

Vocation & Dependable Strengths[®]

The DSA Process for Faith Communities

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Frederick Buechner once said, “The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet” (as quoted in Schuurman, p. 110). As one studies vocation and discernment this quote becomes a familiar one. Still, it is a great springboard into what vocation is, a recognition of where God calls us, using our gifts and abilities, “your deep gladness” to serve God and neighbor. But how do one’s strengths and God-given gifts relate to vocation? The following is an integrated look at vocation and discernment and also how recognition of one’s God-given abilities allows us to live out our vocation.

In May, I participated in a Kairos course focused on discovering one’s Dependable Strengths. The class was a modified version of the *Dependable Strengths Articulation (DSA)* Process originally developed by Bernard Haldane, PhD, and was presented by Sara Fortin and Sally Peters. Since the class was offered as a continuing education course for those in ministry, the make-up of the students present included pastors, youth workers, seminary students, Christian educators, and church representatives. For this class, we were taken step-by-step, as participants, through the *Dependable Strengths Articulation* Process, and then instructed in how to lead this workshop as certified facilitators of a specific application developed for use in faith communities. In addition to the class, I was assigned two books on vocation, *Vocation: Discerning Our Callings in Life* by Douglas J. Schuurman and *Courage and Calling: Embracing Your God-Given Potential* by Gordon T. Smith. Together these three elements discuss vocation and strengths. They aid persons in recognizing their God-given gifts and give understanding to how they can connect these abilities to their lives in Christ.

First let’s address Dependable Strengths. Our lives seem to be a search for meaning, a search for the understanding of ourselves and our place in the world. The Dependable Strengths Workshop brings forth these questions and articulates them: “How do I know what I was created to be? Where can I experience belonging? Where can I make a difference in the world?” (Peters & Fortin, p. 16).

Yet in answering these questions, we are often dissuaded by our own habitual patterns of thinking. This concept was demonstrated in the workshop by the use of a puzzle in which one had to draw outside the presented “box” in order to solve. Without thinking “outside the box” the puzzle’s solution was impossible, yet possibilities opened up when one thought “outside the box” and was open to trying something aside from the expected. In his work *Courage and Calling*, Gordon T. Smith expresses how change can be a chance for opportunity. He writes of our existence in a rapidly changing world. “The change our world is experiencing has had, and is

having, profound implications for the way we think about our work and how we make sense of who we are and what we do. In fact, it is appropriate to speak of this change as a *crisis*” (Gordon, p. 15). Crisis of employment, of confidence, of focus, and of meaning all come into play in our lives, shaking who we are and how we respond to the world. We can allow these types of crisis to tear us down or see them as a point of opportunity in our lives. Many find these types of crisis as a hindrance and an obstacle to daily life and, by extension, to one’s vocation. The *Discover Your Call: Uncovering Your Dependable Strengths* workshop allows one to probe each of these areas by discovering one’s personal strengths. Discovering one’s strengths can influence one’s capability and advancement in employment. It can boost confidence by allowing one to “prove” one’s personal strengths through one’s own experiences, and can allow one to focus energy on things that one does well and enjoys. This realization can even demonstrate how those personal Dependable Strengths can be applied to life and infuse meaning by opening up an avenue to express one’s vocation in life. Discovering one’s Dependable Strengths is quite different from merely saying what one can do well.

In Dependable Strengths, the focus is on *strengths*. Often, in our society, we are asked to acknowledge the existence of our strengths and weaknesses and called upon to focus on our weaknesses to improve them. Even if we strive to do this we may only raise that “weak” ability to the point of mediocrity or, if we’re lucky, to “average.” Such an attitude brings to mind phrases such as “admit your mistakes” and “learn from your mistakes.” However, our God-given gifts, our strengths, often fall by the wayside, and Dependable Strengths Articulation seeks to aid one in recognizing them and articulating them. Margaret Mead, an anthropologist who is mentioned in the Dependable Strengths Workshop, concluded that after studying cultures around the world *only* 20% of one’s potential is used. Often the other 80% remains in our subconscious and is not realized or addressed. Bernard Haldane, PhD, is quoted in the background information of the Dependable Strengths manual: “All of us are trained to look for our weaknesses and try to overcome them. Employers don’t pay for the weaknesses you know you have. They pay for your strengths. So we enable you to explore for your strengths” (Peters & Fortin, p. 29).

Although this program has been used to aid one in entering or advancing in the work force, it has also been modified for use with young adults, teenagers and, now, congregations. The idea of emphasizing strengths also comes into play in vocation. If something is not a strength you can generally assert that it is not at the core of your vocation. For example, one who is tone-deaf will not be called to serve God as a music teacher, or one who has poor acute motor skills to be a surgeon.

There is an element of duty and a sense of inadequacy in the way the vast majority experience God’s callings, but God usually works with, not against, our abilities and aptitudes. The biblical stories that seem to suggest otherwise only prove the rule by their exceptional character. They finally underscore the basic truths that all gifts and callings depend upon God’s grace and good will, and that God delights to take what is weak in the eyes of the world to shame the strong (Schuurman, p. 143).

We need to recognize and articulate our strengths in order to allow them to be recognized and utilized, for they are truly a gift from God.

The Dependable Strengths workshop allows one to create confidence in talking about oneself, builds one's sense of self worth, and overcomes modesty. Our personal strengths need to be recognized. This is not a display of conceitedness or arrogance but recognition of the gifts by which we are blessed by God. In the DSA process, through the recognition of *Good Experiences* (activities you believe you did well and enjoyed doing and are proud of), one articulates one's gifts and brings them to the forefront for use in the world. This is where vocation comes in.

Gordon T. Smith's book on vocation titled *Courage and Calling* is written as a guide to vocation as a specific call, "a vocation that is unique to each person, an individual's mission in the world" (Smith, p. 10). The book is divided into two sections. The first involves looking at oneself, one's context, and one's relationship to God. This portion is an evaluation, just as the DSA process called each of us in our class to reflect on our life and list *Good Experiences*. The second portion calls the reader "to be all that you are called to be." This portion encourages and informs in order that one may identify and seek out where one is called to live out the self God created (Smith, p. 115). Douglas J. Schuurman's book, *Vocation: Discerning Our Callings in Life*, is a fleshing out of the Protestant understanding of the doctrine of justification. The author writes of the word "vocation" and how its meaning has become lost in our society. He strives to present a biblical and theological definition, one that connects to the actual lives of Christians. He supports his work by Scripture and the writings of many well-known theologians and reformers, including Martin Luther and John Calvin, and shows how faith and a sense of call can influence daily life. Schuurman quotes Luther: "[Faith] opens its eyes, looks upon all these insignificant, distasteful, and despised duties in the Spirit, and is aware that they are all adorned with divine approval as with the costliest gold and jewels" (Schuurman, p. 91).

First and foremost, one begins an understanding of vocation with Scripture. There are two types of vocations in Scripture. One is a general vocation, a call to participate as one of God's people and to express oneself as such. In the New Testament, followers of Christ are called to a life in Christ. Jesus Christ articulates this vocation many times. For example, in John: "You did not choose me but I chose you" (John 15:16).

The second type of vocation found in Scripture is the call of an individual to a specific task, office, place of responsibility, or to a specific station in society. This second type of vocation is the one which is the focus in the DSA process and also the focus in Smith's work. Smith strives to approach vocation, not as a theoretical, but for what it is: the reality at work in real lives and in real situations. He writes:

We must live and work within the context of both the limitation and the opportunities that are current and real in our lives. I am convinced that in principle we should be able to fulfill our vocation anywhere, even if we are confined to a concentration camp. The question remains the same: What needs to be done here? What are the strengths and passions that I can bring to this situation and this opportunity, in light of the needs and in view of the opportunities before me? (Smith, p. 78)

In Dependable Strengths Articulation, vocation is not an aspiration for the future, to fame or success, but a recognition of one's gifts present *now*. The participants of the workshop used their own personal life experiences to articulate *Good Experiences*. Good Experiences are, as stated previously, activities you believe you did well and enjoyed doing and are proud of. Through the

articulation of these experiences in groups, and through a process of discerning what skills were used and needed in those experiences, participants were able to identify many Dependable Strengths that they have used in the past, and yet have never identified before.

For myself, I discovered that one of my Dependable Strengths is foresight. I tend, not just to evaluate or work on the task at hand, but also to realize what impact that activity may have in the future. I find that I enjoy, not only living in the present, but also seeing the impact of my actions on the future. Other Dependable Strengths which I discovered through the DSA process included the ability to be reflective, the ability to work with energy and drive, and the ability to be communicative to a wide variety of people. Through the DSA process I was able to name these strengths as well as discover them by using my actual life experiences (my *Good Experiences*) as examples. Not only will these skills aid me in my candidacy process as I speak about my call to those on my candidacy committee, but the naming of these strengths is assuring to my person. It assures me that God has called me to be myself. And, by being Jeanette, I have gifts and abilities to offer to God's service. That gives me joy as I discover more about how I feel called to serve in my life now.

Joy is ever so important in vocation. Smith writes "It is worth noting that we will only be effective in fulfilling our vocation if we joyfully do what we are called do (Heb. 13:17). Without joy we cannot be effective. It is therefore very important that we come to terms with what it is that gives us joy, even if it means that we will not have comforts or wealth, fame or power" (Smith, p. 41).

In our society, the idea that vocation is in the now has been lost in the use of the word "vocation." Often, the word is associated with one's future career, as something to aspire to in life. The word vocation is sometimes used inappropriately as a stamp of approval on one's life, as if, for example, one might find one's true vocation by finding the right career or the right spouse. Many feel that the definition of vocation can be used interchangeably with the word "technical," as in reference to a technical school where one may learn a trade. This is not the meaning of vocation discussed here. Another misconception is to associate vocation with a career or work in the church as an institution. Although one's vocation could mean a call to ordained ministry or to youth ministry, it cannot be limited to such. Martin Luther held strongly to this idea, incorporating it into his well-known theology of the priesthood of all believers. Schuurman comments:

Unlike this world, which demeans some jobs and exalts others through differences in pay or prestige, [the Apostle] Paul insists that even functions seemingly trivial are in fact crucial to the good of the whole. The professor or pastor should not look down upon the custodian or landscaper, as though their jobs were of lesser value in God's scheme of things. Work in a career should not be exalted over work in the home and family, or vice versa. Both home and paid work must be offered in service to Christ and the kingdom (Schuurman, p. 136).

While participating in the Dependable Strengths Workshop, we experienced first-hand how the many gifts of a group of individuals can confirm one's own vocation. We witnessed this in an activity called "Partnership of Excellence." For this activity, we were divided into groups of five to seven people and asked to share our discovered Dependable Strengths. From those strengths,

we decided on a project, a need that should be met, and then brainstormed as to how we would use our individual gifts in a collaborative effort to meet that need.

In my group, we discovered that each of us was passionate about the welfare of children. Our project became a *hikoi*—an evolving walk to raise awareness for children in need of food and clothing. (“Hikoi” is a Maori word meaning a walk, a march, a demonstration.) We would walk from city to city, gathering people to spread our message. Each person in our group took on a task that applied to her skills and his skills. Because of my language and communication skills, I became a leader to first greet people of the cities we were to encounter. Another member, who enjoyed organizing and accounting, took on the role of food distributor for our group. After twenty-five minutes, each person in our group had a task that applied to her and his personal strengths. Not only were they to contribute by offering something they did well, but it was also something they enjoyed! The process that had formed our project had stemmed from our strengths. Therefore, we had the resources through the strengths of the persons present to carry forward our idea. The project was not to be a burden, but an outpouring of what we felt we could do well, coming together in a collaborative effort to meet a need in the world (even through, in this case, it was a theoretical exercise). What transformations could happen if this were to be how church committees were organized, especially for work outside the church walls! As the author of *Vocation* put it so eloquently, “God has given each person a particular constellation of gifts to be identified and exercised for the good of the whole” (Schuurman, p. 143).

So how does the Dependable Strengths Workshop, Douglas Schuurman’s book *Vocation: Discerning Our Callings* and Gordon T Smith’s work *Courage and Calling: Embracing Your God-Given Potential* apply to me specifically as a seminary student preparing for ordained ministry? For myself, vocation is not a new word. As a student at Wartburg College in Waverly, Iowa, vocation became part of my vocabulary. The language and dialogue surrounding vocation played a role in my classes as well as in conversation with my professors, my academic advisor, and my mentor. Books such as *Awakened to a Calling* by Ann M. Svennungsen and Melissa Wiginton and *Work and Integrity* by William M. Sullivan aided in articulating my own vocation.

Perhaps one of the most significant lessons I learned about vocation was this: vocation is part of who God has called us to be and who God has made us to be. Our true vocation is not contrary to who we are. This was reiterated in both Smith’s and Schuurman’s work. The idea is also reinforced in *Dependable Strengths Articulation*, as it was our own personal experiences which helped us to discern our gifts and abilities, and because it challenged us to prove that these were indeed gifts God had given us to utilize. Schuurman quotes Parker Palmer who also embraces the personal nature of vocation: “Vocation does not come from a voice ‘out there’ calling me to become something I am not. It comes from a voice ‘in here’ calling me to be the person I was born to be, to fulfill the original selfhood given me at birth by God” (Schuurman, p. 45).

When I first felt called to ministry as part of my vocation, I hesitated. I was in high school and felt that, in order to be in ministry, I would have to be someone other than myself. I would be forced to fit into a certain box, never to expand or grow, but to meet the expectations and demands of others without fully expressing who I am. Thankfully, many opportunities arose to prove otherwise, including the encouragement of a pastor who recognized my gifts as I finished high school and that of a college pastor willing to be my mentor, helping me discover who God was calling me, Jeanette, to be.

As a student at seminary, I have had an academic, theoretical introduction to the doctrine of vocation. However, I find that vocation is easier to identify when you can look to examples rather than theory. When one is foundering, and a sense of call seems elusive, it is helpful to hear a story about someone else finding their vocation. Help in finding a vocation is help in finding meaning. “Vocation adds meaning to work by evoking hope and trust that needs are met, and therefore workers are agents of God’s provident care” (Schuurman, p. 169).

One of the strongest concepts I gleaned from these readings is that one’s vocation does not always have to be one’s career. I often drift towards understanding vocation in terms of serving God and neighbor through one’s career, whatever that may be. This career may be as a pastor, perhaps as a school teacher or a farmer. One could even live out one’s vocation as a cashier at the local grocery store. Yet, vocation can be expressed in ways that are not confined to one’s paid work. One’s daily interactions with people—the family you care for when you return home from work, the volunteering that utilizes your gifts even if it occurs on the weekends—these too can be an outlet of one’s vocation. Vocation cannot be constricted or constrained. One can serve God and neighbor through one’s occupation, but one can also do this outside of one’s paid work.

By occupation, I am a student. However, I often feel a sense of fulfillment, renewal, and an expression of my vocation when I am in conversation with my fellow students, staying up late to comfort a friend, or merely volunteering behind the scenes at my home congregation. For me, it is in these ordinary instances of life that I truly feel I am utilizing the gifts which God has given me in order to meet some part of the world’s need. I also recognize that this is true for others. Just over a year out of undergraduate school, many of my classmates are struggling to find work, or have found jobs that are less than ideal. However, God is not waiting for them to acquire their dream career in order to use their gifts in the world. Just as God gives us *Good Experiences* in the now, so too will he give us Dependable Strengths and opportunities to use them for the common good and for God’s service as we continue our journey in life.

The Kairos Course on Uncovering Your Dependable Strengths, Smith’s book *Courage and Calling* and Schuurman’s *Vocation: Discerning Our Callings in Life* continue to deepen my understanding of vocation. Not only have I received additional knowledge from more sources, but I am also learning about vocation in my own life. As I address my own call, mine at this point being to serve God and neighbor in the ministry, I realize that vocation is not just a word in my vocabulary to be used from time to time, but part of my call and work for God’s people.

As someone preparing for ordained ministry, I feel that pastors must help people understand what vocation truly is. It is not just a career in the ministry or a career with some religious affiliation. As a person serving in ministry, I am called to aid all in understanding that each of us has a vocation, a place “where our deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.” Each of us has a place that God calls us to in this world. For me, as a Lutheran, vocation is part of the doctrine of my denomination. Vocation is our recognition of the priesthood of all believers and our response of thanksgiving as we are set free by God’s saving grace.

Each person needs to know that she, and he, has been given a vocation. Each person also needs to recognize that God has given them strengths and abilities which can direct them in the expression of that vocation in their lives. Each person should have confidence in speaking of themselves, building their self-esteem and then overcoming false modesty, which may interfere with what God is calling them to be. Just as Samuel could say to God, “Speak, Lord for your servant is listening” (1 Samuel 3:10), just as Isaiah could say to the God, “Here I am, send me”

(Isaiah 6:8), we can know our vocation, we can answer our call. If we know our abilities and can articulate them, we can tear down the reservations and restrictions that hold us back.

At the end of the Karios Class on Dependable Strengths, the suggestions for closing statements for workshop facilitators included the following words:

You are at a new beginning because you are now a NEW YOU! Not the same as when you started this journey. You have expanded your awareness of yourself and your potential. You cannot go back. You cannot “un-know” what you now know.... You can never look at yourself in the same way because you now know more about yourself—your strengths, value and potential....

Those words apply to an understanding of vocation. A vocation, your vocation, is not something you merely stumble upon. It is not a mere job for which you happen to get hired. It is not always an occupation within the institutional church. Vocation is where God calls you in this world. Just as there are a variety of gifts, and “constellations” of gifts, so too there are variety of ways for one to express one’s vocation, the place God calls you to in order to serve God and neighbor. It is truly a journey, something that once it is experienced can never be “un-known.”

As I learn, read, and understand more about vocation, the more complex I understand it to be. Yet, as the DSA process so wonderfully revealed, God has prepared me, and each of us, with gifts, talents, abilities, Dependable Strengths with which to travel on this journey. My vocation is ever morphing. Perhaps five years from now it will not be as I expected, yet it is still mine to have and to live.

Gordon Smith’s *Courage and Calling*, Douglas Schuurman’s *Vocation: Discerning Our Callings in Life* and *the Dependable Strengths Articulation Workshop*, my other encounters with materials relating to vocation, as well as my own experience, reiterate and emphasize the importance of the doctrine of vocation.

According to this doctrine all relational spheres—domestic, economic, political, cultural—are religiously and morally meaningful as divinely given avenues through which persons respond obediently to the call of God to serve their neighbor in love. Human beings participate in God’s provident care for creation through their activities as parents, artisans, farmers, princes and preachers. Trust in Christ issues forth in gratitude that motivates Christians to see themselves as participants in God’s providence through their callings (Schuurman, p. 4).

The word “vocation” has such depth of meaning, and there is no end to the possibilities we are given to use our strengths to serve God and neighbor. God has given each of us the capacity to experience “deep gladness” and to meet the “world’s deep need” and, therefore, in our own way to exclaim, “Here I am, Lord! Send me!”

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