

From Parker J. Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*. San Francisco: 2000.

Vocation does not come from willfulness. It comes from listening. I must listen to my life and try to understand what it is truly about — quite apart from what I would like it to be about or my life will never represent anything real in the world, no matter how earnest my intentions.

That insight is hidden in the word *vocation* itself, which is rooted in the Latin for “voice.” Vocation does not mean a goal that I pursue. It means a calling that I hear. Before I can tell my life what I want to do with it, I must listen to my life telling me who I am. I must listen for the truths and values at the heart of my own identity, not the standards by which I *must* live — but the standards by which I cannot help but live if I am living my own life. (pp. 4-5)

Our deepest calling is to grow *into* our own authentic selfhood, 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 Buechner asserts when he defines vocation as “the place where your deep gladness meets the world’s deep needs.”

Buechner’s definition starts with the self and moves toward the needs of the world; it begins, wisely, where vocation begins — not in what the world needs (which is everything), but in the nature of the human self, in what brings the self joy, the deep joy of knowing that we are here on earth to be the gifts that God created. (pp. 16-17)

One sign that I am violating my own nature in the name of nobility is a condition called burnout. Though usually regarded as the result of trying to give too much, burnout in my experience results from trying to give what I do not possess — the ultimate in giving too little! Burnout is a state of emptiness, to be sure, but it does not result from giving all I have: it merely reveals the nothingness from which I was trying to give in the first place. (p. 49)

John Middleton Murry put this truth into words that challenge the conventional concept of goodness to its core: “For a good man to realize that it is better to be whole than to be good is to enter on a strait and narrow path compared to which his previous rectitude was flowery license.” (pp 50-51)

The spiritual traditions do not deny the reality of the outer world. They simply claim that we help make that world by projecting our spirit on it, for better or for worse. If our institutions are rigid, it is because our hearts fear change; if they set us in mindless competition with each other, it is because we value victory over all else; if they are heedless of human well-being, it is because something in us is heartless as well.

We can make choices about what we are going to project, and with those choices we help grow the world that is. Consciousness precedes being; consciousness, yours and mine, can form, deform, or reform the world. Our complicity in world making is a source of awesome and sometimes painful responsibility — and a source of profound hope for change. It is the ground of our common call to leadership, the truth that makes leaders of us all. (pp. 77-78)