who discusses secular as well as religious practices, vocation describes activities which individuals can only undertake because they have certain personal qualities. One person cannot fulfill the vocation of another, as one might step in and perform another’s function, or instruct someone else to carry out a purposive action which he had planned. Vocation does not admit of interchangeability. The office of prophet may be an institutionalized role within certain societies. Yet if the mantle of Elijah falls upon Elisha, it may also be because Elisha is himself a certain kind of person.

Teachers may not be prophets, but nor are they interchangeable, at least if one grants that teachers do more than transmit a mandated body of knowledge. Despite a host of common obligations and practices, no two teachers have the same personal and moral impact on students. For better or for worse, every teacher has a unique and varying influence on students’ orientations toward learning, toward knowledge, and toward other people. Moreover, those differences have to do with a lot more than overt dissimilarities in personality and teaching style. They have to do with the ethos of the person, his or her characteristic conduct when in the presence of students, his or her reputation, expectations, hopes, fears, worries, and more. The relationship between a teacher and his or her students is invariably a moral one, even if that relationship is cold or impersonal or aloof — for those qualities themselves constitute messages about how to interact with others and how to regard and treat the products of human experience and effort. These claims support the notion that a person thinking about becoming a teacher may indeed have something to offer that nobody else can provide — even if he or she may not appreciate (as yet) what that “something” might turn out to be.

This last caveat calls attention to the fact that while a person may have a strong inclination to teach, she or he may also have equally strong questions about it and about her- or himself. One can conceive teaching as a vocation and still harbor real doubts about how successful one might be (or is) in the classroom. The uncertainties and doubts that accompany teaching have been well-documented, as have the depths of self-questioning those states can trigger. Teachers often cannot know for sure whether their students have learned the material, much less whether their efforts have contributed to students’ intellectual and moral well-being. Yet such doubts need not lead to paralysis — nor to abandoning teaching or its prospect altogether. On the contrary, some have argued that those uncertainties, rather than being cause for anxiety, help account for why teaching is such an intriguing and attractive endeavor. The unknown and the unmeasureable in the practice invite creativity and an individualized response on the part of the teacher.

Moreover, commitment to teaching without entertaining doubts about it can border on ideology or closemindedness. Brann describes an ideology as a system of ideas, beliefs, thoughts, that is closed to further questioning. The idea of teaching as a vocation does not, in this respect, imply holding to an ideology. It describes an inclination to teach that can co-exist with lifelong questions and doubts — about how teaching really “happens,” about
its impact on students and teachers alike. It connotes a disposition to be of service in a form that can evolve as one responds to one’s circumstances — to the changing needs of students, to the changing shape of knowledge. This orientation is not so much ideological as it is temperamental. Keats touched on it in his praise for Shakespeare. He attributed Shakespeare’s successful art to what Keats calls his “negative capability,” his capacity to accept uncertainty and doubt and to refuse to reach for easy answers or intellectual crutches.\(^{10}\)

Teaching seems to require something of this capability — if not to the depths of a Shakespeare! — if a person is to remain meaningfully engaged in it. It is a truism that the work is full of surprises: classroom lessons that lead to unexpected questions and insights; lessons that fail despite elaborate planning; spur-of-the-moment activities that work beautifully and that may change the direction of a course; students who grow and learn; and students who seem to regress or grow distant. The wonder is how one could willingly accept and also learn from this barrage of disappointment, joy, surprise, delight, and sadness without being borne by a sense of vocation. However, the point here is that that sense does not presume social zealotry; persons with vocational orientations are not necessarily “heroic.” The sense of vocation implies a measure of determination, courage, and flexibility, qualities that are in turn buoyed by the disposition to regard teaching as something more than a job, to which one has something significant to offer.

To regard teaching as vocational further presumes a sense of it (however inchoate) as an activity whose meaning is larger than the sum of its parts. It is larger than carrying out a finite number of prespecified duties and responsibilities, with a preordained set of rewards as compensation. A person enacting a vocation has an active and creative relationship with the work. The work involves initiative, rather than carrying out passively a package of discrete tasks. Emmet argues that a person with a sense of vocation will often not know just where it is going to take him. This is because he will not merely be carrying out a specified function according to recognized norms, but will be feeling out after new possibilities in ways of thinking and working. So one stage may open up further possibilities to another, and he will find that he has to go on and on. He cannot set himself a limited objective and call it a day…[T]here will be an inner incentive which prevents [the] person from treating his work as a routine job with limited objectives.\(^{11}\)

In metaphorical terms, teaching is felt by a person with vocational interests as constituting more than carrying brick, mortar, and shovel. Rather, it implies being the architect of one’s classroom world. A person who wants to teach doubtless hopes, at some level of thought or feeling, to have a say in what aims and purposes will guide the classroom, as well as in how those goals might be realized. This means supplementing and possibly extending the functional requirements of the job. It may mean questioning some of those requirements. For example, rather than just “delivering the goods,” a teacher may find herself paying increased attention to what students say, think, and feel about what they are learning. This posture also implies that the person with a sense of vocation will be his or her own final critic, a stance that may accompany any work perceived as more than routine.

Logan Smith contends that an additional “test” of a vocation is “the love of the drudgery it involves.”\(^{12}\) Smith’s formulation may be an overly romantic way of putting the matter. Still, every vocation does embody its share of mundane chores, and teaching is no exception. Teachers have to straighten up their classrooms, keep their materials organized, listen to innumerable questions and concerns, and much more. Some would say that it is precisely those everyday doings that, knit together over time, can undergird a sense of meaning and fulfillment in the work. Just as an enduring memory of a journey comes from having attended to specific sights and sounds along the way, so part of the satisfaction that
can derive from vocation comes from paying attention to its details. This is not to say that a person with a vocational interest in teaching must bring to the practice a refined sense of perception. Rather, it means the person is disposed to be attentive to detail and nuance; he or she has the initial sensibility to develop a sense of perception in the first place. Nor is it to idealize the “drudgery,” the need to address details. Rather, it is to emphasize that the repetitive obligations of teaching are not a distraction from the vocation but constitute part of the main event itself, the locus where all the individual steps one takes add up to both the teacher one becomes and the influence one has on one’s students.

The metaphor of architect (though every teacher does have to “carry brick and mortar”) highlights the elements of agency and autonomy embodied in the idea of vocation. A person with vocational interests comes to inhabit the role more fully than does a person who sees it as only a job. This does not imply that a vocational disposition automatically guarantees results; a feeling that one has something to offer does not translate by itself into qualities that actually make a difference. My argument presupposes the need for careful preparation for the work one is “called” to take on. However, a vocational orientation does imply that the person will be more likely to try to shape the role, to give it an original and creative stamp. At first glance, that distinctive touch may be hard to perceive. A casual or short-term visitor to a classroom may feel there’s nothing new or at least nothing noteworthy about what the teacher is doing. But that impression may change the more one witnesses classroom proceedings, at least if one presumes that a teacher who is engaged in the work tends, as argued earlier, to leave a personalized imprint on what takes place there. The fact that that imprint may come to the surface slowly rather than immediately says nothing about the strength of the teacher’s sense of vocation nor about his or her possible effectiveness. It attests more to the nature of teaching itself, a practice whose impact and consequences tend to emerge over time, often in uneven and unpredictable ways. Emmet may be correct to suggest that enacting vocation requires a certain originality and sustained creativeness. With respect to teaching, however, that creativeness may take subtle forms. It may require time to perceive and understand. Moreover, it may continue to take new forms, because of changing social and cultural conditions — leading, for example, to new views of what students ought to know — and because of changes in the teacher her- or himself — resulting, for example, in a deeper appreciation of what the young can do.

For these reasons, the idea of teaching as a vocation should not be associated solely with persons of unusual stature or energy, whose doings sometimes end up being widely publicized within a particular school or beyond. Such individuals often dramatize qualities that others simply enact more quietly. The fact that a teacher’s creativity and originality may express itself subtly and imperceptively does not by itself call into question the possible impact that teacher may have on students. A teacher’s moral and intellectual influence on others can derive as much from a kind of everyday continuity in his or her practice as from heroic efforts. Albert Schweitzer used to advise visitors who came out to Africa in order to “do something special” to go back home unless they understood that the work they could do there was “not something out of the ordinary.” Schweitzer would recommend they turn around unless they had “no thought of heroism” but rather appreciated the sense of a “duty undertaken with sober enthusiasm.” His counsel implies that along with a desire to engage the world, the sense of vocation presumes a certain mixture of realism and humility, at least in incipient form. Those qualities would seem to make possible a more respectful appraisal of oneself and one’s setting.

Person and Practice

I have argued that a person with a sense of vocation brings to bear a feeling of agency and commitment to the work that embodies the belief that he or she has something to contribute to it. I also contended that the notion of being “called,” of having something distinctive to
offer teaching, does not imply a kind of blind faith in one’s capabilities. Rather, teaching as a vocation goes hand-in-hand with questions, doubts, and uncertainties, some generated by the nature of the work, some by the sheer fact that the person treats the work as more than a routine task. I also argued that the sense of teaching as a vocation can only come to life within the practice itself. A social practice like teaching has its own integrity. It has its own noninterchangeability with other practices that must be balanced with the individual’s uniqueness or sense of calling. To contend, as I did, that teachers are not interchangeable is not to imply that they “own” teaching. The weight is as much on the other side of the coin: without the practice of teaching, would-be educators would have no context in which to act. Teaching presupposes a social medium that provides many of the meanings associated with it. Persons do not generate those meanings out of whole cloth. They are meanings characteristically associated with helping others learn and improve themselves intellectually and morally.

The willingness to accept the public obligations of the task implies accepting the fact that the criteria used to judge performance reside in part within the practice itself rather than solely within the individual teacher’s purview. The person’s ostensible reasons for entering teaching and remaining there may differ from criteria of public evaluation. This may be true in both general and particular terms. One may want to “help the young.” But doing so in a systematic way is impossible without some practice in which to do the helping, a practice that provides a concrete, recognizable instance of what “helping” means. One may believe strongly in certain ways of helping or of being of service in the classroom. But teaching embodies its own particular ways of working that distinguish it from parenting, doctoring, counseling, and so forth. Those ways are not set in stone. They take new shapes with social change, and through the everyday efforts of teachers themselves. But however teaching evolves, it remains a public act that bears directly on the shaping of society. Consequently, the constituents of that society have a right to offer input into how the practice of teaching is judged. Entering the practice means entering that domain of public accountability.

But one of my primary reasons for seeking to revitalize the idea of teaching as a vocation is to call attention to the boundaries of society’s role in influencing and judging what teachers do. Those limits stand out all the more sharply when one thinks of teaching as a vocation and of it being enacted by persons with a sense of service. The “inner incentive” characteristic of vocation — an incentive which “prevents a person from treating his work as a routine job”14 — merits respect and support. Yet, an individual’s sense of vocation can be taken advantage of or even manipulated by others. Gustafson warns that a person with a calling may inadvertently allow her- or himself to “have justifiable self-interests denied, even justice denied, because of a deep sense of vocation.”15 Emmet writes that “too often in the past people like nurses have been exploited…because they were supposed to have a vocation.” They were “supposed” to be persons who sacrifice for the common good. But in making such assumptions, those who structure the institutions in which nurses and others work too often create conditions that make it hard to enact that very sense of vocation (or that exhaust it without fostering opportunities for personal renewal). Such institutional conditions can make it difficult for persons to do what they believe is right for those whom they want to serve. Emmet argues for structures that provide autonomy for the personal ethics she associates with vocation. “Social ethics should be concerned with matters of function and status,” she writes; “‘vocation’ takes us into a sphere of personal ethics for which society cannot covenant.”

Emmet is correct to imply that the domain of personal ethics in teaching should be protected from undue social demands and pressures. Teachers need the room — and the institutional support — to reach their own judgments about individual students’ needs and problems and how best to address them. They should be prepared to defend their judgments, given the public nature of the work, and to alter them if they prove wrong. But they ought not to
be forced to accept solutions and strategies without their own initiative. They merit this support because that is why they are hired, at least in principle — to be people who make a lot of important decisions about others’ capabilities and futures. To take away that autonomy is to undermine the basic terms of their work, and to undermine potentially why they became teachers in the first place. The protection Emmet argues for enables teachers to perform one of the most lasting contributions they can make: it positions them to act independently, creatively, imaginatively, and, thereby, to help the new generation to develop those qualities themselves.

This claim does not discount the challenge of balancing or integrating public obligations with personal belief and purpose in teaching. From time immemorial there have been tensions between individual creativity and originality — such as that embodied in the idea of vocation — and the maintenance of social practices. Every teacher is likely to confront those tensions from time to time. Yet, those tensions can be productive — both for personal flourishing as a teacher and for keeping one disposed to fulfill public obligations — provided that teachers’ sense of vocation is given secure opportunities to express itself. However, in an educational climate characterized by continued attempts to manage the work of teachers, there arises the danger of forgetting to pay close attention to how teachers actually go about enacting their ideals of service. I have suggested that that enactment is often subtle and ordinary in appearance. It is rarely heroic, and thus requires time and trouble to perceive. Revitalizing the idiom of vocation might help retain some public focus on the everyday personal and moral dimensions of the work that lead many into it in the first place, and that reside at the root of teachers’ potentially positive influence on the young people placed in their care.

For a response to this essay, see Brown.


2. Booth and Huebner are among the few writers who have applied the term to teaching. Booth illustrates his sense of it through essays that center on his career as an English professor; Huebner emphasizes the ideal of service to the young, and criticizes what he regards as institutional impediments to the enactment of vocation. Wayne C. Booth, The Vocation of a Teacher (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); Dwayne Huebner, “The Vocation of Teaching,” in Teacher Renewal: Professional Issues, Personal Choices, ed. Frances S. Bolin and Judith M. Falk (New York: Teachers College Press, 1987), 17-29. Philosophers have not examined the concept in any detail, either, as Frankena notes; William K. Frankena, “The Philosophy of Vocation,” Thought 51, no. 203 (December 1976): 393-408. Frankena offers an analysis of the concept that he embeds within a consideration of the nature of the good life and the moral life.


5. Germain Lesage, Personalism and Vocation (Staten Island, N.Y.: Alba House, 1966), 104.


14. Quotations from Emmet in this paragraph are from her *Function, Purpose and Powers*, 255.

15. Gustafson, “Professions as ‘Callings,’” 505.