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Identity, Power, and Vocation in Community

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Critical Vocational Imagination

LEARNING

Through this class, I have kept a list of my favorite quotes pulled out of the various readings we have done. To set up the framework for this critical vocational imagining, I want to share the ones I feel the most connected to:

- “Sooner or later, dominant groups must embrace this hook they’re on, not as some terrible affliction or occasion for guilt and shame but as a challenge and an opportunity.” (Johnson, 124)
- “This process is not simple or easy: it takes courage to embrace a vision of wholeness of being that does not reinforce the capitalist version that suggests one must always give something up to gain another.” (Hooks, 183)
- “Solidarity, then, becomes the new way of understanding and living out this commandment of the gospel.” (Isasi-Diaz, 102)
- “Remember that our hearts are full of compassion, not empty. And the spirit dwells strong within.” (Anzaldua, 154)
- “Our antipathies towards others is a thorn in the flesh that perhaps the Holy Spirit may someday liberate us from.” (Vanier)
- emilie m. townes on Vocation:
 - “Struggling for faith and justice”
 - “a ripening and ripening into wholeness”
 - “We are called to live our lives out of the possibilities not our shortcomings / answering yes to God’s what if”
 - “So that we learn to live creatively in the tight circle of choices that are given to us by this social order we all live in / but also plot, scheme, and realize ways to craft that tight circle into a spiral of possibilities for this generation”

Altogether, I hope these paint a picture of wholeness and liberation, of overturning the systems we have to create systems that work for the goodness of all people. White western - eurochristian - systems are life-limiting to all people, and I have an extremely privileged position within them.

I grew up under patriarchal, white supremacist, heteronormative, oppressive morality that

assigned morals to morally neutral actions (like food, etc), encouraging toxic beliefs like binary thinking and purity culture. Even with all my privilege and natural compliance, I was under their thumb.

I worked through a lot of the “limiting perspectives” listed in *Another Way* long before I came to Iliff. I held this prejudice of believing that pastoral work was meant for men and women were confined to other roles. When I let go of that belief, I had to work against this backswing where I resisted “nurturing” roles. This was due to internalized reactions against the subjugation of women and “nurturing.” I understood that my call was not necessarily all within my own autonomy or choice because my vocation has found me again and again, even as I have resisted it.

I am nurturing. I am a caretaker. Empathy and connection are some of my superpowers. I have a high threshold for emotional distress - mine or someone else's. I see the best in people, and I want the best for people. I am trained to see what people need and find ways to meet those needs. I am a people pleaser, and I have to resist my tendency towards trampling my own boundaries. I am a broken down, burnt out person. I am an introvert who is constantly working in social situations. I feel out of place and out of my own depth so much of the time. These things came out of my upbringing as a parentified oldest daughter in conservative Evangelical contexts. The systems I grew up in thrive on wearing down individuals, and I am often easily worn down. I lose myself, and I think that is one of my biggest constraints. If I lose myself, what do I have left to offer?

For power to become a constructive force, more people in my circles need to commit to curiosity. Listening is an important skill that is missing from people in positions of power. In my circles, I am often the lowest-powered person at the table. This could be attributed to my being

the least educated, the lowest paid, the least experienced, or the youngest. Even though I am in a progressive community, I am almost exclusively surrounded by white, cis, heteronormative people over a certain age. They are lovely people, and I do not mean to be disparaging. But these are the dominant people who are absolutely on the hook. I am tired of people assuming that because I am young, I need help or advice. I am tired of people who have never worked with youth telling me how to do youth ministry. I wish there was a greater commitment to amplifying the voices we normally quiet.

Something I come back to often from our time as a class is Brynn's idea of "spaciousness." How are we making space? What kinds of spaces are we creating? Do our spaces reflect the expansive nature of God? Are we committed to embracing and displaying the fullness of God's diversity? Where is God in our spaces? Where is God missing from our spaces? Who is missing?

My communities are full of white, upper-middle class, privileged people. There are areas of individual differences, to be sure. I can work across differences in age, gender, sexuality, education, and ability because I have had hands-on experience in ministry with these populations. But we still are only representing a thin slice of the world. I think universally, loving and respecting people indiscriminately will take me pretty far. I am comfortable with being uncomfortable. I prefer to let others lead and speak. That said, my experience relating to people with different identities and histories is small, and it is ever-growing.

I have a handful of communities that are important to me. I have my family, a small social circle that is pretty disjointed, my grad school community, and my professional/spiritual community. I feel accountable to all these standards, which boil down to a commonly-held belief that people have intrinsic dignity that needs to be protected and honored. Reflecting on the

life-limiting systems that formed me, I see the damage that was done to myself at seventeen, fourteen, eleven, and even younger. I needed someone like me. My communities will always have someone like me.

IMAGINING

I cannot imagine my future vocation without reflecting on how my sense of vocation has developed over the last three years. In 2020, I wrote this:

God is inviting me to bring about Kin-dom living by building bigger tables. I spent a lot of time feeling the need to earn my spot at the table. Jesus tells a parable about a great feast that was empty, so they extended the invitation, bringing in the marginalized, the outcasts, the “least of these” they found on the street. There was plenty of room for everyone at the table. When we come together, offering each other intimacy and solidarity, we bring the kingdom of heaven closer to our earthly experience. In youth ministry, I get to participate in God’s redemptive work of connecting people through love and healing. If I could do anything for Jesus, I would live in a way that indiscriminately invites everyone to the love feast at God’s table.

What have I learned since then? What would change? A lot of it still rings true for me, and it looks different now than it did then. By this point, I was already frustrated and feeling complicit in the harm that my Evangelical church employer was enacting. Now, in a progressive church, I feel much more empowered to love the marginalized and the outcast and the church-traumatized. However, I often wonder about the harm this “better” system is complicit in that I am not seeing. I feel a small tug to keep asking that question and remain open to what might be revealed.

The framework that *Another Way* offers reminds me of so many conversations I have had with mentors and coaches. During my freshman year of college, I sat down with a professor and asked for her advice on transferring schools and switching majors. I wanted to know if another program would serve me better for my creative and professional goals. She had navigated a similar path in her undergraduate studies. Ultimately, she said that God would use whatever

choice I made. To me, this resonates with the idea from *Another Way* that sometimes our vocation finds us. Sometimes life prepares us for the next right step that we could never have seen coming.

Most of all, I am grateful for the invitation to “Asking Self-Awakening Questions” and especially the question, “In the last day and a half, when did you feel the most alive?” (*Another Way*, 67). One of my daily affirmations reads like this: I am fully alive when I am fully myself; I am a whole person, and my desires deserve to be heard. I want to find wholeness for myself. I want to help other people find wholeness. I want people to recognize that their spiritual selves are just as real and important as their physical/emotional/mental selves. This is when I feel the most alive: connecting people (including myself) to themselves, to others, to God, and to their whole lives. Now, that is within the context of children and youth ministry. Now, that looks like pursuing clinical pastoral education and ordination in the United Church of Christ. Someday, it might look like Spiritual Direction. Someday, it might be in retreat ministry. Someday, I might be a pastor or a teacher or a counselor. I will be helping, and I will be bringing about wholeness and healing.

NEEDING

To move forward, I need my communities. I have colleagues who are personal and professional mentors. I trust them and check in with them on a regular basis. I am always open to building more relationships like these. I also have colleagues who feel more like peers, who I dream with and collaborate with, and that expands my creativity. I think I need more relationships where I am not expected to provide anything, where I can simply exist as myself and be appreciated for absolutely no reason. I need to graduate. I want to complete my degree

and get ordained so I can continue on this professional pastoral journey. Getting out of grad school will offer its own spaciousness.

I need my therapist who is informed in religious trauma. I need my home, where I can rest and form myself. I need my safe people - my partner, my close friends, my sisters, my parents, my in-laws, and beyond. Rhythms of rest are counter-capitalist, counter-cultural, counter-my-internal-hardwiring, and perhaps the hill I will die on. I will preach rhythms of rest until I run out of breath. I will lean into rhythms of rest so I can keep offering my whole, fully alive, fully in-tune self. Ultimately, I feel called to be an agent of wholeness in every community I find myself in. Thus, I will remain open to any invitations or shifts that might pull me into new spaces and I will continue fighting to show up as myself in all my spaces until I feel it might be time to move on.

Right now, I feel called to working with children and youth and their families, and that happens to be my professional space. My colleagues and peers are often twenty-five or more years older than me, and I feel like I hold an important space in their lives as the youngest person they work alongside. I know that I need extra support and self-preservation in that role, but I am unsure of how that might take shape. Soon, I could see myself working with college students, young adults, and even older adults in Christian formation or religious education. As I go to work on my clinical pastoral education, I will be working in a retirement facility. Building deeper relationships with this population will stretch my call.

As I have mentioned, my communities are largely homogenous, so I will need to be intentional about seeking out and amplifying voices that are different from me. My graduate education, both at Fuller and at Iliff, have been hugely foundational for my ability to seek out solid voices I want to teach me. I try to follow primarily BIPOC thinkers on Twitter and listen to

primarily BIPOC theologians' podcasts. If I ever start reading outside of graduate school requirements, I will be looking for BIPOC writers. I bring these ideas into conversations at work. I think I have more to learn from people who are different from me than from the culture that raised me.

I started with ideas from this class that I am holding close. I will leave you with questions from this class that I hold in the same hand. How am I bent towards making things better? Where does my nature meet the world's needs? How might I equip other people to recognize that potential within themselves through education or through pastoral or spiritual care? Where am I feeling fully alive right now, and where is that leading me?