Consensus

Volume 44
Issue 1 *Religious Community in a Digital World*

Article 2

1-25-2023

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Recommended Citation

Thompson, Deanna A. (2023) "Beyond Deep Gladness: Coming to Terms with Vocations We Don't Choose," *Consensus*: Vol. 44: Iss. 1, Article 2.
DOI: 10.51644/KBGP4493
Available at: https://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol44/iss1/2

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Beyond Deep Gladness: Coming to Terms with Vocations We Don't Choose

Deanna A. Thompson[1]

I begin by taking a step back to frame our conversation in terms of coming to terms with vocations we don't choose. This may be where many of you, like me, find yourselves as we (possibly) emerge from two years of pandemic into a world where very little is the same as it was before.

I am a Lutheran, and I teach and work at St. Olaf College, a Lutheran-affiliated undergraduate college in Minnesota. Lutheran-affiliated institutions are big on vocation, and over the past few decades the Lilly foundation has funded vocation-related programs at hundreds of US colleges and universities. While exploration of vocation goes deep and wide, I am going to focus on one of the definitions of vocation that has become almost synonymous with the term at many US institutions, and that definition comes from the writings of theologian, minister, and novelist Frederick Buechner. Buechner's approach to vocation is deeply theological. He is clear that a "calling" assumes a caller, and for Christians, Buechner observes, this Caller is the living God. What makes it so difficult to hear the call, however, is that God's voice is not the only voice calling to us. The challenge is to hear God's voice amidst a cacophony of voices. "There are all different kinds of voices calling you to all different kinds of work," Buechner writes, "and the problem is to find out which is the voice of God rather than of Society, or the Superego, or Self-Interest."[2]

How can we discern God's voice amidst all the others? According to Buechner, "a good rule for finding out is this: the kind of work God usually calls you to is the kind of work (a) that you need most to do and (b) that the world most needs to have done. . . . The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."[3] This last sentence of Buechner's definition in particular is what has become synonymous with the word "vocation" in many institutions of higher education over the past few decades: our vocation is located at the intersection of our deep gladness and the world's deep hunger. I imagine this is or has been a sweet spot for many of us—our calling is the place where our passions, our joy, our gifts can be put to work in service of the suffering and needs of the world.

I did not encounter Buechner's definition of vocation until I was a professor of religion in the 1990s, but if I had encountered it as an undergraduate student in the 1980s, it likely would have become my mantra. As a student at St. Olaf, I enrolled in the Paracollege, a college-within-the-college where students designed their own majors and were asked to articulate how becoming generally and liberally educated in this particular way was going to set us up for meaningful vocations beyond college. After graduation I served for a year with Lutheran Volunteer Corps running an after-school program in inner-city Baltimore, Maryland, where my passion for teaching was put to work in service of students whose lives

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[2] Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABCs* (New York: HarperOne, 1993), 118.
[3] Buechner, *Wishful Thinking*, 118–19.

sometimes made it difficult for them to learn. Doing a PhD in theology led me to a career of teaching and writing, where my deep gladness around being immersed in the really big questions of life with college students felt like a great vocational match.

But in 2008 the world I knew and loved turned upside down. The mysterious breaking of two vertebrae in my back led to a stage IV cancer diagnosis shortly before Christmas. 2009 began with me resigning from virtually every aspect of my full and wonderful life. Once I was weaned off the oxycodone and fentanyl I had a recurring vision of taking a file folder labeled "cancer diagnosis" and handing it to the receptionist at the oncology clinic where I spent much of my time, telling her firmly but politely that I had tried incurable cancer on for size but unfortunately it didn't fit into the vocational path I was on, so I was returning it. This lousy diagnosis didn't relate in any way to my deep gladness. Instead of meeting the world's deep need, my life had become a bucketful of needs that relied on a small army to help me keep going.

I taught what I thought was going to be my last class ever in the spring of 2009 and went on sabbatical the following fall. I initially approached sabbatical as a time to try and bring closure to my life before it ended. Instead of dying, however, I went into my first remission. I'm not naturally an anxious person, but life-threatening illness can mess with one's equilibrium. As my sabbatical came to an end, I didn't know if I could handle returning to teaching. What if I were signing back up for life only to have to resign from it all again?

Some of you may have read Paul Kalanithi's heartbreakingly beautiful book *When Breath Becomes Air*. He is the Stanford neurosurgeon who was diagnosed with incurable cancer in his thirties and lived just a few years with the diagnosis. But in that short period of time he, too, went into remission and gained back much of his strength. His oncologist suggested that he go back to working as a neurosurgeon. He reminded his doctor that he was dying, and her response was this: "True. But you're not dying today."[4] Kalanithi observes that of course we're all dying. But some of us know this more acutely than others. And when that's the case, it can be really hard to opt back into the life you've already had to opt out of once before. But, supported by his family, his faith, and his friends and co-workers, he found strength to put on his scrubs and return to work until the cancer spread once again.

Even as I find myself in my fourth remission of living with incurable cancer and continuing to resonate with Buechner's vision of vocation as our deep gladness meeting the world's deep need, my journey with cancer has led me to realize that conversations about vocation also need to make space for the deep sadnesses that fill our lives. What does it mean to integrate deep sadness into our lives, even to make it part of our vocation, to figure out ways to go on?

In describing the vocation of a theologian, Yale professor Willie James Jennings writes, "theologians write as fragile bodies even as we write about fragile bodies." Jennings calls on theologians to never forget that we are "fully body."[5] Since my diagnosis I have become much more aware of my own body's fragility, and I have tried to write and speak in ways that honestly acknowledge bodily pain and suffering, writing and speaking to and on behalf of those who struggle to find words for similar kinds of suffering. Many days I really

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[4] Paul Kalanithi, *When Breath Becomes Air* (New York: Random House, 2016), 64.
[5] Willie James Jennings, "Undone and Redone," foreword to *Glimpsing Resurrection: Cancer, Trauma, and Ministry*, by Deanna A. Thompson (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2018), xii.

wish I had a different vocation—that I didn't see describing the anatomy of life with cancer as part of what I'm called to do as a theologian writing from this particular fragile body.

It has been hard work putting words to this journey with advanced-stage cancer. Immediately after the diagnosis, words went away. Arthur Frank, whose work as a sociologist includes investigating the stories we tell one another about illness, says that seriously ill people "need to become storytellers in order to recover the voices that illness and its treatment often take away."[6] As Frank notes, the stories we tell about illness give form to lives that often inherently lack form. Frank proposes that, rather than imposing a limited set of stories that often get told about illness (that he fought valiantly, that she was always so positive), what is needed is to let our stories about living with serious illness breathe, allowing them to take a more capacious form. I think our current reflections on vocation might take a cue from Arthur Frank—that we should work to create more spacious definitions of vocation, encourage more discussion, more stories about our deep sadness as well as our deep gladness and how both intersect with the world's deep need.

And now we get to one of the main reasons I've been invited to speak at this event: prior to my diagnosis I was what I call a "digital skeptic." I didn't own a cell phone, wasn't on social media; I didn't believe that life could be enhanced by our burgeoning opportunities to connect virtually. But when I got sick, it didn't take long for me to realize that online spaces offered me a place to begin to match words to my life with incurable cancer. While most in-person encounters I had in the early months after the diagnoses quickly resulted in tears rendering me unable to talk about what was happening to me, I found that online I could speak in full sentences about the awfulness of what my family and I were experiencing—and that awfulness could be met with immediate compassion, support, and prayers. It didn't take long before I was writing as a theologian from this fragile body about being held and carried along by what I call the virtual body of Christ, the Christian community that includes but also extends beyond the physical manifestations of church. As a previous committed digital skeptic, this new vocation of spreading the gospel of the virtual body of Christ was definitely one I would not have chosen—and yet, here I am.

This vocational quest to locate words to express the deep sadness with which so many of us live was furthered when I was invited by Boston University School of Theology professor Shelly Rambo to be part of a project that eventually became *Post-Traumatic Public Theology*, a collection of essays witnessing to the breadth and depth of traumatic experiences we humans endure and offering theological reflections on how we as individuals and communities might better support those living with trauma.[7] Rambo's definition of trauma is "the suffering that remains."[8] Trauma is most often caused by an event: war, forced migration, natural disaster, sexual assault, racial violence—now we can add "living in a pandemic" that has claimed millions of lives worldwide. The stress of a traumatic event is often so great "that it cannot be defended against, coped with, or managed well. The event stunts and often immobilizes. Coping skills are frozen; defense mechanisms fail. When a

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[6] Arthur Frank, *Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness, and Ethics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 4.
[7] Stephanie Arel and Shelly Rambo, eds., *Post-Traumatic Public Theology* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).
[8] Shelly Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 15.

person experiences a traumatic event, the survival response is triggered, causing the person to fight, flee or freeze."[9]

Through my participation in the post-traumatic public theology project, I was introduced to growing numbers of studies that investigate trauma as it relates to the awful experiences of life. I learned about the ways in which traumatic experiences rob people of language to talk about what they've been through and how our bodies respond in divergent ways to traumatic events. We can feel numb, sad, depressed, exhausted. We can be combative and disagreeable, tired and disconnected. People living with trauma often try to hide these emotions, retreating from relationships in an attempt to protect themselves. "Trauma affects our brains, but it has a lasting effect on our bodies."[10]

One of the reasons I appreciate Rambo's definition of trauma as "the suffering that remains" is that it includes but also extends beyond the confines of post-traumatic stress disorder. PTSD can be debilitating and life-threatening, and those who suffer from it often need medical and therapeutic help to learn how to live alongside the trauma they carry. Invoking the language of trauma can open up ways for people to talk about their deep sadness and how it relates to their sense of meaning and place in the world. Trauma theorist Cathy Caruth describes the work she and others do for those living with the aftereffects of traumatic emotional wounds: "[We try] to understand the nature of the suffering without eliminating the force and truth of the reality that trauma survivors face and quite often try to transmit to us."[11] Making space for the deep sadness, then, involves inviting those who have been traumatized to begin to locate language that can help them begin to narrate stories about who they are and what they carry with them.

As a theologian I've become committed to emphasizing how our faith traditions don't just help us overcome and defeat suffering—they also help us face it and live alongside it. I've gravitated more toward prayer practices and places in scripture that make space for lament. We can point to Jesus' crying out in pain from the cross using words from a lament psalm: "My God my God, why have you forsaken me?"[12] One of the ways I've learned to go on is to understand that God has been there too, and that the story doesn't end with the cross but continues on with resurrection. This understanding helps me integrate suffering into my story without the suffering overwhelming and defining my life.

The past two years of living through a global pandemic have upped the urgency that we make space for deep sadness in our conversations about vocation. Like me, you may still find it difficult to put words to how living through the past year has impacted us. Talk about vocations we did not choose. Those of you in church communities likely moved essentially every aspect of worship and ministry online. Many of us in academic contexts had never taught online before—let alone run programs, departments, offices, even entire institutions, while being remote. While there has been great innovation and so much incredible pivoting, it's also really important to acknowledge and name the losses: Countless events have been postponed or done virtually. So many family rituals and gatherings have not been able to happen. Many of us have lost family members, parishioners, friends, and have been unable

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[9] Beverly Wallace, "Bible Study: 'She Had to Keep Him Hidden' – Experiences of Trauma in the Lineage of Moses," *Connect Journal*, June 30, 2020, https://connectjournalorg.wordpress.com/2020/06/30/bible-study-she-had-to-keep-him-hidden-experiences-of-trauma-in-the-lineage-of-moses.

[10] Wallace, "Bible Study."

[11] Cathy Caruth, preface to *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995).

[12] Psalm 22.

to come together to mourn and to bury our dead with the rituals and rites that give shape to our grieving. And we remain in a state of uncertainty about what the weeks and months ahead will look like. What is the suffering that remains for each of you? For your families? For your neighbors? For your congregations and communities?

Perhaps some of you have been tracking how experts are talking about the trauma experienced by so many during the pandemic. Those who study trauma and its effects note that over the past two years there has been "extreme distress, children and adults alike report worry, fear, hurt, and anger along with symptoms and reactions such as anxiety, depression, fatigue, difficulty focusing, problematic behavior, and the use of at-risk coping skills such as substance abuse. There is grief over what has been lost, and uncertainty about how to navigate daily life and concerns about what the future holds."[13] And some are now talking about Post-COVID Stress Disorder[14]—this talk about trauma and the pandemic gives a way to name some of the dimensions of this experience that we may not be as able to talk about yet.

In the spring of 2021, St. Olaf hosted a (virtual) panel of alumni talking about how their faith traditions influenced their vocational path at St. Olaf and beyond. One of the panelists told the students, "You all have a pandemic story, and whatever step you take next is going to be interested in that story—how you used this time, how the pandemic has changed you." Students attending the panel really resonated with that suggestion, as they knew they had been through something whose implications had yet to be fully explored. As we practice telling our pandemic stories and how they relate to our vocational discernment, we also need to encourage space for lament, as well as how the pandemic might have helped us better identity the deep needs of the world and perhaps even cultivated gladness for the simple beauty of a slower-paced life.

The last significant illustration of deep sadness I want to lift up this evening is our collective awakening to the intergenerational trauma around systemic racism in the US. Just over two years ago, just six miles from my house, George Floyd was murdered by former Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin. George Floyd's killing was neither the first nor the last police killing of a Black person, but teenager Darnella Frazier's courageous recording of Floyd's murder allowed the world to witness Floyd's last breaths. And the viral nature of that video injected the language of (collective, historical) trauma into national conversations about what it means to be Black in America.

In her work on trauma and its embodied effects, Lutheran womanist and pastoral care professor Beverly Wallace draws on Resmaa Menakem's powerful book *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies* and his discussion of how bodies have a form of knowledge that is different from our cognitive brains.[15] Traumatic knowledge often gets expressed as a "felt sense of constriction or expansion, pain or ease, energy or numbness. This knowledge is stored in our bodies as

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[13] Dr. Caelan Soma, "Post-COVID Stress Disorder and Pandemic Trauma and Stress Experience," *Starr Commonwealth*, February 19, 2021, https://starr.org/2021/post-covid-stress-disorder-and-pandemic-trauma-and-stress-experience

[14] Soma, "Post-COVID Stress Disorder."

[15] Beverly Wallace, "Bible Study," citing Resmaa Menakem, *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies* (Las Vegas: Central Recovery Press, 2017).

'wordless stories.' These stories are about what is safe and what is dangerous. It is in the body that we have our hopes and our fears."[16]

Dr. Wallace uses the story of Moses and the characters involved in the dramatic attempt to preserve his life as an infant to reflect on the trauma she and other Black Americans experienced during the aftermath of Floyd's murder. Wallace writes,

> I write this in the midst of a pandemic, on the week anniversary of the killing of another male child. I write this as I think of an adult male child George Floyd who called for his mother, whose last breath after he told the authorities he could not breathe was to call to the one who gave him life.
>
> Since we are the children of God, then within our bodies, within our DNA are also the experiences of those who have come before us. Our very bodies house the unhealed dissonance and trauma of our ancestors—intergenerational transmission of trauma, trauma passed on in the expression of our DNA. Might we still be living with the traumatic experience of Jochebed, the mother of the liberator of God's people? Might we have within us the experiences of Moses and Miriam? Might we respond as Shiphrah and Puah with the resiliency to resist engaging in activities that are harmful to a community even though communities of people are being hurt and traumatized?[17]

Wallace's question of how we respond to traumatic situations is a question about vocation. And she insists that we pay attention to the deep sadness, to the toll that systemic injustice takes on Black bodies and spirits, and asks where we find ourselves in the Moses story, in the story of intergenerational trauma, and in cultivating resilience amid the long legacies of race-based violence and injustice.

My vocation as a White American Christian and theologian calls me not to shy away from the deep sadness of the insidious ways racial injustice lives, moves, and has its being in the institutions and communities of which I am a part. This past spring, we started my course on "Anti-Racist Christian Theologies" by viewing a lecture from Dr. Ibram Kendi on the need to shift from being not racist to being anti-racist, as well as Willie James Jennings' definition of fragile bodies doing theology, and that the theology most worth doing is that which is done "at the site of pain and suffering while [the theologian themselves is] a site of pain and suffering."[18] We also read and digested Beverly Wallace's article on the impact of intergenerational trauma on actual bodies.

It is important that, in her analysis of the Moses story, Wallace does not neglect the roles of Shiphrah and Puah, the midwives who refused to heed Pharoah's directive to kill the Hebrew baby boys. "When faced with a stress as great as the order to end newborn lives," Wallace notes, "the midwives chose to fight back by not following this order and doing their part to protect the lives of babies such as Moses."[19] With this description of the vocations of Shiphrah and Puah, perhaps we've returned to Buechner's definition of vocation as God calling you to the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep need meet.

[16] Wallace, "Bible Study."
[17] Wallace, "Bible Study."
[18] Jennings, "Preface."
[19] Wallace, "Bible Study."

Serious health challenges, a global pandemic, the ongoing persistence of systemic racism in our institutions and communities—all of these realities call us to vocations most of us would rather not choose. *Telling Secrets*, Frederick Buechner's memoir that chronicles his father's drinking and suicide as well as his feelings of helplessness over his daughter's anorexia, reveals a vision of vocation intimately linked not just to "the world's deep need" but also to his own sadness and the sadnesses of those he loved most. Buechner struggled at times to accept that "God calls me to be this rather than that"—a sentiment that likely resonates with many of us here today.

One additional word about making more space for deep sadness when we're reflecting on vocation: I'm not advocating that all of us must share our deep sadnesses with others, that we are required to incorporate them in public ways into our understanding of vocation, or that we should always be on the lookout for how to talk more about trauma and suffering and sadness. It could be that we simply do not have the language to talk about what we've been through. It could be that it is re-traumatizing to open up about our deep sadness. The first time I returned to the classroom after my cancer diagnosis I had a little speech prepared about the diagnosis and the treatment I was undergoing and how we would try and carry on as best we could. But once I actually stood before my students on that first day of class, unsteady on my feet, I realized I couldn't talk about the cancer at all. During the early months after the diagnosis, the classroom became the one cancer-free zone of my life—and what a gift that was. When I listen to colleagues and friends of color talk about the emotional labor and personal cost of rehearsing some of their own race-based trauma in the company of White people, they say it is not just exhausting but can at times feel exploitative. So this is tricky and delicate work. Still, when we name that our callings often also encompass sadness as well as gladness, we open up space for expanded visions of vocation that relate even more profoundly to the world's deep need.