

Learning to be Astonished

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Rev. Dr. Susan Fowler

This is a story from the life of St. Francis.

One day he saw a man working and stopped to ask what he was doing. “I’m chipping stone; can’t you see that?”

Shortly thereafter, he saw another man doing similar work and he stopped to ask him the same question. “I’m chipping stone to make a statue,” he said.

The he met another. “I’m chipping stone to make a statue that will someday be part of a beautiful cathedral.”

Finally he met another man who seemed to be doing the exact same thing as the others. “What are you doing?” the Saint asked. “I’m chipping stone to make a statue to be part of a beautiful cathedral that will give glory to the Creator forever.”

The last man was delighting in his work; it had meaning and purpose. It was his vocation.

When most of us hear the word vocation, it conjures up notions of a divine call to God’s service. While the root meaning of vocation is to call or to summon, it can also suggest a strong impulse or inclination to follow a particular activity or career. The Bible Dictionary notes that human activity that is wholesome, no matter how humble in the eyes of society, may be the object of a vocation from God. Whatever we do with wholeheartedness, creativity, joy and a concern for the common good is rightly called vocation.

For many of us, our work is an expression of our deepest values and highest aspirations about how we want to live. Yet how often do we reflect on the sources of our own sense of vocation and mission?

In his book *The Soul’s Code*, psychologist James Hillman proposes what he calls the acorn theory, the idea that each life is formed by a unique image that is the essence of that life, and that calls it to a particular destiny. The fundamental questions for us, then, are “what is it in my heart that I must be and do? Who am I in the world?”

The Judeo-Christian Wisdom writings give us some clues: we are made in the image of a Creator who calls us Beloved. To know ourselves as Beloved shapes our identity, meaning and purpose in life: it at once grounds us in an unconditional love rooted in the heart of God and moves us beyond ourselves into relationship with others.

While vocation springs from an inner imperative, it is given flesh by what it calls us forth into and by what it calls forth from us. Poet David Whyte notes that in the conversation between ourselves and the world, we find and make a home for ourselves in which we discover ourselves and our work. It is not without its risks, however.

“In work, it has always taken courage to follow a unique and individual path exactly, because making our own path takes us off the path, in directions which seem profoundly unsafe; it takes us to the cliff edges of life. Finding a work to which we can dedicate ourselves always calls for some kind of courage, some form of heartfelt participation...because its intrinsic worth bring us into conversation with larger, fiercer worlds where we are forced to remember first priorities.”

We live in fierce times. Constantly bombarded by social media of the many ways the world is crumbling around us, we become so habituated to it that we stop paying attention (Hannah Arendt calls this “the banality of evil”). We are either lulled into unconsciousness or propelled into frantic activity, adopting a “me and mine” stance that pits us one against the other, turning a blind eye to those whose suffering reminds us of our own vulnerability.

Faith in these times matters, because it reminds us of our first priorities: that we are God’s Beloved, co-creators with God in mending the Creation, what Jews call “tikkun o’lam” and Christians call social justice: seeking full flourishing for all persons. Remembering doesn’t lessen the fear and trembling, but it does ground us in the knowledge of who and Whose we are and fosters the courage to move forward.

Poet Mary Oliver wrote: “My work is loving the world. Here the sunflowers, there the hummingbird – equal seekers of sweetness...are my boots old? Is my coat torn? Am I no longer young, and still not half-perfect? Let me keep my mind on what matters, which is my work, which is mostly standing still and learning to be astonished.”

As you rest from your labors, I invite you to be still and consider what matters: what is the courageous conversation your life calls you to? What is *your* work in the world? What will delight and astonish you? Embrace it; it is your birthright and your vocation.

Rev. Dr. Susan Fowler is a spiritual director at the Yale Divinity School and an Adjunct Professor of Philosophy at Quinnipiac University. She welcomes your thoughts at susan.fowler@aya.yale.edu