



Why It's Important to Be Who You Are

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By the time this article comes to print it'll be summer where I live, just weeks away from the start of the Minnesota State Fair. (It's a Really Big Deal in these parts.) One of my many delightful memories as a dad is of a brief encounter one of our kids had at the entry gate to the fair a number of years ago. Our son, Josiah, who was maybe ten or so at the time, happened to be wearing a T-shirt that day with a question emblazoned across the front: *Who does the world need you to be?* The ticket-taker paused in his repetitive task long enough to take note of Josiah's shirt, gave a quick nod of appreciation, and asked, "So, what's *your* answer to that question? *Who does the world need you to be?*" Without missing a beat, Josiah placed his open palm against his chest and gleefully proclaimed, "Myself!"

I so loved that answer, both for the content it contained and for the exuberant, guileless, unselfconscious spirit with which it was delivered. Without being arrogant or boastful, Josiah—at least in that moment—knew that he mattered, that precisely because he was who he was he would make a difference to others.

Across the years there have been so many times that I've wanted to "grow up to be just like him," yearned to have that kind of grounded and contributing sense of self, longed to know that I have worth, that I am lovable and loved as the person I am. Truth is, that's often been really hard for me; I'm easily daunted by my internal

Awareness of self and of one's being as a child of God is crucial to an understanding of one's God-given vocation in the world. This sense of self is not for our own gratification, but to center us in our vocation for others and the world.

voices of inadequacy or shame or desire to be “more” or “better” or simply “different.” Of course, there have been plenty of times when Josiah has heard his own version of internal voices like that; all three of our kids do (and I would hazard to guess that most people do) from time to time. And of course, as their father I so often wish that they could see themselves the way I see them and love themselves as I love them—and, more importantly, as God sees and loves them. I wish I could set them (and myself) free from the burdens of anxiety and depression that sometimes drag us into the swamps of not-enoughness and muzzle our ability to show up as the children of God that we actually are.

To be sure, there are always plenty of external voices coming at us all the time as well—voices that belittle or violate, condemn or correct, shout us down or shut us out. Those voices can shriek in our faces, or whisper in the darkness, that it's *not* good to be who we are. They might echo across time as generational trauma, or be hurled across the table in a family argument, or reverberate across social media. They might slither into our psyche through ads that remind us of our faults and shortcomings, with the hollow promise that we just have to buy this product or upgrade to the newer, faster, shinier whatever in order to be *better*, the person we long to be (but aren't—what a shame).

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But here's the thing: the world really does need Josiah and his siblings, and me, and you—each of us, all of us—to be who we are. The needs and hungers of the world remind us every moment that we're all in this together and that we have work to do. The billions of particularities of our daily lives call us to show up as the people we are, in whatever places and roles and relationships we inhabit, and to offer what good we can. And when we do—when we live out who we are and are called to be—the noise of those interior voices of self-doubt and self-diminishment, the cacophony of external voices that criticize and seduce can be, if not banished altogether, at least toned down. In turn, the truer, more authentic, and deeply resonant voice of our gifts and skills and talents, of our deepest passions and values, of our integrity and our dignity as beloved children of God can ring through.

Sure, each of us is flawed and incomplete. In our own ways—which we likely share in common with others—we are bruised and broken. We each have growing and learning (and often a good bit of *un-learning*) to do. But far from disqualifying us from having something to contribute, all of that is part of what makes us not perfect but *whole*. Shadow and light together. Brokenness and beauty. Villain and hero. Sinner and saint. Every step of the path so far has brought us to where we are. Each step ahead calls us to bring our fullest and truest selves to the journey.

But *why* be yourself? *Why* does the world need you to be who you are? In what follows I offer some suggestions, for starters:

- Being yourself honors God’s promise that you are “enough” and liberates you from the debilitating pressure of trying to be someone else.
- Being who you are allows and encourages others to be who *they* are and leverages our fundamental connectedness with others.
- Being yourself opens you up to, and empowers you to respond to, the suffering and the wonder of life.

First, it might be helpful to recall that *vocation* means “calling” (from *vocare*, to call, invite, or summon; and related to *vox*, voice). Among other things, thinking about one’s life as a “calling” implies a source of the call—a *caller*: for some, that may be other people and their needs; for some it’s God, the sacred, or Mystery; or perhaps nature, the community, or one’s deepest self. It also implies an ongoing dynamic of listening and discernment, seeking and discovery, questions and “answers,” response and conversation.

It will also be helpful to know what vocation is *not*.

- *It is not just your work, job, occupation, profession, or career.* These can and likely will change—and many people don’t have a profession or career at all. It’s great if your vocation can be lived out, at least in part, in and through your work, but there’s much more to it. It’s a thread that is woven throughout and binds together the various pieces of the tapestry of your life, and so is deeper and more constant than jobs and careers can ever be; it is irreplaceable in a way they are not.
- *It is not just something particularly “religious,” or some special position or status or responsibility that only “religious people” have.* Your vocation may grow out of and express your faith or spirituality, but it does not depend on identifying with a particular religious tradition or on holding a particular set of beliefs or practices. Still, it is likely rooted in your deepest sense of meaning, and can help put your life and work into a larger narrative or vision that can sustain you over the long haul and help you survive disappointments and tragedies.
- *It is not just a possession or thing, a kind of commodity you “have” or “buy” or “find” or “get”—as in, “Get a life!”* It doesn’t get handed to you with your diploma as you walk across the stage at graduation, or appear when you scratch off a lottery ticket, or come wrapped in glittered packaging. Instead, it emerges within and around you, and takes on various shapes and meanings—in and through the myriad experiences and relationships, questions and discoveries, disappointments and frustrations, accidents and circumstances, promises and fulfillments of life. It might not be too strong to say that you don’t “have” a vocation, but rather you *are* your vocation.

Vocation, in other words, is *who you most truly are, in and for the world*. This can be expressed in a number of ways:

- Vocation expresses who you are when you live in ways that make life better for others.
- It's about being of service in your daily roles, relationships, and choices. It encompasses your whole life, which can include (but isn't limited to) family and friendships, citizenship and community involvement, spending habits, leisure activities, care for the earth, and a job or career.
- It's the expression of your truest identity, your deepest sense of faith and meaning, your distinctive wholeness as a child of God in the living of your life toward the well-being of others and the flourishing of the common good.
- Imagine a tent pole: Vocation is the elastic cord that ties together the segments of your life (e.g., different life stages, different jobs, different roles and relationships) and forms the flexible framework of the life-story you inhabit (the "tent").
- Vocation is orienting your life toward the well-being of others as your *lived answer* to the Big Questions of identity, purpose, and meaning—questions like:
 - Who am I, and why am I here?
 - What's my place in the world, and how can I make a difference?
 - How does my life today contribute to peace and justice—or doesn't it?
 - Who has God created me to be, and what work is God doing in the world through me?
- Vocation is an overarching self-understanding that sees the self¹ as the following:
 - The self as *gifted*, both in terms of discerning and nourishing your gifts, talents, skills, competencies, strengths, interests, and passions, and in terms of knowing that your very life is a gift to be cherished and shared with others. It grows out of and expresses a capacity to live your life with a posture of awe and gratitude (theologically, a posture of grateful response to grace) rather than one of entitlement, or fear, or cynicism.
 - The self as *free*—that is, both free *from* and free *for*. Free *from*, for example, the need to conform to social norms and practices that are ultimately damaging to your spirit and destructive of community and the planet, or *from* the need to earn God's favor through "good works," or *from* prejudice and narrow-mindedness. And free *for* a life of meaning, passion, and purpose in service to the neighbor, free *for* the joy (and at times the anguish) of allowing your heart to sing,

¹ I am grateful to Rev. Dr. Darrell Jodock for this understanding of vocation, which we shared across the years we worked together (2001–2014) in a campus-wide initiative on vocational reflection at Gustavus Adolphus College. See Chris Johnson and Ben Hilding, "Deep M-Pact: Mentoring Gustavus Men for Masculinities of Meaning and Making a Difference," in *Engaging College Men: Discovering What Works and Why*, ed. Gar Kellom and Miles Groth (Harriman, TN: Men's Studies Press, 2010), 134–35.

free for a hope-filled life of courageous willingness to risk for others and to stand up for justice.

- The self as *nested* within or connected to realities and relationships that are greater than yourself. Vocation grows out of and expresses a sense of the self not primarily as an isolated, independent, individualistic unit but rather as fundamentally relational, interdependent, and interconnected with others and with the planet.
- The self as *mattering*, or having agency and efficacy—that is, as someone whose decisions and actions are meaningfully your own and do in fact matter in the lives of others. It grows out of and expresses a sense that your life has significance, a sense that you have a role in the larger working-out of the meaning of things, a sense that your life really does make a difference.

Let's face it: It's no small or easy thing to "be yourself"—perhaps especially in the face of all those internal voices that get in the way, as I described above. But as the adage goes: "Who *else* are you going to be? Everyone else is already taken."² Being *yourself* liberates you from the debilitating pressure to try to be someone other than who you are, even (or perhaps especially) if that's "only" a matter of trying to become the person you think you *ought* to be. God created you, God loves you, God knows that you are enough. Now what? What can it mean to live into that truth, that promise, to live *as if* that's the case? Oliver Burkeman writes in his book *Four Thousand Weeks* that it's from the position of "*not* feeling as though you need to earn your weeks on the planet that you can do the most genuine good with them. Once you no longer feel the stifling pressure to become a particular kind of person, you can confront the personality, the strengths and weaknesses, the talents and enthusiasms you find yourself with, here and now, and follow where they lead."³

When we are fully and authentically ourselves, moreover, we leave room for others to be *themselves*—and for each of us to honor the ties that inextricably bind us together and in fact make us who we are. None of us can do it all, and none of us can go it alone—nor should we try. In fact, being truly and fully myself means that I'll be more connected with others, not less, since who I am is always a matter of relationship and interdependence. We are evolutionarily hard-wired for connection and cooperation. The story of who I am (what sociologist and activist Marshall Ganz calls the Story of Self) is also always interwoven with a shared story of who *we* are (a Story of Us) and, simultaneously, with a Story of Now: Who are these times calling me to be? What are they calling us to do?⁴ Former Surgeon General

² Though this quote is often attributed to Oscar Wilde, there is no conclusive evidence to credit him. See <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2014/01/20/be-yourself/>.

³ Oliver Burkeman, *Four Thousand Weeks: Time Management for Mortals* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2021), 223–24.

⁴ Marshall Ganz, "What Is Public Narrative?" (2008), <https://changemakerspodcast.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Ganz-WhatIsPublicNarrative08.pdf>. See also Parker J. Palmer, *Healing the Heart of Democracy: The Courage to Create a Politics Worthy of the Human Spirit* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011), 166–68.

of the United States Vivek Murthy writes in his recent book, *Together*: “Quite simply, human relationship is as essential to our well-being as food and water. . . . we all have a deep and abiding need to be seen for who we are—as fully dimensional, complex, and vulnerable human beings. We all need to know that we matter and that we are loved.”⁵

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Similarly, in her book *Bittersweet*, Susan Cain points to the influential work of, among others, University of California, Berkeley, psychologist Dacher Keltner, who directs the Greater Good Science Center. Cain describes Keltner's notion of “the compassionate instinct,” which explains that “we humans are wired to respond to each other's troubles with care.”⁶ She later says, “Our impulse to respond to other beings' sadness sits in the same location [in our brains] as our need to breathe, digest food, reproduce, and protect our babies; in the same place as our desire to be rewarded and to enjoy life's pleasures. . . . caring is right at the heart of human existence.”⁷

In the company of others, we can come to know ourselves as a distinctive blend of experiences, gifts, learnings, passions, skills, flaws, questions, failures, genes, limitations, and possibilities that is simply too rare and precious to squander. Each of us is the story of our lives. I am, you are, a story that weaves into a larger story, a thread that contributes to the tapestry, a voice in the choir, a part of the body. I am, you are, the accumulation of—but not reducible to—the roles we play and the “masks” we wear, the relationships and experiences we inhabit, the patterns and habits of thought, imagination, emotion, behavior that comprise our character. And while each of us is the *only* one of us there is, at the same time none of us is ever alone. The self that I am is always self-in-relation; my Story of Self is also always a Story of Us. Pastor, poet, and theologian Emily Kuenker writes:

No one else sees the world through your eyes. No one else loves God's people and creation with your heart. No one else preaches with your voice. No one else carries your story, which is of course one stunning thread woven into the tapestry that is God's story. . . . celebrate both the beautiful and unique voice with which God has gifted you *and* that yours is but one of the billions of voices in a holy chorus that has been

⁵ Vivek Murthy, *Together: The Healing Power of Human Connection in a Sometimes Lonely World* (New York: HarperCollins, 2020), 11, 23.

⁶ Susan Cain, *Bittersweet: How Sorrow and Longing Make Us Whole* (New York: Crown, 2022), 9.

⁷ Cain, *Bittersweet*, 10–11.

singing God's song of mercy, justice, joy, peace, and love unending since the very beginning.⁸

Being fully and truthfully yourself anchors you in a stronger position from which to grow and learn, to make amends and receive forgiveness, to empathize and to exercise compassion. It allows you to live simultaneously into a more expansive imagination of what might be, what can be, what should be, *and* into a more grounded relationship with what *is* in the here and now. When we show up as our whole selves, we're able to be *both* more porous and permeable to the world around us, more open to the full spectrum of suffering and wonder that surrounds us,⁹ *and* better able to respond and contribute. Another way to put this is that being ourselves can make us vulnerable: "vulner-*able*," as in "ability, strength, power" to withstand being wounded and to respond to pain and suffering in life-affirming and generative ways.

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Researcher and author Brené Brown describes the two signs in American Sign Language for "vulnerable," one of which conveys the possibly more conventional understanding of the word as signifying "weakness" (the index and middle fingers of one hand bending onto the flat-open palm of the other, as if suggesting "falling to one's knees"). The other sign, in contrast, involves both hands moving outward and apart in front of one's chest, as if suggesting the opening of one's heart.¹⁰ Vulnerability, in other words, can be a matter of showing up with heart wide open, "wholeheartedly," with strength and power and courage. Etymologically, the word *courage* is rooted in *cor*, or "heart."¹¹

Being fully yourself, being wholeheartedly who you are, is both hard and necessary. It doesn't arm you against pain; it can open you to pain—and ground you even more deeply in the power of connection and community that makes us human. As author and educator Parker J. Palmer notes:

If you hold your knowledge of self and world wholeheartedly, your heart will at times get broken by loss, failure, defeat, betrayal, or death. What

⁸ Rev Emily Kuenker, unpublished sermon preached at the ordination of Dane Breslin, December 14, 2022; shared in personal correspondence March 2, 2023.

⁹ Sharon Daloz Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Emerging Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011), 192–94.

¹⁰ *Inc. Magazine*, "Brené Brown: The Biggest Myth about Vulnerability," YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZkDaKKkFi6Y>

¹¹ See Brené Brown, *The Gifts of Imperfection: Let Go of Who You Think You're Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are* (Center City, MN: Hazelden, 2010), 12; see also Palmer, *Healing the Heart of Democracy*, 6.

happens next in you and the world around you depends on *how* your heart breaks. If it breaks *apart* into a thousand pieces, the result may be anger, depression, and disengagement. If it breaks *open* into greater capacity to hold the complexities and contradictions of human experience, the result may be new life. The heart is what makes us human . . . [and a broken-open heart helps us to] use our power courageously for the sake of a more equitable, just, and compassionate world.¹²

When we're being fully and truly ourselves, we're better able to discern and live into our callings—all the places in our daily lives where *who we are* and *who the world needs us to be* intersect. Being yourself includes *being true* to yourself. And that, in turn, means honoring your gifts and talents by seeking ways to put them to positive use, and affirming your core values by manifesting them in actions that benefit others. It means unleashing your passions in the service of something meaningful, and acknowledging your flaws and failures as integral to your wholeness and as crucibles for becoming better. It means inhabiting your roles and relationships with vitality and vision, and nourishing and being nourished by the shimmering tapestry of connections by which we are all woven together.

The world needs you to be yourself because the world needs you to be called—to live out the deep truth of who you are—the *only* one of you that God has created—in ways that make a positive difference for others. ⊕

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¹² Palmer, *Healing the Heart of Democracy*, 18.