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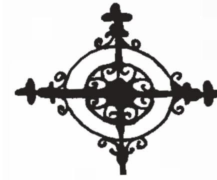

The Santa Clara Lectures

You Bet Your Life: Finding Meaning, and Perhaps, Vocation

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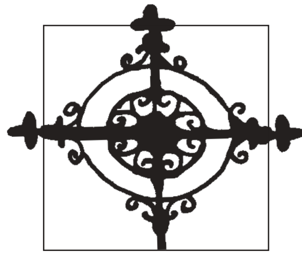

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When I agreed to come to Santa Clara for this occasion I was asked to speak about vocation—the idea of calling, the idea of finding, or being found—by a purpose for one's life that is part of the purposes of God. From Adam and Eve to Abraham and Sarah, to Moses and to the young King David, from the prophets Isaiah, and Jeremiah to John the Baptist, and Mary, the mother of Jesus, and to the Apostle Paul, the Biblical tradition witnesses to the possibility and the power of *calling*, of *vocation*. Put in more secular language, we can speak of vocation as *finding a purpose for your life that uses your best gifts, that serves your truest values, and that brings a sense of worth and worthiness*.

I want to frame the issue of vocation by reflecting with you about four life options in relation to the investments we make with our lives. We will look at four patterns of approaching the question of shaping our lives and vocation. How do you discern and determine how to invest your talents, your gifts, your potential? How do you clarify what your deeper and truer values are or will become? How do you open yourself to the call of good, and of God? How do you recognize your aptitudes? How do you open yourself to the possibility and faith that God has a calling for you?

Our world has tremendous needs. In face of today's uncertainties and threats, you and I are called to utilize our gifts, our talents, and our opportunities, well and wisely, and in good *faith*. We are called to find purposes for our lives that make a difference for good. We are pre-potentiated—that is to say, we are born and blessed with gifts and talents, and a hunger that make us candidates for roles and places of service and leadership that can make a difference for good in the world.

I want to share with you a quote from Frederick Buechner.

> Vocation comes from the Latin *vocare*, to call, and means the work one is called to by God. There are all different kinds of voices calling you to do all different kinds of work, and the problem is to find out which is the voice of God rather than of Society, say, or the Superego, or Self-Interest.
>
> By and large a good rule for finding this out is this: The kind of work God 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. If you really get a kick out of your work, you've presumably met requirement (A), but if your work is writing deodorant commercials, the chances are you have missed requirement (B). On the other hand, if your work is being a doctor in a leper colony, you have probably met requirement (B), but if most of the time you are bored and depressed by your work, the chances are you have not only bypassed (A) but you probably aren't helping your patients much either.
>
> Neither the hair shirt not the soft berth will do: *The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.**

The discernment and emergence of vocation in our lives is tied to the dynamics of faith. In this time together, I invite you to look with me at four faith and life strategies that we can

* See Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (New York: Harper and Row, 1984, p. 95.

examine as models as we reflect on our lives and the challenges of vocation. I am going to illustrate each of these life options—not perfectly, but I hope suggestively—by giving brief capsules of three films and one TV series that captured my attention in the last few years. I will close this talk by offering, in brief, a theology of Vocation, a Theology of calling.

Anomic Faith

You Bet Your Life: We do bet our lives: Consciously, unconsciously; by drift or influence, or by some degree of choice: You and I do shape, make and live a life-wager. There are at least four kinds of options in this process of vocational response—in response to the call of God. Let me chart these for you by sharing the four stories I promised. The first type of faith and life option we will look at can be called Anomic Faith.

Anomy comes from *a-nomos*, meaning without rule, or principle or law; without purpose. The anomic life stance is one of Drift and Draft: Gazing and Grazing. The anomic position says, "My life does not matter much. Something will come along. I'll go along and get along." Or, it might say, "The system is corrupt. I'm unsure how to connect, and I don't know whether I want to connect." Or it might say, "Life is meaningless and my choices and decisions don't mean very much, to me or to others."

Something of this anomic position can be experienced during times of transition in our lives. Transitions are periods when we may have transient times of gazing and grazing, as we seek to work out a sense of direction for the investment, or reinvestment of our lives. But for some, the anomic stance becomes, for whatever reason, a kind of permanent way of being.

Sometime ago, I viewed the video version of the powerful film *Pollack*. Jackson Pollock was one of five sons of a California family. He began to study art seriously in 1931. Across nine years of working in obscurity, he developed a style of painting that would eventually thrust the field of "modern art" into a new American vernacular. Pollack was emotionally unstable. He was quiet to the point of social awkwardness. In the 1930's he worked sporadically, interrupting his work with intermittent bouts of alcohol abuse.

One day, in 1940, a young Russian-Jewish artist, Lee Krassner, walked into Pollock's apartment. She introduced herself, and asked if she could see his work. Mostly mute, he showed her his paintings in progress. Herself an artist, she immediately recognized the originality and power of his abstract paintings. She sensed that his work could open a radically new path in 20th century artistic expression.

Captivated by the power of his painting, Pollock's talent and genius became the focusing cause of Lee Krassner's life. Though she was herself a gifted and serious painter, she committed herself to nurturing the enormous talent and promise she perceived in this vulnerable, but extraordinarily gifted, man.

Through Lee Krassner's initiative Pollock came to the notice of an important critic who worked closely with Peggy Guggenheim, the wealthy patron of modern art in the United States. Ms. Guggenheim became Pollack's sponsor. With Guggenheim's financial support Lee Krassner moved the couple out to Long Island, where she judged he would be less distracted by friends and by the temptations of drink. Economically scraping by, she and Pollack gradually made the run-down farm livable, and he entered upon the most productive period of his

life as an artist.

Pollock and Krassner settled and shaped a pattern of living that pleased them both. Away from the city and distraction, he maximized his creativity and productivity. At Ms. Krassner's insistence they married. This step of commitment to their relationship along with the stability it brought, opened a time in Pollock's life when his work received critical acclaim, including a special photographic study in Life magazine, as well as a film devoted to his work. His art began to be bought by patrons and by museums all over the world.

By 1949, however, when Pollack was arguably at his peak as an artist, it all began to come undone. Several negative reviews discouraged him. The emergence of other artists into the limelight disrupted his work. Returning to heavy drinking and to partying with friends, he became subject to growing self-doubt about the real worth of his art. Discouraged and rebellious, Pollack defied his relation with his wife in a dalliance with a younger woman. After a particular evening of excessive drinking, he was driving this woman and her friend to a Long Island railroad station for their trip back to New York City. On the way, Pollack, whose face shows a kind of grim, dark intent, plowed his Buick Roadmaster convertible at high speed into the Long Island woods, killing himself, and seriously injuring the his women passengers.

Jackson Pollack, at least as represented by Ed Harris's extraordinary film, fits what I called the *Anomic* style of faith. Pollock was a man without a sense of inner direction. He was driven in his art, but he was at war with himself. The anomic position with its drift and its tendency toward cynicism reveals a lack of sustaining values or purpose. As is most often the case

with the Anomic stance, Pollock exhibited a sad agnosticism—an "unknowing"—about his own worth and meaning, and about his potential and capacity to find meaning for his life and for others. He seemed to be unknowing as regards to any source of being, value and meaning. Beneath the unique gift of his talent, he had found no stable sense of self worth, no sustaining grounding or purpose, and no disciplines to cope with isolation or failure. He had no centering values to claim. Sadly, he had a crippled and impaired capacity for love and commitment.

Despite the extraordinary alchemy of his paintings, as vivid and arresting as they are, their repetitive and non-signifying gestures ultimately carry little substance or meaning. They survive as expressions of a gifted but anomic life. That Pollock's work gained such acclaim and influence suggests that his expressions of that anomy resonated with the experiences and feelings of many others in our fragmented postmodern era.

Heteronomic Faith

The second wager in life and faith I want to speak about can be called *Heteronomy*. In this stance, we shape our faith and values in accordance with the values of powerful and influential others. *Hetera* means "other". Heteronomous choices are like paths we take because of the influence of others upon us. Our heteronomic choices can grow out of conditions of worth that are pressed upon us by the value demands of others. These paths may or may not be attractive to us. But out of loyalty, or from duty, or from not recognizing that we really have choices, we assent to paths valued or required by others. The power of family or social expectations can press us to claim a prescribed answer to

the question "who are you and what do you do?"

In the heteronomous pattern of life, our shaping choices do not arise from our own authentic will or deep desires. In heteronomy our attachments to the goals of financial success, to prestige and power, or to self-sacrifice in the service of this or that value or institution, do not arise out of our own choices. Rather we choose our courses to fit what is valued among the most powerful or commanding influences upon us. We choose choices that meet the expectations of those who love us, those who exert influences upon us, or those who impose expectations upon us. *Hetera* means "other." *Heteronomous* means "other directed," "other influenced," or "other controlled."

I have found that the HBO series *The Sopranos* makes for captivating theater. Because of graphic portrayals of violent incidents and the occasional shots of strippers at Tony Sopranos' nightclub, or because of the ubiquitous use of the "f-word" in its scripts, many who have watched episodes of *The Sopranos* series won't admit to watching it. But *The Sopranos*, in the episodes I have seen, provides engrossing drama. One of the powerful reasons is that Tony Soprano, the men, and their families who belong to his Mafia world are trapped in heteronomous life-styles and relationships. They are controlled by patterns and traditions, and expectations and demands they did not really choose.

Tony Soprano appears to be about forty-five. He is a "made" man in the Mafia. He is the son of a Mafia member, and the nephew of the old man who has recently become, in this fiction, the head of the New Jersey mob. Tony owns a nightclub. His organization exacts protection payments from construction firms, and he controls the waste removal industries in the state. He has an attractive wife who also grew up in a Mafia family. His

teenage daughter suspects that he is a ringleader in the underworld. In one episode Tony takes her on a trip to visit a New England college. While she has her interview and gets acquainted with the campus, he carries out the brutal murder of a man who had turned State's witness against the mob. This man had moved to start an anonymous new life in the same New England town as the college. This incident makes vividly evident the paradoxes of Tony's life. He is, in his own way, a loving and concerned father, yet at the same time he is a brutal and ruthless killer.

In the third volume in the series of *Sopranos'* programs, we began to see the doubts and troubled identity of Tony Soprano and his gang. Tony seems to have lost all conviction about being a mobster. He has begun to have disturbing dreams and intruding memories about his father's violent life . He shows signs of serious depression. He goes to a psychiatrist who prescribes Prozac for him and meets him every week for therapy. While she maintains a strict patient-therapist relationship with Tony, it is clear that she is intrigued by him, and he by her.

There is an episode in this volume of *The Sopranos* where Anthony Jr., his 12-year-old son, has been caught with two young friends drinking the consecrated communion wine in the chapel of their parochial school. The boys show up drunk for P.E. class, and are turned in to the priest in charge. The priest-headmaster treats their offense as a sacrilege. He makes the parents come in to consult about the seriousness of their sons' behavior. The boys are then referred to a school psychologist. Tony's concern and fear for his son emerges around the issue of whether Tony, Jr. suspects and should be told about the family's involvement in criminal business. This concern precipitates Tony's intrusive and disturbing flashbacks to the time of his

discovery, at age eight, of his own father's criminal occupation, and of his father's physical brutality toward his victims.

In his appointments with his therapist we see a tender and vulnerable side of Tony. We can see his concern for his son and daughter. But when discipline is needed to keep his gang in line or to deal with competitors, Tony can act brutally and fast. His psychiatrist's divorced husband gets to the heart of the matter when he says to her: "Remember, this man is a criminal. After a while, when you and he get beyond psychotherapy, with its cheesy moral relativism, you're going to get to *evil.* And he *is evil!*"

As I have reflected on *The Sopranos* it seems clear that Tony and his gang of mobsters represent an extreme example of the position of *heteronomy.* Tony feels caught and fated in the family business. He sees it as a determined and inescapable condition of his life. He fears this fate for his son and daughter. He would like for them to escape this destiny, but he sees no way out for them, or for himself. *Heteronomy* is the position of being controlled by a set of cultural expectations and norms, or by an all-defining system or structure of authority. There are forms of heteronomy that lack the violence and cruelty shown in *The Sopranos*, but that represent a kind of fated following of a path one has not *really* chosen.

Autonomous Faith

The third type of life and faith wager we may call Autonomy. It derives from *auto-nomos*—a law given by oneself. The autonomous life, ideally understood, means shaping ones

life from one's self-held principles or desires. The autonomous life is based on rational choices and employing self-knowledge and judgment. It leads toward self-chosen goals, based on taking responsibility for oneself. In the autonomous life style our self-chosen values are dominant. Ideally, we are able to be clear and non-ambivalent. We create goals and a map that we continue to tune and adjust, and do our best to create the path. The prime value here is self-realization and self-fulfillment. The effort toward self-fulfillment may or may not be built on ethical values that keep one accountable to honest dealings, to legality, or to the commitment to care for the common good. It may or may not be grounded in loyalty to relationships. It may or may not include an effort to assess or weigh the worthiness of one's values or goals.

The film that seemed most to capture the values of autonomy—at least at its beginning—is Tom Hank's modern replay of the Robinson Crusoe story titled *Castaway*. The film opens with a FedEx truck picking up a package from a solitary ranch or farm in the mid-west. The package has angel-wings painted on the slender box, which is headed for Moscow. Then, shifting suddenly to Moscow, we see the Tom Hank's character, Chuck Noland, as an executive with FedEx. Noland conducts an extraordinary motivational meeting with all of FedEx's Moscow employees. His rhetoric, being translated by a Russian interpreter, is mesmerizing. His challenge and veiled threat to the Russian staff is incisive. He is a man at the top of his game. A globe-striding master of efficiency and drive, he lights fires under the Moscow office and puts fear into their bones As the meeting ends, he pulls out his cell-phone and calls his girlfriend in Memphis. He describes what he's been doing, acknowledges that Christmas is coming, and tells her that the FedEx plane to

return him to the states is leaving Moscow. He will be home in eighteen hours.

Then this master of the universe climbs on the big FedEx jet, chides the pilots with his need to get home, and settles in for an efficient trip.

Home. Noland goes to the local university to meet Kelley, his graduate student girlfriend. She is just finishing photocopying a portion of her dissertation. A great time! A great reunion! They are calm and tender as they greet each other with a long kiss and embrace. Then, overnight, with a quick exchange of Christmas gifts, he is off for another trip, this time to the Far East, leaving Kelley alone for Christmas. Her gift for him has particular import: It is her grandfather's pocket watch—one of those gold watches train conductors carried that you have to open in order to see the face. In the hinged gold cover of the watch she has pasted her own picture. It's clear that she is devoted to him and to their relationship. Chuck hands Kelly a small square box, wrapped in white. We sense that this is likely an engagement ring. She decides to hold the gift until he returns, in order to celebrate together more fully. Then he dashes off to catch his plane.

On the FedEx plane he is the only passenger among three crew members. A night flight, he straps himself into an available chair, and prepares to sleep. He places the gold watch, open to his fiancée's picture, on the bulkhead in front of his seat. He removes his shoes and settles back. After some time the plane lurches. Pilots take their bearings. Then there are further lurches. Obviously the plane is hitting strong turbulence. It begins to buck like a cosmic bronco. Noland is thrown violently into his seat belt. The gift watch with her picture flies against the

bulkhead, then crashes to the floor. He unfastens his belt to reach for the watch, and is thrown forcefully against the wall. Crashing to the floor he retrieves the watch, closes it, and thrusts it into his pocket. Noland grasps an uninflated life raft as it slides by. Then the plane goes into a dive that cannot be stopped. At high speed they crash nose down into the surging, dark, roiling Pacific Ocean.

Deep in the dark water he finds the inflation cord on the life raft. It blows up instantly, and at great speed, pulling him rapidly to the surface. Through the dark, storming seas and pelting rains his raft carries him through the night toward a small tropical Island. As dawn breaks he works his way to the beach. FedEx packages wash in behind his raft, as does the body of one of the pilots, a friend. Large and small, in diverse shapes, the packages come ashore. He opens most of them, including one that holds a volley ball that will come to play a significant role in his future. He finds one package with angel wings painted on it. While he opens all the others, he decides to leave the winged package intact as an omen of hope for rescue and for return to life.

Chuck Noland proves to be resourceful in learning to survive on his island. He struggles against despair and loneliness. After an abortive effort to get the life raft from the plane across the breakers that surround the island, he returns bloodied and exhausted from being cut on the coral beach. At this low point, he tries to end his life by hanging himself. But the rope slips and the tree to which he tied it tips over. His entrapment on the island seems complete. But then his determination to live is resurrected. He takes the volley ball and, with his own blood, paints a haunting dark red face on its bright white cover. Taking

his clue from the brand name on the ball, he calls his companion "Wilson." As he talks with Wilson, this silent companion becomes the symbol and surrogate of his hope for return to human company.

In his fourth year on the island, Noland succeeds in building a raft sturdy enough to get through the breakers. After arduous days of desperate paddling and sunburned drifting, he is finally picked up by a freighter. Then he is quickly returned home by helicopter and plane.

Four years have passed. Kelley gave up on completing her dissertation. After two years of waiting and hoping for news of his survival, she gave up. She met someone else, married, and now has a young child. Chuck goes to her home, and in a moving last conversation, each acknowledges that theirs was the love of a lifetime. Their pain, grief, and conflict are real. But both sadly recognize that the effects of time and distance and of other choices cannot be undone. Profoundly sad, Noland leaves to begin a new life.

Symbolically, he drives to the Midwest to return the unopened package with the angel wings upon it to the address from which it was sent. He ends up at a cross-roads in the midst of the wide flat Midwest countryside. One who was so autonomous and sure of who he was and where he was going, now stands at the uncertain cross-road, sensing, determining, remembering, grieving, and hoping.

The autonomous person says, "Ultimately things have worth if I choose them and make them my own. I must take whatever gifts I have and whatever life-chances I can claim, and maximize as much personal control, security, satisfaction and

significance as I can create. I must beware of too much dependence upon others. I must claim a place of control over or within the system. I must be prepared to meet the financial and social challenges of success." Chuck Noland started out with this kind of commitment to autonomy. His life events may have led to his becoming a wiser, deeper, and more sensitively searching person.

Theonomous Faith

This fourth life stance I will call *theonomy–theos-nomos*. Theonomy is grounded in the intuition or conviction that we are not alone in the universe, and that our lives are a gift. This position recognizes that we are called into being with the possibility of a partnership with the creative, ordering, liberating, and redeeming God of the Universe: Whether known as Allah, Yahweh, Holy One, Atman-Brahman, Buddha, Great Spirit, or God, theonomy embraces an important paradox. Faith is a commitment made in freedom to One who knew us before we were conceived and born, one who loves and values us prior to any achievement or claim of worth. Theonomy holds that our talents, our energies, our drives, and our gifts can be most deeply realized in partnership with this One in whom the world's possibilities originate and find fulfillment in this life, and beyond.

The film I have chosen to illustrate the option of theonomy is not an overtly religious film. In fact, to many it may seem to be an anti-religious film. *Chocolat* is the story of a modern-day woman and her daughter who move into a small French town beside a river. The town has a narrow Catholic

church—narrow both architecturally and morally—where its people gather for Sunday mass, and a sermon by the very young priest. The town is dominated by a moralistic Count, who enforces a strict discipline upon his people. He treats the young priest as a kind of puppet, writing his sermons for him each week, and requiring him to practice reading them in his hearing in advance. Into this strict old town, with its castle, walls, stone church and river, there comes a woman and her ten-year-old daughter. She leases a patisserie and the apartment above it from an aging woman.

Great curiosity is aroused in the town as the new woman and her child go about cleaning up the long, empty store front and the apartment above it. Flowers appear in the windows along with fresh curtains. Certain kinds of equipment and glass cabinets are brought into the store. As it brightens up there is growing curiosity among the townsfolk about what the store is to become.

Then one day there appears in the windows a remarkable array of beautiful pastries and sweets. Dominant among the ingredients in all the magnificent array is chocolate.

The despotic count soon drops by the store to invite and urge the woman to come to church on Sunday mornings for mass. While offering him a sample of her chocolates, she firmly makes it clear that she will not be in church. Moreover, to the shock of the town's curator of morals, she opens her shop on Sundays in order to attract the churchgoers as they return to their home. For this she is criticized and warned.

Soon churchgoers begin to shun the shop on Sundays and on other days. Clearly the count has sent out the word that

the shop's proprietor is a dangerous woman, a heretic, a threat to morals in the town.

Yet, slowly but steadily, through her generosity and openness, and through the extraordinary flavors of the chocolate samples she gives visitors, she builds a clientele. And more importantly, her kind of grace and loving resistance to injustice and snobbery brings growing joy and freedom to the town.

Soon a woman, who has been badly abused for years by her husband, finds refuge in the patisserie and becomes an assistant in the making and selling of the pastries. In the process she regains her self-respect, and sufficient strength to reject her husband's demands that she return home.

A gypsy band in boats comes to the town on the river. Among them, a young man who plays and sings. He comes to the Chocolate Shop, and in exchange for repairing a door, is given a chocolate. The old woman who owns the building and whose daughter is the Count's secretary defies both her daughter and the count by commissioning a lavish party for what, she knows, will be her last birthday.

In paradoxes worthy of the surprising turns of the gospel, in this story the poor are seen to be rich, and the rich and powerful, through the humiliation they earn, are enabled to receive grace and new being. Reconciliation occurs, not through cheap grace, but through the steadfast and contagious love that radiates from the sacramental chocolate shop and those touched and transformed by it.

When we begin to participate in the theonomous spirit, we recognize that our lives have emerged in a long evolutionary process. We are part of a vast Universe fifteen billion light years

in extent. We are dependent on thousands of generations of ancestors who proceeded us. Each of us is a link in a chain, in which one may become parent, a grandparent, or a great grandparent, to myriad generations yet to come. We live on a fragile, endangered planet with nearly seven billion other humans, and with countless species of other creatures. We are interdependent with all of these. You and I are human sons or daughters who issue from One who brought all of this creation into being. In our short life span we will be most deeply fulfilled if we can shape a way to use our talents and opportunities, our relations and roles, to contribute to the preservation and enrichment of all life on this globe. Our lives, too, can take on sacramental significance. We, too, can be agents for and witnesses to a transforming love.*

Vocation in Theological Perspective

All life is precious to the Creator. All life is interdependent, even in the competitive struggle for life-space, for air to breathe, for water to drink, and for food to eat. In the midst of all this there is a calling for each of us in which our gifts and abilities intersect with the needs and challenges of of God's purposes for life. Life, with a capital L. We intuit, we discern, and we come to understand, that our deepest happiness has something to do with finding ways to use our gifts and opportunities to contribute to the health, vitality, and viability of life in this Creation of which we are a part.

* My use of the terms *anomic, heteronomic, autonomic, and theonomic* were inspired by writings of Paul Tillich, though he should not be held responsible for what I have done with them

When we think about vocation in its relation to our creation and our calling by God, we face a comforting set of paradoxes: We may call these the paradoxes of Vocation:

- The first paradox: As we live our lives attending to the call of God, the Infinite truly does reach toward us in our finiteness. We do not so much grasp our vocation, as we allow ourselves to be lured and awakened to it. This comes by the discovery of aptitudes and talents; it comes by others who recognize in us special gifts and graces. It comes by the awakening and inner leading of the Spirit of God.

- The second paradox: In vocation we are called to a captivation, a luring toward commitment of our spirit that leads to freedom. There is an old hymn that expresses this paradox: "Make me a captive, Lord, and then I shall be free." St. Augustine grasped this paradox when he said, "Thou has created me for thyself, and my heart is restless until I find my rest in Thee." A captivation that leads to freedom.

- The third paradox: We find our fullness as an individual person through our participation in community. The American ideal of the autonomous and self-sustaining individual is a distorted caricature. We become persons and find our identity, our sense of meaning, and our vocation in and through community.

- The fourth paradox: "What God wants for us has something central to do with what we most *deeply and truly* want for ourselves."

This brings us back to where we started with Frederick Buechner: How do you find your vocation? How do you discern the direction that will draw upon your gifts and talents and bring you deep satisfaction? "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." And how do you find the deepest gladness and shape the most fulfilling investment of your life? The answer: *In commune per vocatione*—in community through your vocation: This means finding a purpose for *your* life that is part of the purposes of God.

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