

Letters to a Young Episcopalian: Vocation

This letter is part of a series of fictional letters by Canon George Maxwell intended for Episcopalians young and old who wonder what it means to be faithful in the world today.

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Dear Anna,

Your teacher is right that “following your passion” and “finding your bliss” are good places to start as you begin to think about your future.

That’s how the Greeks thought about it. They believed fulfillment came from listening to your own guiding spirit, or daimon. Socrates, for example, often withdrew from the conversation of the symposium to listen to his own personal daimon.

Most of us, though, hear more than one voice when we stop and listen to ourselves. We hear the voices of our parents. We hear the voices of our culture. We hear the voice that tells us that exceptional achievement is a way to obtain the love and attention that we all want and need.

It’s hard to hear the still, small voice of God. We have to learn what it sounds like and practice listening for it. That’s why we read the Bible, say the Lord’s Prayer, and care for the poor and the sick.

The voice of God will be the one reminding you it’s not all about us. We can’t achieve fulfillment in isolation. Our fulfillment depends on the fulfillment of the community in which we live, if not the fulfillment of whole creation.

In other words, your fulfillment isn’t just about developing your own unique gifts. It’s about using your gifts for the common good. To paraphrase Walter Bruggemann, it’s about finding a purpose for being in the world that is related to the purposes of God.

Sometimes you only know if you’ve heard the voice of God when you look back on how you responded. When the common good is part of the purpose, then you will find it is easier to appreciate the ways others have contributed to it as well. You won’t be quite as anxious about whether you’re the best, or whether you got there first.

And, when you reach your limits, the ability of your body, the scope of your imagination, or your need to make money, you won’t feel like you have failed. Your task was never to do it all. You only need to do your part.

So, yes, start by following your passion and finding your bliss, but don’t stop until you figure out what the world needs you to do. And, when you start listening to yourself, just remember that the loudest voices are not always telling you the truth.

Your affectionate uncle,
Ames

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