

Vocational gluttony

Finding a through line for my many pursuits

by [L. Roger Owens](#) in the [October 10, 2021](#) issue



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Some time ago I was having lunch in the seminary dining hall with a friend, an adjunct professor in town to teach a DMin course. Her silver hair marked her as older and wiser than I. She also happened to be a spiritual director with an open, approachable demeanor, which might be why I felt comfortable talking about my vocational confusion rather than the course we would be coteaching in six months.

“You only have a month left as interim dean. How has it been?” she asked.

I must have taken her question as an invitation to explore my vocation more deeply in her presence. “Some of the work of leadership has scratched an itch that teaching doesn’t,” I said. “Some of it has driven me crazy.”

Then I proceeded to tell her how the longing to be a pastor again, and especially to preach, after more than six years as a professor hadn’t diminished, but a way to

combine my work of teaching with preaching hadn't yet presented itself. And I told her about a spiritual direction training program I was considering applying for. And about the MFA in food and travel writing my wife wisely discourages me from pursuing. And about the children's novel I'm working on, the third chapter of which I'd drafted that very morning at Panera Bread.

I might also have mentioned my plan to take voice lessons again, grieving the music degree I'd abandoned 25 years earlier.

Her spiritual director pause subtly invited, *Is that all?*

"I'm 44 years old—why can't I just settle on one thing?" I blurted. How did a conversation about the syllabus we needed to prepare turn into my whining about vocation?

"Ah," she sighed, as if she'd seen this before, perhaps in herself. "Vocational gluttony."

Have I been rebelling against God's desire for my life's work?

In the traditions of desert monasticism in the early centuries of the church, a young monk would approach an older, wiser monk, seeking wisdom. An inexperienced monk wouldn't be able to survive the harsh spiritual and psychological landscape of the desert, the relentless battle with the devil and one's own false self—which might, in the end, be the same thing—without a spiritual director, a wise father-monk to whom the younger monk could turn for guidance. "Abba, give me a word," the neophyte would say to an older monk.

Or *Amma*. And this *amma* gave me a word I didn't know I needed: vocational gluttony.

I remembered what I learned from church historian Roberta Bondi about how these desert monastics understood gluttony. We typically think of gluttony as eating too much. During family gatherings when I was in high school, I'd park myself beside my sister's seven-layer taco dip and stay until it was gone, and then stay longer still because I didn't feel like moving. That's gluttony, we might say. But for these early monks, according to Bondi, gluttony named the desire for an excessive *variety* of food, not simply an overabundant amount. Gluttony requires a seven-course meal. Gluttony refuses simplicity.

The word my friend gave me helped me frame my situation. Was I greedy for excessive variety in my vocational pursuits? Was I refusing vocational simplicity, refusing to focus, to settle down, to be satisfied?

And then I recalled that gluttony is also one of the so-called seven deadly sins. With that, my thoughts turned less sanguine. While I resonated with this description of my vocational malaise, was my situation really a condition of my spiritual woundedness, my rebellion against God's own desire for my life's work?

Certainly the literature that inspires our thinking about vocation would view vocational gluttony as a problem. Those famous last lines of Mary Oliver's poem "The Summer Day," lines that fire us with an urgency to discern our vocations—"Tell me, what is it you plan to do / with your one wild and precious life?"—surely suggest that in this brief life one should be like her, committed with single-hearted passion to one's truest calling, she who stood poised every morning at her door with a notebook in hand, she who moved so many with the verses she captured and crafted.

And Frederick Buechner's oft-quoted line about vocation presses toward the same conclusion: "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." The place—with a definite article. Is there only one? Buechner certainly found his.

Add Annie Dillard and we have a literary trifecta, a trinity of writers who know vocation names the singular work that shapes one's meaningful contribution to the world. Moved by her sighting of a weasel, jaws clasped fast on its prey, Dillard suggests that to live with vocational purpose is to "grasp your one necessity and not let it go."

Precisely what those desert monks had fled the city to do. Precisely what I was failing at.

I pondered the notion of being a vocational glutton with varying degrees of acceptance and self-recrimination for a couple of weeks. Then another idea from the literary world occurred to me, and it has helped my rumination feel more productive: the concept of a through line.

Years ago, after I finished my dissertation, I was reading about how to turn a dissertation into a book, and I learned that a dissertation, successfully transformed

into a real book, would have a through line, a thread, sometimes invisible, sometimes obvious, that runs through the whole and ties the seemingly disparate parts together. The various chapters will treat different aspects of the topic, but they must be connected by the through line. The through line provides the coherence. It helps the writer, in the thick of revision, decide what stays and what goes.

Might this concept help redeem our vocational gluttony? Vocation doesn't have to be about focus, finding the one right thing, discerning the one right job, landing in the one right place. Instead, we might begin to discern whether there's a through line that gives coherence to the variety of pursuits that call for our attention. We might look at our lives and say, *Yes, these pursuits make sense as chapters in a coherent vocational story, even if on the surface the relationship among them is not obvious.*

And it might also help us decide which pursuits to give over to the delete key or happily consign to the mere-hobby bin.

I'm finding that other people who can see aspects of my life with a clarity I sometimes can't are often better at noticing what connects to my vocational through line and what doesn't. My wife's bemused smile when I mention the MFA in food writing is telling.

But I'm pretty clear about what the through line of my vocation is. I find great joy in helping individuals and communities become open to what God is doing in their lives and to respond in faith. I know that when I lead a retreat on *lectio divina*, for instance, and a young father says afterward, "For the first time in my life, I sensed God speaking to me through scripture," my soul sings as the through line of my vocation is made explicit.

So I'll keep teaching and writing. I'll keep saying yes to leading retreats and speaking in churches. I won't stop paying attention to that longing to preach and to lead a congregation, though there's no way to know when or if that chapter will get written. I'll keep writing essays like this one early in the morning while sipping a lukewarm cup of hazelnut coffee at Panera.

I probably won't go back to college to study music.

Which doesn't mean that I won't pause while putting the dishes away when the overture to Leonard Bernstein's *Candide* comes on the radio and vigorously conduct the orchestra in my imagination. They need me to help them navigate the many

time signature changes!

But I might keep writing that children's novel. The main characters, three kids, have just found themselves shipwrecked on a mysterious island, where they'll be summoned by a great, talking turtle to help save the day. I suspect somehow they will rise to the occasion. And if other kids are able to laugh, as my own daughter already has, at these characters' antics and find in these pages inspiration to imagine how their own lives might make a difference in the world, then I can certainly see how this scribbling, which sometimes feels indulgent, even gluttonous, belongs right there in the story of my vocation.