

Vocational Reflection, Meaning-Making, and College as a Mentoring Community

By Chris Johnson

Chris Johnson, Director of the Center for Vocational Reflection at Gustavus Adolphus College in Saint Peter, Minnesota, discusses the nature of vocation and describes institutional programs on vocational reflection to illustrate how to create intentional mentoring environments on campus that inspire meaning-making in their undergraduate college students.

INTRODUCTION

What is the nature of the times in which we live?

What are these times calling you to do with your life?

Who are you, really – and who are these times calling you to become?

These were among the opening questions at a recent weekend retreat with student participants in the annual, year-long Servant-Leadership Program at Gustavus Adolphus College.¹ This rigorous, high-commitment program supports students in exploring the inner and outer landscapes of their lives and helps them to cultivate skills and capacities that will empower them to address the unprecedented challenges of our time, as people of deep integrity and expansive imagination.

“What shape waits in the seed of you, to grow and spread its branches against a future sky?”

This question, from David Whyte’s poem “What To Remember When Waking,” is one of the guiding questions in another important project, “Gustavus as a Mentoring Community.” This multiyear initiative engages faculty, staff, and administrators from all over campus in purposeful reflection on the “seeds and branches” of their own vocations, and on the ways that their roles contribute to a larger, collective capacity for the entire college to be not just a “community of individual mentors” but a “mentoring community” – one whose shared ethos and common practices mentor each of its members toward lives of contribution to the greater good.

These two programs are important dimensions of a multifaceted, college-wide initiative at Gustavus to equip everyone on campus to live with more meaning, passion, and purpose – in life, and for the world. My purpose in this article will be to describe the vocational soil in which these two projects are rooted, provide a brief description of each, and conclude with some reflections on the contributions of a mentoring community to the meaning-making enterprise of college students.

REFLECTION ON VOCATION

Vocation can be described as a calling to live out one's distinctive gifts, passions, and senses of faith and meaning in ways that benefit the community and help to address the world's deep needs. It has to do with being of service to others in the roles and relationships throughout one's life, including family, neighborhood and community, spending and consumer choices, care for the earth, and daily work (paid or unpaid). It is the shape that one's entire life takes as an other-regarding answer to the Big Questions of identity, purpose, and meaning. Vocation is an overarching self-understanding that (1) sees the self not as an isolated unit, but as fundamentally nested in realities and relationships that are larger than oneself, and that (2) gives ethical priority to behaviors that benefit the community.²

The vocation initiative at Gustavus, led by the Center for Vocational Reflection (CVR),³ is characterized by several key features, including: (1) its comprehensive and pervasive reach and impact; (2) a balance between the strengths of a visible, accessible, and responsive centralized organizational structure (the CVR itself) with innovative and organic collaboration across campus; and (3) its goal to grow out of and contribute to the rich heritage of the College.

Firstly, as a comprehensive and campus-wide program, the overall aim of the vocation initiative at Gustavus is to influence the ethos of the entire institution such that the invitation to more intentionally reflect on one's life in terms of vocation becomes inescapable for every member of the campus community. The CVR works with many other programs, offices, and academic departments across campus to support and coordinate existing programs and to develop new initiatives that support intentional reflection and meaning-making, and help to educate the whole person for a full life of servant-leadership in a global community; such initiatives include retreats, workshops, courses, conferences, discussion groups, guest speakers and artists, a resource center, special-project funding, as well as opportunities for individual and small-group conversation and discernment, and leadership formation through the Servant-Leadership Program mentioned previously.⁴

Secondly, the collaborative and "cross-fertilizing" nature of the CVR's work brings together many different voices from across the campus. Our endeavor has been to pervade and shape the culture of the College, rather than to create an isolated bureaucratic structure and set of stand-alone programs. The Center plays a critical role as a creative catalyst, a gathering place for people and ideas, and a safe and welcoming space for people to reflect on the "Big Questions" in their lives. Our central location within the College's reporting structure (as director, I report to the president) enables us to work with all sides of the house to champion a liberal arts ethos of intersections and connections: Interdisciplinary teaching

and learning, faith and daily life, college and community, multicultural and interfaith perspectives, academics and co-curricular activities, theory and practice, action and reflection.

Thirdly, our original vision and ongoing implementation of a spiritual dimension to the vocation initiative are deeply rooted in the identity and mission of the College, including (among other crucial aspects) a long-standing conception of our Lutheran church-relatedness that fosters inclusive theological and religious⁵ discourse and reflection (Lutheran, ecumenical, interfaith, and humanistic or secular). Our understanding of the concept of vocation grows, in part, from the rich soil of our Lutheran tradition, which also enables us to see the theological exploration of vocation as an enterprise that is accessible to everyone, whether or not they identify themselves with the Lutheran (or even Christian) heritage of the College. In practice, this means that in some contexts the language and activities will take on an overtly “religious” tone, and in others, a tone that is more embracing of diverse understandings, experiences, and practices of faith, deep meaning, and “ultimate concern.”

The CVR’s mission to serve every member of the community springs from our democratizing or egalitarian conception of vocation where each of us, regardless of our “station” in life and simply by virtue of being human, is connected with one another and with realities that are larger than ourselves, and that the “billions of particularities” of daily life⁶ call each of us to live in ways that contribute to the greater good. This approach has enabled us to nourish, in students and employees alike, the possibility that virtually any profession or form of work in the world can take on rich new texture and meaning when lived through the framework of vocation.

GUSTAVUS AS A MENTORING COMMUNITY

An important endeavor of the CVR that helps to create mentoring environments on campus is known as “Gustavus as a Mentoring Community” – a “big tent” for conversation, reflection, and action around a rich phrase and set of ideas, really, more than a stand-alone program. This ongoing, multi-year initiative is grounded, in part, in the work of Dr. Sharon Daloz Parks, scholar, author of several books,⁷ and director of the Powers of Leadership program at the Whidbey Institute near Seattle.

The foundation of the project is two hugely successful professional development workshops facilitated by Dr. Parks in the summers of 2005 and 2007, involving a combined cohort of 60 faculty, staff, and administrators from across the campus (about 10% of the total workforce) in extended discussion of themes from her books *Big Questions*, *Worthy Dreams* and *Common Fire*. Among many other rich strands of content, these workshops explored the notions of “the commons” and the “common good,” what is at stake in the life of the commons with regard to how colleges and universities (and the people who work in them) live out their vocations, the nature and power of mentors and mentoring, and the hallmarks and practices of a mentoring community.

The summer workshops have formed a springboard for a range of other activities that have engaged employees from all over campus in purposeful reflection on their own vocations – and on the ways that their roles here contribute to a larger, collective capacity for the entire

college to be not just a “community of individual mentors,” but also a mentoring community whose shared values, narratives, and practices collectively orient its members toward lives of contribution to the greater good. Faculty have revised their courses and their academic advising to more intentionally consider issues of vocation; staff and administrators are developing richer, more purposeful and spacious ways to explore questions of vocation and meaning with the student employees they supervise as well as with their colleagues.

In addition to these outcomes of the summer workshops, campus-wide consideration of the idea of Gustavus as a Mentoring Community has also included a host of related events and activities, including:

- Increased attention on the part of leaders and advisers of several student organizations and athletic teams to ways in which they can better mentor their members, and to ways in which the activities and internal “culture” of their organizations can contribute to the larger ethos of Gustavus as a mentoring community
- Periodic breakfast or dinner discussions around a variety of themes (such as cross-cultural perspectives on mentoring), or in conversation with guest speakers and artists (including author Gregg Levoy and singer-songwriter Carrie Newcomer)
- Annual retreats for faculty/staff and students on themes and practices of “sabbath,” mindfulness, contemplation, and integrative learning
- The formation of a new campus task force on the special mentoring challenges and opportunities associated with the “sophomore-year experience”
- Reading groups for students, faculty, and staff during our annual January Interim; books have included Wendell Berry, *Jayber Crow*; David Whyte, *Crossing the Unknown Sea: Work as a Pilgrimage of Identity*; Parker Palmer, *The Courage To Teach*; and Po Bronson, *What Should I Do with My Life?*
- Service-learning projects: One faculty participant, Dr. Aaron Banks, for example, worked with the students in his First-Term Seminars in 2006 and 2007 to build a number of Adirondack chairs with assistance from several members of the staff and faculty. These chairs have been placed in circles all over campus to embody and support what Parks calls the practices of “hearth” and “commons” in the life of a mentoring community

REFLECTIONS ON MEANING-MAKING AND MENTORING COMMUNITIES

Questions drive learning; good questions fuel deep learning; deep learning propels more and better questions.⁸ The stories of our students’ lives are being shaped in part by the questions and insights, experiences and relationships they encounter in their mentoring communities. Opportunities to reflect on questions of meaning and vocation, woven throughout the life and work of the community, can equip them to actively invest in crafting, understanding, “owning,” and expressing those stories. And it is those stories by which their sense of self, fundamental values, motivating commitments, and dispositions to action are bound together in a unified whole.

Many students are ripe for exploring questions of identity, meaning, and purpose in their lives, and are often eager for their teachers and mentors to help them to wrestle these questions. But, Sharon Daloz Parks argues, “many young adults, even those who are regarded as privileged, are often being cheated in a primary way. *They are not being asked*

big-enough questions. They are not being invited to entertain the greatest questions of their own lives or their times.”⁹

The questions that are emerging at Gustavus because of our vocation initiative (and via the Servant-Leadership and Mentoring Community programs in particular) are often Big Questions – “questions of the spirit.” With such questions, we are helping one another to become leaders who do more than just go through managerial motions in order to create a community of meaning whose members aspire to lives that are more than what columnist Ellen Goodman describes as “normal.” “Normal is getting dressed in clothes that you buy for work, driving through traffic in a car that you are still paying for, in order to get to the job you need so you can pay for the clothes, car and house that you leave empty all day in order to afford to live in it.”¹⁰

Reflection on the Big Questions within a mentoring community opens up the space to consider more humane and truthful ways of being in the world. Instead of being – and teaching our students to be – “normal,” we are being intentional to engage one another in processes and activities of reflection that:

- Prod us to think of our work, our learning, and the rest of our daily lives as woven together into a larger tapestry of meaning, a way of being in the world that tilts toward justice, purpose, and community
- Renew a sense of knowing oneself to be “nested” in something greater than oneself, be it community, networks of interdependence, a healthful ecosystem, “God,” or a hopeful future
- Help us have the courage to pursue the Big Questions of identity, purpose, and meaning – and to entertain the possibility that these are probably not to be found in ourselves alone, or in working until we drop, or in accumulating more “stuff”
- Enlarge one’s sense of self and of one’s capacity to make a difference, and cultivate our students, departments, institutions, households, and communities to be agents of peace and justice in the world

Reflection on questions of vocation and meaning helps us to map the deep architecture of our lives, the foundational structures or frameworks of belief and value, attitude and action that hold our lives together. This kind of integrative learning involves both an inward and an outward dynamic: A spiraling inward toward the depths of self, meaning, and faith, and outward into an ever-expanding world of community and effective action, for the sake of a more hopeful future.

Dr. Johnson holds a Master of Arts in theology and ethics from Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota (1989), and a Ph.D. in theology, ethics and culture from the University of Iowa (1996). Prior to returning to Gustavus (where he graduated in 1985) to launch the vocation initiative, he was assistant professor of religion and director of service-learning at Buena Vista University in Storm Lake, Iowa. His research and teaching interests include character/virtue ethics, peace and nonviolence, the relationship of forgiveness and justice, the role of narrative and communities of praxis in the shaping of moral character and religious faith, liberation and political theologies, and critical and liberatory pedagogy. Chris works with state, regional, and national projects around issues of experiential learning, vocation, and spirituality in higher education, including research and writing, conference presentations, retreats, and workshops.

ENDNOTES

¹ Gustavus is a residential, liberal arts, undergraduate church-related (ELCA Lutheran) college with a student population of around 2500, located an hour southwest of Minneapolis/St. Paul, in St. Peter, Minnesota.

² This latter formulation of vocation is thanks to Dr. Darrell Jodock, professor of theology at Gustavus.

³ This CVR was launched in 2001 with a generous grant from the Programs for the Theological Exploration of Vocation initiative of the Lilly Endowment, Inc. With the February 2007 shift from that original grant to a “sustainability grant” from Lilly, which is matched by Gustavus, we are now working toward full and permanent ownership of the program on the part of the College by summer 2010.

⁴ The Servant-Leadership Program engages students in a year-long series of retreats, workshops, reading groups, service projects, and other activities designed to foster extended and substantive reflection on questions of meaning and vocation. By attending both to the inner landscapes of their lives (identity, purpose, gifts and strengths, values and beliefs) and to the outward landscapes of the world we share and the times we live in, the program helps students to grow in their capacity to “lead from within” with integrity and commitment, wherever they are in life, in ways that connect their “heart’s gladness with the world’s deep hunger.” It is worth noting that the deep connections between vocation and leadership that characterize this program have influenced a larger discernment and planning process regarding leadership education that is currently taking place at Gustavus, in conjunction with the crafting of a college-wide strategic plan. The vocation initiative as a whole, and the Servant-Leadership Program in particular, are raising questions of meaning and purpose – “Leadership for the sake of *what?*” “On whose behalf are we called to acts and roles of service and leadership in a hungry world?” – that are helping to shape the ethos of the place and the lives of those who work and learn in this community.

⁵ We distinguish between “theological,” which assumes the validity of the Christian story, and “religious,” which we use to represent any set of commitments beyond self. Such commitments may reflect a specific religion or a set of humanistic beliefs.

⁶ This was a phrase employed by Dr. Martin E. Marty in his keynote address, “The Vocation of an Intellectual,” celebrating the inauguration of Jim Peterson as president of the College in the spring of 2004.

⁷ Her books include *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Young Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000); *Leadership Can Be Taught: A Bold Approach for a Complex World* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2005); and (as co-author) *Common Fire: Leading Lives of Commitment in a Complex World* (Boston: Beacon, 1996).

⁸ I have explored this suggestion, with particular regard to the importance of reflection in service-learning for student engagement in matters of spirituality and meaning, elsewhere: For an extended treatment of much of what follows, see my chapter “Deep Learning and the Big Questions: Reflection in Service-Learning,” in *The Spirit of Service: Exploring Faith, Service, and Social Justice in Higher Education*, Brian T. Johnson and Carolyn R. O’Grady, eds. (Bolton, MA: Anker, 2006).

⁹ *Big Questions, Worth Dreams*, p. 138.

¹⁰ Cited in John de Graf, et al, *Affluenza: The All-Consuming Epidemic* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2001), p. 36.