



Called to Wholeness

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As I have defined vocational wellness, I recognize in my own journey the ongoing ways discernment has led to living into my vocation. Wellness has been a part of ministry for me; I have grown to understand wholeness as a better descriptor of wellness. Our call to wholeness is a journey that can only be created by pausing and prayerfully reflecting, noticing the places, people, and experiences that have impacted our growth toward wholeness. The prayer practice of spiritual autobiography is a tool that invites such reflection and helps identify periods of formation, transformation, dormancy, and growth. I have found that the image of a road map—with mile markers, road signs, freeways (times when life was going smoothly), and detours (the unexpected)—can serve as a guide as I illustrate my journey to vocational wholeness (wellness).

Walking with coaching clients, who often focus on discernment, I have shared the words of Father Thomas Keating: “Discernment is a process of letting go of what we are not.”¹ Mark Nepo in *The Book of Awakening*, writes: “I often think of how Michelangelo sculpted, how he saw the sculpture waiting, already complete, in the uncut stone. He would often say that his job was to carve away

¹ Father Thomas Keating, quoted in Mark Nepo, *A Book of Awakening: Having the Life You Want by Being Present to the Life You Have* (Berkeley, CA: Conari, 2000), 212.

The author narrates her own journey to a sense of call from God, resulting in her current vocation. Her study, along with practices such as spiritual autobiography, have helped her help others by discerning their own vocational journey. The article concludes with a series of framing questions to help define and guide these journeys.

the excess, freeing the beauty just waiting to be released.”² As we listen, learn, and grow into who God has created us to be, we will be invited to let go of the attachments, traumas, fears, and distractions that confine us, keep us stuck, and try to define us rather than refine us. Refined, we are freed to grow more wholly into who God created us to be.

This call to wholeness is marked with challenges, opportunities, grief and loss, pruning and new birth, abundant love, adventure, fear, lessons of trust, and grace. Through this journey, God invites us to be open to discover our gifts, passions, and values, and to recognize the way they shape our vocation.

To gain clarity, it sometimes helps to get a bird’s-eye view. Climbing to the balcony brings a new vantage point. At age fourteen, I became a church organist. From the organ bench in the balcony, I could see the entire congregation (albeit their backside!). Though I felt removed from the worshipping community, it created an opportunity for me to see the whole.

Wholeness was a part of growing up on the farm. Daily life brought together the interconnectivity of nature, plants, and animals. I learned how each was a part of the whole. Growing up in rural Minnesota in the 1970s, I had a limited worldview. I was naïve and sheltered from life outside a small German/Irish town where the greatest diversity and conflict were between the Lutherans and the Catholics. This reality shaped my family as my father was an Irish Catholic and mother a German Lutheran. They taught me the value of working hard, faithfulness, care for the earth, and love of family. My parents’ vocations might have been summarized as caregivers. Surely this impacted my formation. As a woman graduating from high school in the ’70s, I found that the career options society suggested for me were to be a teacher, beautician/hairdresser, secretary, wife, or nurse. While our nature is to be choosing creatures, my decision-making skills were not well developed. Others often chose my path—whether who I “should” date, or what to study, or where to live—and so others directed me to become a nurse.

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Highly codependent, I was fearful of being alone, yet I sought to be independent of my family. I got married too young (mile-marker nineteen) to the man I had dated throughout high school. This part of my journey was turbulent; the road signs warned of falling rocks. I kept traveling, not knowing when the next explosion would create more challenges or make the road ahead impassable. Nursing allowed me to share gifts of care and compassion, coaching mothers in labor, bringing humor to stressful situations. After a few years as a charge nurse in a hospital, I chose to become a director of nursing at a local group of clinics. Planning to

² Nepo, *A Book of Awakening*, 212.

start a family (because that was what married couples “should” do), I chose work that offered regular hours closer to home.

The road continued to be rocky; I stayed on this road even when the abuse became physical. When I asked a pastor what our faith said about divorce, he indicated that it was “wrong,” reinforcing that I “should” stay the course. So I busied myself with volunteering at the church. One day on the organ bench, I found a brochure for a parish nurse program through Concordia College. I was excited to find a way to combine my nursing and ministry. After becoming a parish nurse, I was anxious to share this ministry. One Sunday night, I picked up the “want ads” in the Sunday paper and read of an opportunity for a parish nurse coordinator. This began a journey of growth and self-confidence. I applied, interviewed, and was accepted before my family of “shoulds” was aware. It was the beginning of my breaking free of the control that extended family had held for too long. It was an invitation toward refinement. As the parish nurse coordinator, I worked with Presbyterian, Reformed, Catholic, and Lutheran congregations to develop health ministries in their contexts. I felt fulfillment and joy in this ministry.

Soon I found myself on another road, this time to seminary. I wasn’t sure why I was there, but I just knew I needed to be. I learned about discernment and the lifelong process of listening for God, to self, and to those who surrounded me. Listening required slowing down, quieting my mind, and opening my heart. In time I sensed a call to diaconal ministry. Attending a formation event in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, was transformative for me. Spiritual disciplines and prayer practices were introduced, and I found myself excited, giddy, joyful, and laughing more than I had in years. As the two weeks came to a close, I began to cry inconsolably. I realized I needed to walk away from the abusive marriage. I was afraid. God was chiseling away, refining my life little by little.

Seminary took years as I was a wife, mother of two, nurse, organist, and active church member. Extended family questioned my decision to pursue my master’s in leadership and shift toward professional ministry. During this period I heard my husband threaten my son in words that haunted me. It was time. Over the years, I had convinced myself I could manage through the abuse. Those words, “You will be lucky if you are alive when your mom comes home,” awakened me to the reality that the abuse of this angry man was impacting not just me but my children.

I went to the balcony once again; I could now see that the way we were being treated was not based on Christ-like respect and unconditional love. This image of fatherhood was foreign to me. The abusive behavior had been passed from generation to generation. From people who worked in the church by day and came home to abuse their wife when their children misbehaved. Nature or nurture, I am not sure, but this behavior was impacting my children; I could no longer stay complacent to the emotional and physical abuse. This began years of separation and more rocky roads.

The divorce was very ugly, long, and drawn-out. I lost my church family (the congregation who had shaped me, where I confirmed my faith, served actively, and was an organist). I had worked hard to hide the abuse; friends and even some family

were unable to believe it—abuse that often began before we left the church parking lot. My daughter, a victim of his physical abuse, asked me, “What took you so long?” and my son worried he would turn out like his friends who had divorced parents. Throughout my marriage I had taken on the role of the peacemaker. Now I was managing the home as a single parent. My parents were supportive and very present for their grandchildren. This period was yet another time of chiseling and refining.

In the midst of this turbulent divorce, I continued my work in parish nursing. Our family had their hands full, helping care for our elderly grandmother, taking turns spending the night to keep her in her home. Unexpectedly, my father, who had been healthy and actively farming, died of a massive heart attack. My sister and I witnessed the five-wheeler flip with my father underneath; we were able to free him and performed CPR, but to no avail. My mother had been struggling with depression, and our single aunt was hospitalized with paranoid schizophrenia. These were heavy days. We felt like we were on a roundabout with no exit as we cared for so many. Our world as we knew it was being turned upside down.

I have reflected on how I was able to keep going through so much loss and change. I am grateful that I had several practices in place to which I attribute my ability to move forward. The care of friends, spiritual direction, monthly massage, healing touch, and maintaining my routine of a daily walk were self-care practices that sustained me.

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In the midst of this period, I felt I was being called out of my first call. *Really, God?!* I applied and interviewed for a position as the ELCA Wellness Coordinator. Upon my return home from the interview, I found my mother unresponsive beside her bed. She had suffered a massive stroke. Not yet a year after Dad’s death, my mother died. On the day we were to scatter Dad’s ashes at the farm, we ended up scattering both our parents’ ashes.

Grief and loss would not end there, as the next day, I drove my daughter to Sioux Falls to attend her first year at Augustana College. When I received a call to serve the church as the Wellness Coordinator, there was still so much to process: my own grief, all the end-of-life paperwork, finances, the farm with cattle, and family in transition. In my typical caregiver mode, I looked out for everyone else. My grief was delayed and prolonged as a result. At mile-marker forty-three, I had become the matriarch of the family; I had a new vocation, and a change in identity.

More refinement, more change, and more growth. Passionate about wholeness and well-being, I began to write, speak, and walk with leaders on their journey to living well. Defining and shaping the ministry of health and wellness, I defined wellness as “knowing who you are and remembering whose you are.” Living into my new call, I drew upon my sense of wholeness that had shaped my life.

I served on the Inter-Lutheran Coordinating Committee of the Ministerial Health and Wellness Committee of the ELCA and the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod. I contributed to the design of the Wholeness Wheel that later would be trademarked by Portico Benefits Services. In my role as the Wellness Manager, I was able to use my gift of creativity in designing tools, leading retreats, and writing a monthly article on being a whole person and on well-being for leaders.

The balcony view allowed me to recognize how this new vocation was built upon the many life experiences that had served as stepping stones on my journey of health, healing, and wholeness. Beginning with my formation on the farm, then on to nursing, parish nursing, diaconal ministry, health minister, and my role as ELCA Wellness Manager, I had been shaped and prepared in ways I had not recognized at the time.

Creating sustainable well-being among leaders throughout our church was a huge call. What would it look like to live and lead well? Based upon my own journey and self-discovery of who God was calling me to be, I recognized that this may well be a lifelong process of refinement. I discovered that many leaders hadn't stopped to consider who they were; like me, they had allowed others to shape, control, and define them. They had gotten so busy ministering to and caring for others that they had forgotten to nurture their relationship with God. They, too, had become experts in masking their struggles. Often leaders allowed their faith community to define who they were. It is easy for pleasers to get lost along the way, forgetting to listen to who God is inviting them to be. Living out another's identity and losing connection with God is a recipe for unhealthy behaviors.

Walking with leaders to help them step back to practice sabbath, live a life aligned with their values, and name and claim their gifts became ingredients in my sustainability plan to support leaders to live and lead well. Taking time to reflect on life experiences, both good and bad, allows us to see how we have been shaped and how these views impact our ability to live well. I invited others to try on prayer practices to remember whose they were and to deepen their relationship with God.

Along the way, I was blessed to discover love in a generous, caring man; we married at mile-marker forty-five. I took on a new role as stepmom to two grown sons. Over time we have become grandparents to eleven grandchildren. Unconditional love is abundant; we are accepting of each other's quirks, and it is such a gift to be able to laugh and pray together. We listen to each other's stories and recognize how God shaped and prepared our paths to merge into a new road—a journey that has been one of building up and supporting.

I found the balcony to be a place of prayer, a quiet space to be alone with God. Reflecting on life's journey, my story line, I identified three Scripture stories that paralleled my life. While struggling to exit the roundabout of an abusive relationship, and in the throes of grief and loss, I felt drawn to the story of the woman with the hemorrhage. Like this woman, I had tried many things for many years, and still I suffered under abuse. It wasn't until the woman reached out to touch the hem of Jesus's cloak that she was healed. Seeking healing, I finally felt God's strength supporting me and strengthening me to walk away. This lesson of trusting God, of

letting go of what I knew, whether it was comfortable or not, was a lesson I needed to learn again and again.

During a period when I was being called to ministry, I resonated with the Scripture story of Peter being invited to trust and walk out toward Jesus on the water. I found myself stuck and afraid of what the future might hold. I couldn't get out of my boat. I walked with this image for years, longing to trust that Jesus would be with me. I felt paralyzed. Then I got kicked out of the boat—which led to a dark night of my soul.

Months of struggle with my identity followed, as I discerned who I was now without position, purpose, or venue to share my passion. This part of the journey led me into a dense forest. It required picking up my self-confidence and using it like an axe to make a clearing, carving a path forward, and depending on the tools and God-given gifts I possessed. It required believing in myself, leaning into possibilities, and trusting that God was walking with me. This leg of the journey reminded me of the Scripture story of the road to Emmaus—a ministry of walking with another, listening, and asking powerful questions, like Jesus asked: “What things?” This passage of walking with others has been the ministry of coaching for me. Ironically, my godparents, long ago, had given me the confirmation gift of a beautifully framed picture of Jesus walking with Cleopas and his friend on the road to Emmaus.

The prayer practice of spiritual autobiography has allowed me to stand on the balcony looking over the journey of my life. I see the journey, marked by times of transformation. The well-worn roundabouts that kept me in an unhealthy relationship, unable to find an exit to healing and wholeness; the steep drops and deep valleys of grief and loss; and the falling rocks and detours were all plentiful in shaping me too—first to become self-compassionate, to care for my body, mind, and spirit so I could walk compassionately with others in their pain and desire to live faithfully and lead well. Spiritual autobiography invites you to consider when you have felt God carrying you, walking beside you, waiting for you. It also invites you to consider your legacy: What is God's reason for creating you to be you? In the words of the Lord to Jeremiah: “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations” (Jer 1:5).

As I was discerning what God was inviting me into through my seminary education, my mother revealed that throughout her pregnancy with me she had prayed I would become a missionary. In awe, and in gratitude for her prayers, I shared that diaconal ministers were often referred to as domestic missionaries. Her prayers were answered—I became a deacon (a domestic missionary). I have been shaped by Mom's faithful example of spending quiet time in Scripture, slipping away on Saturday nights to prepare before communion, and reading bedtime devotions. Dad was even quieter about his faith; he spent long days in the field, times of prayer. My parents lived life as an expression of faith: “so that the genuineness of your faith—being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is

tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed” (1 Pet 1:7).

As I consider how to answer the question “What is my legacy?,” I have been planting seeds and inviting leaders to live as whole and holy people of God. Some of the scattered seeds have fallen on rocky ground, some on sandy ground, and some on fertile soil. I have been the sower; God has done the growing. I hope I will be remembered as a faithful, loving servant advocating for health, healing, and wholeness. Our gravestone is in place with our names, our dates of birth, and our legacy, “Loving Servants,” inscribed—a vocational call that will continue until the date of death can be engraved.

The journey to living well vocationally invites us to “listen, wait, and pray for our charism and call. Most of us are really good at one or two things. Meditation should lead to a clarity about who we are and maybe even more, who we are not.”³ The road has many twists and turns. I invite you to the balcony to ponder your life’s journey through the prayer practice of spiritual autobiography. Consider the many ways you have been formed and refined to be God’s new creation in Christ.

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Here are some questions you might use to create your own spiritual autobiography. If helpful, use imagery of journey, map language with mile markers for your age, road signs to mark your experience. Be creative and prayerful as you ponder how you are growing toward vocational wellness/wholeness.

- Who are the people who have had the greatest impact on your life? Describe the impacts they have had.
- Identify the places in which important things have happened to you and the communities which have had a lasting influence on you.
- List a few of the happiest and saddest experiences of your life. Why are they important to you? How have they formed you?
- How do you describe the religious and spiritual experiences that have been most formative?
- Which spiritual metaphors and biblical stories are most meaningful to you?
- Think of important decisions you’ve made. What was the importance of these decisions? How have you made them? What have been the results?

³ Richard Rohr, *Dancing Standing Still: Healing the World from a Place of Prayer* (New York: Paulist, 2014), 82–83.

- Each of us has an “overarching story” with themes that summarize our lives. What is yours? What are the themes of your life thus far? Where is God present and moving in your story?
- How do you want to be remembered? What do you want to be remembered for?
- As you step onto the balcony, take a look at where you were being refined and molded into your vocational wellness. ⊕

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