

UNMASKING YOUR FALSE SELF

The ideal of authenticity is something like the ideal of perfection. All of us have some idea of what we are talking about without ever having had any direct personal experience of it.

What we do know from personal experience is how to scramble after what we think is our best shot at personal fulfillment. We all seek a way of being that will lead to happiness. The reality is, however, that not all routes are equally authentic. If there is a way of being that is true to my deepest self, then there are also many other ways that are false.

Everything that is false about us arises from our belief that our deepest happiness will come from living life our way, not God's way. Although we may say we want to trust God and surrender to his will, deep down we doubt that God is really capable of securing our happiness.

PERSONAL STYLE

Early on in life most of us learn to take care of our own needs and satisfactions. We develop what Thomas Keating calls a personal emotional program.¹ This is our plan for coping with life and achieving happiness. It is our best guess about what we need to do in order to feel good about our self. It is our strategy for meeting our basic needs for love, survival, power and control.

Our basic style is often built around the things that were reinforced for us as children. It usually starts with the things we do well. Over time our repertoire of competencies grows, and we learn to live in a way that we think will work for us. This becomes "our way," or what we simply think of as who we are.

The problem is not that we do certain things well and have competencies and qualities that make us special. The problem lies in the inordinate investment that we place in this image and way of being.

At the core of the false self is a desire to preserve an image of our self and a way of relating to the world. This is our personal style—how we think of ourselves and how we want others to see us and think of us. I may have an image of myself as rational and careful. This will be at the core of my basic style. Alternately, my most prized trait might be my fitness, my intelligence or my sense of humor. Or it could be that my investment is in an image of someone who is loving, artistic, unpredictable, creative, fashionable, absent-minded, serious, spiritual or impulsive. Typically the trait that we prize is in fact part of who we are. But the truth always is that this trait is simply one among many. We live a lie when we make it the sum of our being.

Our false self is built on an inordinate attachment to an im-

age of our self that we think makes us special. The problem is the attachment, not having qualities that make us unique. Richard Rohr suggests that the basic question we must ask is whether we are prepared to be other than our image of our self.² If not, we will live in bondage to our false self.

As an example of this life of bondage to a false self, consider Saul before his conversion and new identity as Paul. Ambitious, fanatically zealous and homicidally ruthless, Saul was the terror of first-century Christians. The Acts of the Apostles describes him as working for the total destruction of the church, going house to house arresting followers of Christ and sending them to prison or execution (Acts 8:1-3).

Saul's falsity is seen most clearly in the light of what was true in Paul. The persistence of Saul's hatred pointed to a life that was badly out of alignment, but what exactly was wrong? In retrospect I would suggest that he was consumed by personal ambition.

Saul was making a name for himself. He wanted to be known as the one who single-handedly saved Judaism from the heresy of Christianity. What changed when he met Christ on the Damascus Road was that his prodigious talents and extraordinary level of passion were redirected away from the kingdom of self to the kingdom of God. In this redirection he found freedom from the tyranny of his private ambition. He found his true self.

No longer driven by hatred, he was now compelled by love. His life as Paul showed much of the same dogged determination that was seen in his life as Saul. But now it was not his ambition to make his mark and do it his way that propelled him forward. Instead it was his longing to reach what he described as the mark of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus (Philippians 3:14 KJV).

THE CHALLENGE OF AUTHENTICITY

Something else that we know from experience is how to hide and how to pretend. At some point in childhood we all make the powerful discovery that we can manipulate the truth about ourselves. Initially it often takes the form of a simple lie—frequently a denial of having done something. But of more importance to the development of the false self is the discovery that our ability to hide isn't limited to what we say or don't say. We learn to pretend. We discover the art of packaging our self.

We learn that even if we feel afraid, we can appear to be brave. We also learn to cloak hate with apparent love, anger with apparent calm, and indifference with apparent sympathy. In short, we learn how to present our self in the best possible light—a light designed to create a favorable impression and maintain our self-esteem.

While this might seem quite benign, the dark side of pretending is that what begins as a role becomes an identity. Initially the masks we adopt reflect how we want others to see us. Over time, however, they come to reflect how we want to see our self. But by this point we have thoroughly confused the mask and our actual experience. Our masks have become our reality, and we have become our lies. In short, we have lost authenticity and adopted an identity based on illusion. We have become a house of smoke and mirrors.

Few things are more difficult to discern and dismantle than our most cherished illusions. And none of our illusions are harder to identify than those that lie at the heart of our false self. The false self is like the air we breathe. We have become so accustomed to its presence that we are no longer aware of it. It

is as elusive as the wind, seeming to disappear when the light of attention is shined in its direction.

The only hope for unmasking the falsity that resides at the core of our being is a radical encounter with truth. Nothing other than truth is strong enough to dispel illusion. And only the Spirit of Truth can save us from the consequences of having listened to the serpent rather than God.

LISTENING TO THE SERPENT

The Genesis account of the temptation of Adam and Eve helps us understand how we become the lies we choose to believe. The story tells of a serpent that, knowing our first parents wanted to be like God, offered them a way to achieve this. Their desire to be like God was not in itself the problem. For God had created them in the Divine image and wanted them to be like God. However, God's gift of likeness was quite different from that offered by the deceiver.

The core of the lie that Adam and Eve believed was that they could be like God without God. But without God the most we can ever do is make ourselves into a god. The truth is that we cannot be like God by means of a spiritual coup of Divine authority and sovereignty. James Finley puts it this way:

Any expression of self-proclaimed likeness to God is forbidden us, not because it breaks some law arbitrarily decreed by God, but because such an action is tantamount to a fundamental, death-dealing, ontological lie. We are not God. We are not our own origin, nor are we our own ultimate fulfillment. To claim to be so is a suicidal act that wounds our faith relationship with the living God and replaces it with a futile faith in a self that can never exist.³

Paradoxically, Adam and Eve got what they wanted—to be like God without God, likeness that was based on independence rather than surrender. This is why we must be very careful about what we desire. We might just get it!

However, what we get when we choose a way of being that is separate from God is the life of the lie. It is a lie because the autonomy that it promises is an illusion. We do not become free of God by a disregard of Divine will. Instead, by such disregard we forge the chains of our bondage.

What we get when we choose a way of being that is separate from God is the life of the false self. What Saul got when he chose his way over God's way was a self whose significance depended on accomplishments of heroic proportions—the destruction of the church. What Stuart (whose story I told in chapter four) got was an illusory sense of specialness based on the gratifications of pornography.

The false self is the tragic result of trying to steal something from God that we did not have to steal. Had we dared to trust God's goodness, we would have discovered that everything we could ever most deeply long for would be ours in God. Trying to gain more than the everything God offers, we end up with less than nothing. Rejecting God, we end up with a nest of lies and illusions. Displacing God, we become a god unto our self. We become a false self.

COPING WITH NAKEDNESS

With the self that is created in God's likeness rejected, our false self is the self we develop in our own likeness. This is the person we would like to be—a person of our own creation, the person we would create if we were God. But such a person

cannot exist, because he or she is an illusion.

Basing identity on an illusion has profound consequences. Sensing its fundamental unreality, the false self wraps itself in experience—experiences of power, pleasure and honor. Intuiting that it is but a shadow, it seeks to convince itself of its reality by equating itself with what it does and achieves. Basil Pennington suggests that the core of the false self is the belief that my value depends on what I have, what I can do and what others think of me.⁴ Thomas Merton describes this as “winding experiences around myself . . . like bandages in order to make myself perceptible to myself and to the world, as if I were an invisible body that could only become visible when something visible covered its surface.”⁵

Because it is hollow at the core, the life of a false self is a life of excessive attachments. Seeking to avoid implosion and non-being, the false self grasps for anything that appears to have substance and then clings to these things with the tenacity of a drowning man clutching a life ring. One person might cling to his possessions, accomplishments or space. Another may cling to her dreams, memories or friendships. Any of these things can be either a blessing or a curse. They are a blessing when they are held in open hands of gratitude. They become a curse when they are grasped in clenched fists of entitlement and viewed as “me” or “mine.”

Saul clung to his zeal and force of will. Sounding like the prototypical Enneagram Type One that he was, after his conversion he described this as his desire to attain perfection by the strength of his efforts (Philippians 3:6-9). What a relief it must have been for him to replace the perfection he had sought through hard work with “the perfection that comes through

faith in Christ, and is from God" (Philippians 3:9).

We think of our attachments as anchors of well-being. We feel good when we are surrounded by what seem like innocent indulgences and think they secure a state of pleasure that would not be ours without them. In reality, however, they sabotage our happiness and are hazardous to both our spiritual health and our psychological health.

Attachments undermine our freedom, making our contentment and joy dependent on their presence. If my "innocent indulgence" is being surrounded by the latest high-tech gadgetry, I feel good when I get a new toy and not good when I see a newer version on the market and am unable to get it. An attachment to style, fashion and good taste operates the same way, making my happiness dependent on external things. Attachments imprison us in falsity as we follow the flickering sirens of desire.

Spiritually, attachments serve as idols: we invest in objects and experiences things that should be invested only in God. Anything that is grasped is afforded value beyond actual worth, value that is ultimately stolen from God.

Ultimately, attachments are ways of coping with the feelings of vulnerability, shame and inadequacy that lie at the core of our false ways of being. Like Adam and Eve, our first response to our awareness of nakedness is to grab whatever is closest and quickly cover our nakedness. We hide behind the fig leaves of our false self. This is the way we package our self to escape the painful awareness of our nakedness.

The problem with the false self is that it works. It helps us forget that we are naked. Before long, we are no longer aware of the underlying vulnerability and become comfortable once again.

But God wants something better than fig leaves for us. God wants us to be aware of our helplessness so we can know that we need Divine help. God's deepest desire for us is to replace our fig leaves with garments of durability and beauty (Genesis 3:21). Yet we cling to our fig-leaf false self. We believe that we know how to take care of our needs better than God.

RECOGNIZING YOUR FALSE SELF

While other people's excessive attachments and personal falsity often seem glaringly apparent, it is never easy to know the lies of our own life. There are, however, some trustworthy clues if we dare to be honest enough to face them.

One of these is defensiveness. Because of its fundamental unreality, the false self needs constant bolstering. Touchiness dependably points us to false ways of being. And the more prickly a person you are, the more you are investing in the defense of a false self.

Some people bristle easily if they are not taken seriously, thus betraying a need for others to see the self-importance that is so obvious to them. Others take themselves too seriously, perhaps being unable to laugh at themselves. Both reactions suggest ego inflation. Others have learned to mask these outward displays of defensiveness, but inner reactions of annoyance or irritation still point toward the presence of a false self.

I have always disliked being called Dave. Sometimes I correct people who do so. More often I simply remind myself how trivial the matter is and attempt to ignore my irritation. The obvious question, though, is why I am making such a big deal out of one consonant at the end of a name!

The answer points back to the core of my false self. David—

I confess—seems to fit better with the image of seriousness I want to project. Dave seems too common and ordinary, perhaps too familiar. In the puffed-up state of self-importance associated with my false self, I want to be unique and I want to be important. I don't want to be content with ordinary.

That's how the false self works. Its touchiness is predictable. Pettiness is one of its most stable characteristics. The things that bother us most about others—our pet peeves—also point toward falsity in our own self. The speck that bothers me in the life of someone else is almost always the log in my own eye (Matthew 7:3).

If laziness in others is what really bothers me, there is a good chance that discipline and performance form a core part of the false self that I embrace with tenacity. If it is playfulness and spontaneity in others that I find most annoying, then seriousness may be a central part of the self I protect and seek to project. If it is moral disregard that is particularly irritating in others, my false self is probably built around moral rectitude and self-righteousness. And if emotionality in others is what I most despise, emotional control is probably central to the script I have chosen to live.

Another clue to the nature of our false self is the pattern of our compulsions. Everyone tends to be compulsive about something, and for most of us it is what we think we most need. One person may compulsively pursue success or esteem, while another may invest the same energy in avoiding pain or emotional unpleasantness. There is nothing wrong with any of these things. The problem with compulsions is that they represent excessive attachments. They often involve a good that is elevated to the status of the supreme good by the dis-

proportionate importance we attach to it.

Perfection may be desirable if welcomed as God's work in us, but not as an outcome of the relentless effort people like Saul tend to expend to produce it. Love is certainly also an unquestionable good, but the compulsive effort to always be loving that characterizes others reflects a denial of their humanity and always comes at the expense of authenticity. Similarly, success, beauty, knowledge, security, pleasure, self-reliance and contentment are all good things, but not the supreme good that we make them when we invest in them inordinately.

The most basic function of our compulsions is to help us preserve our false self. But maintaining this illusion is the source of all our unhappiness. As Basil Pennington observes, unhappiness is always a result of "not being able to do something I want to do, have something I want to have, or concern about what others will think of me."⁶ This brings us back to the core of the false self—placing my value in what I have, what I can do and what others think of me.

THE ILLUSION OF THE FALSE SELF

Perhaps an illustration will help clarify these false ways of being. While I would rather tell someone else's story, my own is the one I know best.

The root of my false self was the childhood discovery that by being a good boy I could earn love. Of course, learning how to interpret "good" took some time. A false self is never established overnight! However, over time the interaction of the dynamics of my family and of my personality suggested ways of wrapping my naked and vulnerable self with successive layers of accomplishment to secure love.

The problem was that these strategies worked. The more I accomplished, the more people seemed to like me. Consequently, I became better and better at being the little performing boy that I thought people would like. This gave me some distance from the abyss of feeling like a nobody. Even more important, it gave me a way of being not just a somebody, but somebody special. Tragically, however, it kept me from discovering just how likable I was without any effort to look good. And it set me up on a treadmill of performance.

Securing love by generating accomplishments leaves one dependent on the potentially fickle response of others. As I look back, it seems I put a spin on this as I shifted from seeking love to seeking respect, something that I unconsciously realized made the supply of love even more secure. While love is freely given, respect is earned.

My longstanding investment in being respected has been an attempt to control my environment and guarantee the sense of specialness to which I have become addicted. The bondage in any false self is the bondage of having to keep up the illusion. I am not simply an overachieving good boy. I am not my accomplishments. The things I can do or have done do not make me special. In fact, the attempt to define myself by my accomplishments is as boringly common as it gets!

My compulsive pursuit of accomplishments and the respect of people who are important to me suffocates the life of my true self. It binds and inhibits my growth and restricts my freedom. It is important for me to remember that I am a human being, not a human doing. My worth lies in who I am, not what I can do or how I am seen by others. This is the truth of my existence.

A DIVINE BATTLE WITH THE FALSE SELF

If Jesus was—as Christians believe—both fully man and fully God, he too had to battle with the false self. He too must have been tempted by false ways of being and excessive attachments to his personal style. In his humanity, his identity in the love of the Father could not have been obvious from the first moments of consciousness as an infant. He had to find himself and in so doing must have been tempted by many false ways of living his life.

We know this to be true because we have a record of some of those temptations. Pennington suggests that the well-known account of the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1-11) is best understood as his struggles with three major potential false selves.⁷

After forty days of fasting, Jesus would have been ravenous. The first attempted seduction of the tempter was to turn stones into bread—a temptation to power. But Jesus said no to the invitation to establish his identity on the basis of his doing, particularly doing something that was independent of submission to the authority of God. Jesus had, Pennington notes, “a better food”—the Word of God (Matthew 4:4).

Then the tempter invited him to throw himself from the top of the temple into the crowds below, so they would immediately recognize him as the Messiah. Again Jesus rejected the temptation. He chose not to base his identity on prestige. And in so doing he took a further step to anchor his identity in the Father, not in what people thought of him.

Finally the tempter offered him all the kingdoms of the world. But once again Jesus rejected the offer, refusing to find his identity in possessions. He knew himself in terms of poverty

of spirit and the loving will of the Father. He knew, therefore, that power was a poor substitute for this.

Jesus knew who he was in God. He could therefore resist temptations to live out of a false center based on power, prestige or possessions. By resisting these false ways of being, Jesus was moving toward an identity grounded in his relationship to the Father—an identity in which his calling became obvious as he came to understand who he really was.

COMING OUT OF HIDING

Every moment of every day of our life God wanders in our inner garden, seeking our companionship. The reason God can't find us is that we are hiding in the bushes of our false self. God's call to us is gentle and persistent: "Where are you? Why are you hiding?"

The more we identify with our psychologically and socially constructed self, the more deeply we hide from God, ourselves and others. But because of the illusory nature of the false self, most of the time we are not aware that we are hiding. Coming out of hiding requires that we embrace the vulnerabilities that first sent us scurrying for cover. As long as we try to pretend that things are not as they are, we choose falsity. The first step out of the bushes is always, then, a step toward honesty with our self.

We all tend to fashion a god who fits our falsity. If my false self is built on an image of moral rectitude, I will tend to bolster this by casting God in the same light. Or if my investment is in an image of self as whimsical, spontaneous and playful, it is almost inevitable that I develop a picture of God painted with these same colors. Having first created a self in the image of our own making, we then set out to create the sort of a god who

might in fact create us. Such is the perversity of the false self.

Coming out of hiding is accepting God on God's own terms. Doing so is the only route to truly being our unique self-in-Christ.

If this is your desire, take a few moments to do two things.

First, ask God to help you see what makes you feel most vulnerable and most like running for cover. It may be conflict. Or perhaps it is failure, pain, emotional upset or loss of face. Allow yourself to feel the distress that would be present if you did not avoid these things. Then, listening to God's invitation to come out of the bushes in which you are hiding, step out and allow God to embrace you just as you are.

Second, prayerfully reflect on the image of your self to which you are most attached. Consider how you like to think about yourself, what you are most proud of about yourself. Ask God to help you see the ways you use these things to defend against feelings of vulnerability. And then ask God to prepare you to trust enough to let go of these fig leaves of your personal style.

There is an alternative to the false self. And it takes less energy and work. The way of being that is based on our life in Christ is a way of truth that leads to our vocation and to our deepest possible fulfillment.

6

BECOMING YOUR TRUE SELF



The true self is the exact opposite of all that I have described as the false self. The true self is who, in reality, you are and who you are becoming. It is not something you need to construct through a process of self-improvement or deconstruct by means of psychological analysis. It is not an object to be grasped. Nor is it an archetype to be actualized. It is not even some inner, hidden part of you. Rather, it is your total self as you were created by God and as you are being redeemed in Christ. It is the image of God that you are—the unique face of God that has been set aside from eternity for you.

We do not find our true self by seeking it. Rather, we find it by seeking God. For as I have said, in finding God we find our truest and deepest self. The anthropological question (Who am I?) and the theological question (Who is God?) are fundamen-

THE FALSE SELF

Security and significance achieved by what we have, what we can do and what others think of us

Happiness sought in autonomy from God and in attachments

Identity is our idealized self (who we want others to think we are)

Achieved by means of pretense and practice

Maintained by effort and control

Embraces illusion as a means of attempting to become a god

THE TRUE SELF

Security and significance achieved by being deeply loved by God

Fulfillment found in surrender to God and living our vocation

Identity is who we are—and are becoming—in Christ

Received as a gift with gratitude and surrender

Maintained by grace

Embraces reality as the place of meeting and being transformed by God

tally inseparable.¹ It is by losing our self in God that we discover our true identity.

There is no true life apart from relationship to God. Therefore there can be no true self apart from this relationship. The foundation of our identity resides in our life-giving relationship with the Source of life. Any identity that exists apart from this relationship is an illusion.

AN IDENTITY GROUNDED IN GOD

Because the true self can exist only in relation to God, we see its clearest expression in the one person who lived his whole life closely and consistently in relation to God—Jesus. Jesus is the True Self who shows us by his life how to find our self in relation to God. The self we find hidden in Christ is our true self, because Christ is the source of our being and ground of our true identity (1 Corinthians 15:22).

No one is born with an identity, and Jesus was no exception. Some people worry that an exploration of the humanity of Jesus compromises his divinity. But being fully man and fully God means that he was nothing less than fully human.² And being fully human meant that he, like all humans, had to discover who he was. Even Jesus had to find his way, his self. What do we know about how he did so?

The Gospels tell us remarkably little about his childhood. Apart from a few stories of visitors during infancy and the family's movements to and from Egypt, they present only one event in the approximately thirty years between his birth and baptism in which his actions are described—his visit to the temple at age twelve. But before we consider this event, let us speculate about what it must have been like to be Jesus in the years before that public incident.

All children first find themselves in relation to their parents. Jesus would have been no different. Mary was, of course, a woman apart from all others—"highly favored" by God and "of all women . . . the most blessed" (Luke 1:29, 42). Her humble surrender to the will of God—"let what you have said be done to me" (Luke 1:38)—set the stage for Jesus' own learning of life lived in relation to God. And over time, Jesus undoubtedly began to internalize Mary's steadfast confidence in the trustworthiness of God's love. Over time Jesus would have also absorbed Mary's deep conviction that he was the "Son of the Most High" (Luke 1:32). He would have grown up hearing the stories of the remarkable events of his birth and early years. He would have heard of the visits of the shepherds and wise men, and of the prophecies of Simeon and Anna on the day he was circumcised. He would know that his family viewed him as the promised and

long-awaited savior, the Christ who would bring salvation to Israel and light to the pagans (Luke 2:32).

Jesus could have responded to these expectations by developing a smug sense of entitlement that would lead him to lord it over his relatives, friends and even parents. Being the Son of God could have been a power trip of disastrous proportions. But we don't see this. Instead his emerging sense of fundamental relatedness to God led him to a loving dependence on and surrender to God. The event at age twelve gives us a glimpse at the self that was developing at this point.

As recorded in Luke 2:41-50, this incident revolved around the annual trip made by Jesus and his family to the temple for the feast of the Passover. At the conclusion of the feast, Mary and Joseph left with the family caravan, thinking that Jesus was with his cousins. A day later, discovering that he was not in the group, they returned to Jerusalem to try and find him. After three panicky days of looking they finally found him at the temple, "sitting among the doctors, listening to them, and asking them questions" (v. 46).

Seemingly surprised by his parents' concern, Jesus responded in a way that said a great deal about his understanding of who he was: "Why were you looking for me? . . . Did you not know that I must be busy with my Father's affairs?" (v. 49).

Jesus had come to think about himself in relation not simply to earthly parents but to his heavenly Parent. And he was beginning to understand that this latter, most fundamental aspect of his identity was the soil out of which his calling was to emerge. He was beginning to understand that his Father's affairs were his affairs, his Father's priorities his priorities.

Jesus would later ask his disciples who people thought he was

and who they thought he was (Matthew 16:13-20). This would have been a dangerous question if he had not already been clear on the answer. Jesus did not merely accept the identity that others offered him. Had he done so he would have, like us, been pulled in many different directions.

Judas, among others, hoped he would be a political savior from the oppression of the Romans. Others saw him as a prophet. These and numerous other potential identities were all available as distractions from Jesus' true self. But he did not look to the expectations of others to understand who he was. Instead he looked to his relationship with God.

The clarity of thought and action that would later characterize Jesus' public ministry came from his years of preparation in solitude and anonymity. The core of that preparation was meeting God in the secret place of his inner self. It was through meeting God in places of solitude that Jesus discovered his identity and grew in intimacy with God.

Jesus gave glory to God by being himself—deeply, truly, consistently. Thomas Merton says that "to be a saint means to be myself."³ Sanctity is finding our hidden and true self in Christ and living out the life that flows from this self in surrender to the loving will and presence of our heavenly Father. In this, Christ leads many sons and daughters to the Father and to the freedom of being our true self.

VOCATION

But identity is not static. It always gives direction to how we live our life. The discovery of our true self does not simply produce freedom. It also generates vocation.

Vocation is the older, more theologically rooted word for what

we sometimes today refer to as “calling.” Both point us in the same direction—toward a purpose of being that is grounded in God rather than in our self. Our vocation, like our self, can be understood only in relation to the One Who Calls.

We can understand God’s call to us at a number of levels. First, we are called to be human beings. In *Becoming Human*, Jean Vanier reminds us of the fundamental importance of this call to discover and live out our shared humanity. He describes it as “a journey from loneliness to a love that grows in and through belonging,” a love that “liberates us from self-centred compulsions and inner hurts . . . that finds its fulfillment in forgiveness and in loving those who are our enemies.”⁴ This, and nothing less, is what is involved in the call to become fully human.

A second level of calling is to be Christians. This builds on the first by showing us the route to the fulfillment of our humanity. Genuine Christ-following will always make us more, not less, human. We know something is seriously wrong if it does not. Jesus Christ, the perfect God-Man, bridges the chasm between God and humanity. By becoming fully human, Jesus leads us to the fulfillment of our humanity. By being fully God, he leads us to God.

But we can also think of our calling in terms of our mission in the world, the way of living out our uniqueness within the more general call to become fully human as we follow Jesus toward union with God. Gordon Smith notes that—much bigger than a career, job or occupation—our unique calling will be based on our gifts and abilities, will grow out of our deepest desires, and will always involve some response to the needs of the world.⁵

The Christian concept of vocation derives its meaning from the belief in “a creator God who molds humanity and all nature

with loving intent, seeking the flourishing and fulfillment of all created things.”⁶ Our calling is therefore the way of being that is both best for us and best for the world. This is what Frederick Buechner means when he states that “the place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”⁷

Our vocation is always a response to a Divine call to take our place in the kingdom of God. Our vocation is a call to serve God and our fellow humans in the distinctive way that fits the shape of our being. In one way or another, Christian calling will always involve the care of God’s creation and people. This realigns us to the created world and to our neighbor, moving us from self-centered exploitation to self-sacrificing service and stewardship.

The communal nature of the kingdom of God also draws our attention to the fact that we discover our calling—and, as previously noted, our true self—in community. Here, through the help of others who know us well, we learn to discern our gifts and find our authentic voice and vocation. We are all called to Christ-following and loving service of God and neighbor. But the specific call that is rooted in your unique identity, gifts and personality will be found as you come to know both God and self in Christian community.

To live apart from a sense of calling by God is to live a life oriented simply to our own choices about who we want to be and what we want to do. Calling brings freedom and fulfillment because it orients us toward something bigger than self.

A VOCATION GROUNDED IN IDENTITY

Just as Jesus had to work out his identity, so too he had to discern his calling. Like us, he faced the demand to work out with

God the truth of his being. We have seen how this was developing at age twelve. The next glimpse the Gospels provide of him was approximately eighteen years later, when he presented himself to his cousin John for baptism. Here we begin to see the unfolding of his vocation.

John was not happy about the idea of baptizing his cousin Jesus. He had long viewed Jesus as the Messiah and had found his own calling as the one who prepared the way for Jesus. He argued that Jesus should baptize him, not the other way around. But Jesus was insistent. "Leave it like this for the time being," he said. "It is fitting that we should, in this way, do all that righteousness demands" (Matthew 3:15). John gave in and baptized Jesus.

The feature of this account that I find most striking is Jesus' humility. He knew that he was without sin and did not need the baptism of repentance. But involvement in his Father's affairs included meeting the demands of righteousness. Here was no megalomaniac who was unable to stoop to submit to his humble and rather eccentric cousin. He was able to submit to his cousin, however, because he was first prepared to submit to the will of God. Nothing mattered more than that.

The way of the true self is always the way of humility. Pride and arrogance move us toward our false self, but humility and love allow us to live the truth of our being. Jesus was on his way to knowing his calling because he was perfectly and completely the True Self.

Perhaps the most revealing of the Gospel accounts about Jesus' understanding of his vocation is that presented in Luke 4. Arriving in Nazareth one sabbath in the first days of his public ministry, Jesus did as was his custom and went to the syna-

gogue. Standing up to read, he was handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. Unrolling the scroll, he selected and read the following words:

The spirit of the Lord has been given to me,
for he has anointed me.
He has sent me to bring the good news to the poor,
to proclaim liberty to captives
and to the blind new sight,
to set the downtrodden free,
to proclaim the Lord's year of favor. (Luke 4:18-19)

As he finished, every eye in the synagogue was on Jesus. The unspoken question in everyone's mind was *Who is this man who dares to take upon himself the mantle of the Messiah?*

Jesus heard the unspoken question and answered it with shocking directness. "This text is being fulfilled today even as you listen" (Luke 4:22).

How had Jesus come to discover that he was to be the fulfillment of the promises of the Old Testament? What could have ever produced such astounding confidence to lead him to assert that the text that had been read so often in synagogues throughout Israel referred to him? The answer lies in part in what he had been doing in the days preceding this remarkable incident.

This bold assertion of vocation came immediately on the heels of Jesus' forty days of temptation in the wilderness (Luke 4:1-13). Jesus' understanding of his vocation came out of wrestling with God, himself and the devil in the solitude of the wilderness.⁸ Resisting the temptations to a false self based on power, prestige or possessions, Jesus chose his true identity as the deeply loved Son of God. His identity was not an issue. This

is why he was also not distracted by the critics who tried to dismiss him as being merely Joseph's son (Luke 4:23). Jesus knew who his Father was, and as a consequence he knew what his calling was—to do the will of the Father.

Nothing was more central to Jesus' understanding of his calling than to do God's will. Describing a dependence on God that could appear to be unhealthily infantile, Jesus said that he could do nothing whatsoever by himself because his aim was not to do his own will but the will of God (John 5:30). Doing God's will was so central to who he was that on another occasion he described his kin as those who, like him, obeyed the will of the Father. This kinship-of-calling was sufficiently strong that—as in the incident at the temple at age twelve—Jesus risked giving offense to his natural family by affirming the priority of his heavenly family. Nothing took primacy for Jesus over surrender to the loving will of the Father, even the subservient obligation of love of family and neighbor.

Our call, like Jesus' call, is to live out our life in truth and in dependence on the loving will of the Father. As was the case for Jesus, the discernment of this call must always involve wrestling with God, our self and the devil in the solitude of our private wilderness. And as for Jesus, this discernment must always occur in the light of our present life circumstances. This means that attentiveness to God's call is a lifelong matter.

Jesus' understanding of his calling continued to develop right to the point of his death. He had been predicting his death since early in his ministry (Mark 8:31). So in one sense it was not a surprise to him as he saw it approaching. However, as things began to close in around him in the Garden of Gethsemane, he may have found himself doubting that he had read

God's will correctly. Perhaps he wondered: *Surely this couldn't be God's plan! Surely a premature death just after starting my public ministry could not be the eternal intention of my existence!* But never faltering, Jesus' words were the same: "Let it be as you, not I, would have it" (Matthew 26:39). His unshakable trust was in God. Nothing, he knew, could be more important than doing God's will. This was the reason he was on earth.

Too often we think of God's call (or our vocation) solely in terms of what we do. People speak of being called to the ministry or feeling called to work in healthcare or teaching. However, while doing will always be involved, vocation is much more than our occupation. It is the face of Christ we are called from eternity to show to the world. It is who we are called to be.

LIVING THE TRUTH OF OUR UNIQUENESS

As an adolescent, I had a lurking fear that God was going to call me to be a missionary, like the uncle I was named after and the heroes of my family and our church who received much visible admiration. God's will was presented more in terms of what I did than of who I was. And the place where I was pointed to find this will was external. It was the Bible.

Without deemphasizing the value of the Bible in knowing my calling, I have come to understand an even more basic place in which God's will for me has been communicated. That is in the givens of my being. My temperament, my personality, my abilities, and my interests and passions all say something about who I was called to be, not simply who I am. If I really believe that I was created by God and invited to find my place in his kingdom, I have to take seriously what God had already revealed about who I am.

I cannot, for example, imagine God giving me my interest in ideas and not making this an important part of the place I am called to fill in the kingdom. Thoughts have always been my inner companions. I seek dialogue as a way to explore and organize these imperfectly formed parts of my inner architecture. And I gravitate toward writing as an extension of this. Similarly, my interest in people—particularly in meeting and understanding them in their depths—was part of my attraction to psychology and subsequent interest in spiritual direction. And my longstanding interest in the dynamics of the soul has been a central part of finding my way toward a calling in soul care.

My calling is not simply to be a lecturer, writer or psychologist. It is to be a kingdom servant of Yahweh. But the way I am to do that is grounded in the self that God created. And that self has directed me toward the understanding and promotion of the well-being of the inner life of persons. That is why David Benner was created, and that is the context within which I am called to live out the truth of my existence in dependence on God.

While the first revelation of our calling is in the givens of our being, it is important to note that God's will for us does not always grow naturally out of our wishes. Jonah is a good example of someone whose calling was diametrically opposite to his superficial desires. Moses didn't like public speaking, and Gideon didn't feel courageous. Even Jesus didn't look forward to being crucified! This is the discipline of doing what we don't want to do but know we should. Doing so can also be transforming.

God sometimes calls people to a cause not born of their own abilities or most superficial desires. But his call is always abso-

lutely congruent with our destiny, our truest self, our identity and the shape of our being.

We are all called to live the truth of our uniqueness. Divine creativity has never involved a production assembly line. The results of God's creative acts are never less than original and truly unique works of art. You and I are no exception.

But God does not only create us in uniqueness. God meets us in our uniqueness. Think, for example, of the quite different ways Jesus encounters people in the Gospels. Some are simply invited to follow him, some are engaged in Socratic dialogue, some are given provocative parables as answers to questions, some are healed, some are told their sins are forgiven. There has never been one standard way to meet God.

God meets us in our individuality because God wants to fulfill that individuality. God wants us to follow and serve in and through that individuality. God doesn't seek to annihilate our uniqueness as we follow Christ. Rather, Christ-following leads us to our truest self.

The spiritual life of one person should never be a carbon copy of that of another. Peter and John had quite different personalities and quite different transformational journeys as they followed Jesus. Mary and Martha, two sisters whom Jesus loved deeply, each expressed their love for him uniquely. And he received both, not discouraging Martha from busying herself in service, simply encouraging her to not fret in doing so (Luke 10:38-42).

God's will for us is that we live out the harmonious expression of our gifts, temperament, passions and vocation in truthful dependence on God. Nothing less than this is worthy of being called our true self. Nothing less than this will lead to our

deepest fulfillment. And nothing less than this will allow us to show the face of Christ to the world that we have been called from eternity to show.

OUR CALLING, OUR FULFILLMENT

Christ's way to self-fulfillment is not like any way we could ever have imagined. His way involves losing our life so that we might find it, dying so that we might live. His way is always the way of the cross. Death always precedes new life.

Our happiness is important to God. But what he desires for us is infinitely more than the superficial feelings that come from pursuing happiness directly. What he wants to give us is the deep joy that comes from finding our self in Christ—that is, being poor in spirit, mournful, meek, hungry for righteousness, merciful, pure in heart, a peacemaker, persecuted for the sake of the kingdom (Matthew 5:1-10).

Our fulfillment is also important to God. But the self he wants to fulfill is not the self of our autonomous existence. Nor is it any of the false selves of our own creation. It is our truest and deepest self.

Happiness and fulfillment are blessings that come from surrender to the loving will of God. Both are idolatrous if pursued directly. Both are also easily a distraction from our true destiny, our calling in Christ. This is the only self within which we will ever be able to find absolute authenticity.

It is like putting on a perfectly custom-tailored dress or suit after wearing clothes made for other people. Our self-in-Christ is a self that fits perfectly because it is completely us. It is a self that allows us to be free of all anxiety regarding how we should be and who we are. And it allows us to be absolutely our

self—unique not by virtue of our strivings for individuality but profoundly original simply because that is who and what we are.

God's call to our fulfillment is therefore a call to take our place in his grand restoration agenda of making all things new in Christ. Our vocation is grounded in the self that from eternity God has willed that we be. Our calling is to become that self and then to serve God and our fellow human beings in the particular ways that will represent the fulfillment of that self. Our identity is not simply a possession. It is a calling.

Paradoxically, our fulfillment lies in the death of our own agendas of fulfillment. It also lies in the crucifixion of all our ego-centered ways of living apart from complete surrender to God. It does not lie, then, in any of the places we would expect to find it. Christ's way always turns our ways upside down. But it is only in the upside-down world of Christ's kingdom that we will ever find the self we were called from eternity to be and the God we were created to serve. In God alone is the truth of our being.

THE NEXT STEP

The ideas and ideals of this chapter are big. Postmodern cynics smirk at the notion that there is a way of being for each of us that is truth. But if our identity is grounded in Truth, the self we find there will be, for each of us, the unique truth that is our vocation.

It remains to make these big ideals practical. I assume that having read thus far, you have already done some of the preliminary work of knowing yourself and God and of meeting God in your depths. None of us ever finishes with this work, so don't fail to read on simply because you know there is more work to be done in this area. Nor do we ever wait until this work is com-

pleted to figure out our vocation. The discernment of our vocation is an ongoing, lifelong process. It is learning to live the truth of our being, not simply fill certain roles or accomplish certain expectations.

You may feel that your calling has been clear for many years. You may have already answered God's call to some form of ministry. Or you may feel you have already found your calling in your work. But at some point in the near future, take some time to review this call with God—not to determine whether you should change what you are doing but to help you live the truth of your life with even more focus and passion. Periodic times of prayerful review of calling can be a great aid in keeping our Christ-following personalized, up to date and in focus.

On the other hand, you may still be struggling with what your calling in life is. You may feel that rather than a review, what you need is for God to finally and clearly reveal your vocation. If so, approach the suggestions that follow with patience. Remember to not confuse your vocation and your job or career. And don't assume that you have not already been living out that vocation. Often looking back at who we have been helps us discern who we are called to be.

Regardless of your confidence about your calling or your sense of progress in the development of your true self, let me suggest two things for prayerful review.

1. Set aside some time to meditate on the Gospel account of Jesus' trip to the temple at age twelve (Luke 2:41-50). Conduct an imaginary conversation with Jesus, asking him where he found his clear sense of his identity. Listen to him speak and watch him act. See what you can learn from his knowing of himself in relationship to God. Then pick up this conver-

sation with Jesus as you meditate on his public declaration of his calling in the synagogue as recorded in Luke 4:16-22.

2. Prayerfully write out a mission statement for your life. Think back over your life to this point, reviewing the givens of your being and seeking to discern calling within them. Add to this any direct leadings of God that you believe yourself to have received. Begin your written statement with the words "Called to . . ." and allow it to reflect what you feel to be the reason you were created and the unique face of Christ you have been called to be. Discuss this with someone who knows you well and whom you trust, seeking their perspective but not adopting it as your own unless it is confirmed by prayer and careful reflection.