



## Editorial: Vocation, Wellness, and the Modern Cult of the Self

In the early 1840s a group of New England intellectuals and socialists formed a communal settlement called Brook Farm in eastern Massachusetts. Intended as a utopian community and a model for the future, Brook Farm attracted the cream of the Transcendentalist movement, and many famous intellectuals, including Nathaniel Hawthorne and Ralph Waldo Emerson, were either members of the community or frequent visitors and supporters. Brook Farm was to be a place where all members were free to pursue the work they wished to do, and where the community as a whole pooled their resources and shared equally. It was believed that such a community would allow the members plenty of free time to express themselves in their chosen fields. Of course, it was a disaster; most members wanted to be poets or writers or artists, and very few people wanted to do the work that would actually support the community. After a few years the community collapsed. But through intellectuals like Emerson and others, the modern cult of the self (and its expression) was popularized in American culture.

The trouble with this modern cult was that it built on a faulty anthropology, which posits that people are born as a “blank canvas” and, with the right education and training, can grow up to be model citizens. Education was the key to all. These New England intellectuals, and their followers, were running away from their Protestant forebearers and from the Calvinist understanding of human sin and self-centeredness. Unfortunately, at Brook Farm the lack of this realistic understanding of sin and the self caused the collapse of the community in a few years, as has happened with most other such utopian experiments.

These faulty ideas of individualistic self-actualization and self-expression are deeply rooted in our modern culture, and have the tendency to hijack and distort our understanding of vocation and wellness. Without a robust sense of sin and the distortions caused by our wills, any of our own urges—even those that are harmful and destructive—can be rationalized as a legitimate expression of our

“genuine” selves. Remember the Augustinian definition of sin as the “self, curved in on itself”? This is the ultimate end of much of our modern cult of the self and of self-expression. We harm ourselves and others in the unfettered search for “that which we were meant to be.” God does not love us “just the way we are” (what a horrible idea!); God loves us for what we can be, when transformed by his love.

Even when the modern search for self is not sinful, it is often self-centered and selfish. In a sort of moral libertarianism, the modern search for self posits that if you do what you want, and I do what I want, and everyone does what they want, then the world will be a happy place because individually, we are all happy. The inhabitants of Brook Farm found out very quickly how wrong that assumption was. Everyone there did what fed their souls, but what about the needs of others? When vocation and wellness are defined primarily by individualism, then we lose any sense of the vocation of serving others in their need. Many vocations to which we are called do not, after all, feed our souls and lead us to well-being. Rather, these social and societal relationships can be at times, quite frankly, a burden and can have the effect of diminishing or postponing our own wants, needs, and desires. Being called to the vocation of family member, parent, spouse, or friend means putting aside our wants and desires to serve the other. These are God-given vocations, and of course at times they can be a real joy—but not always. Sometimes they require sacrifice and compromise, and even real suffering.

Wellness here must be understood as communal wellness—how we serve others in their needs, just as Christ has served us. The wellness of our society takes precedence over that which we think will make us well. This is not a call to be a “doormat” for others to trample in pursuit of their own self-centered desires. But it is to recognize that wellness is much more than simple personal growth or fulfillment, and that there are needs in others and this world that often transcend our own needs and desires.

Only in light of these realities can words like *vocation* and *wellness* have any real meaning for Christians. And this runs so counter to the direction many gurus in our popular culture would have us go, and to our own inclinations of what might make us happy. But that is what Christ calls us to—the vocation(s) that we, in Christian love, undertake for the sake of the world, a world that Christ loves and would have us love for him as well. Our vocations and our wellness, both, are ultimately to be found in our identity as children of God. In *The Freedom of a Christian* Luther expressed it in this dichotomy: we are truly freed in the love and grace of God, but thus we are also truly bound to love and serve our neighbors. That is the true vocation of a Christian.

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