

**Calling: A Journal for Leaders Who Nurture Vocation**  
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**VOCATION AND CULTURE**

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**Evoking Each Other's Truth: Testimony Re-Imagined**

In a collection called *The Book of Questions*, Chilean poet Pablo Neruda asks “Whom can I ask what I came to make happen in this world?” I encountered this line in 1993 while I was a youth pastor preparing to take a group of North American teens to the Atacama Desert in Chile for their first international mission trip. Emily, then 16, grasped this line and refused to let it go. It became the group’s oft-whispered mantra. Someone would utter it as we gazed at the stars after a day spent playing soccer with barefoot children, as we hammered assembly-line fashion the desks and chairs that would furnish their school, or as we strolled through the dusty cemetery surrounded by the majestic Andes Mountains.

Neruda’s question is a shorthand articulation of the profound developmental task of discerning vocation.<sup>1</sup> As mission trips often do, this journey invited us to step outside our everyday lives. In a foreign landscape, awash in an unfamiliar language, and encircled by new friends, we were freed to evoke one another’s truths about life’s big questions.

Emily, now 27, spends her summers slogging through the wetlands of Wisconsin, collecting and interpreting dirt samples. She is an environmental scientist dedicated to diminishing human encroachment on the mating grounds of the region’s endangered species. As one in a circle of elders who watched this particular expression of vocation unfold, I celebrate that Emily found “meaningful work consistent with her faith and values.”<sup>2</sup> For help in deciphering her vocational urges, Emily turned to her peers, her parents, her youth group, and her particularly attuned biology teacher. Emily’s experience causes me to wonder:

- Where do people engage in deep listening to the emerging longings of teens?
- Who is taking the time to immerse youth in cross-cultural experiences and then tease out their impact on emerging beliefs?
- When are youth invited to slow down, take a look around, and tell the truth of their lives out loud to one another?

Hopefully, this happens in the course of any good ministry by, with, and for youth. But as watchers and practitioners of youth ministry well know, carving out space and time for deep reflection is challenging. In the influential book *Practicing Our Faith*, the authors invite exploration of the ancient Christian practice of testimony, defined as the act of telling the truth of our lives out loud to one another.<sup>3</sup> But inviting youth to “testify” can feel forced and unnatural. The word testimony connotes the recital of a conventional conversion experience, rather than honest talk about God’s activity in the daily events of the here-and-now.

In my work as a seminary teacher and retreat leader, I frequently make it my business to create hospitable places for storytelling to emerge. This is a way of re-visioning the Christian practice of testimony for a new day. Based on a method I researched and wrote about for the book *Doing Girlfriend Theology: God-Talk with Young Women*, I invite a participant (male or female) to tell a true story from their lives out loud to a small group of active listeners. The process then invites the listeners to relate their emotional responses, shared stories and common identifications to the story. We then tease from the story connections to scripture or ways that it points to an aspect of God's nature. The last step in the process is naming the "aha" moments. We speak of any future actions the story and our participation in it call forth.<sup>4</sup> The value of evoking such testimony cannot be underestimated. The opportunity for fresh, new, startling testimony to emerge is a gift the church can offer in accompanying youth toward their calling. In offering such spaces, we remember that life's deepest questions are not answered by external authorities. However, a host of attentive listeners might help youth come to trust their own inner voice and discover their own inner wisdom.

After more than a decade of using this method, I've heard stories that include:

- A woman's story about a glistening spring day when, as a teenager, she gathered with her brothers on a tree branch for a family portrait.
- A boy's story about taking a walk to the cemetery with an elderly neighbour whose husband had died six months before.
- A teenage girl's story about the day her boyfriend woke her up early in the morning to take her to a hilltop so she could see the sun rise.
- A young woman's story about a dream that came to her the summer after her twin sister died of leukemia.
- A teenage boy's story about knowingly breaking the rules so he and a friend could skateboard through the empty rooms of the church building.

In this process, testimony points to startling and refreshing discoveries. We go looking for God, not just in the expected places, but also in experiences, events or relationships that have been tucked into the seams of everyday living. When invited, these stories might pour forth and come into focus as significant testimony to God's activity in the everyday moments of life. In the presence of artful listeners, a youth may better be able to discern a pattern of calling, claiming and ongoing revelation woven through such life events.

Youth who ponder their purpose in life echo the poet's question: "Whom can I ask what I came to make happen in this world?" People of faith engaged in ministry with young people might discern two implicit assumptions in this quest: 1) that one's life is intended to have purpose beyond self-fulfilment and material gain; 2) that someone stands at the ready to help one discover that purpose.

These assumptions are in keeping with the ethical mandate of communities seeking to incarnate the body of Christ. However, my experience as a teen, young adult, seminary student, pastor, researcher and seminary professor is that church communities often fail to live up to these assumptions. Churches do not always help youth articulate the religious dimensions of their call, often settling by default to support a more comfortable, less challenging quest for self-fulfilment and material well-being.

However, when the church does rise to its high calling, the faithful engage young people in the life-shaping practices of the Christian faith. Community forms and trust develops. These faith communities provide challenging exposure to the world, buffered by safe spaces that encourage the unfolding of a young person's unique gifts, talents, abilities and desires. In communities such as this, young persons might find the "whom" to hear them into clarity about what they are supposed to be doing, both now and in the future.

*The Rev. Dr. Dori Baker is a United Methodist pastor, seminary professor, and author of "[Doing Girlfriend Theology: God-Talk with Young Women](#)." Stories in this article were drawn from research for "Lives to Offer: Accompanying Youth on the Quest for Vocation," co-authored by Dr. Baker and Joyce Ann Mercer. It will be published by Pilgrim Press in fall 2007.*

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<sup>1</sup> See Sharon Daloz Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Young Adults in their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith*, (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2000) for a discussion of discerning vocation as a life-long task that is particularly acute during adolescence and young adulthood.

<sup>2</sup> Margaret Ann Crain and Jack Seymour, *Yearning for God: Reflections of Faithful Lives*, (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2003), 47.

<sup>3</sup> Sharon Daloz Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams*.

<sup>4</sup> Dorothy C. Bass, editor, *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*, (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1997).

<sup>5</sup> See *Doing Girlfriend Theology: God-Talk with Young Women*. See also *Lives to Offer: Accompanying Youth on the Quest for Vocation*. Chapter 7 indicates a "Guy-friendly Theology" as an adaptation more suitable to the lives and cultural situations of males.