

“Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?”

This last line of Mary Oliver’s poem, “The Summer Day,” goes to the heart of what I want to say to the Class of 2009. Notice that it is a question, not a formula for how to win friends and influence people or seven habits that will lead you to success. I have no prescription like that to offer you, just this one question.

It’s not the kind of question I expect you to be able to answer yet. To be honest, at 46 years of age I’m still working on it myself. But I hope it is the kind of question that you might live with over the next few decades at least, and that from time to time you will pause to reflect on it, maybe while walking along the beach on Cape Cod or gazing at the stars on a clear Vermont night. Or maybe as you are trying to figure out what to major in, or starting your first real job, or when you find yourself saying the words “I do” to the love of your life. Or witnessing the birth of a child, or coaching Little League, or teaching dance.

Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?

The word “vocation” comes from the same Latin root from which we get the word “vocal,” as in vocal chords. The Native American healer, Black Elk, said “behold, a sacred voice is calling you—all over the sky a sacred voice is calling.” In order to hear that sacred voice, however, we need to take time to listen. I think of Moses at the Burning Bush or Jesus at the Jordan River or Mohammed on Mount Hira. But those examples may make it sound as if vocation is something that happens only to people who consider themselves to be “religious,” and I mean to suggest that religious people have no monopoly on asking such an important question. Each of us must decide which voices we will choose to listen to as we discern not just what it is we will do, but who it is we are becoming.

Last spring I was riding around one night in a police cruiser with an officer from the Holden Police Department. (For the record I was in the *front* seat, not in the back!) He asked me why I became a minister, and I think he half expected me to tell him a story that included burning bushes or a voice from the heavens, speaking in English and telling me to go to seminary and “do not pass GO and do not collect \$200.” It didn’t happen that way for me, though. So I did something that clergy and teachers are taught to do: I turned it around and asked him why he had become a cop. And as he talked, I heard him telling me about what he cared about and believed in. About the world he wanted to raise his kids in. He almost *had* to be a cop because it was what made sense to him and gave his life meaning. It was the

way that he felt he could make a difference. And so I told him it was pretty much the same way for me.

Michael Himes teaches theology at Boston College. He says that we give ourselves a better chance to hear the true Voice that calls to each of us out of the unique circumstances of our lives when we pay close attention to three things: *joy, talent, and service*. Joy is about asking yourself: “what makes my heart sing?” Joy isn’t a synonym for being happy all the time: the truth is that sometimes there will be unpleasant and even boring tasks in work that brings us great joy. Sometimes our hearts will be broken. But deeper than pain there is joy.

When I was in high school I played tenor sax and I did enjoy it and at some level it even made my heart sing a little bit. But there was never a chance that Bruce Springsteen was going to call me to see if I’d be interested in replacing Clarence Clemens in the E. Street Band. That’s because I didn’t have much *talent* for it. Now that isn’t an excuse not to play; it is just that none of us can excel at everything. But all of us are good at something.

By now I hope that you have discovered some of your own talents—you may not even feel they are a very big deal because they simply are a part of who you are: you can run fast or play an instrument or you have patience with young children or you have an eye for beauty. I hope you will continue to develop those in the years ahead, but also that you will remain open to discovering talents you don’t even yet know that you have. To discover those hidden talents will require a willingness to take some risks, and even to risk failure.

Himes reminds us that it’s not all about us; we live in a broken world. It is, I think, a beautiful and good world, but it is also a world in need. You don’t have to change the *whole* world; in fact, I highly recommend against it. Most people who think they are going to change the world end up discouraged and burned out and sometimes even cynical or angry before they turn thirty. But if you think globally and act locally you will discover those places where your joy and talents intersect with the world’s needs. Rather than trying to change the world, it seems to me that each of us are called to be *menders*—repairers of the breach. That may sound less glamorous than sending you off to change the world. But if each of you leaves a little part of the world a little better than you found it, then it is quite possible that your grandchildren will look back on your generation and deem it to have been great.

Joy, talent, and service: the place where those three intersect will be a place where, if you are still, you will be able to hear that sacred Voice that is calling out all over the sky, a Voice that is calling uniquely to you.

I stand before you as an Episcopal priest who has, for more than eleven years now, served as the rector of St. Francis Church in Holden. Twice before I've been invited to offer reflections at baccalaureate services and it's been an honor and a privilege to do so. I am a preacher, and even here in a public high school auditorium (where I am profoundly aware of our secular and multi-faith context) I can't change that.

But my own vocation is not limited to being a pastor. The most important thing I've done so far in my own wild and precious life has been being a dad. Tonight I stand before you as a proud parent of one of these amazing graduates, and I find myself needing to add just one more thing before I conclude. As parents, it is sometimes difficult to remember that there is a difference between us and you. High school graduation is a time for us as parents to remember that part of the vocation of parenthood includes learning to let go and to recall that our children's joy and talents and world are not the same as *ours*. While we parents hope and pray that we will always have a role in your lives as trusted and perhaps even wise counselors, it is important to be clear that it isn't *your* job to fulfill *our* dreams. Letting go requires enormous trust on both sides—as parents and as adult children. None of us will ever get that down perfectly, or without some bumps in the road. Parenting, like all relationships, requires a good bit of improvisation.

My prayer tonight, and in the journey that lies ahead for each of you, is that you will discover your own joy, your own talents, and your own ways to serve. For it is from that place that you stand the best chance of answering the question with which I began, and with which I now conclude: so, *tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one, wild and precious life?*