

# BEARINGS ONLINE

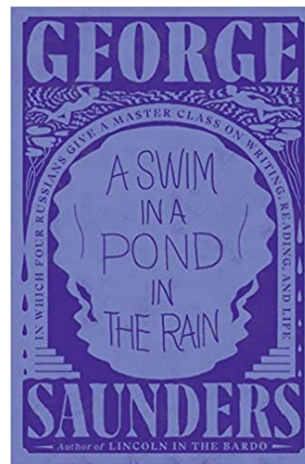
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## BEARINGS ONLINE

## A Problem with Vocation

MAY 13, 2021 BY MARK R. SCHWEHN [LEAVE A COMMENT](#)

In his latest book, *A Swim in a Pond in the Rain* (2021), George Saunders, during the course of his effort to describe what it means for a writer to find her own voice (more accurately, to choose a voice from among all of those inside of her), invites us to imagine the following situation. A young man has for twenty years lived only in a room with a television that showed over and over again various world-class sprinters winning races. Finally, when he is released from the room at age twenty-one, he aspires to be—guess what!?!—a sprinter. He finds a cinder track, but on his way there he notices that he is six foot five inches tall with substantial musculature all over his body. After many lost races (he always finishes last), he is walking away from the track for the last time when he notices a group of guys who look a lot like him throwing the shot put. He joins them. And soon he happily succeeds. “When I said I wanted to be a sprinter,” he concludes, “what I really meant was that I wanted to be an athlete.”



One of the best ways we can help students discern their callings is to enable them to see that they may really be called to be healers rather than, say, pediatric oncologists. Most young people have grown up in some version of the hypothetical sprinter’s room: their vocational imaginations have been severely restricted. Church-related colleges and universities have been pretty good at enlarging those imaginations, opening up new possibilities, encouraging students to try out a lot of things to study and experience. But they have done less well at helping students navigate the theological and conceptual confusions that inhibit their ability to discern, as many of them would put it, “what God has called me to do.”

For years, even centuries, the central theological disagreement among Christians about the matter of vocation has been between those who believe that all Christians have two callings and those who believe there is only one. The latter camp, one of whose most forceful spokespersons has been the Canadian ethicist Gary Badcock, maintains that all Christians are called out of a pagan way of life and into the project of sharing in Christ’s mission of love and service wherever they find themselves stationed. Those in the first camp maintain that, in addition to this “primary calling,” all Christians have a “secondary calling” to a particular occupation and to particular stations like parenthood, citizenship, and husband/wife/partner/friend. Lee Hardy in *The Fabric of this World* is one of the most careful spokespersons for this latter position.

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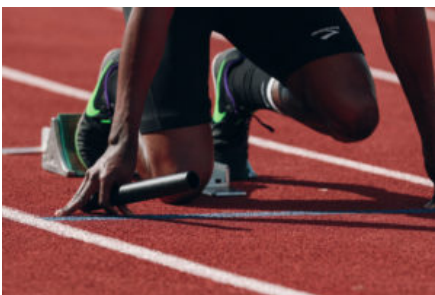
Though the one calling/two callings dispute is not likely to be resolved any time soon, both sides have been helpful to students. Badcock and other ethicists like him sometimes provide great relief to students who are already having a difficult enough time deciding what they want to do for a living without adding to their burden the belief that the wrong choice would be displeasing to God. “The will of God,” Badcock insists, “does not extend down to the details of career choice.” Many students quite literally respond, “Thank God!” when they hear this good news, which they find profoundly liberating.

On the other side, Hardy and other Calvinists like him offer a different kind of consolation without suggesting that God is indifferent to vitally important matters in the lives of believers. Hardy simply construes all of the ordinary processes by which and through which students decide what they are called to do as the way God works in their lives. God works mediately, not immediately (except in rare Biblical cases like Samuel or Moses or Mary) to call believers to their work in the world. Thus, students are heeding God’s call by being prayerfully attentive, open to good counsel, and trusting that God is guiding them.

Yet for all the wisdom in both of these strains of the Christian tradition, neither one of them ponders whether a summons from God must be specific or can be rather more general. Not a sprinter but an athlete. Not a materials engineer but a builder. Not a trial lawyer but a mediator. Just such a distinction proved to be important at a pivotal moment of my own life. A university president suggested that I consider becoming a candidate for an academic deanship. I protested that I did not have the requisite experience nor the inclination. And I thought I would clinch the matter by saying, “I have just always felt called to be a classroom teacher.” I had not expected his quick response, “Have you ever thought that you might have been called to be an educator?” And he then proceeded to elaborate on a dean’s work as done well if and only if the dean thought of herself as an educator, as someone who could create and sustain spaces and programs and communities that enable others to teach and learn. What followed was 13 years as a dean and 5 years as provost, very satisfying years that expanded my understanding of calling.

*Neither one of these strains of the Christian tradition ponders whether a summons from God must be specific or can be rather more general.*

Students need, I think, to hear words like those I received. Simply to say that they are totally free is to oppress them with an excess of liberty and to fail to take the time to listen to their longings and to assess their gifts. To say that God is indifferent to their career choices risks leading them to fret about how far God’s indifference extends. On the other hand, to say that God has a very specific plan for their lives that they must discern seems both theologically unsound and anxiety inducing. Helping them to discern a kind of middle ground—builder, healer, mediator, educator—recognizes their own strengths and limitations and longings and helps bring greater constructive clarity to them. And if you are a Christian educator (parent, teacher, pastor, friend), this is what God is calling you to do: to enable others to attain in their lives greater clarity, resourcefulness, and vocational imagination.



And, we should add to that list of virtues, greater humility and patience. For although our desires are not unrelated to our callings, we should not entirely conflate them. The Saunders story at the opening of this reflection was about discernment of what someone truly wanted. But the classic Biblical call narratives—Moses, Jonah, Mary—do not feature people who discover what they really want to do. On the contrary,

photo by Braden Collum for unsplash

they find themselves summoned to tasks they might not have chosen and sometimes even resisted. So, too, with us. For long periods of our

lives, some of us find ourselves placed in circumstances we did not choose and do not particularly desire, as did the young men at Oxford whom C.S. Lewis addressed at the onset of World War II who wanted to be at the front but who found themselves in college libraries and classrooms. The very fact that these students found themselves so located was, Lewis said, good evidence that God had called them to be students. Their task was therefore to learn how to pursue the vocation of being a student in a God-pleasing way.

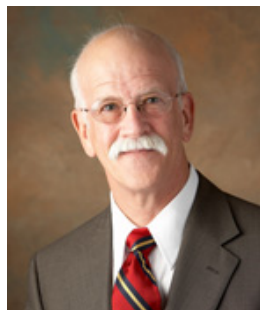
So the “problem with vocation” is that it does not reduce to skill or desire or preference or obedience. It is as much a dynamic process as it is a settled conviction or task. God calls the whole person to a place of responsibility at particular times and occasions. Education for vocation, therefore, involves character formation as much as it does self-understanding, the cultivation of spiritual strength as much as the discovery of gifts and talents. If we find ourselves trapped in a room watching sprinters, we might discern a calling to be an athlete. Then again, we might turn off the set altogether and read a book instead, or we might choose to disassemble the television and learn to become an electrical engineer or a television repair person. Vocation is not a summons to one thing forever; rather, it is a summoning to live in a certain gifted way in many specific times and places.

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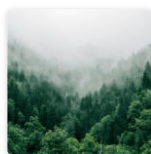
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Mark Schwehn is currently a Senior Research Professor in Christ College, the honors college of Valparaiso University. He served as Dean of Christ College for thirteen years (1990-2003) and as Provost of Valparaiso University for five years (2009-2014). Mark has been a resident scholar at the Collegeville Institute three times: 2005-6, 2014-15, and 2018.

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