



“God’s Vocational School”

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Jeremiah 1:4-10 (NRSV)**

In the June issue of *Popular Science*, the magazine ran its list of the Worst Jobs in Science. In this annual “bottom-10” list, they “salute the men and women who do what no salary can adequately reward.”¹ Just a little warning—you may be hearing some words here you’ve never heard uttered in church. Here’s the list:

- Number 10: Whale-Feces Researcher. They scoop up whale dung, then dig through it for clues.
- Number 9: Forensic Entomologist. They solve murders by studying maggots.
- Number 8: Olympic Drug Tester. When your job is drug testing the world’s top athletes, there’s no way to win.
- Number 7: Gravity Research Subject. They’re strapped down so astronauts can blast off.
- Number 6: Microsoft Security Grunt. Like wearing a big sign that reads, “Hack Me.”
- Number 5: Coursework Carcass Preparer. They kill, pickle, and bottle the critters that schoolkids cut up.
- Number 4: Garbologist. Think Indiana Jones— in a Dumpster.
- Number 3: Elephant Vasectomist. When your patient is Earth’s largest land animal, sterilization is a big job.
- Number 2: Oceanographer. Doesn’t sound so bad—except that it’s nothing but bad news, day in and day out.
- Number 1: Hazmat Diver. The Jacques Cousteau of the sewers.

It amuses me to invent a scene from the past of some of these folk, a scene in the high school guidance counselor’s office. The counselor intones, “Well, Rosalind, we’ve looked over your test scores, coursework and grades and have determined that you have the perfect talent and aptitude to pursue a career studying whale poop.”

¹ Popular Science, June 2007

<<http://www.popsci.com/popsci/science/0203101256a23110vgnvcm1000004eecbccdrd.html>> Accessed on August 31, 2007

To my knowledge there is no specific vocational program or school one attends to become a whale-dung researcher, and I doubt that any of these folks imagined these particular jobs in their vocational dreams as teenagers.

And yet when you read the enthusiasm with which whale researcher Rosalind Rolland or entomologist Neal Haskell discuss their work, you get the sense that they really love—even feel called to—their difficult and smelly jobs. Despite the fact that some of their jobs have no immediate payoff, they continue their work in hopes that future generations will reap the benefits of their toil.

The guidance-counselor scenario I imagine is not far off from what is described in our Biblical text today. Some scholars do believe Jeremiah was a teenager when he heard God's call. I can see God calling a young Jeremiah into the counseling office, peering at him over the desk and saying, "Well, Jerry, we've looked over your test scores, coursework, and grades, and we think you have the perfect talent and aptitude for a prophet of Israel." And, like a typical teenager, Jeremiah responds, "Dude. No way!"

To comprehend Jeremiah's hesitance, we must understand two things about Jeremiah's time. First, Jeremiah's was a culture that placed great value on the wisdom of elders. Jeremiah must have felt that his youth placed him at great disadvantage as a prophet. Second, being a prophet in Ancient Israel is no small matter, and was not an easy occupation. A prophet didn't just predict the future, but pointed out the moral, religious, and political faults of rulers, priests, and common folk alike and advocated for reform. In essence, God is asking Jeremiah to do one of the ten worst jobs in Ancient Israel, a difficult job with little hope of immediate payoff. No wonder he recoils.

Jeremiah was born into a time of world change and political upheaval, a time when the two local superpowers, Assyria and Babylon, duke it out over who will control little Israel. It is a time when Israel sends protection money to Assyria and takes on the religious practices of the Assyrians to protect itself from being overrun. Into this environment, God throws Jeremiah and asks him to warn the people that if they do not repent of the forbidden pagan practices they have adopted and return to the worship of Yahweh, they and the temple in Jerusalem will be destroyed by a powerful force.

Jeremiah may have hesitated at first, but when he accepts God's call, Jeremiah finds that he is innately gifted for his work, with a talent for making a bold statement. To get his message across, he uses props and demonstrations so vivid that they become almost like performance art. He smashes a pot during a sermon to illustrate the destruction heading Israel's way. He walks around Jerusalem wearing a wooden yoke around his neck, handing out wooden yoke necklaces to the local rulers to symbolize how they will have to submit to the yoke of Babylon.

Still, in spite of Jeremiah's creative examples, Israel won't listen. The kings and priests won't listen. He is even rejected by his own family. Unique among the prophets in the Old Testament, he complains to God that he feels abandoned and laments about how difficult and lonely his work is. Near the end of his life, he witnesses his most dire

predictions come true: the destruction of the temple by the Babylonian forces and the exile of Israel. Despite his gifts and his best efforts, Jeremiah didn't make a big difference in his own lifetime—but he made a huge difference in the lives of the generations that followed.

At first glance Jeremiah's story seems to have little to do with me. He lived in a time so far removed and foreign, and I just can't believe that one day I'm going to wake up and have God call me into God's counseling office and tell me what my vocation is. But Jeremiah's story does have something to say to us, and urges us to ask questions that are at the very heart of our relationship with God. What does it mean to be called by God? How do we discern God's call for us? How do we live out God's call in our daily lives?

What **does** it mean to be called by God? First, I think it's beneficial to talk about the words *calling* and *vocation*. They are often used interchangeably and are rather loaded words, especially in the church. We often associate these words with the motivation of a person to take on a religious profession. *Vocation* has the additional and sometimes contradictory sense of referring only to one's work, occupation, or livelihood. The word *calling* also suggests something outside ourselves summoning or commanding us. To see *calling* or *vocation* only in these terms, though, is limiting. It suggests that perhaps only some are called by God and the rest are not.

True vocation does not necessarily come from outside ourselves. To think this suggests that a calling is an external voice that asks us to be something we are not, to be somehow better than we are now. Rather, calling means to live into our God-given gifts, our God-given self. This is implied in God's words to Jeremiah: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you" God knows us and has formed us with unique gifts for the world. Our task, then, perhaps our life-long vocation, is to discover those gifts and how they may be of best use.

In the Hasidic Jewish tradition, this idea is illustrated by a story about a Rabbi named Zusya. One day, Rabbi Zusya suddenly began to weep in the middle of a service. After being questioned about his distress, he explained, "In the coming world, they will not ask me: 'Zusya, 'Why weren't you a Moses, leading your people out of slavery?' or 'Why weren't you a Joshua, leading your people into the Promised Land?' Instead they will ask me: 'Zusya, why were you not more like Zusya?'"²

God isn't asking us to be Jeremiah, or Moses, or Joshua, or any of the prophets. God is rather asking us to be fully ourselves. As spiritual writer and Trappist monk Thomas Merton puts it, to be called by God means, "to work together with God in the creation of our own life, our own identity, our own destiny." To do otherwise is to deprive the world of a crucial aspect of God's presence.

² "Why Weren't You Zusya?" adapted. *The Hasidic Stories Home Page*
<http://www.hasidicstories.com/Stories/Other_Early_Rebber/zusia.html> Accessed on August 31, 2007

So, if we acknowledge that we are each uniquely called by God, how then do we discern that call? The way the story is told in the Bible, God spoke aloud to Jeremiah; how do we know God speaks to us? If God is not going to call us into the counseling office and tell us what our vocation is, how do we hear God's call? Again, the word *calling* becomes problematic. *Call* implies an external voice, something audible, something that gets our ears' attention. A person who waits to hear God's call in a literal, physical voice may wait a lifetime and never hear it. I have never heard a voice, a literal voice, which I understood to be God calling me. But I do believe that God "speaks" to me in a variety of ways.

One of those ways is what some call "body wisdom." Two or three years ago, my dentist noticed some evidence of teeth grinding. I was fitted for an occlusal guard, which I wear at night to prevent my teeth grinding from causing further damage to the enamel. What I started noticing, however, was that I not only clenched my jaw at night, I did it during the day, too. A lot. Over a two year period, the jaw clenching got so bad that my jaw ached at the end of every day, even when didn't think my stress level was especially high. I took Advil. A lot. My chiropractor started adjusting my jaw on a regular basis, and my chiropractic visits got closer and closer together. Last year at school I was in pretty constant agony. I finally woke up to the fact that my jaw pain was a sign that I needed to make a significant change in my life. Sometimes our bodies act as a sort of "receiving station" for God's call. We have to learn to interpret the signal.

Another way I know that God speaks to me is through synchronicity, or when events or situations just fall into place without effort. Last fall, when it became apparent to me that I could not last another year teaching the way I had been, I struggled with the decision to take a year's leave of absence and wondered if it was the right course of action. I was concerned about what I would do in that year and how I would live without my salary. Within two weeks of making my decision to leave, both concerns were solved without my having to do anything.

Mike Foster had a similar experience when he made the decision to leave IBM and get a teaching credential. Within weeks of making his decision, a livelihood, a means to pay for his schooling, and an affordable place to live all materialized without effort.

Like body wisdom, synchronicity can be God saying, "Yes. This is it. This is your call!"

As hard as it may be sometimes to discern God's call, perhaps the hardest question to tackle is how do we live out God's call for us in our daily lives? How do we find an expression of God's call for us in our secular work that seems to have nothing to do with spirituality? We are used to compartmentalizing ourselves—spirituality on Sunday, work Monday through Friday, leisure on Saturday. And yet to **not** bring that sense of call into our everyday lives is to say that true vocation belongs only to a chosen few, the Jeremiahs of the world, and not all of us.

How do we bring our relationship with God to work with us, as office workers or factory workers or farmworkers, as parents with small children or teachers or civic leaders or

salespeople or business executives—without offending the sensibilities of others? I can't begin to answer this question for all of us here today, since our work is so varied, but I do offer three suggestions to ponder.

First, we can reframe our attitude toward our work. Focusing on the greater good to which a job contributes, rather than the job's duties, can provide meaning and fulfillment from the work and a reminder of God's call in our lives. Ten years ago, when I worked for a PR firm that served clients in the food packaging industry, my boss Barbara did just that. She always reminded herself, and us, that by promoting businesses that created safe food processing and packaging equipment, we were increasing the health and safety of many people.

Second, we can reframe the way we deal with the people we encounter every day. In his book *Spirituality at Work: 10 Ways to Balance Your Life on the Job*, Gregory F. Augustine Pierce relates the practice of Ana-Maria Rizzuto, medical doctor in Massachusetts. "Years ago," Rizzuto says, "I found a very simple and most rewarding spiritual exercise. I decided that each time I had to address a person—be it at work, on the street, when buying something, or in any other circumstance—I would smile (from the heart, no "toothpaste" smile) while at the same time reminding myself that the person I was addressing was beloved by God. It is most rewarding. People seem to need smiles. More frequently than not, they smile back. It becomes both a contemplative prayer and a friendly and unpretentious human interaction between the two of us."³

Finally, we can reframe our physical workspace. Last year, I created what was essentially a personal altar in my classroom. I taped a few evocative but not overtly religious pictures on the wall near my computer—one of the Chartres labyrinth, and two art reproductions that I find meaningful. I also posted a line of scripture next to my computer where only I could see it. These things were quiet, constant reminders of my relationship with God. If you don't have a place for it or know such a display would be inappropriate, you can carry something with you instead. Some people keep a small metal cross or an angel in their pocket or purse; every time they touch it, it is a reminder of their call.

Such practices may be simple, but finding small ways to appropriately bring our spiritual practice into our lives on the six days besides Sunday can help us remember our relationship with God and develop our true vocation.

Jeremiah's story reminds us that each of us **does** have a calling, and our calling has a spiritual expression. Jeremiah challenges us to make a commitment to God and to ourselves to become aware of the ways God is calling us, to explore our own gifts and talents as we become more fully and authentically our true selves, and like Jeremiah, to passionately express God's unique call for each of us.

³ *Spirituality at Work: 10 Ways to Balance Your Life on the Job*, Gregory F. Augustine Pierce. p. 65