

COMPLEX CHARACTER OF CALLING

Joanna Williamson

JOANNA WILLIAMSON EXPLORES HOW PART OF THE PROCESS OF DISCOVERING OUR CALLING IS TO FIND OURSELVES.

Discerning our calling is deeply personal and can be a painfully slow journey; therefore, it would not be totally inappropriate to start with a personal story of an ongoing process. If you were to ask me how I discerned my calling for my life, I would probably ask: which one in particular? The call to preach and teach? The call to global ministry? The call to work with women?

My call to preach came about naturally, almost unnoticed; I just found myself preaching and it felt totally natural. I grew up in Poland, and for a long time I was the only person in my small Methodist congregation who spoke English well enough to translate. This gave me an opportunity to meet some great leaders and great preachers. Then one day I remember standing behind the pulpit, thinking while I was translating: 'This feels very natural, I can do it. I have my own voice and instead of listening to a preacher standing next to me and translating their words, I can listen to the Holy Spirit in me and translate his words.' It was as simple as that. So it began, at the age of fifteen I felt a call to preach. I was given opportunity straight away and very soon was preaching almost every Sunday in a small church that did not have a pastor. I never lacked the confidence in the call itself - it felt very obvious and natural.

My call to work with women came differently. I resisted it at first - I made excuses. I did not want to be pigeon-holed. It took almost four years for me to acknowledge that God had been calling me - and then I laid out the last fleece: 'Lord if you want me to work with women you have to make it very obvious. In fact, what I need is to be invited to work specifically with women.' Within two weeks I was invited to work in China, mentoring and training women there. This time I responded to the invitation and it has been one of the best things I have ever done and one of the greatest privileges of my life.

DISCERNING OUR CALLING

Some people 'fall into' their calling almost accidentally, some choose it very intentionally. Some of us may have been engaged in our calling before even realising we had one. Some see their calling as being specifically linked to the work they are already doing. Some see it as something they can only engage in after they come back from work. Some find their calling and live it out for the rest of their lives in long uninterrupted focused commitment, like Hudson Taylor; others, like Amy Carmichael, stumble into their destiny, simply because they thought it was a good idea to be or go somewhere. One thing I have learned is that our calling is a sum total of the fragments of our story. Obedience is the glue that binds and holds the story together.

Over the years I became less anxious, less knotted inside about the destination and

more excited about the journey itself. Over the years I have also started to care less about the definitions for, regardless of whether we use calling, vocation or vision to describe what we mean, what is important is that we live out the best possible story God has got for us, that we always walk in obedience before him. We do not want to live someone else's life, we want to truly be ourselves, because deep within us we know that we have been uniquely and beautifully made and we long for this significance.

WHEN OUR CALLING GETS CUT SHORT

Recently I have been thinking about this question: What if we responded to the calling, sacrificed for it and suddenly the possibility of living out this calling gets blocked or cut short? We have to open ourselves up to the possibility that the calling was only for a season. I have met many people who, having thought they were called to one thing, had to abandon it and move to something else.

There is Mark, a long-term missionary who had to leave Bosnia after thirteen years, leaving the years of investment into language study and building relationships there. His daughter was ill and needed ongoing hospital care back in his home country of the USA. A friend from Romania, equally a long-term missionary in Kazakhstan, also had to leave the country due to one of his children needing hospitalisation, never ever to go back again. Jung, who was a pastor of a vibrant church in New

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York, was suddenly called back home to South Korea by his retiring father with no opportunity to refuse; he took his wife and little boy and has struggled ever since to live and minister in the city of Seoul, the city he is still learning to love, along with his struggling congregation. There is Becky, thrown out of China three years ago, currently living in Thailand, hoping the door to her beloved people will be opened again for her one day. I could continue...

BEING OURSELVES

Over recent years I have narrowed down my desperation to know what to do with my life, to the need to know how to live daily in obedience to Christ, how to persevere in what Eugene Peterson calls 'a long obedience in the same direction.'

There are two things that I would like to share that may help when we think about our calling. First of all, we must remember that, it is in 'being what God means us to be that we are obeying him. We do not find ourselves by focusing on ourselves but by focusing on God' (David G Benner, *The Gift of Being Yourself: The Sacred Call to Self-Discovery*, 2015: IVP, 16). Self-knowledge is extremely important in discerning our calling: in all of creation, identity is a challenge only for humans. A tulip knows exactly what it is. It is never tempted by false ways of being, nor does it face complicated decisions in the process of becoming. The same applies to dogs, rocks, trees, stars, amoebas, electrons and all other things. All give glory to God by being exactly what they are.

Humans, however, encounter a more challenging existence. We think. We consider options. We decide. We act.

We doubt. Do not force the call, do not try to produce it, arrange it. Wait for it, let it be birthed in you, do not compare yourself to others. (David G Benner, 16) Do not measure your beginnings by someone's middles or endings. Do not wear other people's faces.

'Simple being is tremendously difficult to achieve and fully authentic being is extremely rare. There is a Hasidic tale that reveals, with amazing brevity, both the universal tendency to want to be someone else and the ultimate importance of becoming one's self: Rabbi Zusya, when he was an old man, said, 'In the coming world, they will not ask me: 'Why were you not Moses?' They will ask me: 'Why were you not Zusya?''
Benner, 21

And secondly, let me remind us all that the discerning of calling is a long and often painful process. It takes trust in the slow work of God, a lot of listening and prayer, many coffees with wise mentors, and often simple steps of obedience in the right direction. As Pierre Teilhard de Chardin says in his poem, 'Patient Trust,' 'Above all, trust in the slow work of God.'

Only God could say what this new spirit gradually forming within you will be. Give Our Lord the benefit of believing that his hand is leading you, and accept the anxiety of feeling yourself in suspense and incomplete.

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin
(ignatianspirituality.com/8078/prayer-of-theilhard-de-chardin)

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