

**Telling Your Story as Vocational Discernment
Proposal for DISCOVER Curriculum Development Grant**

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We travelers, walking to the sun, can't see
Ahead, but looking back the very light
That blinded us shows us the way we came,
Along which blessings now appear, risen
As if from sightlessness to sight, and we,
By blessing brightly lit, keep going toward
That blessed light that yet to us is dark.

Wendell Berry, *Given*

I. Background: Seeking Holistic Learning

This proposal is in response, not just to the formal invitation to apply for a grant, but to a number of questions that have emerged during my first three years of teaching at Santa Clara. As a Jesuit I spend a great deal of time pastorally with students, both individuals and groups, discussing very significant life questions, frequently related to vocation. As a professor, I teach highly academic courses, in religious studies and classics, that touch upon many of these issues.

Professionally, however, I have felt responsibility to preserve a sense of methodological integrity in the classroom. I often suggest to my classes that a particular issue has significant consequences for them personally but am unable to pursue those questions directly. In informal mid-quarter evaluations, students note that they would like to spend more time doing just that. This proposal, therefore, seeks ways of integrating both parts of my life and of students' lives and of admitting a wider set of questions than my disciplines in themselves generally allow.

II. Curriculum Proposal: Format, Pedagogy, and Rationale for New Course

A. Placement within CORE and Religious Studies Department

I propose a third-level Religious Studies (TESP) course that would satisfy a core requirement and that will be easy to repeat at least once a year, either by myself or by another member of the Religious Studies faculty. Because the disciplinary lines would be drawn broadly and would integrate theology, literature, and film, I expect the course to be popular and to attract a good number of students on a regular basis. Its title would be something like "Telling Your Story as Vocational Discernment."

B. Pedagogy and Philosophy: Addressing the Needs of Juniors and Seniors

As a third-level Religious Studies (TESP) course, it would be directed to juniors and seniors, who have had significant life experience, have already been challenged to ask serious questions, and have had time to feel settled at Santa Clara. A good number of them may be anxious about what lies beyond. In terms of pedagogy, therefore, the aim of the course is to offer structures for reflecting upon past experience, ideas, and desires as significant data not only for deciding what comes next but for discerning what is a person's vocation.

First, however, let me expand on convictions grounding my emphasis that learning to construct one's past is central to discovering one's vocation. It will also help explain why this dynamic is so appropriate to students moving toward graduation from Santa Clara.

Both in my own life and in the lives of many people who describe significant vocational turning points, the search for one's own vocation includes a very unique paradox. On the one hand, it appears to be a *pro-spective venture*. On the other hand, the actual discussion of one's vocation is necessarily a *retro-spective practice*. Our account of Paul of Tarsus' conversion, for instance, is a description well after the event and informed by his later ministry. Augustine of Hippo's *Confessions* are widely recognized by scholars as a narrative constructed by a middle-age bishop about experiences from the time of infancy. Ignatius' story of his encounter with God while recovering from his injury at Pamplona is written much afterward, while he is the leader of a new religious order. I myself have explored this dynamic in my own article in *Explore* (Spring, 2003), the issue inaugurating the DISCOVER project on vocation. I noted that, while talking about the future quality of one's vocation is deeply mysterious, I can see in my own history a strikingly coherent pattern of desires that makes up the story. Please see "Confessions" at the following URL: <http://www.scu.edu/ignatiancenter/bannan/publications/explore/spring03/confessions.cfm>

It is essential not to ignore this mysterious prospective-retrospective tension of vocational discernment. As I have spoken to many students toward the end of their time at Santa Clara, it has become clear to me that they face an overwhelming temptation, which is at irreconcilable odds with everything I believe about vocation. Namely, they are tempted to think that "discovering one's vocation" means fitting into some dominant template that is not their own or finding some ready-made yet still unknown "personal destiny" (cf. Paul Coelho's influential novel *The Alchemist*, which in my opinion presents a very false notion of vocation). What these formulations threaten is the appreciation of the complexity of one's desires and identity, the commitment to cultivating a discipline of discernment over the long-haul, the resting in mystery, with all its ambiguities, and recognition that crucial to the discovery of vocation is the constant skill at telling one's own story within an actual community.

C. Telling Your Story as Vocational Discernment: An Explanation

Juniors and seniors may rightly ask how they can discover a calling to a life that has yet to be lived. My answer is something like this: Learn to tell the story of your own life up to this point. Learn to tell it with great skill and increasing honesty. Learn to recognize patterns, repetitions, constructs in

the narrative you create. Learn to be critically attentive to those patterns without being ironically detached. Learn to discern how complex both the joyful and the painful parts of the story can be and how you want to change the narrative. Learn too to recognize patterns of deception in the way you tell it. If you can do that, you will be engaging in an authentically spiritual exercise in a manner similar to the saints, and you will discover your vocation in a way that won't be complete at any age. Constructing one's story and developing habits of interpretation necessary for such narration is discovering one's vocation. The cultivation of voice, the recognition of multiple, overlapping narratives is of the essence to discernment. Hence, the importance of learning to "tell your story."

By the time students enter their junior and senior years, they have sufficient experience, maturity and self-reflection to recognize patterns, repetitions, and constructs and to begin naming them.

III. Tentative Syllabus

The following outline represents a sketch of what the final syllabus will become. It will necessarily change as I think more about the course, incorporate input from others, and calibrate the practical dimensions. Formulating a syllabus and really working it out will be the labor of the quarter in which I take the course-release, if this proposal is successful.

A. Basic Schedule

The course will meet twice a week at an early evening hour (e.g., T/Th 7 - 8:45 PM). This hour is popular for many students as well as an excellent time to incorporate more creative forms of expression such as film. The weekly theme will be based on questions described below (Section E). Within each week, I will follow a *praxis-reflection* approach. Thus the first class meeting of the week (Tuesday) would focus on a creative expression from film or literature or a personal reflection by a guest speaker. The second class (Thursday) would apply relevant theological lenses to whatever we had done the previous class period. Much of the work to be done in the period of the course-release would be to calibrate effectively these two parts of each week.

B. Assignments

1. *Short Papers*. Most weeks students will be responsible for: a) a short response to a discussion question given prior to Tuesday's class; and b) a 1-page essay on the readings for Thursday's class (collected and graded). [25% of total grade]
2. *Interview and Presentation*. In the sixth or seventh week students (in groups) will make a presentation based on an interview with a person willing to share his/her vocation story. Each group will interview and present collectively but individuals will submit their own papers of 4-5 pages. The paper will include both a description of the person's story as well as an individual theological reflection on it. Evaluation will be based on how the student applies the material we have been discussing in class. [15% of total grade]

3. *Seminar Paper*. A ten- to twelve- page essay based on the weekly papers, readings, and discussions in which the student is required to employ the concepts and ideas used over the course of the quarter and apply it to an event or issue in the student's own life directly related to the topic of vocation. Needless to say, in the course-release quarter, I will have to refine and delineate more clearly my expectations of students in this paper. [35% of total grade]

4. *Participation in Class Discussion*. [25% of total grade]

C. Assessment of student learning: Grades will be based on how well each student demonstrates: 1) preparation for class through written assignments and discussions; 2) active understanding and ability to apply themes and concepts discussed in the class; 3) development in reflective skills and critical judgement, especially in the final seminar paper; 4) competence in writing clear, thoughtful, and formally correct papers. Refining paper requirements in such a way that helps a student tell his/her story with understanding represents one of the chief tasks of the course-release quarter.

D. Readings/Films

Much of the time of the course-release time will be spent looking closely at sources to develop a plan of readings and discussion. As a rule, I intend to use both personal narratives and more theological sources in addition to films and speakers. Most likely, students will be required to purchase two anthologies, one theologically-oriented book, and a course reader. Options are described below.

- 1) *Anthologies* The advantage of anthologies is that they offer a very wide range of authors, and the selections (rarely more than 5-6 pages) always move directly into questions of how to make important decisions and recognize vocation. They also represent a range of narrative approaches. I shall choose from the following.

Leading Lives that Matter: What We Should Do and Who We Should Be, Mark R. Schwehn and Dorothy C. Bass, editors (Eerdmans, 2006). This anthology includes short selections related to virtue, vocation, and discernment from a wide range of writers. Examples from the more philosophical/theological method: Aristotle, Charles Taylor, William James, Abraham Heschel, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martha Nussbaum. Examples from more narrative writers: Albert Schweitzer, C.S. Lewis, Dorothy Day, Wendell Berry, Annie Dillard, Amy Tan.

Callings: Twenty Centuries of Christian Wisdom on Vocation, William C. Placher, editor (Eerdmans, 2005). This anthology includes short selections from classical Christian writings, including the *Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicity*, Clement of Alexandria's *Who is the Rich Man that Shall be Saved?*, Tertullian's *Apology*, Athanasius' *Life of Anthony*, and Various Rules, Lives, Institutes (Cassian, Benedict, Bernard of Clairvaux, Bonaventure and Aquinas). It also has selections of pre-modern and modern spiritual classics (Luther, Ignatius of Loyola, Calvin, Theresa of Avila, Jonathan Edwards, John Wesley, Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky, Simone Weil, Dorothy Sayers, Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton).

Po Bronson, *What Should I Do With My Life?* (Ballantine, 2002). This book also provides great little narratives from contemporaries that students will be able to relate to. The paperback is available and inexpensive enough that I may also order it from the bookstore, either as required or recommended. It is also engaging enough that students may actually want to read it on their own (!!!). If I don't order it, good selections will be included in the reader below.

- 2) *One Theological Book*. I want students to read a single theological text that would have an integrating effect. I will choose one of the following three:

Dean Brackley, *The Call to Discernment in Troubled Times: New Perspectives on the Transformative Wisdom of Ignatius of Loyola* (Crossroad, 2004).

John Haughey, *Revisiting the Idea of Vocation: Theological Explorations* (CUA, 2004)

John Neafsey, *A Sacred Voice is Calling: Personal Vocation and Social Conscience* (Orbis, 2006).

Of these three, Dean Brackley's book may be the most useful to students. Although it doesn't exactly correspond to the question of vocation, it does follow one school of spirituality (Ignatian) with some comprehensiveness. That itself may be of value to students. John Haughey's book is an anthology of essays by various scholars on the notion of vocation. Although it is very good, I am not sure that all of the essays would address students' experience. John Neafsey's book is very well-written and very valuable from many points of view and has the advantage of including theological, psychological, and social-justice perspectives. If I adopt Brackley's book as the sole theological text for students to buy, I will probably include parts of the other books in the reader.

- 3) *Course Reader*: Unfortunately, no one theological source adequately addresses the question of vocational discernment. Thus, I will supplement the course with more theological readings on the issue of calling and a few literary-critical texts on the nature of narrative. One of my release-time projects will be to assemble a good reader.

The readings will have to be selected for their brevity and comprehensibility. Possible authors for this reader are George Lindbeck, Hans Frei, Henri DeLubac, John Donahue, Joel Green, Stanley Hauerwas, Rowan Williams, William Lynch, and Karl Rahner. Their insights regarding narrative and reading of scripture will provide helpful theological frameworks for the consideration of "telling one's own story." It will also be helpful to consider some of the problems with "narrative theology" and how that affects basic arguments of the course itself. Additional selections will be chapters from Larry Cochran's work, *Becoming an Agent: Patterns and Dynamics for Shaping Your Life* and *A Sense of Vocation: A Study of Career and Life Development*. These works will not become the center of the course, but selections will be helpful.

4) *Films/Guest Speakers*

Films will be viewed either in part or in whole with a view to the guiding questions of the course. Part of my course-release time will be spent reviewing and finalizing film choices. At present, the following seem to be fine possibilities: Kieslowski's *Blue, Red, The Decalogue* Jonze's *Adaptation*, Sollett's *Raising Victor Vargas*, Bennett's *History Boys*.

I will also invite two or three guest speakers to address the week's theme from their own perspectives. I will seek presenters who are able to articulate their story and to model a reflective skill at interpreting it. I will not be looking for people whose stories are particularly dramatic or unusual but people of contemplative depth and interior sensitivity to recognize relevant theological dynamics in their own telling of their story.

E. Weekly Schedule: The Guiding Questions

All of the above material will be selected and organized on the basis of the following schedule. Roughly based on the dynamic movements within the four "weeks" of Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises*, each week of the quarter would be devoted to a question related to the topic of vocation. The questions are open and not based in any reference to Ignatian spirituality. My discussion, however, will be more theologically explicit and reflect my own starting-place. Some reflections will be more amply developed than others.

I am only presenting eight weeks below in expectation of further expansion. I suspect and intend that the final week (and perhaps the time otherwise allotted for a final exam) will be spent in some form of presenting seminar papers to the larger class.

Week 1: What does it mean to give my life to someone or something?

Most people, consciously or not, make commitments that greatly transcend what they can possibly know. When someone makes a marriage vow, for instance, he/she intentionally identifies with an unseen future. When someone decides to have a child, who and what that child shall become is a mystery that cannot and should not be mastered. A young person who devotes his/her life to the pursuit of medicine or justice or music or religious life commits to an ideal with little sense of knowing how it will be filled out in reality.

Furthermore, many people presume that to "give my life" to someone or something is crucial to one's happiness, but when you really think about it, it's deeply mysterious venture. St. Ignatius talked about a "First Principle and Foundation" that governed his whole way of making decisions. This course proceeds on the assumption that we should discover our vocations. What's really going on here? What are our presumptions about human happiness and final goals and even what constitutes "my life"? What are our presumptions that we can tell a story, construct a narrative, that is coherent?

Week 2: In what ways are other people's stories inscribed into my own?

This week we will consider ourselves as historical beings, whose stories and identities are deeply bound to those of other people. In his *Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius urges us to look at a history of grace wherein each of us comes to recognize ourselves as freely loved. In this week we will consider how we come to possess our freedom in a web of relationships that enable that freedom. By learning to tell the stories of significant people in our lives, we gradually come to tell our own stories. The students will be encouraged to tell the stories of other people whose narratives are crucial to their own.

Week 3: What can I learn from my mistakes?

In theological terms, this week will consider the reality of sin, both our own, for which we are personally responsible, and that of others, which have shaped, even conditioned our own environment and choices. The question is not only how do we account for the good and the bad in our world, but how the clear recognition of that, painful as it may be, is a crucial step in discovering where we might now go, including the further enactment of our freedom through forgiveness.

Week 4: What's love got to do with it?

While the explicit focus is on love, this week will center on the importance of recognizing the affections as guideposts and signs of who one is and how one desires to come to be.

Week 5: What's God got to do with it?

We will reflect on what we are doing when we speak of "God" and/or "God's will." What experiences or insights (personal and communal) guide our discussion of God. To what extent is "God" (variously conceived) an important element of our understanding of an coherent narrative?

Week 6: How does the search for "my vocation" avoid becoming narcissistically fixated on me?

This is a crucial question that I need to think more about, but it will relate to issues of justice as well as Santa Clara's insistence on competence, conscience, and compassion. How do the needs of my community fit into questions of vocation? By the time students take this class, I hope that they will have had some experience of immersion that has made them more conscious of the concerns of the broader world. This week will offer a way to consider how that is a crucial element in their own sense of vocation.

Week 7: How do I tell the story of my life?

By this time in the quarter, we will have had sufficient reflection for each student to begin asking what are the elements necessary for narrating (and thus interpreting) his or her own

story. This will be a pivotal week as the students begin to start working on their own final seminar papers.

Week 8: How does constructing and interpreting the story of my life represent the discovery of my vocation?

In some respects, this is a question that I want to leave the students with at the end of the quarter. Assuming that students have moved forward in their ability to tell their story, this question represents a meta-reflection on how such story constitutes vocation. Although we will not necessarily be Christologically explicit, the analogue for this question comes from the end of Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises*, where a person asks "What have I done for Christ? What am I doing for Christ? What will I do for Christ?" My suggestion is that these three may actually be the same question, which reflects the governing conviction of this proposal that the activity of telling one's story is discovering one's vocation.

IV. Plan within Religious Studies Department

After having consulted with Paul Crowley, the RS Department Chair, we have agreed that, if this proposal is accepted. I will:

- 1) Take a course-release in the Winter Quarter, 2008.
- 2) Introduce the course for the first time in Spring Quarter, 2008
- 3) Offer the course *at least once a year*, most often in the Winter or Spring Quarters. If I am away from the university in any given year, the department will try to find someone, with my help, to offer the course, perhaps with a slightly modified syllabus to fit the particular gifts and inclinations of the instructor.

V. Final Observations

I have felt considerable excitement throughout the various months of drafting this proposal. It touches upon so many concerns and desires of my own. I like the general framework I have proposed, the questions, potential readings and films and dynamics.

The real question, obviously, is how to pull it together. That will require a lot of thought, labor, sifting through practical sources (readings, films, live interviewers), consultation with colleagues and students, and prayer. To do it well really will take significant time, and that is the justification for seeking a course release.

I am confident, however, that, with sufficient preparation, it would be a great and popular class that could be repeated frequently for many students. Furthermore, it would be a good addition to the Religious Studies and Core Curriculum. Thank you for your consideration.