

The Conundrum of Calling

“Calls are essentially questions. They aren’t questions you necessarily need to answer outright; they are questions to which you need to respond, expose yourself, and kneel before. You don’t want an answer you can put in a box and set on a shelf. You want a question that will become a chariot to carry you across the breadth of your life.”

Gregg Levoy, *Callings*

Moses was destined to be a leader. When you are raised as the son of a princess, you are groomed to lead. You are scrutinized and evaluated regarding your capacity to lead.

Expectations are high. But Moses was not just *expected* to be a leader by virtue of his situation; he was also *called* to be a spiritual leader by God himself. And this is never as easy as it sounds.

You see, Moses had a problem. He was not an Egyptian by blood nor was he related by blood to the royal princess who was raising him. Even though Moses’ life and story contained much evidence of God’s grace, it was still a convoluted childhood by today’s therapeutic standards! He was born into a highly unsafe and volatile environment for children. He was abandoned by his mother even though it was for the best of reasons. He was then reunited with his birth family only to be returned to his adoptive family later on. Raised in a pagan environment that was fundamentally different than the environment in which he had spent his early years, he was prohibited from living and worshipping with his family and his countrymen according to the traditions of his own heritage. He lived between two worlds—always longing for home.

Moses probably had a bit of a chip on his shoulder because he always had something to prove. As an outsider both among his own people and among the Egyptians who had raised him, he probably wrestled every day with issues related to his identity.

Should he fit into the environment in which he had been raised and follow the path marked out for him there? OR should he identify with his own people and try to make it by those rules instead? Neither one was a very good choice. Either one would involve emptiness and loss.

Humble Beginnings

Moses developed some pretty good coping mechanisms for dealing with the pain of his situation as all human beings do. One was to repress his anger since he had nowhere to go with it. But he also used that anger to “power up” in relation to others and to control situations that seemed out of control. One day his anger—this anger that had been building for so long—got the best of him and everything exploded. On this particular day he went to visit his people and he saw the injustice of their forced labor. When he saw an Egyptian abusing a Hebrew, his anger overwhelmed him and he killed the Egyptian and then tried to hide his sin by burying the body in the sand. This is a snapshot of Moses’ leadership before solitude and it was not well-received!

The very next day, when Moses tried to help his fellow Hebrews by refereeing a fight between two of them, they would not have it. They had seen Moses’ out-of-control attempts at “helping” and were quite cynical about it. Their reaction to his unrefined and undisciplined leadership was, “Who made you a ruler and a judge over us? Do you mean to kill us as you killed the Egyptian?” And Moses was afraid, as well he should have been. He was afraid that he would be found out, that he would be seen for who he really was. What had been present *under* the surface of his life was now *on the surface* and it could no longer be ignored.

This experience of the destructive power of his raw and unrefined leadership was so frightening that Moses fled into solitude. He did not walk. He did not jog. He did not take time to put his affairs in order. He *fled* into solitude. He said, in effect, “This part of me, if left as it is, will be no good for anyone.” Often this is what it takes to move us beyond mere dabbling in solitude and silence to a more substantive experience—an encounter with God that eventually changes the trajectory of our lives. And as improbable as it may seem, something of our calling is embedded in these humble and disturbing beginnings.

Settling into Ourselves

The first thing that happened to Moses during his extended time in solitude was that he settled—in Midian, to be exact. It was a place far from public view, far from the places where the most painful parts of his life had occurred, far from the place of his greatest mistake so far. And solitude began to do its good work. The next time we see him exercising any leadership, he is starting to use it for good in more effective ways. The strong sense of justice that was so essential to his nature was still there but this time he used it to come to the defense of some shepherd girls who were being threatened by unruly shepherds. This time Moses was truly helpful—he defended the shepherd girls and helped them to water their sheep—and he exercised more restraint. This time he accomplished justice without killing anyone—a real improvement! His withdrawal from his more public existence and the settling that has taken place there is already paying off.

Moses remained in a solitary, non-public existence for a long time. It was as if—in some deep and fundamental way—he just let go. He let go of his dreams of fixing

anything, of helping anyone or even living among his people. Instead, he received what was given. He was offered a home in Midian and so he settled there. He was given a wife and so he took her as his own. He fathered a son and it became a touchstone in his life, an opportunity to name something about himself with more courage and realism than ever before. When his son was born he named him Gershom because “I have been an alien residing in foreign land.”

This was a profound admission. Finally, he began to make sense of his own history and he was able to say, “This is who I am. This is where I’ve been. The experience of living my life as an alien in a foreign land is what has shaped me.”

Finally he came home to himself.

Hearing the Call

When God saw that Moses had settled down enough to listen, he finally began to speak. Finally, the true God was able to address the real Moses. And the first thing he talked to Moses about was his calling.

In our day, it is easy to dismiss the idea of calling as mere concept, but God called to Moses, quite literally, out of the burning bush. It was as if God was saying, “I know the question about your identity has been a little confusing for you, but I have always known who you are. You are a Hebrew. No matter where you live, no matter who raised you, no matter how anyone tries to beat it out of you, no one can take that away from you. You know what it is to be displaced. You know what it is to live your life on someone else’s terms, to see the injustice of it all and want to do something about it. In the very essence of your being, you are someone who is not willing to let injustice go

unanswered; your care for your people and their well-being is deep and genuine. Now that *you* know who you are, I am calling you to *do* something out of the essence of your being. You have submitted to the rigors of the wilderness. *Come now, and I will send you to Pharaoh, so that you may bring my people, the sons of Israel, out of Egypt.* ”

In this moment, the pieces of Moses’ life started to come together. Finally it was becoming clear that his calling was inextricably interwoven with his human situation and his own personal history. His passion for his people and the strong sense of justice that caused his violent outburst back in Egypt was at the heart of what God was now asking him to do. Even though his human reaction to the injustice that he witnessed back in Egypt was terribly wrong, the incident itself was not irrelevant. It was connected to something real within him. Before his encounter with God he had been propelled primarily by his own raw, human anger. But being angry is not the same thing as being called.

Now something new was starting to unfold. *Now* God was *calling* him to move beyond his undisciplined, angry outbursts to a more substantive and helpful response. *Now* God was guiding him to embrace even more fully the person he had always been and, paradoxically, to also transcend it!

Beyond just naming what was false within him, God was calling for Moses’ true self to come out of hiding. He was asking Moses to claim his full identity, and to lead boldly from that place. It was a lot to ask, but now—forty years later!—Moses’ moment had come. God was asking him to step up and be everything he was and everything God would call him to be, for the good of many. Moses discovered, as we all do, that our transformation is never for ourselves alone. It is always for the sake of others.

Holy Ground

When God calls, it is a very big deal. It is holy ground. It produces within us such reverence and awe that it is hard to know what to do with ourselves. Finally, the whole of our life begins to make sense and the awareness of the Divine orchestration that has brought us to this moment makes us want to take off our shoes and fall on our face in worship and surrender. Or we might even argue with God about the improbability of it all. But no matter how much we might want to resist, suddenly the landscape of our lives opens up. Every single thing that didn't make sense when it happened or that seemed too harsh or too random or too shameful, now finds its place in the storyline that brought us here.

We “see” with new eyes that God's call upon our lives is so tightly woven into the fabric of our being, it is so core to who we are, that to ignore it or to walk away in refusal of it is to jeopardize our well-being. If we were to try to compromise or live it only half-way, we run the risk of being plunged into the darkness of emptiness and meaninglessness. Jonah tried to walk away from his calling, but ended up in the belly of the fish. Jeremiah tried to walk away from his call to be a prophet and it was like a fire shut up in his bones and he got weary from holding it in.

Somewhere along the way, we discover that the soul of leadership begins with who we are—really. Not who we think we are, not who we would like to be, not who others believe us to be. This includes (and yet is not limited to) the particularities of our own life, our heritage, our personality, our foibles, our passions and deepest orientations, and even our current life situation. Being called by God in this way is one of the most

essentially *spiritual* experiences of human existence because it is a place where God's presence intersects with a human life. Our calling emerges from who we really are—in all the rawness and sinfulness of it as well as in all the glory and God-given-ness of it.

There is no escaping who we are. Leadership will not help us escape ourselves—it will only bring it into bolder relief! Before calling has anything to do with *doing*, it has everything to do with *being* that essence of yourself that God knew before the foundations of the earth, that God called into being and that God alone knows—really. It is the call to be who we are and at the same time to become more than we can yet envision. Parker Palmer states, “Vocation does not come from willfulness. It comes from listening. I must listen to my life and try to understand what it is truly about—quite apart from what I would like it to be about—or my life will never represent anything real in the world, no matter how earnest my intentions.”¹

The Biblical idea of calling is not easily dismissed. In its simplest and most straightforward meaning, the verb *to call* refers to the capacity that human beings and animals have to call out to one another, to stay connected, to communicate something of importance. Even in this most basic element, the dynamic of calling is profound because it reminds us that calling is first of all highly relational; it has to do with one being (God) reaching out and establishing connection with another (us). It is an interpersonal connection and communication that is initiated by God and thus demands our attention and our response even as a basic courtesy.

In the New Testament, the idea of calling is almost synonymous with salvation and the life of faith itself. We are saved from being who we are not and called to be who we are. God calls us first and foremost to belong to him, but our secondary calling is to

answer to God's personal address to us. It is to say yes to his summons for us to serve him in a particular way at a particular point in history. To say yes to our calling is one more step in the journey of faith which involves a glad, joyful self-surrender. It is living in the awareness that the most wonderful thing in the world is to be completely given over to a loving God.

Saying Yes to God

At the heart of it, Moses' story is one of calling. Why else would one choose to leave security and wealth, power and influence for such a risky proposition? After the initial pomp and circumstance, it was just plain hard all the time. There was very little glory and many small humiliations. But there were also these encounters with God that were profoundly dis-orienting and re-orienting. Ezekiel had a similar experience: "The Lord said to me: O mortal, stand up on your feet and I will speak to you...And when he spoke to me, a spirit entered into me and set me on my feet. He said to me, I am sending you to the people of Israel, to a nation of rebels who have rebelled against me..."

(Ezekiel 2:1-3)

Ezekiel's story mirrors Moses' in demonstrating that *the call of God comes to us as mortals*. It comes to us in the place where we are most human and it is the spirit of God who comes over us to empower our human frailty so that we are able to even hear the call, let alone answer it. Somehow we know that this is different. This is not about making a brilliant career move. It is not about security. It is not about success or failure or anything else the ego wants for us. It is not about choosing among several attractive options. This is about the Spirit of God setting us on our feet and telling us, "This is

yours to do. Whether they hear or refuse to hear, whether it feels to you like you are failing or succeeding, you are to speak my words.”

The great psychologist Carl Jung once made this observation: “To the extent that a man is untrue to the law of his being and does not rise to personality, he has failed to realize his life’s meaning. Fortunately, in her kindness and patience, Nature never puts the fatal question as to the meaning of their lives into the mouths of most people. And where no one asks, no one need answer.”²

Some people seem to make it through life without ever having to wrestle with the fatal question. Somehow they seem to move through life with a greater ease—making a living, enjoying the fruits of their labor, taking what seems to be an easy or at least a more clearly marked path to security and success—while others of us seem to be called to make commitments that require us to do strange things and orient our lives towards realities that others do not even see. It is hard to be this kind of person—a person who has a fire shut up in our bones that we can’t seem to set aside without doing damage to the soul, a calling that continually takes us right out to the edge of our faith and our own human limitations. Sometimes we are tempted to feel resentful.

But a true leader is one who has heard the fatal question. This is a person who has seen a vision of what could be and who continues to take steps in that direction against all odds. We might argue with God a bit. We might put forth every excuse that comes to mind. But God always wins this argument because every time we go down deep inside to listen, we know that what God is calling us to do is ours to do and that the path before us is ours to walk. We know it is the meaning of our lives. And so we say yes. For better and for worse, we say yes to meaning. We say yes to God.

Practice

In the quietness, allow yourself to remember the time when you first began to sense God's call upon your life. Maybe it was a moment in time in which you heard God speak deep into your heart with a clarity that was similar to Moses' or perhaps it was something that grew in strength and conviction over time. Remember where you were, what it sounded like, what it felt like, what you said to God, how you resisted and how you said yes.

After taking time to be with that initial experience, ask "What is God saying to me these days about my calling?" As I "settle into myself" more fully, does this have anything to say about my calling? Is there any place where I am resisting who I am or have lost touch with who I am? Where am I still wrestling with God and needing assurance of his presence with me? Am I willing to say yes again?

I believe in all that has never yet been spoken.

*I want to free what waits within me
so that what no one has dared to wish for*

*may for once spring clear
without my contriving.*

*If this is arrogant, God, forgive me,
but this is what I need to say.
May what I do flow from me like a river,*

*no forcing and no holding back,
the way it is with children.*

*Then in these swelling and ebbing currents,
These deepening tides moving out, returning,
I will sing you as no one ever has,*

*Streaming through widening channels
into the open sea.³*

Rainer Marie Rilke

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¹ Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), p.4.

² Carl Jung, as quoted in John English, *Spiritual Pilgrims* (New York: Paulist Press, 1982), p. 131.

³ Rainer Marie Rilke, *Rilke's Book of Hours*, trans. Anita Barrows and Joanna Macy (New York: Riverhead Books, 1996), p.58.