

# What is my mission in life?

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“WHO AM I? Where do I come from? Where is my life going? What do I value? What am I meant to do with my life?” These questions surface at various times in our lives. More often than not, we suppress, deny, or postpone giving them an answer. Indeed, it is difficult to know where to begin to answer them. It can be tempting to lose ourselves in more general questions about the “meaning of life,” when we are confronted more immediately by a question much more intimate, and potentially unsettling, “What is the meaning and purpose of *my* life?”

A good place to begin is reflection on our own experience. For instance, you might ask yourself: When you were a child, what absorbed your attention, so much so that time flew by, that you came in late for dinner? What makes you feel most alive? What fills you with a sense of gratitude? What stories, movies, songs, and works of art speak most directly to your heart? When you were young, who did you want to grow up to be like? What do your friends tell you they like best about you? What is it that you find yourself doing, no matter what you do? In the pregnant phrase of Quaker author Parker J. Palmer, we need to “let our life speak.”

These are not easy questions to answer. But when we pay attention to our experience, patterns do begin to emerge. They emerge not only through introspective self-reflection, but also in the context of community, through the perceptions of others who know and care about us, through the needs of the world around us. In *The Sacred Journey*, the Reformed theologian and writer Frederick Buechner connects care of self and service to others in this beautiful phrase: “You will find your vocation where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hungers meet.”

In Christian circles, this word *vocation* is often used to describe this inner voice, the dynamic of call and response

through which we discern a sense of direction to our existence. It is a word with a checkered history. It has often been used in a restrictive sense—for instance, when only clergy or religious are described as “having a vocation.” Alternately, it can lead us into the trap of seeing a distant God “somewhere out there,” making demands on me, imposing on me a mission that has little or nothing to do with my true nature, my own needs and desires.

We have to begin where we are, not with some idealized notion of what we are supposed to be. In the end, vocation is “not a goal to be achieved, but a gift to be received: accepting the treasure of true self I already possess. Vocation comes not from a voice ‘out there’ telling me to become something I am not, but from a voice ‘in here’ inviting me to be the person I was born to be, to live out the name given to me at birth by God.” (Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak*)

This is all well and good. It serves as a helpful reminder that what I *do* with my life must follow from who I *am*: *agere sequitur esse*, action flows from being. But who am I? How do I come to know the name by which God calls me? How do I hear the voice within which is at once my best self, and something more than myself? We read in the Bible that even before we were formed in the womb, God searches our heart, knows our name, knows us more intimately than we know ourselves. But it can be difficult to identify, among so many voices within and outside us telling us who we are, who we should be, what we should do with our lives, where we should invest ourselves.

The “call narratives” in the Bible shed interesting light here. Take, for example, the call of Samuel. Entrusted by his parents to service in the temple, Samuel hears a voice calling to him in the night. But he does not know who it is, or what is expected of him. With the gentle

but firm guidance of the priest Eli, Samuel learns to pay attention to that voice. His initial “here I am” develops into a wholehearted “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.” In this dialogue, Samuel’s mission is revealed: he is to become a prophet, one who can deliver God’s message to the people precisely because he has learned to listen and respond to the voice of God echoing within.

This learning to listen and respond is a process. For most of us, it does not happen all at once, with dramatic visions and voices. God speaks through the ordinary events of daily life: families, jobs, relationships; challenges, disappointments, successes, failures; in the books we read, the movies we watch, songs which won’t leave our heads. In this regard, it is often useful to have, like Samuel, a friend, a mentor, a teacher, a guide, someone who helps us to listen to and honour our deeper self, and to translate that into a meaningful investment of our life.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus is approached by two of the disciples of John the Baptist. Jesus asks them, “What are you looking for?” Interestingly, the disciples’ response indicates a desire not so much for a teaching as for a relationship: “Master, where do you live?” Jesus responds simply: “Come and see.” They came, they saw, and they spent the day. And the next day. And the next after that. Out of this initial time spent together, as friends getting to know one another, the foundations were laid for their life as disciples. They would come to know Jesus, the Rabbi from Nazareth, not only as teacher and mentor, but also as one who came “that they might have life, and have it in abundance” (John 10:10). Out of that relationship, out of that experience of abundant life,

the first disciples of Jesus joyfully embraced as their primary mission to share the Good News of the life and teaching, the death and resurrection of Jesus, with “all the nations.”

The 1981 Oscar-winning film *Chariots of Fire* tells the story of two runners training to represent Great Britain in the 1924 Olympic Games. One of them, Eric Liddell of Scotland, is also training to become a Christian missionary in China. His sister Jennie, also a missionary, disapproves of what she sees to be a distraction from his true calling, and seeks to dissuade Eric. His answer speaks volumes about the nature of a God-given vocation: “Jennie, I believe that God made me for a purpose, for the mission in China. But he also made me fast. And when I run, I feel his pleasure. Not to run would be to reject his gift, to hold Him in contempt.”

Eric Liddell did win the gold medal in the 400-meter race in the 1924 Paris Olympics. The next year, he left for the missions in China, where he worked as a teacher and pastor for the next 20 years, while competing in the occasional athletic event. In 1945, Eric Liddell died in a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp. Interestingly, in 2008, Chinese authorities revealed that shortly before his death, he refused an opportunity to leave the camp in a POW exchange, giving up his place instead to a pregnant woman. Eric Liddell lived his vocation to the full: he found the place where his deepest gladness and the deep hungers of the world met, and he embraced it joyfully and generously.

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## Questions for discussion

What about you?

1. Where do you feel God’s pleasure in *your* life?
2. How have you been gifted, and how are you sharing *your* gift with the world?
3. Where do *your* deepest desires and the deepest hungers of *your* world meet?

That is where you will find your mission in life. That is your personal vocation.