The surprising gift of knowing my vocation

How I became the kind of person who wants to do the work to which she's called.

by Ellen F. Davis in the February 10, 2021 issue

(Illustration by Tim Cook)

During times of turbulence in politics, culture, and religious life, it's tempting to hold tightly to current convictions. Allowing a change of one's mind or heart can be difficult work. With this in mind, we have resumed a Century series published at intervals since 1939, in which we ask leading thinkers to reflect on their own struggles, disappointments, and hopes as they address the topic, "How my mind has changed." This essay is the seventh in the new series.

It was a midsummer afternoon in 1982 when I was first introduced to the person I was called to become. I was ending a year of graduate study in Oxford with a farewell visit to Sister Mary Kathleen at Fairacres (formally known as the Convent of the Incarnation), who had spent the better part of that year teaching me how to pray, an activity I found less familiar and more taxing of my energy than theological

study. “So what are you going to do?” she asked, looking toward my return to the States.

I was not expecting the question, since for months she had repeatedly instructed me to focus on the immediate, an instruction I found easy to obey. The protracted pain of a marriage that floundered and failed when I was in my twenties had excised the delusion that the most important elements of my future were under my control. But now Sister pressed me to think ahead: “It wasn’t time before, but now it’s time. What are you going to do with this education of yours?”

To my complete surprise, the answer was out of my mouth before I had time to consider: “I need to teach, preach, and exercise a pastoral ministry.”

“That sounds right, and how will you do it?”

“I’ll get a doctorate in Old Testament.”

“Fine,” she said, “do that.”

Our exchange was soon over, since Sister was not one for small talk, and I went on my way.

That conversation seems completely unremarkable, viewed from the perspective of my life since that day. I went ahead and did what I told her I would do, and the rest is my personal academic history.

It is worth relating only because prior to that conversation, I had no intention at all of becoming a professor, the chief role in which I now teach, preach, and exercise a ministry. Being an unreformed introvert, I dreaded public speaking and was averse to any kind of frontline leadership. Before going to seminary I had done writing and administrative work for a small nonprofit organization working in the field of religious media programming, and I assumed I would return to that kind of work, now with greater theological depth.

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Yet once my words to Sister had been uttered and accepted, I was committed to a very different future than I had ever imagined. In a matter of minutes I had received the gift of knowing my vocation, with a certainty that had long eluded me. The relief was incalculable; it was the peace that passes all understanding (Phil. 4:7).

Nonetheless it is good that Sister Mary Kathleen had taught me to focus on responding to God in the immediate, because it would take years for me to grow fully into my vocation. I had to become the kind of person who wants to do the work to which I am called; my temperament had to change along with my mind.

Vocation, I've learned, is a tapestry. It gathers up the disparate threads of a life, and when the weaving is true, a pattern emerges, one that is capable of incorporating new threads that may appear. The pattern itself provides the standard for discerning if certain threads are fitting or should be set aside for now—or indefinitely, perhaps forever.

The basic pattern of my vocation is outlined in those words that I blurted out at Fairacres: teaching, preaching, and pastoral ministry (my own ministry being to equip my students to serve in professional pastoral roles). Of all the thread bundles that have helped create that pattern, three strands stand out as the most essential: language, the relationship between church and academy, and practical theology.

Love and respect for words, in English and in Hebrew, is much of what keeps me going as a scholar, writer, and teacher. It is my spiritual gift, if I have one, and in a sense it may be my most valuable inheritance from my parents. By current norms, they were relaxed about my intellectual and spiritual development (concepts that surely never entered their minds). Nonetheless my mother was vigilant about word usage and spelling—her own, mine, and what she saw in the newspaper. Through some years of my adolescence my father worked with uncharacteristic patience on a semiautobiographical novel, which he eventually self-published. I earned summer money typing parts of it, absorbing some of his sentence structures, which I retain to this day.

However, the most important way in which my parents bred in me a love of language was unintentional, at least for that purpose: they took me to church. I never much liked Sunday school, but as a small child I loved being in the dark and numinous sanctuary of our Anglo-Catholic parish (All Saints' Episcopal in San Francisco), with the words of the 1928 Book of Common Prayer forming the cantus firmus for whatever else was sung or said or done in that place. My first church memory—I might have been four—is of kneeling in the pew and losing all track of time and what everyone else was doing, so eventually I alone was kneeling. I doubt it was a religious experience, but it may have been a philological one. Those beautiful words were seeping into my awareness and memory; I recall no time when

they were not familiar to me.

I wonder now if it was the words of the prayer book that eventually led me to become a biblical scholar. After all, 90 percent of the BCP is biblical phraseology, mashed up and remixed so that we may, as one BCP collect famously puts it, “inwardly digest” it as we pray. That language provided for me a way into scripture, and now I recognize that it gradually shaped my understanding of what the Bible is: a source not of doctrinal propositions but rather of language for reckoning with reality. It is the most fully adequate source known to me of a complex story that rings true, of essential concepts and poetic images that equip me to live in awareness of God, self, and neighbor and make sense of what I experience.

For Jews and Christians, scripture is more a linguistic experience than a doctrinal one.

It was not until college that I had any sustained engagement with the Bible, but in the interval two things happened that helped me develop some linguistic and literary sensibility. The first was four years of high school Latin, which put me on notice that in some matters my opinion is of no value. It either is or is not an ablative absolute. My spin will not alter that, and further, if I cannot read the text accurately, it is of no interest. The second salutary influence was two years in a Great Books program at the University of California in Berkeley, in which I learned the difference in cultural and intellectual value between a text and a textbook, between a carefully crafted literary work and the endless stream of scholarly criticism or theory. I also learned something about the kind of questions that are worth engaging century after century and through an intellectual lifetime. I remain grateful to two formative teachers, Latin teacher Robert Kuehnl and philosophy professor Joseph Tussman, whose rigor with language and texts challenged the rampant solipsism and cultural arrogance of the Bay Area in the 1960s.

The final linguistic thread that figures importantly in the pattern of my vocation is Hebrew, which I began to study while spending an academic year (1969–70) at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Hebrew was immediately more entrancing to me than any language I had previously studied. The joy of it has never faded for me and is possibly the most significant gift I have to pass on to my own students.

Learning to speak Hebrew while I was studying the Bible for the first time, and studying it among Jews, doubtless prepared the ground for my eventual recognition

that scripture as Jews and Christians traditionally have known it is more a linguistic experience (even if most Christians have read the Bible in translation) than a doctrinal one. Without the words and stories of scripture, we would have no way of talking about God in relation to ourselves, and of course that experience is more intense when the Hebrew language is a major player in the interpretive experience.

With its broad semantic ranges and musicality, its often ambiguous or homophonic word patterns and elliptical grammatical and poetic structures, biblical Hebrew invites open-ended modes of interpretation. Even my students who have not studied Hebrew are drawn into the always unfinished game of translation when I do it in front of them during an ordinary class lecture. They often notice points of difference from their familiar translations, starting with the first clause of the Bible: “In the beginning, God created” or “When God began to create.” Suddenly what seemed perfectly obvious—*creatio ex nihilo*—is something worth talking about. What other ways might that decidedly, even defiantly, odd syntactic structure be construed? The game is on.

The second bundle of threads that runs through my vocational pattern is the integration between church and academy, made possible through four decades of studying and teaching in seminaries and university divinity schools. I began my doctoral studies at Yale with the expectation of teaching in the kind of church-based seminary that educated me. As it turned out, I did spend five of my teaching years at Virginia Theological Seminary, which serves my own (Episcopal) denomination. Yet I have been surprised to find that I am best suited to teaching in a university divinity school: first Yale and now Duke, for nearly 20 years. I seem to prefer being one of the churchier people in a predominantly academic setting to being one of the more academic people in a predominantly ecclesial setting. All my adult life (and longer) I have loved the inexhaustibly rich environment of a middling to large university, an affection that horrified my parents when I first developed it at the age of 16 and directed it toward UC Berkeley, which in 1967 was strange enough to satisfy any curious teenager.

At Yale I was both challenged and encouraged to effect a deep integration between theology and biblical studies, as well as between church and academy. My first two papers in the doctoral program were for seminars taught by Brevard Childs, one on Jeremiah and the other on the post-Reformation history of European biblical interpretation. I wrote an exegesis paper for the first and for the second, a paper on John Donne’s use of scripture in preaching, with an exegesis of two of his sermons

(c. 1620). I now realize how remarkable it was that Childs greeted both topics with equal enthusiasm.

At that time in academic biblical studies, virtually no one took preaching seriously as a mode of interpretation. Yet, as teacher and mentor, Childs never urged me to choose between academic and practical theology. He therefore freed me to become the scholar I wanted to be, for whom the most pressing questions are how we may live as people of faith and think in light of Israel's scriptures. My 2003 Lyman Beecher Lectures, published in 2005 as *Wondrous Depth: Preaching the Old Testament*, are dedicated to Childs.

No less important for my vocational formation and freedom was Childs's impatience with the conceit, common at research universities, that good teaching and good scholarship are incompatible, simply because they both demand so much attention. From the start (that moment at Fairacres) I have understood that my primary vocation is teaching those preparing for ministry. But research and writing compel me, and I am privileged to serve at a university where I have the responsibility of guiding younger scholars who are weaving their own vocational tapestries.

Because I write for the same people I teach, I experience no tension between teaching and writing, as long as I let each "bear fruit in its season" (Ps. 1:3). I do not try to do substantial writing during term time; through those weeks, for the most part I go to bed and wake up thinking about the work of the classroom. As a result, I am inevitably hungry to write whenever there is a break. The intense introversion of research and writing refreshes me for teaching, at the end of a week or a month or a summer, and invariably I discover in the classroom substantive complementarity with the writing task at hand.

If it sounds as though teaching and writing occupy most of my time and energy and furnish most of my entertainment, then I have accurately represented my work-life balance, although that dichotomous term is specious. A truer statement is that my vocation is a great part of my life, and it is complementary with other parts, especially my marriage. My husband, Dwayne Huebner, is also a professor and an educator by temperament. Now retired and in his tenth decade, he remains deeply committed to advancing learning, his own and that of our grandchildren. He is, moreover, a caretaker of language, which makes him the first and best editor of whatever I write. Thus he understands my obsessions, even if he does not share each of them to the same degree. We care about making our home a peaceable

place of simple hospitality, and as introverts, we find ease in the large swathes of quiet that wrap our daily lives.

One result of the complementarity I experience between teaching and writing is that unlike many senior scholars, I do not look toward retirement as the time to write my "big book." On the contrary, I wanted to be sure to write what will undoubtedly be my biggest book, in terms of pages and scope, while I am still teaching. *Opening Israel's Scriptures* (2019) is dedicated to my students, because I could write it only with their voices, concerns, challenges, and insights fresh in mind. The book is pedagogically inflected throughout, but it is not a textbook. Rather, I hope it reads as a sort of inscribed conversation about the various books of the Bible, a reflection (not a record) of what happened in multiple classrooms over many years, and thus a stimulus to further exegetical conversations among my readers and their conversation partners.

My academic title is "Professor of Bible and Practical Theology," devised by Dean Greg Jones when I came to Duke to describe the kind of biblical scholar I am. The title is apt, even if (or maybe, precisely because) it is two ways of saying the same thing. The Bible, properly taught in the context of theological study, is practical theology, or at least the basis for it. It offers deep insight into virtually every aspect of our existence as material, social, and spiritual beings.

I have learned much from the dead and even more from the living.

In this way, practical theology comprises the third bundle of threads that make up the distinctive pattern of my vocational tapestry. In the classroom, in writing, and in the pulpit, I have consistently looked at how biblical interpretation intersects with conversations about matters within church and society that regularly touch the lives of people of faith yet have not conventionally been treated within biblical studies.

Writing my second book, *Imagination Shaped: Old Testament Preaching in the Anglican Tradition* (1995), formed me more profoundly than I had expected when I began the project. Frustrated with much of the preaching I heard in my own denomination, and remembering the example of John Donne, I was convinced that there had to be something in the tradition of Anglican preaching to redeem us from triviality.

I did not intend to take a lengthy research sojourn away from biblical studies "proper," but so it was. Spending a year with each of five great biblical preachers

from the 17th and 19th centuries was like doing a second doctorate. These teachers, all long dead and yet vividly present through their words, opened up to me possibilities for poetic modes of interpretation I had not imagined.

Above all, this research persuaded me that sermons are ultimately the most consequential form of biblical interpretation, for good and sometimes for ill (for instance, in the long and tragically consistent tradition of anti-Judaism in Christian preaching). Many people who never read the Bible have opinions about it based upon the sermons they have heard. That sobering fact has prompted me to focus much of my scholarly energy on exegetical preaching, in three different books. Further, I hope that everything I write, regardless of whether it is expressly on preaching, is useful for those who, in the words of the Book of Common Prayer, “speak where many listen . . . that they may do their part in making the heart of this people wise, its mind sound, and its will righteous.”

As a theologian with an eye to the practical, I have learned much from the dead and more from the living. My exegetical practice has been deepened and made more accurate by reading Israel’s scriptures with those whose daily lives are not abstracted from certain geophysical and social realities that the writers and hearers of the Bible knew well.

Unexpected friendships with Wes Jackson, Norman Wirzba, and Wendell Berry made it possible for me to write *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture* (2009), which required thinking in ways that had not figured in my formal biblical and theological education. These three—a plant geneticist, a philosophical theologian, and a man of letters, respectively, all of them also farmers—enabled me to believe that an agrarian reading of the Bible is not just plausible but persuasive, congruent as it is with both ancient literary practices and contemporary scientific understandings. The most surprising thing about that book is that many of my colleagues in biblical studies are now persuaded by its argument.

Shortly after I discovered the (then) small cadre of North American agrarian writers, I was introduced to another culture in which agrarianism has consistently been the dominant way of life. For more than 20 years I have had the privilege of reading the Bible with Sudanese and other East African women and men, often in their own local communities. They have given me insight into the inescapable limits that a semiarid land imposes on a daily basis, into the exigencies of an economy that reckons in the first instance with land and domesticated animals and not the colossal abstraction of

money, and into the constraints and supports that operate within a society in which the extended family structure, not the individual, is the touchstone of identity and the context in which all important decisions are made.

It is eye-opening to read Exodus in settings where just a few skilled midwives make the difference between life and death for mothers and infants, or the book of Jeremiah among those who have experienced war coming to their homeland and villages. I tried to make the voices of these colleagues audible in *Opening Israel's Scriptures*. To Western readers, perhaps the most enlightening witness these readers from traditional cultures offer is their unwillingness to make a clear divide between the spiritual and the material. Further, because they are not burdened by the narrow rationalism that characterizes much Western thought, they are more adept at perceiving logical patterns that are strong elements of biblical thought and expression: not merely mechanical processes of cause and effect but also patterns of thought that may work through analogy, metaphor, symbolization, wordplay, repetition, and echoing.

More than 30 years into this vocation, I would judge that nothing has fed my excitement more than collaborative teaching. I now have a pronounced preference for it; I doubt there is a year in the last decade when I have not taught one or more courses with a partner. It is often said that shared teaching is twice the work, but I have found it to lighten the load while doubling both the joy and the insight.

Invariably my teaching partners view things quite differently than I do, whether because they come from a different discipline (Stanley Hauerwas and Sarah Musser in theology, Richard Lischer and Jerusha Neal in homiletics) or a different religious tradition (Mona Hassan and Abdullah Antepli in Islamic studies, Laura Lieber in Jewish studies). The very act of teaching together challenges the notion of individual expertise as the basis for biblical interpretation, or for thinking well on any subject. Because we trust each other both personally and intellectually, we are willing to venture outside our scholarly comfort zones.

The students themselves are more willing to take risks when they witness our exposed differences and disagreements, sometimes marked by uncertainty and frank discomfort, and yet the conversation does not break down. In these situations, we all learn that when dealing with the most important aspects of being human, being right (whatever that means) is not the main goal. Staying in a conversation that is probing yet respectful, even loving, is the goal.

Using our minds and even our practical skills to facilitate such conversations might be the best contribution that theologians can make to the university and to culture in our time. That is hopeful work, and I am grateful to be called to it.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Weaving my vocation.”