

Visions of Vocation: Common Grace for the Common Good

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“Vocation is integral, not incidental, to the missio Dei.”

—Steven Garber, the
Washington Institute
(www.washingtoninst.org)

Banality Goes Both Ways

I recently had lunch with a former British boarding school chaplain. He remembers being with the boys in his school the morning thirty years ago that the very first pictures of widespread starvation in Africa were shown on the BBC. “We were dumb-struck. Having the children’s faces in our faces made a tremendous impression. I will never forget the feelings I had that day.” He has seen and heard a lot since then, given who he is and what he does. “But then, after awhile, what do you do?” he asked.

That is the most difficult dilemma for thoughtful, serious human beings: *What will you do with what you know?*

Whether our reading of the world began pre- or post-early 1980s, the images which caused the British chaplain and his students to be dumbstruck may or may not have been part of our experience. But each one of us knows the feeling. We know in our deepest places how hard it is to keep our eyes open to the complexity of the broken world around us, to keep feeling the pains of a world that is not the way it is supposed to be and, knowing the difficulty, choosing to engage it rather than being numbed by it.

Eichmann represents one side of this story. Not able, or perhaps not willing, to see that it was the small choices of his daily life that implicated and condemned him, he had eyes that did not see. *Banality* was Arendt’s word, trying to capture the surprising ordinariness of the man. But history is mostly that, very ordinary people in very ordinary places. One of the graces of Percy’s fiction is that it artfully insists on the commonplace character of responsibility. Most of us cannot and do not live extraordinary lives. Instead we live in families and in neighborhoods, working and worshiping week by week in rhythms that make the sum of our lives, season after season, year after year. Life cannot be other than that.

I am a teacher, and for years I have taken students of all sorts to the Holocaust Memorial on the Capitol Mall of Washington. We walk through its story of “the banality of evil” in the lives of countless men and women all over Europe who did not see themselves as implicated in the world around them. In Weil’s terms, they did not see their neighbors as neighbors. They did not pay attention to what was going on next door and on their street. They did not pay attention to what Nazism meant for Europe and the world. *Thoughtless* is the simple, tragic summary of Arendt’s judgment.

But banality goes both ways. If most of Europe was Eichmann-like, offering “the obedience of corpses” in thousands of terribly ordinary ways, there were exceptions. In every nation there are people who choose otherwise, who have eyes to see that something is wrong and that they can do something about it. Germany had its students, France its farmers, Denmark

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its fishermen, and Holland its shopkeepers. Taken together they are some of the best stories in the whole of history, reminding all of us what it means to be a neighbor, what it means to have eyes that see.

The undergraduate students known as the White Rose at the University of Munich gave their lives as a testament to the truth about the Fatherland amidst the Holocaust horror. They were very ordinary young men and a very ordinary young woman together insisting, as only students can, that their nation was wrong. The villagers of Le Chambon in the hills of France hid thousands of Jews in their basements and barns. In one of history's strange coincidences, Albert Camus wrote *The Plague* in Le Chambon at this very time as he wrestled with God, suffering and death, vocation and responsibility, all while surrounded by this conspiracy of simple goodness. The whole nation of Denmark also refused to go along with the genocide, choosing *en masse* to secretly send every Jew to Sweden by boat. It is evidence that this was not only an individual responsibility; the Danish people as a people said *no*. In thousands of important and different ways, each is a story formed by the asking and answering of the question, *Knowing what I know, what will I do?*

The nation of the Netherlands is its own poignant window into this question. Over the years of my visits to the Holocaust Memorial, what stands out is that one of the smallest nations in Europe had the most people who said, "It will not be like that here." Their names are listed, one after another; every person who took part in the resistance is remembered, each one a righteous Gentile. What is remarkable is the banality of goodness in the stories of these people. None lived as great people of history, though each one was in fact a great person; but the greatness was seen in the ordinariness of their lives. Shopkeepers and farmers mostly, men and women living simple lives as neighbors to neighbors, Jew and Gentile alike. What marked them was that they had eyes to see into the complexity of history, understanding that they were responsible, for love's sake, for the way the world turned out.

Always and everywhere, this is our challenge as human beings. Can we know and love the world at the very same time? Knowing its glories and shames, can we still choose to love what we know? Is there any task more difficult than that? Think it through for yourselves. From roommates to parents to siblings to friends, from neighborhoods to cities, from countries to cultures to continents—once you begin to really know what a person or a place is like, can you still love them, can you still love it?

At the dawn of the twenty-first century that question is a hard one to answer. Perhaps the honest human in every century and every culture would say the same. But this is our moment, and in it we face a world shaped by pressures that *feel* unique—whether they are or not. On the one hand, answering the question seems especially difficult given the challenge of the sociological stoicism of the information age, what some have perceptively called "the info-glut" culture; and on the other, we live with the worst face of modernism-become-

"The word vocation is a rich one, having to address the wholeness of life, the range of relationships and responsibilities. Work, yes, but also families, and neighbors, and citizenship, locally and globally—all of this and more is seen as vocation, that to which I am called as a human being, living my life before the face of God. It is never the same word as occupation, just as calling is never the same word as career. Sometimes, by grace, the words and the realities they represent do overlap, even significantly; sometimes, in the incompleteness of life in a fallen world, there is not much overlap at all."

—Steven Garber, "On Vocation"

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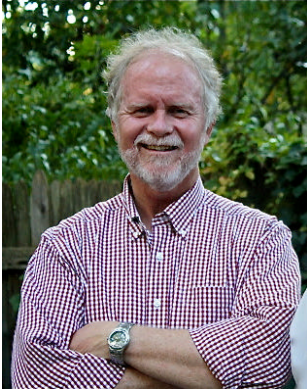
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postmodernism, what might be called “the culture of whatever.”

These are not abstractions. In their own ways the sociological and philosophical faces of our world conspire to haunt us. Attending to the info-glut character of contemporary culture carries with it the ironic edge that the more we know, the less we care; the more information we have, the less engaged by it we are. Responding to the critique of postmodernism – a word that Percy was using as early as the 1960s to explain the soul-strained character of contemporary life – makes most of us wonder whether anything is ever really true for everyone all the time. We do not need to read the philosophers to understand this. As the twentieth has become the twenty-first century, the air we breathe is full of the ether of “whatever.” In the next chapter we will explore the meaning of both, weighing their influence upon our ability to be fully and responsibly human.

“Knowing what I know about the way the world is, what am I going to do?” A mime in Europe had to answer, as did the Nazi bureaucrats, as did the Justice Department lawyer, as do all of us. Percy’s question echoes through the heart of every human being, and it is especially poignant for those coming out of the starting blocks of early adulthood with a life of knowing and doing on the horizon. The question requires an answer if we are going to be human.

– Taken from chapter two, *“If You Have Eyes, Then See”*



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A Teacher to Many People

Steven Garber has a classroom among many people in many places, serving as a consultant to foundations, corporations and schools. He is the founder and principal of The Washington Institute for Faith, Vocation & Culture, which is focused on reframing the way people understand life, especially the meaning of vocation and the common good. As such, the heart of his calling is that people understand the integral character of faith, vocation, and culture. Author of *The Fabric of Faithfulness: Weaving Together Belief and Behavior*, he writes frequently for *Comment* and *Critique* magazines. Additionally, he has contributed to the volumes *Faith Goes to Work: Reflections From the Marketplace*, and *Get Up Off Your Knees: Preaching the U2 Catalogue*, as well as the Mars Hill Audio journal, "Tacit Knowing, Truthful Knowing: The Life and Work of Michael Polanyi."

For many years Steven taught on Capitol Hill in the American Studies Program and then became the scholar-in-residence for the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities. He serves as a board member for Ransom Fellowship, the Blood:Water Mission, A Rocha, and the Telos Project, and as a consultant for the Wedgwood Circle, the Murdock Trust, the Demdaco Corporation and the Mars Corporation. A native of the great valleys of Colorado and California, he is married to Meg and is the father of five children whose own callings have scattered them around the world.

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