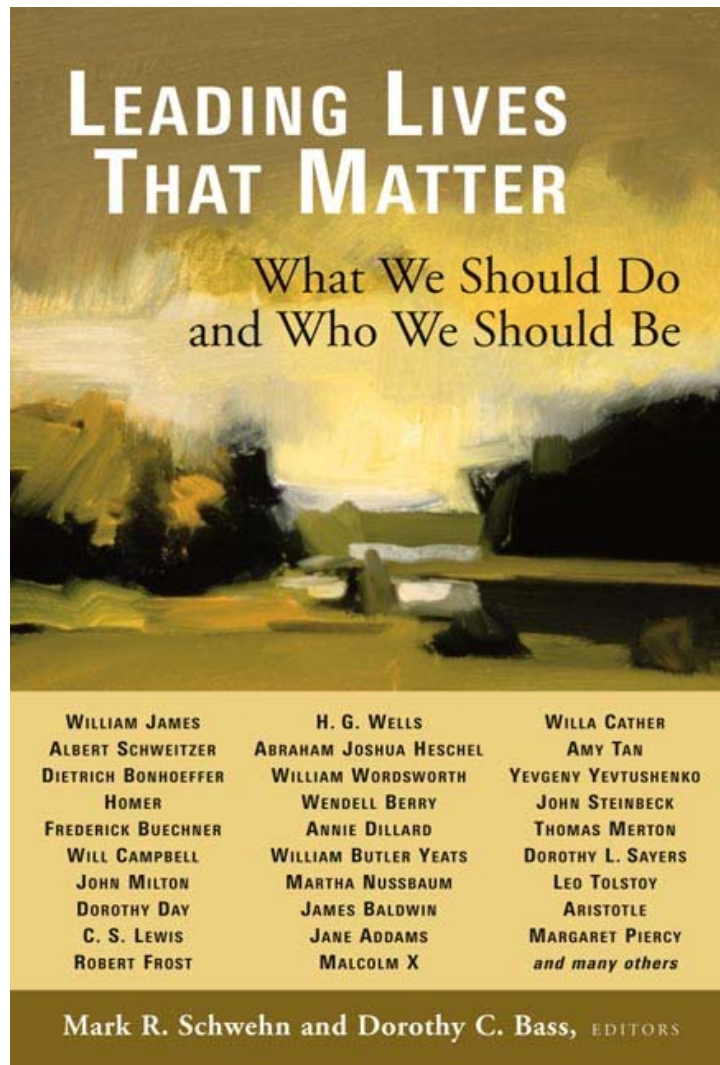


Study Guide



By Elaine C. Nocks

About the authors



Mark R. Schwehn

Mark R. Schwehn is currently professor of humanities in Christ College and project director of the Lilly Fellows Program in Humanities and the Arts at Valparaiso University (www.lillyfellows.org). His undergraduate work was done at Valparaiso; he received his doctorate in history and humanities from Stanford University. Mark Schwehn has written widely about Henry Adams and William James, including, with other scholars, *A William James Renaissance*. He has also published essays on the poetry of Robert Frost and other topics in the humanities such as film criticism, history and cognitive theory, human sexuality, and the modern university.

Schwehn's book about the relationship between religion and higher learning, *Exiles from Eden: Religion and the Academic Vocation in America*, was published in 1993 by Oxford University Press, and in 2001, his anthology, *Everyone A Teacher* was published by Notre Dame Press. These two works, especially, have revealed Mark Schwehn's deep sensitivity to and understanding of the academic vocation.

Dorothy C. Bass

Dorothy C. Bass is director of the Valparaiso Project on the Education and Formation of People of Faith, a project of the Lilly Endowment located at Valparaiso University (www.practicingourfaith.org). Along with an ecumenical group of authors associated with the Valparaiso Project, Bass produced *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People* (Jossey-Bass, 1997). This book addresses the contemporary hunger for a way of life that can be lived with integrity. Twelve Christian practices are explored: honoring the body, hospitality, household economics, saying yes and saying no, keeping Sabbath, testimony, discernment, shaping communities, forgiveness, healing, dying well, and singing our lives to God. In accord with her deep interest in Christian faith practices, Dorothy Bass has also written *Receiving the Day: Christian Practices*

for Opening the Gift of Time, and edited with Miroslav Volf, *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life* (Eerdmans, 2002).

A graduate of Wellesley College and Union Theological Seminary in New York City, Bass received her doctorate in American Civilization from Brown University. She has taught at several theological schools and college. Mark Schwehn and Dorothy Bass, who are husband and wife, are the parents of three young adults. They belong to Christ Lutheran Church (ELCA) in Valparaiso, Indiana.

About Elaine Nocks



Elaine Nocks is Professor of Psychology and Project Director of the Center for Theological Exploration of Vocation at Furman University, Greenville, South Carolina. A graduate of Winthrop University, she holds an M.A. in Psychology from the University of Florida and the Ph.D. in Social Psychology from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. In 1996, she completed the M.Div. at Candler School of Theology and is a certified candidate for licensed ministry in the South Carolina Conference of the United Methodist Church. With interests in both psychology and religion, she has team-taught numerous interdisciplinary courses involving both fields of study. She takes pleasure in the vocation of "interpreter" across various "languages" of discourse, especially the social sciences and religion.

Using This Study Guide

No matter where I was in my study of psychology or theology, I always loved it when the assignments involved a work of literature. There is something so personal, so inevitably compelling, in the intentionally subjective voice of a writer. It is an invitation to conversation. Such is the hospitality of the present anthology of literary works on the topic of vocation—a companion volume to *Callings* by William Placher.

This collection of brief selections (essays, poems, short stories, chapters, and the entire text of Tolstoy's *Death of Ivan Ilych*), could not have been better chosen or more appropriately organized for the purpose of guiding the reader towards a deeper understanding of his or her own life. The authors avoid some of the baggage that weighs down the concept of "vocation," by stepping outside the usual texts of vocation; yet never do they betray the development and expansion of what it means to "lead a life that matters."

I feel sure that each reader will find in these works inspiration and encouragement, if not outright guidance, in the quest for meaning and purpose. The text is designed for a broad adult audience. College students, faculty and staff as well as other adult study groups within or outside of religious or academic contexts can appreciate what this book has to offer. The study guide is designed to enrich that experience and enable it to be more dialogical and communal. Assignments and pedagogical ideas within the study guide are wide-ranging in length and difficulty, and the teacher or leader can glean those that best fit the group's context.

Organizing the Sessions and Assignments

The following lesson plans are constructed around the model of a 15-session course of study; however, it is possible to reduce the number of sessions by, for example, combining certain designated lessons as noted below.

The leader will want to be attentive to the fact that the assignments for the different sessions are somewhat unequal in length (varying from 24 to 52 pages, the average length being about 35 pages) due to the effort to hold the thematic elements of the text together. Moreover, some sessions contain more discrete articles (e.g., shorter items and poems as opposed to longer stories or essays) than do others, thereby potentially introducing more diverse themes for reflection.

Listed below are the reading assignments for each session. For each of these sections in the Study Guide, the leader will be provided:

- 1) Questions for group discussion
- 2) Writing assignment ideas
- 3) Ideas for individual reflection and journaling
- 4) Ideas for active engagement
- 5) Selected pertinent movies for individual or group viewing

Session 1: Introduction and Prologue

William James "What Makes a Life Significant?"

Albert Schweitzer "I Resolve to Become a Jungle Doctor"

Session 2: Epilogue

Leo Tolstoy *The Death of Ivan Ilych*

(Note that alternatively this session may be presented as the final session; it is used here, as the authors suggest, to frame the remaining readings.)

Session 3: Vocabularies

Introduction

Authenticity

Charles Taylor from *The Ethics of Authenticity*

Elizabeth Cady Stanton "Solitude of Self"

Virtue

Aristotle from *Nicomachean Ethics*

Theodore Roosevelt "The Vigor of Life"

Session 4: Vocabularies

Vocation

Matthew 20: 20-28

Lee Hardy "Making the Match: Career Choice"

Gary D. Badcock "Choosing"

Dietrich Bonhoeffer "The Place of Responsibility"

Frederick Buechner "Vocation"

Will Campbell "Vocation as Grace"

Session 5: Are Some Lives More Significant Than Others?

Introduction

C.S. Lewis "Learning in War-Time"

Aristotle from *Nicomachean Ethics*

Homer from *The Iliad*

The Martyrdom of Perpetua

Session 6: Dorothy Day from *Therese*

Three Biographical Sketches

Ray Kroc

Iris Chang
Joseph S. ("Smiley") Landrum
Thomas Gray "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard"

Note that Sessions 5 and 6 may be combined into one session.

Session 7: Must My Job Be the Primary Source of My Identity?

Introduction
Russell Muirhead from *Just Work*
Dorothy L. Sayers "Why Work?"
Robert Frost "Two Tramps in Mud Time"
Margaret Piercy "To be of use"
H.G. Wells "The Door in the Wall"

Session 8: Abraham Joshua Heschel from *The Sabbath*
William Wordsworth "The World Is Too Much with Us" and "Lines
Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey"
Gilbert Meilaender "Friendship and Vocation"

Note that Sessions 7 and 8 may be combined into one session.

Session 9: Is a Balanced Life Possible and Preferable to a Life Focused Primarily on Work?

Introduction
Robert Wuthnow "The Changing Nature of Work in the United States:
Implications for Vocation, Ethics, and Faith"
Bonnie Miller-McLemore "Generativity Crises of My Own"
Arlie Russell Hochschild "There's No Place like Work"

Session 10: Abigail Zuger, M.D. "Defining a Doctor"
Henry Wadsworth Longfellow "The Village Blacksmith"
Wendell Berry "An Invisible Web"
King Hussein and Noa Ben Artzi-Pelossof, Two Eulogies for Yitzhak Rabin
Annie Dillard "Living Like Weasels"
William Butler Yeats "The Choice"
Jane Addams "Filial Relations"
Martha Nussbaum interviewed by Bill Moyers

Note that Sessions 9 and 10 may be combined into one session.

Session 11: Should I Follow My Talents as I Decide What to Do to Earn a Living?

Introduction
Matthew 25: 14-30
John Milton "On His Blindness"
Immanuel Kant from *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*
Elizabeth Gaskell from *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*
Matt Damon and Ben Affleck from the screenplay of *Good Will Hunting*

James Baldwin "Sonny's Blues"

Session 12: To Whom Shall I Listen?

Introduction

Will Weaver "The Undeclared Major"

Amy Tan "Two Kinds"

Malcolm X with Alex Haley from *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*

Lois Lowry from *The Giver*

Session 13: Vincent Harding "I Hear Them...Calling"

Willa Cather "The Ancient People"

Garret Keizer from *A Dresser of Sycamore Trees*

Note that Sessions 12 and 13 may be combined into one session.

Session 14: Can I Control What I Shall Do and Become?

Introduction

William Ernest Henley "Invictus"

Thomas Lynch "Passed On"

Stephen Dunn "The Last Hours"

The Book of Jonah

Sullivan Ballou, A Letter to His Wife, 1861

Yevgeny Yevtushenko "Weddings"

Thomas Merton from *Thoughts in Solitude*

Session 15: How Shall I Tell the Story of My Life?

Introduction

Robert Frost "The Road Not Taken"

Mary Catherine Bateson "Composing a Life Story"

Wendell Berry from *Jayber Crow*

John Steinbeck from *East of Eden*

Dan McAdams "An American Life Story"

Michael T. Kaufman "Robert McG. Thomas, 60, Chronicler of Unsung Lives"

Planning

The readings are complex and abundantly ripe for discussion. Yet they tap into extremely personal topics, evoking vulnerabilities that may not be anticipated. The *group* experience is pivotal, but must be rendered trustworthy for all participants. The suggestions below may aid in generating an atmosphere of confidence and reasonable expectations.

- **Esprit de corps**

It is important to generate group trust in the initial session, because the frank sharing of questions, ideas and personal experiences is a critical clarifying feature of this project. Ice-breakers that open the way to the dialogues and discussions ahead are helpful even for groups who already know each other. Such openers also provide a good opportunity for introductions and integration of new members.

Here are a couple of openers that I have used successfully. For one, have each member state their current "calling" without using any term that describes what they *do per se*, but rather using a broader term for what they bring to the community. For example, a professional teacher would not be allowed to say "teacher," but would have to find another way of describing what they bring to the world, like, "nurturer" or "clarifier." A student could not simply say "student" but would need to something like "encourager" or "explorer." In other words, members are discouraged from the limiting view that their occupation is the sum total of their vocation.

Alternatively, I have asked individuals to draw or paste a picture on a card of an everyday object that makes a good metaphor or symbol for the way they see their calling; for example, a "bridge" for one who helps make connections or a "Swiss army knife" for one with multiple talents. This activity can encourage active creativity and imagination, as well as build a positive and open sense of community, especially if fun materials (colored markers, crayons, magazines, blank index cards) are provided.

- **Ground Rules/ Group Covenant**

Whether structured or relatively unstructured, achieving consensus on the group's purpose and process is an important next step. More formal (e.g., academic) groups will need to agree on specific guidelines for the completion of reading and writing assignments in a timely manner, for class format (lecture, seminar, discussion), and for accountability (attendance, evaluation). In

addition, group members may be encouraged to consider adopting an ethos of confidentiality and of respect for divergent perspectives and opinions.

More informal and voluntary groups (e.g., church groups, campus ministries) may desire to create a *covenant* of commitment to the project. The group can be guided to give voice to its particular vision and hopes for the project. Then parameters of mutual commitment may be considered and adopted by the group members; e.g., frequency and timing of meetings; expectations concerning regular preparation (reading, writing/journaling); expectations about attendance, participation and/or leadership. Finally, the ethos or atmosphere of the group's time together (e.g., confidentiality and respect for diversity) may also become part of the covenant.

- **Assignments**

A variety of assignments can be made to extend individual and group participation. **Questions for Discussion** can be initially pursued as written assignments to be shared in class or they can be used simply as discussion prompts. The **Writing Assignments** are best used as short essays—one to three pages of response to a given question. **Journaling/ Reflection** is meant to be a personal and private endeavor—written and retained for future consideration by the writer. **Activities** often have a writing component for the sake of later consideration or sharing. However, these projects can be made more or less formal according to the discernment of the instructor. **Movies** can provide an informal out-of-class activity for the group or sub-groups, or can be used to introduce or conclude a theme.

- **Using a Web Study Guide Effectively**

A web-based study guide offers teachers, leaders, and students certain freedoms and flexibilities. The material can be downloaded and printed—in entirety or in portions, or used on PCs and laptops, or posted to shared server systems. I find that it is useful for the teacher/leader to have a printed copy of the entire guide in a three-ring binder for quick reference. Enjoy the many options afforded by this approach and add your own!

- **A Disclaimer**

At the end of each lesson, I have provided a short list of movies that allow for further exploration of the topics. Some selections are literary and scholarly; others are more “pop.” The list is far from exhaustive; and I have not personally read or previewed every entry, but I have perused descriptions and reviews or consulted with colleagues until I am reasonably convinced of the exploratory worth of the listings.

Session 1

Introduction and Prologue

Readings

- Introduction
- Prologue
- William James "What Makes a Life Significant?"
- Albert Schweitzer "I Resolve to Become a Jungle Doctor"

Questions for Discussion

- What does it mean to have "ultimate concerns"? How can one's ultimate concerns be rendered practical in the everyday world, or can they?
- In your opinion, how do the Christian tradition and the democratic tradition inform each other, if at all? Where are points of convergence and divergence?
- Think of a realistic example (perhaps something with which you have struggled) in which living a *good* life (e.g., according to Christian values) might conflict with leading a *significant* life (even one with positive outcomes). Consider private versus public life as you reflect on this question.
- How might one actually *measure* the significance of a life? What items would need to be on the checklist? (Create a sample list.) Is your list primarily oriented towards character traits or outcomes? Do you think of the measurement as primarily quantitative (how much? or how many?) or qualitative (what kind)?
- What would it mean for a life to simply be "ordinary"? Is ordinariness incompatible with significance?
- William James and Albert Schweitzer responded differently to the voices of parents and others regarding their sense of calling. How so? With what outcomes? Does listening to and responding to other voices (i.e., external opinions) necessarily result in inauthentic vocation?

- Both James and Schweitzer were skeptical of the institutional forms of Christianity. Is such skepticism useful or confusing when trying to discern God's will for one's life? How so?
- James is dubious about the "charm and ease" of the middle class lifestyle. Why? Do you share any of his concerns? Give examples from your own experiences where our culture appears to deny or hide from sight the existential realities of suffering and death? How does this affect the vocational responses of persons living in the culture, regardless of or depending on their socioeconomic status?
- Who, in the first part of James's essay, are the real heroes? What is heroic about their lives? Do you agree or is James overly romanticizing this group?
- What "calculus" does James finally pursue in his conception of the "total significance of a human being"? Does it matter (conceptually) that the relationship between virtue and place is multiplicative rather than additive?
- Part of the "inner virtue," according to James, is to have an ideal (or ideals) to lend direction to qualities of courage and endurance. How does James define an *idea*?
- Schweitzer finally determined that his particular calling was to "direct human service" as opposed to scholarship or the arts. What were his reasons? What is your opinion of his decision?
- How did Schweitzer see his calling in relation to the teachings of Jesus? On what grounds did "people who passed for Christians" criticize him? Did their criticisms have any validity, in your opinion?
- What did Schweitzer mean when he said, "There are no heroes of action...only heroes of renunciation and suffering"? How does this idea compare with James's analysis of heroes?
- Schweitzer does not suggest that his way of direct service is the only way to serve humanity. What ideas does he offer those who cannot, for a variety of reasons, devote their whole life to service? How does this compare with James's sense that people need ideals appropriate to their own life situations?

Writing Assignments

- Think of someone whose life you admire very much. Which of the perspectives on life, James's or Schweitzer's, better helps you understand this person and why he or she is so admirable? Develop a short thought paper using one or the other perspective to interpret this person's life.
- Think of a range of people whose lives you admire very much. Do some seem better explained by James's categories? Some by Schweitzer's? To what conclusions are you led by this analysis? Write a thoughtful and well-justified summary of your insights.

Journaling/Reflection

- As you begin this course of study, reflect on your own current perspectives, using some of the prompts below:
 - What gives a person's life meaning and significance? Think first about the point of view of that particular individual and then consider the point of view of others who know him or her.
 - Write descriptions of two or three specific people, living or dead, whose lives really mattered to you. What made their relationship to you so meaningful?
 - What qualities of character or virtue appear essential for a meaningful life? What actions or commitments?
 - When you examine your own life thus far using the foregoing perspectives and criteria, what do you learn about yourself?
- Sometimes the voices of significant others are louder and more powerful than one's own inner voice of calling, as exemplified in the stories of James and Schweitzer. What "other voices" do you typically hear when the issue of your life purpose and direction come up? How do you respond? Are there conflicting motives at work here? Can you name them?
- James's definition of an *ideal* is that which provides novel, captivating, vital and conscious intellectual direction for your life. Make a list of the five most important guiding ideals of your life. Write further about the one that seems most important to you. How do your ideals connect with

your personal strengths (character traits) and how do they give life to your everyday activities?

- In a manner similar to that of Albert Schweitzer, write a letter to your parents/other family members/friends telling them about your deepest vocational longings and dreams. Are there parts that are difficult to communicate? Why or why not?
- List some of your experiences with direct service to other human beings. Choose the most memorable one and write further about it. Did you feel effective? Overwhelmed? Needed? What was appealing and what was unappealing about the experience? Based on this experience, how would you say change is best effected? Did the experience inform your sense of calling?
- Schweitzer chose to *practice* rather than *preach* the "religion of love." What are your thoughts on your calling in that regard? When do you tend to use words, and when do you tend to rely on actions to convey your beliefs? Which, for you, is fitting?

Activities

- Arrange for individual or group service opportunities in your community, preferably service that involves face-to-face interaction with those being served (e.g., a soup kitchen, kids' club, hospice, or neighborhood revitalization project). Reflect individually and as a group on the benefits and pitfalls of direct service both from the perspective of the helper and the perspective of the ones being served. What other ways might the same issues be addressed by compassionate persons? Once a community problem calls you, how can you discern what form your service should take?
- Engage a speaker (or panel of speakers) for your class whose public commitments and/or direct service have made a difference in your community. Ask that person to share with your group some of the difficult choices and decisions, turning points, plateaus and setbacks related to their community vocation (this does not have to be their formal occupation).
- Have each class member interview and create a news release about an "unsung hero" of their choosing; i.e., someone who has led a life that matters but without public attention. Compile and share the stories, looking for commonalities. Consider and discuss the heroic element in every person's vocation.

Movies

- ***Romero*** (Four Seasons, 1989, PG-13, 102 minutes). This film recounts the life of Archbishop Oscar Romero, who was killed during Mass for his opposition to the repressive government of El Salvador.
Link: <http://imdb.com/title/tt0098219/>
- ***The Hero's Journey: The World of Joseph Campbell*** (1987, NR, 58 minutes). A biographical portrait of Joseph Campbell, who spent most of his career seeking to understand how myths speak to us in our own life.
Link: <http://imdb.com/title/tt0093183/>
- ***The Insider*** (Buena Vista, 1999, R, 157 minutes). The true story of tobacco industry whistle-blower Jeffrey Wigland, the former head of development at the Brown & Williamson Tobacco Company, who went public on an episode of "60 Minutes".
Link: <http://imdb.com/title/tt0140352/>
- ***The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*** (1974, NR, 120 minutes)
The story of a black woman in the South who was born into slavery in the 1850s and lives to become a part of the civil rights movement in the 1960s. Link: <http://imdb.com/title/tt0071175/>
- ***Stand and Deliver*** (1988, PG, 102 minutes) A dedicated teacher inspires his dropout prone students to learn calculus to build up their self-esteem. The students do so well that they are accused of cheating.
Link: <http://imdb.com/title/tt0094027/>

Session 2

Epilogue*

Readings

- Epilogue
- Leo Tolstoy *The Death of Ivan Ilych*

* Note that this session may be deferred and presented as the final session; or it may be used here, as the authors suggest, providing a framework for the remaining readings.

Questions for Discussion

- What kinds of choices did Ivan Ilych make that shaped the course of his life? Were there any limits to Ilych's options? What other significant factors entered into the formation of his life besides his own choices?
- Did Ivan Ilych have *ideals* that gave direction to his life (as William James suggested)?
- In your opinion, did Ivan Ilych live a life that mattered? Justify your answer.
- Sometimes a life is judged significant according to the different realms of occupational, relational, and spiritual pursuits. How did Ilych fare in each of these areas of his life—from his own point of view and in the eyes of the world? Give examples.
- At what point in Ilych's life do you sense that a "vocational crisis" might have occurred if at all?
- If, miraculously, Ilych had recovered from his illness after his journey into the throes of death, do you think he would have been a changed man? Why or why not?
- Describe the qualities attributed to Gerasim the assistant who held Ilych's legs up when he was in pain. Are these virtues in the sense that James understood? How do virtue and place interact in the portrayal of Gerasim, revealing Tolstoy's point of view about true heroes?

- Ivan Ilych does not have religion as a point of departure in his reflections on death. What difference does that make in how you think about life and death? Try to avoid simply applying a theological term such as “salvation” without delving into how such a notion changes the way a life is lived.
- How *well*, in your opinion, did Ivan Ilych die? How do you understand the moment of death? Was it resignation, transformation, or what?
- Ivan Ilych was “a capable, cheerful, good-natured, and sociable man;” also dutiful, respectful to authority, and “unfailingly...correct” in his behavior. From Tolstoy’s point of view, what then is missing?
- How did Ilych satisfy the basic needs of human beings to *matter* and to *belong* in his adult life? Was he successful? Note especially Section iii on the “hardest year.”
- How do routine, order and discipline affect Ilych’s quest for significance?

Writing Assignment

- Ivan Ilych’s story begs for a *developmental* analysis. Is his life, with its ups and downs, normal for adults or is his development somehow blocked? Does his life seem to follow a basic developmental trajectory that cannot be broken or are there points at which adult consciousness can open up for new growth? Consider these issues by doing some research on adult development (e.g., writings of Erik Erikson, James Fowler, Daniel Levinson, Gail Sheehy). Apply what you learn to Ilych in a two to three page analysis of where he is developmentally at the end of his life.
- Select a writer whose understanding of what makes a life significant was very persuasive to you (e.g., William James, Albert Schweitzer, or, if you are doing this after studying the entire book, some other author such as Aristotle or Bonhoeffer). Imagine this writer’s analysis of Tolstoy’s story. What might this writer think of Ivan Ilych’s life and where he went wrong?

Reflection/Journaling

- Ilych experienced “not only ennui, but intolerable depression” at one point in his life, precipitated by idleness but more by feeling “forgotten.” Write about a time when you felt ignored, forgotten or irrelevant. How did it feel? Can you relate to the boredom and depression that Ilych experienced? What did you do to move forward? What revitalized you?

Did religion or your faith offer you any help? Did you learn anything from the experience?

- Imagine that you are living out your own last days with that knowledge. Apart from the inevitable sadness and fear, what other thoughts about your life would you expect or hope to have? Write an imaginative internal response to impending death. Is your life presently heading you in the direction of your best case retrospection?
- Write a letter to the dying Ivan Ilych in which you offer your thoughts about life and death, or imagine a conversation with him and write out both sides of the conversation. What would seem important to say at this point? What would you want someone to say to you?

Activities

- Collect five or six obituaries from the *New York Times* (on-line) or another newspaper that provides details about the deceased person's life. Choose some of persons who are well-known and others of persons who are relatively less well known. Make a list of the qualities, actions or outcomes of the person's life that are eulogized as significant. Do these seem significant to you, or might you look for other things in a life that matters?
- Write your own obituary, imagining yourself to have lived to a rather ripe old age. Imaginatively project what you would hope to find there, acknowledged by others. If you find this activity too unnerving, you can write from the perspective of a speech given about you at your 80th birthday party. Share these musings with others in your group, looking for some communal consensus as to what *really* matters about a life.

Movies

- ***Wit*** (2001, PG-13, 98 minutes) Emma Thompson stars as Vivian Bearing, a disciplined, esteemed English professor dealing with a sensitive issue -- her health. After being diagnosed with ovarian cancer, Vivian is forced to reassess her life and decide what's really important. Link: <http://imdb.com/title/tt0243664/>
- ***Dead Man Walking*** (Gramercy, 1995, R, 122 minutes). A nun, while comforting a convicted killer on death row, empathizes with both the killer and his victim's families. Link: <http://imdb.com/title/tt0112818/>

Session 3

Vocabularies: Authenticity and Virtue

Readings

- **Introduction**
- **Authenticity**
 - Charles Taylor from *The Ethics of Authenticity*
 - Elizabeth Cady Stanton "Solitude of Self"
- **Virtue**
 - Aristotle from *Nicomachean Ethics*
 - Theodore Roosevelt "The Vigor of Life"

Questions for Discussion

- How does it serve us to imagine that persons with great talent, or some other highly salient positive quality, are all-around good persons—to be admired or imitated? What are the risks of such assumptions?
- Why, according to Schwehn and Bass, are we confused about how to define a life that matters?
- In general, how do the vocabularies of authenticity, virtue and vocation tend to differ in the way they convey what really matters about a life?
- How do you define *success* when judging a life? How does this relate to our culture's definition(s) of success? What vocabulary of meaning are you using (authenticity, virtue, or vocation)? What vocabulary appears to dominate our culture?
- Is every work potentially a vocation, or is one's vocation different from what one does?
- Charles Taylor proposes that there is a contradiction inherent in having role models of authenticity, at least according to contemporary definitions of authenticity. How so? Is this an impossible conundrum or a paradox?
- Taylor declares that modern culture has made a "massive subjective turn." What does he mean and why does this concern him?

- Is Taylor, in the end, arguing against the value of intuition and listening to a deeper inner voice—perspectives that are often associated with religious or spiritual revelation? What precisely is his point?
- Taylor seems to attack the American ideals of individual rights and freedoms. On what grounds does he oppose this way of thinking about the way one ought to live? Is he therefore advocating a collectivist culture that promotes conformity?
- What does Taylor mean by a “horizon”? Give an example. He refers to horizons as “inescapable.” Which horizons are these, and why are they inescapable? How does awareness of these horizons counteract the claims of soft relativism?
- What does it mean to say that human life is “fundamentally dialogical”? Do you agree? What role does language *per se* play in the character of individual human beings?
- Do we ever, in Taylor’s view, “outgrow” the original limitations imposed by language on a person’s perceptions and judgments? Or, is there always an implicit interlocutor (“other”) whom we address or to whom we respond?
- How do you think the contemporary push for authentic selfhood might negatively affect relationships such as marriage, parenting, and friendship? What resolution does Taylor offer?
- How might the quest for authenticity get in the way of living a life that matters? Under what qualifying conditions could it help?
- What are several important benefits of the development of self-reliance or self-sovereignty, according to Cady Stanton? What “horizons” (to use Taylor’s term) does she seem to apply as the backdrops for such value judgments?
- What “birthrights” (Cady Stanton) do you think all human beings deserve? On what basis (dialogical horizon or pure intuition) do you make this judgment?
- What is a “virtue,” according to Aristotle? Try to find a concise way to include all of the necessary ingredients and essential differences from other human functions, such as skill, or physiological process.

- What does Aristotle mean by happiness? How is human happiness related to virtue?
- For Aristotle, how is reason related to virtue? What particular, though inexact, standards does reason seem to provide for the assessment of what is virtuous? Why is the measure of a virtue inexact?
- How does one acquire a virtue, and how does the acquisition of virtue differ from the acquisition of knowledge? Give an example. Is a person who thinks virtuous thoughts virtuous, in Aristotle's view?
- Is sheer practice of a virtuous action enough? That is, is it enough to try and try again, or must one reach some *standard of excellence*?
- What is required for an action to be truly virtuous in Aristotle's understanding? Can this be random action? Does it have anything to do with the actor's state of mind?
- In what way is the exemplary virtue a "mean" or middle ground? What do the endpoints of the continuum of a virtue represent? Illustrate your point with the virtue of bravery.
- What does it signify to say that the mean is *relative* to the person enacting the virtuous behavior? Take the example of generosity and show how this is so.
- Why is it hard to be virtuous; that is, why is it hard to stay at the mean? Can any deviation be tolerated and still represent the virtue?
- Why is virtue so admired? If everyone were supremely virtuous, would virtue still be admirable? What are we implying about human nature here?
- If you wish to be a generous person, what attitudes (associated with fitting practices) should you take towards both obtaining and letting go of your money, according to Aristotle? Where might you go wrong?
- What is *wastefulness* in Aristotle's discussion of money? How is being wasteful somehow better, and a more hopeful state, than being ungenerous? Do you agree?
- What modern term might you give to the virtue of magnificence? How does magnificence modify the virtue of generosity? Can anyone be

magnificent in that sense? Is it fitting, in Aristotle's view, for a major donor to your university to live in an elegant mansion?

- Which of Aristotle's points about virtue does Theodore Roosevelt highlight in his description of the successful person? What is the most generally fruitful path to the virtue of, say, courage?

Writing Assignments

- A growing body of popular literature promotes the language of authenticity; i.e., finding or fulfilling oneself. In two pages, critique this approach according to Charles Taylor's arguments. Then offer your own perspective of agreement or disagreement with Taylor's critique.
- Construct Charles Taylor's likely analysis of Elizabeth Cady Stanton's speech on the "Solitude of Self." How might Taylor have gotten to the same conclusion—that women ought to have the same rights and privileges as men?
- Using both Taylor and Aristotle as resources, write a one-page thought paper on the topic: Finding Virtue: Monologue or Dialogue? In so doing, show that you understand the difference between the language of authenticity and the language of virtue. Do these languages necessarily conflict?

Reflection/Journaling

- Make a list of three to five contemporary public figures (celebrities) whom you admire. What do you find appealing about each of these persons? How do you relate these qualities to your own life, or are they simply to be admired in someone else?
- Who are your personal role models for a life that matters? What are these persons like? Write about one or more of these persons, seeking to identify what about them is worthy of imitating. Are role models a good thing or do they detract from individuality and authenticity?
- If you wished to frame your life purpose in the language of authenticity, what (in short) would that sound like? What about with the language of virtue? Does either of these vocabularies seem to fit you at this point in your life?
- Write your thoughts and feelings about a recent matter of concern to you. As you do so, what other "voices" seem to be present in your mind as

persons to whom you are speaking or who are reacting to what you are saying? If you are able, switch to a two-sided conversation style of writing and write out both your own voice and the voice(s) of response. Does this inner dialogue (made more conscious) help or hinder you?

- As a variation on the above exercise, choose to write responses in the voice of someone whom you find to be particularly wise or admirable; i.e., write out your side of the conversation as well as the imagined responses, questions, etc. of the wise person. Does invoking wisdom in this dialogical way add anything to your discernment?
- Describe the relationship in which you have felt most fulfilled or able to be yourself. What was it about you, the other person, or the nature of the relationship that seemed to make this possible? In a similar manner, describe the relationship in which you have felt *least* fulfilled or able to be yourself. What is the difference in the two relationships?
- What virtues do you actively seek to exemplify in your life? Name four or five and write examples of how you try to actualize them. Where did you get the idea that these are worth pursuing? Do you ever find yourself either “backsliding” or becoming obsessed with these virtues? How do you attempt to adjust “up” or “down” to keep the balance (or mean)?

Activities

- Visit a bookstore that has a large collection of contemporary books and magazines. Browse through sections that seem devoted to optimal human living; e.g., the psychology section, the health section, the religion and/or spirituality section. Jot down titles and book jacket notes. Classify your findings according to the three vocabularies of authenticity, virtue and vocation. Which vocabulary appears to be dominant? Which seems to be more useful to you? Why? Share your findings in the group.
- Aristotle has inferred that the virtue of kindness could be cultivated by consistently practicing acts of kindness with conscious and voluntary intention. Decide upon some period of time in which you will increase your practices of kindness. Consider some specific ways in which you could do this. Keep a daily log of your attempts and the outcomes. At the end of the designated period of time, summarize your thoughts observations, and feelings.

Movies

- ***Dead Poet's Society*** (1989, PG, 128 minutes). English professor John Keating inspires his students to a love of poetry and to seize the day.
Link: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0097165/>
- ***Groundhog Day*** (1993, PG, 101 minutes) A weatherman finds himself living the same day over and over again.
Link: <http://imdb.com/title/tt0107048/>

Session 4

The Vocabulary of Vocation

Readings

- Matthew 20: 20-28
- Lee Hardy "Making the Match: Career Choice"
- Gary D. Badcock "Choosing"
- Dietrich Bonhoeffer "The Place of Responsibility"
- Frederick Buechner "Vocation"
- Will Campbell "Vocation as Grace"

Questions for Discussion

- Why do you suppose that feminist Christians have concerns about some interpretations of Matthew 20: 20-28? Does Aristotle's perspective provide any middle ground for interpretation?
- In American culture in general, how is service to others valued? Give examples where serving others is touted as a symbol of greatness, and other examples where serving is a signal of diminished worth? What makes the difference?
- Is every work potentially a vocation, or is one's vocation different from what one does?
- What theological doctrine underlies Lee Hardy's discussion of vocation? Do you agree with Emil Brunner, whom Hardy quotes, that this doctrine is a necessary assumption in the notion of calling?
- How do you personally understand the idea of divine providence? Is this understanding part of your belief system or that of your faith tradition's? How does that affect your process of vocational discernment?
- Hardy's title and examples suggest that we may make a *mismatch* in choosing our career. What is at odds in such a mismatch? Is a mismatch a matter of sin? Does our particular career choice really matter to God, according to Hardy? What is your opinion?

- In practical terms, what does Hardy suggest as good correctives for our private intuitions about our career?
- Do you agree with Hardy that only an atheist or unbeliever would say that a particular individual's life is a chance outcome of genes and context? Justify your answer. Does such a "chance" origin necessarily signify meaninglessness or purposelessness?
- Distinguish between "general" and "particular" callings for Christians. How does each type of calling affect the choice of a career, according to Hardy?
- When people realistically have no choice about their occupation or career, are they without vocation? What other kinds of choices might they make in line with Hardy's idea of calling?
- In the Bible, some of the people God calls to special tasks seem uniquely unqualified and uninterested. How does Hardy deal with this dilemma for his theory of vocation? Are you persuaded?
- Comparing the essays of Hardy and Badcock, what is the difference (see the titles of the essays) between "matching" and "choosing"?
- Why does Badcock object to the notion that "God has a plan for each life"? What is the human vocation as he understands it?
- Is "vocation" largely a Christian concept that is not easily translated into other paradigms of ethical thought, or can this vocabulary have general human relevance?
- Some might say that Badcock's theory is a *developmental* (as in human growth and development) theory. How so?
- Badcock describes his own life as a "surprising journey" that sometimes seemed to go against his own plans. Does such a life have vocation? Was the choice of a career in academia the right vocation for him?
- Dietrich Bonhoeffer speaks of vocation in the strong language of Christian tradition. Precisely what is Christian vocation for Bonhoeffer? How narrow or broad is the reach of a person's vocation?
- What is the relationship between the divine law (as revealed in the Ten Commandments) and the call of Christ to responsible discipleship? Are they always the same or can one "trump" the other? Show how

Bonhoeffer's own vocational discernment regarding Christian response to the Nazi regime brings this issue to life.

- What is the sense that Bonhoeffer has about a person's particular *place* in life, as concerns vocation? Are we called to be in a particular place and time, or is this an accident within which we are called to proceed responsibly?
- Does Frederick Buechner's bi-fold definition of vocation appeal to you? Why or why not? What does he seem to mean by the modifier "deep" with regard to both "your gladness" and the "world's hunger"?
- What is the point of Will Campbell's story? Does it capture anything similar to Jesus' point in Matthew 20: 20-28?

Writing Assignments

- Look up several interpretations of Matthew 20: 20-28 (e.g., in the *New Interpreter's Bible* or other commentaries on Matthew). Write two to three pages on "The Meaning of Greatness: Jesus and Aristotle Speak." Do Jesus and Aristotle agree or disagree, or meet in the middle, in your opinion?
- Writing on "wealth and vocation," imagine Aristotle, Hardy and Badcock each offering advice to a budding entrepreneur on the acquisition of wealth. What do you think each would say? Would Jesus concur? Is it necessarily a "bad" vocation to be in the business of making money? Justify your answer.

Reflection/Journaling

- Read Matthew 20: 20-28 several times, pausing between readings to jot down words or phrases that catch your attention—raise questions for you, disturb you, give you encouragement, etc. What fresh wisdom does this passage offer for your own current practices of service?
- Using Hardy's practical ideas for discernment, write about a) your unique gifts and abilities; b) your growing concerns; c) your strongest interests. Does this method help you think more clearly about the direction and purpose of your particular life?
- Using your answers to these questions, brainstorm several different ways of responding to what you discovered; e.g., several different jobs. Go a little "wild" and try to imagine some interesting possibilities that may

presently seem unrealistic to you, noting what attracts and what repels you in each case. For example, you might imagine yourself as astronaut, philosopher, photographer, farmer, professional athlete, etc. What common thread of vocational intuition do you sense for your life in your imaginings? Adventure? Challenge? Service? Aesthetics? Relationships?

- How do you picture your “deep gladness”? Paint a word picture of yourself experiencing deep gladness. Claim whatever truly makes you glad.
- There are many problems in the world; which one is most personally compelling to you? Why does this particular problem move you?
- Using the idea of Buechner’s definition of vocation, think of some possible vocations that bring together your “deep gladness” and the world’s “deep hunger” as you see it.
- Has a sense of call ever produced inner conflict for you because it seemed the right thing to do in the immediate circumstance but the wrong thing according to some religious teachings? Would failing to act have felt irresponsible? How do (did) you resolve this moral dilemma of calling?
- With Will Campbell’s trapeze artist in mind, think of vocations that you have entertained or considered simply because you were needed (these may have been temporary, such as caring for someone who was ill). How did such service for the sake of service feel to you?

Activities

- As a group, view *Weapons of the Spirit* (see below). Consider whether it is possible to think of a social group (a town, a congregation) as being “called” to a “vocation.” If so, you could ask some of the questions about this group that you might ask about an individual: What past experiences shaped it for this calling? What talents? To what deep hunger and deep gladness did these rescuers respond?

Movies

- *Weapons of the Spirit* (1987, NR, 90 minutes). This historical documentary describes how a small French hamlet opposed the Vichy government and saved 5,000 Jews from extermination in what director Pierre Sauvage describes as a “conspiracy of goodness.” Sauvage narrates the experience of returning to Le Chambon-sur-Lignon where a local farmer and his wife had concealed him and his family during the war.

Link: <http://imdb.com/title/tt0100905/>

- ***Bonhoeffer*** (2003, NR, 93 minutes). Dramatic documentary about the young German pacifist and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer who resisted the Nazi regime and was hanged two weeks before World War II was over. Directed by Martin Doblmeier.

Link: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0371583/>

- ***Romero*** (Four Seasons, 1989, PG-13, 102 minutes). This film recounts the life of Archbishop Oscar Romero, who was killed during Mass for his opposition to the repressive government of El Salvador.

Link: <http://imdb.com/title/tt0098219/>

- ***The Mission*** (Warner Bros., 1986, PG, 126 minutes). Two missionaries fight for the rights of South American Indians against Spanish colonial landowners. Link: <http://imdb.com/title/tt0091530/>

- ***Babette's Feast*** (Orion, 1988, G, 102 minutes). Babette, a refugee from the wars of the French Revolution, works as a cook for two sisters in a Danish town. When she unexpectedly wins the lottery, Babette decides to prepare a feast for several members of the village.

Link: <http://imdb.com/title/tt0092603/>

Session 5

Are Some Lives More Significant Than Others?

Readings

- Introduction
- Are Some Lives More Significant Than Others?
- C.S. Lewis "Learning in War-Time"
- Aristotle from *Nicomachean Ethics*
- Homer from *The Iliad*
- *The Martyrdom of Perpetua*

Questions for Discussion

- Does the question for this chapter bother you, as Schwehn and Bass suggest that it might? What problems or difficulties are inherent in the question of whether some lives are more significant than others?
- How does C.S. Lewis propose that students justify their pursuit of knowledge when their peers are going to war? Does Lewis think the academic vocation is more significant than others?
- For C.S. Lewis, is the pursuit of knowledge *per se* a vocation or a preparation for vocation? Explain.
- How, according to Lewis, can one get off track in the scholarly vocation? What would he think of today's institutes (and research labs) of higher learning in this regard?
- What emotional states get in the way of learning during war time, according to Lewis? Might one experience the same distractions under peacetime conditions?
- Why is education especially important in a world in which enemies and strife abound?
- What problem does C.S. Lewis find in commitment to long term goals? Do you agree? Can one's plans be too temporary as well? What is his point?

- What value *does* war bring to our sensibilities in Lewis' perspective?
- What seems to have caused the shift in Achilles's former willingness to risk longevity for honor? What role should prior consequences play in future vocational discernment?
- For Achilles, the motivation of anger (over betrayal) surpassed what other powerful motives? Do you think there was any argument (in this context) that would have persuaded Achilles to risk his life again?
- Is the way we die important? What makes a death noble or honorable?
- When, in your opinion, is the choice to risk becoming a martyr justified? What criteria are you using? Relate your response to Perpetua's story.
- What is most admirable about Perpetua? What is most disturbing? Is Perpetua's death more "noble" or "humble"? Explain.
- Why do the crowds seem to relish a display of martyrdom? Do you find this odd or predictable in human nature? What modern evidence can you cite?
- Similar to the story of Achilles, those around Perpetua offered arguments meant to change her mind. What was the nature of those arguments? Were they similar to or different from those used on Achilles? What does this say about what moves or compels human beings in general?
- Christian tradition often rests heavily on the notion of sacrifice. Why? Do you think this is what is intended for humans? Is self-sacrifice necessarily and always a good thing?

Writing Assignments

- Prepare a two-to three page analysis of martyrdom in which you consider the questions of intention or voluntary nature of the action, the purpose(s) sought or served, direct and indirect, and the intended and unintended consequences. Using your analytical scheme, address the martyrdom of Perpetua. Was this a morally justifiable action—a good choice? Compare with a modern-day figure such as Martin Luther King.

Reflection/Journaling

- To what extent do or did you experience your education as a distraction from real life? What contributed to that feeling? Did education ever feel like a duty or responsibility to you? How did that affect you?
- If your experiences warrant, write about someone whose death to you seemed noble. What aspects of the person or the context so defined the death? How would you want your own life to be described: noble or humble? What kinds of choices that you actually consider might make the difference?
- Write about a time in your life when you faced a choice about whether to sacrifice something of value for something you believed. Was it worth the sacrifice? Would you do it again?
- If you have not been called to sacrifice for something you believe, write about what belief or value you would be willing to die for, if necessary.

Activities

- Invite to your class or group meeting someone who has been called upon to suffer for what they believe; e.g., someone in the armed services during a major war, a prisoner of war, or a Holocaust survivor. Ask that person to reflect on what sustained him or her and how he or she has found purpose and meaning in the experience, if at all.

Movies

- ***It's a Wonderful Life*** (1946, G, 130 minutes) An angel helps a compassionate but despairingly frustrated businessman by showing what life would had been like if he never existed. Link: <http://imdb.com/title/tt0038650/>
- ***Saint Maybe*** (1998, PG) A lonely teen (Thomas McCarthy) troubled by a past family tragedy is suspicious of his sister-in-law (Mary-Louise Parker), believing she is being unfaithful. His confrontation with his brother sets off a series of tragic events. Link: <http://imdb.com/title/tt0168156/>
- ***The Mission*** (Warner Bros., 1986, PG, 126 minutes). Two missionaries fight for the rights of South American Indians against Spanish colonial landowners. Link: <http://imdb.com/title/tt0091530/>

- ***Romero*** (Four Seasons, 1989, PG-13, 102 minutes). This film recounts the life of Archbishop Oscar Romero, who was killed during Mass for his opposition to the repressive government of El Salvador.

Link: <http://imdb.com/title/tt0098219/>

Session 6

Are Some Lives More Significant Than Others?

Readings

- Dorothy Day from *Therese*
- Three Biographical Sketches
 - Ray Kroc
 - Iris Chang
 - Joseph S. ("Smiley") Landrum
- Thomas Gray "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard"

Questions for Discussion

- What is it about the life of St. Therese that so captivates the vigorous reformer spirit of Dorothy Day?
- Dorothy Day's life choices are far removed from those of Therese in concrete realities; i.e., Day's life is hardly cloistered. What points of similarity or connection do you see? Is Day a member of the "mighty army of little ones," in your opinion?
- Therese appears to embrace suffering in much the same way that Perpetua embraced her martyrdom. What is the underlying premise involved?
- What characteristics of little children would Therese have us imitate in our spiritual lives? How does suffering fit in?
- Therese "felt her vocation to be a saint." Are all human beings called to be saints, or only those specially qualified? How do you understand sainthood?
- What external features of Therese's life specifically contributed to her finding her "way"? How important, in general, are such experiences in the human quest for vocation?
- Why was it important to Therese "to see things as they were" and "to live in reality, not in dreams"? Can a person be too realistic—to the point of despairing? What enables Therese to be so realistic?

- According to Day, what stood out in the life of Therese and her family was “holiness.” What do you think she means? Against what does Day contrast holiness?
- In general terms, what would you say mattered *most* about each of the lives described: Ray Kroc, Iris Chang, and Joe Landrum? Who did you find to be most admirable? Why?
- In Gray's poetic musings, what finally seems to make the difference between the lives of those honored and those not honored in the public memory? Does Gray see this difference as indicative of which lives are more significant?
- What examples of “mattering” or significance does Gray attribute to those whose lives were relatively unknown?
- How do *you* answer the question, “Are some lives more significant than others?”

Writing Assignments

- Do some biographical research on Dorothy Day. In what way is Day's life one that matters? Analyze Day's life according to its ordinariness (littleness) and according to its potential saintliness. Draw some conclusions about the relationship between the ordinary and the saintly life.
- Write on the topic: “Who is a saint?” In preparation, read a few external sources on the topic of sainthood; e.g., William James in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* or Sally McFague in *Life Abundant*. You might also investigate liturgical resources for All Saints Day in the Christian church.

Journaling/Reflection

- A dream, a loss, and substantial neurotic anxiety about her imperfection were apparently powerful motivators in St. Therese's seeking of a “way” to live. Write about similar signals that have disturbed your equilibrium and moved you to consider or reconsider your life's direction and purpose. What have you learned from these experiences?
- Create an imaginary epitaph for your tombstone, one that expresses what you hope or expect to be significant about your life. Journal about this experience—how you felt and what you learned.

- Create an imaginary epitaph or eulogy concerning someone whose life has mattered to you. What do you learn about yourself in this process?
- Choose an obituary at random from your local newspaper. Using the typically sparse details as a starting point, write a longer remembrance, giving voice to what might have been significant about this life.

Activities

- Divide the class or group into three groups—each group advocating for one of the three lives cited in the biographical sketches: Ray Kroc, Iris Chang, and Joe Landrum. Dialogue about which life was more significant and why. Is it possible to reach a consensus on this? Why or why not? What values come into play?

Movies

- ***Changing Lanes*** (2002, R, 99 minutes) The story of what happens one day in New York when a young lawyer and a businessman share a small automobile accident on F.D.R. Drive and their mutual road rage escalates into a feud. Link: <http://imdb.com/title/tt0264472/>
- ***Tender Mercies*** (1983, PG, 100 minutes) Alcoholic former country singer Mac Sledge makes friends with a young widow and her son. The friendship enables him to find inspiration to resume his career. Link: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0086423/>
- ***The Girl in the Café*** (2005, NR, 94 minutes). Lawrence (Nighy), an aging, lonely civil servant falls for Gina (Macdonald), an enigmatic young woman. When he takes her to the G8 Summit in Reykjavik, however, their bond is tested by Lawrence's professional obligations. Link: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0443518/>
- ***Norma Rae*** (1979, PG, 110 minutes). A young single mother and textile worker agrees to help unionize her mill despite the problems and dangers involved. Link: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0079638/>
- ***Erin Brockovich*** (2000, R, 130 minutes). An unemployed single mother becomes a legal assistant and almost single-handedly brings down a California power company accused of polluting a city's water supply. Link: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0195685/>

- ***Hotel Rwanda*** (2004, R, 121 minutes). Don Cheadle stars in the true-life story of Paul Rusesabagina, a hotel manager who housed over a thousand Tutsi refugees during their struggle against the Hutu militia in Rwanda. Link: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0395169/>

Session 7

Must My Job Be the Primary Source of My Identity?

Readings

- Introduction
- Must My Job Be the Primary Source of My Identity?
- Russell Muirhead from *Just Work*
- Dorothy L. Sayers "Why Work?"
- Robert Frost "Two Tramps in Mud Time"
- Margaret Piercy "To be of use"
- H.G. Wells "The Door in the Wall"

Questions for Discussion

- How could a job affect one's identity and/or character for better or worse? Give some examples. Do jobs have substantial power in the development of persons?
- Obtaining a job in our culture is often a function of the "justice of fit," to use Muirhead's term. What does this mean? Does "fit" have anything to do with choice?
- What is meant by the "justice of fair" (attributed to Rawls) in relation to work? Which type of justice ("fit" or "fair") appears to apply more to *getting* a job? Which to the *experience* of working?
- Muirhead poses the following questions: "What is the difference between a good fit and a bad one? Are there some useful jobs that cannot be said to fit anyone well?" What do you think? Give examples. In the latter category of jobs that are needed but not fitting for anyone, what is fair?
- How has work legislation in recent decades attempted to be sensitive to both "fit" and "fair" justice? Give examples.
- If work, identity and self-esteem are as closely related in our culture as they seem to be, what problems does this raise for some among us?
- Are we inclined to proclaim a double-standard for judging what matters about a life, depending on a person's social location? Recall William

James's way of answering this question. Does it correlate with or challenge the perspective developed by Muirhead?

- What is the gist of Sayers's theological argument for the value of work? Do "making" and "serving" have equal potential for creative expression in Sayers's analysis? Do you agree? Under what conditions do you see constraints on creativity in work?
- Describe the ideal qualities of a *job* that is in accord with Christian vocation, according to Sayers. What qualities of the *person* undertaking a Christian vocation are assumed? Under what conditions does work fail as a vocation?
- In Sayers's view is every work a vocation if rightly pursued? Explain.
- What does Sayers mean when she says, "the worker's first duty is to *serve the work*"? How is this related to the first and second commandments?
- In Frost's poem, the appearance of the two tramps sets off his pondering on the true meaning of vocation. What does he conclude? Is wood-chopping a vocation for anyone in the poem?
- What is "mud time"? Is "season" a meaningful metaphor when thinking about vocation?
- "Mud" is named in both Frost's and Piercy's poems as a symbol related to work. Why mud? What possible archetypal (universal) significances can be attributed to mud as a symbol?
- What qualities of work (or workers) does Piercy cherish?
- Both Frost and Piercy idealize physical labor. Is non-physical work "real" work? Can a philosopher or an artist or even a poet be among the people Piercy "loves best"? Among the people Frost sees in his description, "work is play for mortal stakes." Has the desire to quantify work (and success at work) led us to idealize "doing" over "being"?
- In H. G. Wells's story, what does the "door in the wall" symbolize for Wallace? For you? A *liminal* or threshold image such as this one can have multiple meanings. Offer other meanings than the ones identified by the narrator.
- Is Wells offering us some wisdom about a life that matters, or displaying pessimism about whether worldly life can matter? Explain your answer.

- What were the primary barriers to Wallace's revisiting the garden? What kinds of choices was he making about what makes a life matter?
- When and why did Wallace know that he had missed his last chance at entering the door? What is significant about this?
- Apparently Wallace had disappointed his host by being preoccupied with matters other than the mundane. Does this reflect our culture's view of what matters? Is there such a thing as being too occupied with other-worldly thoughts? Why did Wallace expect others to be angry or disappointed if he returned to the garden?
- Wallace expressed a deep longing and sense of something lost in real life. Describe what he experiences (through the garden) as missing from real life. Are these natural human longings or particular to certain life experiences?
- Was there any evidence of a conflicted inner spirit in Wallace? Can you identify with this kind of conflict? What, exactly, is in conflict?

Writing Assignments

- Write on "Changing Attitudes Towards Work in the 20th Century." Do some preliminary research on how the nature of work has changed since 1900, and how business, industry and government have responded to the personal aspects of work. Conclude with where you think we are headed in the technological age of the 21st century.

Journaling/Reflection

- Write about a job that changed the way you see yourself—for better or worse. In what ways did the nature of the work change you?
- What are the qualities that you seek in your ideal job? Be as honest as possible about your considerations, ranking them in order of importance, if possible. How do these qualities correspond to those discussed by Sayers in her Christian understanding of the optimal nature of work? Are you more likely to be working to live or living to work, as you see it now?
- Describe in some detail your favorite avocation (hobby or unpaid but cherished work). What is it about that kind of work that appeals to you? Does the work have any larger meaning beyond its intrinsic value to you? In what way is your avocation a calling or related to your calling, if at all?

- If you think of a life as having vocational seasons, in what season do you currently find yourself? Consider factors other than your age, such as how life *feels* to you (arid, fresh, frozen, resting, etc.).
- After reading "The Door in the Wall," imagine your own green door. What do you see on the other side that looks better, more inviting to you, than what you see on this side of reality? Describe in some detail your "ideal" world.

Activities

- Arrange for the group to participate in a gleaning project, a construction project or a cooperative farm (or anything that involves physical labor). Consider how "fitting" the work seemed for you, and in what way the work affected your sense of well-being. Ponder whether you would feel the same way if this were your life's work. Why is it unlikely to be your life's work?
- Bring in a writer, poet, artist or performer to speak to the group about his/her "work." What kinds of qualities are used to describe creative or expressive work? Is work that allows a person to be herself/himself more likely to be a calling?

Movies

- ***Frida*** (2002, R, 123 minutes) A biography of artist Frida Kahlo, who channeled the pain of a crippling injury and her tempestuous marriage into her work. Link: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0120679/>
- ***Ray*** (2004, PG-13, 152 minutes) The life and career of the legendary popular music pianist, Ray Charles. Link: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0350258/>
- ***Amadeus*** (1982, PG, 160 minutes) The story of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, told in flashback mode by Antonio Salieri - now confined to an insane asylum. Link: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0086879/>

Session 8

Must My Job Be The Primary Source of My Identity?

Readings

- Abraham Joshua Heschel from *The Sabbath*
- William Wordsworth "The World Is Too Much with Us" and "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey"
- Gilbert Meilaender "Friendship and Vocation"

Questions for Discussion

- Based on Heschel's essay on Sabbath, describe some ways in which one's entire worldview might undergo a "shift in perception" if Sabbath holiness is embraced? In particular, how is the perception of *work* altered?
- Why does Heschel deem Sabbath so important to human life at the deepest level? Is it simply a matter of needed rest from work or simply a matter of honoring God?
- How does Heschel extend the case for Sabbath to the reign of peace in the world? Does this logic make sense to you? Could it actually work?
- What does Heschel mean when he asserts that practicing Sabbath can help us "learn the art of surpassing Civilization"?
- In what way can a discipline, such as Sabbath-keeping, be freeing?
- When Wordsworth proclaims that "the world is too much with us," what distortion or contradiction in our way of living is he seeking to highlight?
- From Wordsworth, what do you understand to be the connection between *our* powers and what "in Nature is ours"? What power might we glean from Nature that could make us less "forlorn"?
- In "Lines Composed...", what several human psychological processes are evoked within nature?
- Is Nature, for Wordsworth, primarily an escape from the "fret" and "fever" of the world, or more?

- What parallels do you notice between Heschel's reflections on Sabbath and Wordsworth's on Nature?
- Three temporal perspectives on the natural scene are represented by Wordsworth in "Lines Composed..." What differences in perspective occur with each time of life? Can you relate to these different points of connection with nature?
- With what particular metaphors does Wordsworth convey a sense of *personal* relationship with Nature? What special gifts does this relationship offer the poet?
- In what important ways do Sabbath, nature and friendship provide meaningful balance to work? Could such balance be a calling, or must human beings resolve their primary calling, down-playing others?
- In what ways does success in the vocation of work and love for significant others come into conflict, according to Meilaender? Does this fit your experiences?
- How, in Meilaender's view, does caring for a few significant others fit into the larger vocation of caring for the world's people?
- What are Meilaender's critiques of both the classical and the Christian ideals of vocation? Is he on target here?
- What common themes are evident in Heschel's and Meilaender's depictions of the working life?
- What typically enables a human system (e.g., an organization) to function smoothly according to our society? How about according to Meilaender?
- What issues arise on the job between "overriding vocational commitment" (Sayers) and friendship with a co-worker? Is it clear to you how Meilaender views this situation and its resolution?
- In what ways does Meilaender sense that the concept of vocation can foster corruption? Do you agree?
- Is the so-called alienation of the worker primarily due to societal, personal or ideological demands on the individual? How is the alienated worker to accommodate to work, according to Meilaender?

- What societal symptoms suggest that work has become an idol, as Meilaender suggests?

Writing Assignments

- Write a two-page thought paper on what Sabbath, nature and/or love offer to the assumptions that connect work and calling.
- In two or three pages, critically respond to Meilaender's essay on the potential corruption of the understanding of Christian vocation. Offer both supporting and opposing arguments to his thesis, and draw your own conclusion.

Journaling/Reflection

- Describe in some detail your typical weekend activities, including how much time you spend on each. To the extent that you choose these activities, what experiences are you trying to cultivate during this period of supposed down time from work? After reading Heschel, are you satisfied with Sabbath in your life?
- What feelings are most dominant during work time for you? How do these compare with the feelings Heschel suggests accompany Sabbath? Outline a plan of Sabbath practices that you might like to undertake in coming weeks. What difficulties do you anticipate in following the plan?
- Seek out some focal point in nature (e.g., tree, flower, insect, etc.). Create a poem, song or word-picture about what you experience when you attend to this portion of nature for awhile. Does writing focus your attention in new ways, drawing you closer to nature, or God?
- Reflect on your present relationship with nature. Is it one of appreciation, devotion, fear, neglect, activity, or what? What feelings does nature evoke in you? What particular forms of nature have been most meaningful to you? Do you seek these out?
- Has nature ever taught you something about yourself or the world or revealed something to you? Does nature have a sacred quality for you? Write about your experiences along these lines?
- Write about an experience of conflict between the demands of your work and significant relationships in your life at the time; e.g., family, partner, friend. What was the nature of the conflict and how did you resolve it? Offer advice to others about such situations, given your experiences.

- Do you ever feel over-extended in your personal commitments? How so? How do you deal with the inevitable conflicts among your commitments? What advice might you offer others?
- If, as Meilaender offers, one is called to friendship, who or what has made that calling most meaningful in your life? How would you describe the “called” nature of friendship as compared to more worldly views of friendship, and how does this play out in your life?
- Write about an on-the-job experience where you felt some conflict between being a friend and being a co-worker or supervisor? How did you handle this situation? What advice would you offer others about close relationships at work?

Activities

- Create a Sabbath plan and share it with the group or with a partner from the group. Consider the suggestions and ideas of others; then make a covenant with someone or the group to try this plan for a period of time (two weeks, a month). Gather with the group or covenant partner to share your experiences at the end of the time period.
- Arrange for a group hike in silence, a two-person silent hike, or a solo walk in a safe place, such as a natural labyrinth. Choose a place that is rich in natural beauty. As you hike or walk silently, use your senses to receive the offerings of nature. What do you see that you typically do not notice? What do you hear, smell, or feel on your skin? Later, in a debriefing session, share with others what you experienced or learned by being silent and attentive in nature.

Movies

- ***A River Runs Through It*** (1992, PG, 123 minutes) Two fly-fishing sons of a Presbyterian minister--one reserved, one rebellious--grow up in rural Montana. Link: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0105265/>
- ***Chariots of Fire*** (1981, PG, 123 minutes) The story of two British track athletes, one a determined Jew and the other a devout Christian, who compete in the 1924 Olympics. Link: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0082158/>
- ***Grand Canyon*** (1991, R, 134 minutes) Grand Canyon revolves around six residents from different backgrounds whose lives intertwine in modern-day Los Angeles. At the center of the film is the unlikely

friendship of two men from different races and classes brought together when one (Kevin Kline) finds himself in jeopardy in the other's (Danny Glover) rough neighborhood. Link: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0101969/>

Session 9

Is a Balanced Life Possible and Preferable to a Life Focused Primarily on Work?

Readings

- Introduction
- Robert Wuthnow "The Changing Nature of Work in the United States: Implications for Vocation, Ethics, and Faith"
- Bonnie Miller-McLemore "Generativity Crises of My Own"
- Arlie Russell Hochschild "There's No Place like Work"

Questions for Discussion

- In your experience, how do work and a "balanced life" come into conflict, if at all?
- What conflicting values or stress points between work and relationships does Wuthnow highlight in his analysis of workplace trends? Do you agree?
- How has the increasing number of dual-working families contributed to a society of "rising expectations"? What further consequences does Wuthnow anticipate within this climate?
- Considering the problems associated with a positive quality of life in Wuthnow's trend analysis, what possible solutions come to mind? For each possible solution, reflect on the potential negative by-products or tradeoffs presented by that particular change.
- Who are the most frequently disadvantaged personnel in today's labor market? What kinds of specific disadvantages do they experience?
- How are large companies in the United States responding to the trends raised in Wuthnow's analysis? Note that Hochschild's study focused on the employees of one large company. How did this company try to change, and how did employees respond?

- What factors are increasing uncertainty and anxiety in the lives of young people presently entering the workforce? Are these legitimate concerns? How do they affect the ideal of responding to a sense of vocation?
- What long term consequences might there be in a culture for which "Flexibility, rather than fidelity, becomes the watchword...?"
- According to Miller-McLemore, what practical and societal factors work against the ideal of gender role equality in the workplace and at home?
- Describe Miller-McLemore's view of how children complicate the enactment of "democratic values" at home and work?
- Do you agree that "becoming a parent require[s] nothing less than the clearest truth about one's deepest values" (Guerrera Congo, cited in Miller-McLemore)? How so?
- How has our society's construction of parenthood changed in the last 50 years? What new demands have emerged?
- Revising Erikson's theory, Miller-McLemore identifies the risk people now face in mid-life crisis as "fragmentation" rather than "stagnation." Thinking of the mid-life people you know, do you agree? Might it matter whether children were involved or not? Are the risks different for married parents, single parents, and those without children?
- In what ways does the situation of two working parents bring the private and public spheres of life into specific and visible conflict?
- Should self-care have a moral claim on individuals and their relationships?
- By way of example, what solutions does Miller-McLemore offer to the crises of generativity?
- How does our culture value various activities of parenting? Consider both economic indicators as well as media portrayals. Is there evidence of gender role inequality or ambiguity in how we value these activities?
- How could churches and other religious or community groups support working families better? Make specific suggestions.
- What surprising twist does Hochschild introduce into the conversation about work and home life?

- In what ways might work become a haven from home? Might this differ for men and women? What risks does this introduce for families?
- Women sometimes find themselves being “moms” at work, according to Hochschild. What does this mean and how does it happen? Does it also happen that parents become “bosses” at home? What are the pros and cons of these home-work role reversals?
- What is TQM? What positive outcomes has TQM brought to the world of work? Have we missed out by limiting this method only to work? How could it benefit the home environment?

Writing Assignments

- Based on these articles, develop a thought paper on “Societal Responses to Quality of Life Issues.” In your paper, offer your analysis of the most pressing problems and possible public responses to those issues. Consider the costs and consequences, both positive and negative, of your suggestions.
- Imagine that you are CEO for a large American corporation. Address the topic: “Profiting from Human Resource Management.” Include as context or critique Wuthnow’s notion that we are in a “post-materialist economy” in the workplace.
- Using Miller-McLemore’s essay as a starting point, enlarge upon the idea that gender role equality is a theological, moral and/or religious matter.

Reflection/Journaling

- Reflect on your childhood home environment and the roles assumed by your parent(s)/guardian(s). What memories come to mind about your mother’s work, your father’s work, care of the home, nurture of the children, etc.? How does this affect your own ideals about marriage, parenting, home and work?
- Create an image of your ideal adult life. Include your best case scenarios about love, marriage, family, work, play, material acquisitions, etc. What realistic problems do you expect to interfere with this vision?
- Design your ideal job. Include not only what you would like to be doing, but also qualities of the workplace and the management system. Is your idea realistic or idealistic? What would you need to make this dream come true?

- Write about your own view of men's and women's roles at work and at home. What would you criticize in present day arrangements? What societal changes would you like to see in this area?

Activities

- Divide the group with television viewing assignments that cover a range of days of the week, channels and times. Focus on shows that portray families. Have each person record the situations or crises encountered by various family members, who is doing what, and how gender roles are depicted. You can include other research questions generated by the group. Gather to share your observations and discuss the media images of contemporary families. Does what we see on TV matter?

Movies

- ***Cinema Paradiso*** (1989, R, 155 minutes) Spanning three stages of a man's life, this movie tracks the relationship between a boy, Salvatore, and the cinema projectionist, Alfredo (Philippe Noiret), who inspired him to become a film director. Link: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0095765/>
- ***Mr. Holland's Opus*** (1995, PG, 143 minutes) A frustrated composer finds fulfillment as a high school music teacher. Link: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0113862/>
- ***Searching For Bobby Fischer*** (1993, PG, 110 minutes) A prepubescent chess prodigy refuses to harden himself in order to become a champion like the famous but unlikable Bobby Fischer. Link: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0108065/>
- ***Erin Brockovich*** (2000, R, 130 minutes). An unemployed single mother becomes a legal assistant and almost single-handedly brings down a California power company accused of polluting a city's water supply. Link: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0195685/>

Session 10

Is a Balanced Life Possible and Preferable to a Life Focused Primarily on Work?

Readings

- Abigail Zuger, M.D. "Defining a Doctor"
- Henry Wadsworth Longfellow "The Village Blacksmith"
- Wendell Berry "An Invisible Web"
- King Hussein and Noa Ben Artzi-Pelossof, Two Eulogies for Yitzhak Rabin
- Annie Dillard "Living Like Weasels"
- William Butler Yeats "The Choice"
- Jane Addams "Filial Relations"
- Martha Nussbaum interviewed by Bill Moyers

Questions for Discussion

- Given the opposing models of medical care described by Zuger, do you sense that she has an implicit preference? What is it? Do you agree?
- Did gender have anything to do with the two models of medical care, in your opinion?
- How could the medical field moderate the extremes described by Zuger, given that both may be prone to error. Is there another alternative?
- Is the work ethic of medicine unique? What about other professions? What about salaried jobs in general? Are people expected to demonstrate commitment by working longer than required?
- How does the team model affect work responsibility in general? Do team members invariably work less than if they were working alone?
- What costs are there to an extreme work ethic? Consider costs to the organization, the consumer and the person holding the job.
- Does a very focused and intense calling such as medicine necessarily exclude a balanced life? Try to imagine the external lives of the two physicians described by Zuger.

- For what does Longfellow seem to yearn (or admire) in the working life of the blacksmith? Are such qualities possible in the 21st century? Who might the poet choose for observation today?
- What, to you, seems to be missing in the life of the blacksmith (aside from the obvious loss of a spouse)?
- What lesson does the poet extract from the life of the blacksmith?
- In Berry's story, what rewards does Jayber the barber find in his work? Are these perks of the particular job of barbering or of Jayber's character?
- What implicit definition of vocation does Jayber appear to adopt? Do you feel that Jayber has a vocation, calling or life that matters? How so?
- To what does the "invisible web" refer and what does it offer Jayber?
- What role does the garden play in Jayber's life? Is this part of vocation or something else?
- Considering the content of the two eulogies, one could say that Yitzhak Rabin was a *hero*. What qualities of a heroic life are mentioned? Are there parallels in how you think about a heroic life and a life that matters?
- What composite image of the man Rabin did you get from the two eulogies? In your opinion, did he live a divided life or an integrated life with regard to public and private commitments?
- In "Living Like Weasels," how does Annie Dillard characterize the notion of "calling"? What particularly powerful descriptors does she use?
- Does Dillard's simile of the weasel work for you? In what ways does it offer wisdom, and in what ways does it break down for human beings?
- What does Dillard believe we could learn by "living without bias or motive"? Can we? Is there an advantage in leaving our minds aside and using our senses instead? Why or why not? Is this possible for human beings to achieve, even briefly?
- What exactly is the nature of "the choice" in Yeats's poem? What does it mean to perfect one's life or perfect one's work? Is this a necessary or typical choice that people must make? Can it be avoided or reframed?

- It appears that Yeats conceived of “the choice” as having ethical implications; i.e., could bring remorse. What kinds of ethical dilemmas does “the choice” bring to mind for you?
- What are the most likely parallels in today’s world for the conflicts between private (filial) versus public (social) claims on a life? What form do those claims take most frequently, and in whose lives most typically?
- What objections arise when a young person today chooses a life of service that runs counter to the conventional norms for success and respectability?
- Do you agree with Addams’s hierarchy of claims—that the claim of societal need is greater than the filial claim? Are there contingencies that need to be considered?
- Is it always a capitulation to the selfish motive to take time for pleasure; e.g., travel, when there are greater needs in the world to be addressed? At what point does the social motive claim too much from the individual, if ever?
- What, according to Nussbaum, is the essence of tragic conflict? Can you think of some real life examples in recent history?
- How do we attempt to escape from the suffering caused by tragic conflict? Are we cheating our lives out of significance by doing so?
- Why ought we to live into tragedy, in Nussbaum’s view?
- How could accepting the potentially tragic consequences of multiple commitments move us forward?

Writing Assignments

- Choose a contemporary public figure and do some biographical research on that person. Based on what you learn, write a short (2-3 pages) “vocational biography” about that person. Does this life appear “balanced” to you? If not, would adding a measure of balance make this life more meaningful and significant?
- Compare and contrast the notions of a life well-lived in the articles by Zuber, Dillard, Addams, and Nussbaum (interview). Consider how gender roles enter into and shape the thinking of these writers. What light would

Miller-McLemore's more explicit claims about gender shed on their thinking?

Reflection/Journaling

- In your approach to work, are you more like one or the other of Zuger's doctors? Describe the parallels. Reflect on how this affects your life, your work, your relationships, and your health.
- Which doctor would you rather have treating you if you were ill? Imagine two similar teachers; which do you want? Two friends? How do your own expectations of others guide them in adopting their own "balance," or not?
- Keep a log of your daily routines for several days. Review the log and write about the rhythm and timing of activities in your life. What do you observe about boundaries, balance or stress points? Do you have a sense of accomplishment each day?
- Describe your present sense of place and connection, similar to the story of Jayber. Do you have a sense of community, of an invisible web of memories and history?
- Write a description (or eulogy-type essay) about someone who is your personal hero. Note what qualities appear to emerge as important. How does your life reflect those qualities?
- Reflect from within your own experiences on the meaning of Annie Dillard's words: "I would like to learn, or remember, how to live." What seems to be lost or missing in your life that needs learning or remembering?
- Write about a difficult choice in your life that seems to involve excellence at work versus excellence in private life. What are the costs entailed on either side of the choice? Would you consider this a tragic conflict or a conflict with potentially tragic consequences, as described by Nussbaum?
- Are you considering or have you ever considered a vocational choice that your family would disapprove? What is or was the nature of their objections? Do you experience this as a conflict of commitments? A tragic conflict? What moral guidelines are you or did you use, if any?

Activities

- Have each person in your group interview someone who appears to live a balanced life. Find out the realities of that person's life and how they maintain balance, if indeed they do. In sharing these with one another, identify what factors make the most difference: Job selection? Family situation? Personal character and attitudes?
- Collect eulogies of famous people from media or other sources. The Sunday *New York Times* is an excellent source. Bring these to class and create a collective list of characteristics that mark these as lives that mattered enough to be publicly recognized. How do these qualities fit your sense of what it means to live a life that matters? Can you tell whether the person was devoted to a single purpose, or to multiple, perhaps even conflicting commitments?
- Following Annie Dillard's lead, find a place in a natural setting where you can be still and observe. Focus in, eventually, on one thing—one life form that grabs your attention. Study it for as long as you can, seeking to learn something from it. Return to the group with your notes and share the life lessons learned in nature.

Movies

- ***Cinema Paradiso*** (1989, R, 155 minutes) Spanning three stages of a man's life, this movie tracks the relationship between a boy, Salvatore, and the cinema projectionist, Alfredo (Philippe Noiret), who inspired him to become a film director. Link: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0095765/>
- ***Mr. Holland's Opus*** (1995, PG, 143 minutes) A frustrated composer finds fulfillment as a high school music teacher. Link: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0113862/>
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- ***Erin Brockovich*** (2000, R, 130 minutes). An unemployed single mother becomes a legal assistant and almost single-handedly brings down a California power company accused of polluting a city's water supply. Link: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0195685/>

- ***Spider-Man 2*** (2004, PG-13, 127 minutes) Peter Parker is beset with numerous personal problems while Spider-Man confronts the brilliant Dr. Otto Octavius, who has been transformed into "Doctor Octopus," a multi-tentacled menace. Link: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0316654/>

Session 11

Should I Follow My Talents as I Decide What to Do to Earn a Living?

Readings

- Introduction
- Matthew 25: 14-30
- John Milton "On His Blindness"
- Immanuel Kant from *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*
- Elizabeth Gaskell from *The Life of Charlotte Bronte*
- Matt Damon and Ben Affleck from the screenplay of *Good Will Hunting*
- James Baldwin "Sonny's Blues"

Questions for Discussion

- What does the term "talent" mean to you? A variety of ideas are offered in the readings, ranging from special abilities and natural aptitudes to sacred trusts and deep passions. Offer your agreement or disagreement with these, as well as your own sense of the meaning.
- In the parable of Jesus (Matthew 25: 14-30), it seems that a talent can readily increase in measured success if one seeks to invest the effort. Is this necessarily so (assuming the contemporary meaning of "talent")? What limitations, if any, might one encounter besides lack of effort?
- If a person is able to "bury" a talent, is it really a talent?
- What other meaningful interpretation could be given to the idea of investing in versus burying one's talent suggested by the parable? What else could a "talent" be?
- What might a young, physically challenged athlete learn from Milton's poem on his blindness? What response to a talent no longer employed is being offered? Would you find this satisfying?
- How does one serve "who only stand(s) and wait(s)"? Give some examples of service to humanity provided by patience.

- Does Milton's poem apply primarily to those whose talents are physically diminished? Might there be a different response to those whose talents are limited by external circumstances (e.g., finances) or by personal choice?
- Is Milton suggesting a significant change in the parable of the talents if the one who buried his talent had been lame or blind? Do you agree?
- Given Kant's "categorical imperative," what is the moral problem with a person simply choosing to enjoy life's pleasures instead of developing "natural aptitudes"? What if one seeks and finds pleasurable work (e.g., working as a steward on a cruise ship) and does not have to depend on others for support? Is there still a moral problem for Kant?
- Kant suggests that natural talents might have "all sorts of possible purposes." Does this enlarge your understanding of talents? How so?
- What is Gaskell (describing Bronte) saying about gender roles and the ability to replace one person with another? Is this a fair analysis? How has this perspective been affected by changes in the last few decades, if at all?
- Now that a woman's traditional domestic duties are more easily filled by others (e.g., babysitters, housecleaners), do women have an even greater responsibility to develop their talents?
- How does our society view a woman who wishes her primary role to be that of wife and mother? Does Gaskell acknowledge such individual differences in preference even among talented women?
- In *Good Will Hunting*, Will appears to be momentarily stymied by the long term implications of using his talent. Is this rational? How ought one to weigh the benefits and costs, long and short term of using one's talent? (Consider, for example, the scientist whose discovery may lead to both positive and negative outcomes.)
- Will is pressured by others, namely Sean and Chuckie, who have strong expectations about how he should use his mathematical ability. What personal motives underlie the expectations of these friends? Does Will owe them anything?
- What is really stopping Will from using his talent?

- Is caring for one's family a vocation, as implied in *Sonny's Blues*? If so, what is the nature of that vocation?
- Does one's family have expectations that ought to be considered when one is making vocational decisions?
- If you were forced to choose, which life seemed to matter more—Sonny's or his brother's? By what criteria?
- Why did Sonny *have* to play the piano? What then was the actual character of his calling, apart from musical skill *per se*?
- Does an intense passion necessarily destabilize a life? Justify your answer.
- Looking back over all of the readings, should one follow one's talents? What advantages and disadvantages ought one consider in reflecting on whether to follow one's talents?

Writing Assignments

- Do research in some Bible commentaries (e.g., *The New Interpreter's Bible*) on the meaning of Matthew 25: 14-30. What alternative views do you discover? Summarize what you learn about possible meanings of the parable and conclude with the one most compelling for the present discussion of leading lives that matter.
- The authors in this section place a high moral value on what one does with one's talents, although their particular perspectives differ. Develop a thought paper on the "Moral Obligations of Talent," using these readings and your own thoughts to develop a critical analysis.

Journaling/Reflection

- Ponder the metaphor of "burying" something important about yourself and write about what that might be. Are there things about yourself that you have kept hidden or wished to hide—things that others might need or value?
- Do you have a talent? How would you describe your talent? Do you feel that you are actualizing that talent or have plans for actualizing it? If not, why not? If so, is your talent a likely source of income or visible success for you? If not, what benefits and/or costs do you anticipate?

- Reflect on your mother's talents and how, if ever, she used them visibly or productively. What limitations did she experience? What sacrifices did she make?
- Do you have any fears about fully embracing what you perceive to be your talents? What specific fears emerge to hold you back? Write about both short term and long term fears.
- Write about a time when you felt you couldn't *not* do something. Have you ever suffered from not fulfilling your passion? Has your passion itself brought suffering to you or others in your life? If you have never had such experiences, ponder whether you have avoided risk at the expense of fulfillment.

Activities

- Watch the movie *Good Will Hunting* in its entirety. Afterwards in the group, discuss:
 - the moral implications of a great ability
 - the justification of others' expectations
 - fear as a signal in vocational discernment
 - friends as a resource for clarification of goals

Movies

- ***Good Will Hunting*** (1997, R, 126 minutes) Will Hunting, a janitor at MIT, has a gift for mathematics which is discovered, and a psychologist tries to help him with his gift and the rest of his life.
Link: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0119217/>
- ***October Sky*** (1999, PG, 108 minutes) The true story of Homer Hickam, a coal miner's son who was inspired by the first Sputnik launch to take up rocketry against his father's wishes.
Link: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0132477/>
- ***Billy Elliot*** (2000, PG-13, 110 minutes) A talented young boy becomes torn between his unexpected love of dance and the disintegration of his family. Link: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0249462/>
- ***Finding Forrester*** (2000, PG-13, 136 minutes) An African-American teen writing prodigy finds a mentor in a reclusive author.
Link: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0181536/>

- ***Shine*** (1996, PG-13, 105 minutes) Pianist David Helfgott, driven by his father and teachers, has a breakdown. Years later he returns to the piano, to popular if not critical acclaim.
Link: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0117631/>
- ***Five Easy Pieces*** (1970, R, 96 minutes) An oil rigger returns home to comfort his dying father, where he is confronted with the past he ran away from: A successful career as a classical pianist.
Link: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0065724/>

Session 12

To Whom Shall I Listen?

Readings

- Introduction
- Will Weaver "The Undeclared Major"
- Amy Tan "Two Kinds"
- Malcolm X with Alex Haley from *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*
- Lois Lowry from *The Giver*

Questions for Discussion

- What parental response had Walter Hansen imagined as he prepared to announce his major at home? Were his expectations confirmed? How is it that our inner voices may at times not match their real life counterparts?
- What were Walt's father's primary questions or concerns? Do you find these to be legitimate concerns? How would you characterize the father's way of speaking?
- Must Walt give up everything he loves about his home and community in order to pursue his career in English? Is this an all-or-nothing choice? Explain.
- As a parent, how ought one to offer wisdom about the life directions of a son or daughter? Respond as a parent or as you hope to be when you are a parent.
- What parental dream turned into heavy expectations in the life of Jing-Mei? That is, what did her mother *really* want, apart from the particulars?
- What did Jing-Mei *really* want, both as a child and as an adult?
- Was the conflict between Jing-Mei and her mother primarily due to old culture-new culture differences, or is this a prototypical family conflict?
- Why do human beings react to pressure by rebelling? What motive does rebellion serve?

- What important aspect of herself did Jing-Mei discover in her resistance?
- Malcolm X attributes his English teacher's bigotry to "his nature as an American white man," while the teacher urges Malcolm to "be realistic about being a nigger." What is ironic about these attributions? Are either of them reasonable?
- What helped Malcolm to have the insight that his teacher was wrong? Might not others in his place have simply accepted the "reality"?
- Why do you think Malcolm was unable to voice his feelings, even to his own people?
- What alternative futures does Malcolm ponder in retrospect? Given that he took neither of those paths, to what do you attribute the decision he did make? What role did the teacher's voice play then?
- Thinking about *The Giver*, how do our communities help children learn both to fit in and to honor difference? Do you think we provide the right balance?
- What difference could it make if every job was considered important in its own way—an honor to undertake for the community?
- What possible benefits can you see in Lois Lowry's imaginative idea of job assignment at age 12? Does this ever happen—in less obvious ways? What is the down-side?
- In what way was the calling of Jonas (Is the name symbolic?) different from the assigned roles of the other children? Can you think of other archetypal stories of calling that resemble this one?
- What is the difference, when adults are mentoring children, between advice and expectation? When or if you are in this mentoring role, how will you approach vocational guidance, especially when you believe you see a true talent?

Writing Assignments

- Select a public hero or heroine of your own about whom you can find biographical information. Write a paper on "Turning Points in the Life of _____," identifying key themes or pivotal changes in that person's life.

Journaling/Reflection

- Think of three or four wise individuals with whom you would like to have a conversation about vocation. They can be living or dead. Pick one and write out both sides of a conversation with that person as you imagine it might occur. Obviously you will have to use your imagination about that person's voice. Try to write freely without thinking too much about whether this is exactly what the person would say. It is really their voice *in you* for which you are listening.
- To what voices are you, in fact, listening as you attempt to discern how to live? Are their voices to which you want to attend and others that you wish would be less obtrusive?
- Describe what you felt when you told your parents what you wanted to do with your life. What responses did you anticipate and what response did you receive? Was it helpful?
- From where you are now, how would you respond to Walt's father's basic questions: Did anyone talk you into this? Do you like it? Can you make a living with it?
- Write about a time during your youth when you felt pressured to perform or learn a new skill. How did you respond? What did you learn from the experience? Is there a place for strong parental influence?
- Write about the "turning points" in your life so far. That is, who or what helped to change the direction of your life?
- Did anyone ever try to assign you to a role in life, so to speak? Write about that experience, considering in retrospect whether they were right in their hunches. Were you encouraged or resistant?
- Imagine yourself in the row of "elevens" about to become "twelves" in Lois Lowry's story. What assignment would you have expected or desired at that age? Does this reflection offer any insight for your current musings on vocation?
- Have you ever felt called to a role bigger than your understanding? Write about that time.

Activities

- Have your group members collect “turning point” narratives from a variety of adults (by asking people to tell about the major events or persons that changed the direction of their lives). Compare the group’s collection and look for common themes of “turning.”

Movies

- ***Kundun*** (Buena Vista, 1997, PG-13, 134 minutes). The story of the 14th Dalai Lama of Tibet, who was forced into exile after China’s invasion of Tibet. Link: <http://imdb.com/title/tt0119485/>
- ***Joy Luck Club*** (1993, R, 139 minutes) The life histories of four Asian women and their daughters reflect and guide each other. Link: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0107282/>
- ***Whale Rider*** (New Market, 2002, PG-13, 101 minutes). Pai, an 11-year-old girl in a patriarchal New Zealand tribe, believes she is destined to be the new chief. But her grandfather Koro is bound by tradition to pick a male leader. Pai loves Koro more than anyone in the world, but she must fight him and a thousand years of tradition to fulfill her destiny. Link: <http://imdb.com/title/tt0298228/>
- ***Inherit the Wind*** (United Artists, 1960, PG, 128 minutes). This film recounts the true story of a Tennessee schoolteacher who went on trial in 1925 for teaching the theory of evolution. Link: <http://imdb.com/title/tt0053946/>
- ***Malcolm X*** (Warner Bros., 1992, PG-13, 202 minutes). Director Spike Lee's Oscar-nominated drama illuminates the life of civil rights leader Malcolm X, following him from his early days as a prison-bound gangster to his conversion to Islam, marriage to Betty Shabazz and discovery of the Nation of Islam writings of Elijah Mohammad. When Malcolm turns his back on the Nation of Islam (following a pilgrimage to Mecca), he becomes a murder target. Link: <http://imdb.com/title/tt0104797/>
- ***Gandhi*** (1982, PG, 188 minutes) Biography of Mahatma Gandhi, the lawyer who became the famed leader of the Indian revolts against the British through his philosophy of non-violent protest. Link: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0083987/>

- ***Motorcycle Diaries*** (2004, R, 126 minutes) The dramatization of a motorcycle road trip Che Guevara went on in his youth that showed him his life's calling. Link: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0318462/>

Session 13

To Whom Shall I Listen?

Readings

- Vincent Harding "I Hear Them...Calling"
- Willa Cather "The Ancient People"
- Garret Keizer from *A Dresser of Sycamore Trees*

Questions for Discussion

- Do communities tend to call young people forth to meet their needs of the future? Give some examples. How is the call of the church enacted in Vincent Harding's biographical story?
- Is it appropriate for adults to try to "recruit" young people to replace them or to meet particular community needs? How is the job market itself a mechanism of recruitment for community needs? How does it feel to be recruited?
- In what sense, if any, is a person obligated to serve in some way the community that nurtured him or her?
- What kinds of inner conflicts of calling did Harding experience along the way? How did being Black affect these tensions? How does a person sort out such inner conflicts?
- Do you find any significance in Harding's repeated description of callings as "strange"? If so, what significance?
- What in Harding's callings seemed to be clearer and freer of conflict? Why were these easier to discern?
- In what ways did Harding fulfill his first sense of calling by the "Tribe"? How does the voice of one's community of origin continue to play a role even when one is no longer there?
- What, in the end, does Harding understand as his calling?

- What does a retreat into the natural environment, especially this one of ancient cave dwellings, do for Thea? What voices does it still and what voices are awakened or reawakened?
- How does the retreat change Thea's sense of time and activity? What benefits does that offer to her sense of her own capacities?
- How does Thea connect to the "Ancient People"? How do you connect with the wisdom of those who have gone before you? From Cather's implicit perspective, is reading about them or reading their works enough?
- Thea attributes her turning point in Panther Canyon to "the merest chance" as opposed to Providence. Does that make a difference in her response?
- What significant, but surprising, insight did Garret Keizer gain from his monastic retreat to seek his vocation?
- Does God assign vocations, especially those involving special ministry? Compare your view with that of Keizer.
- In what way is finding one's life work a quest for redemption?
- Keizer expresses the view that an impassioned search may result in life being full of significant signs and parable-like experiences. In what ways might that be true? Does he find this a matter of Providence? If not, then what?
- In what ways (material and nonmaterial) do we tend to assume we can or should "have it all"? Can we—with "good time management"?
- Is the quest for a calling from God in some sense a matter of pride? Does Keizer think so?
- What, finally, was Keizer's calling?

Writing Assignment

- In all three essays (Harding, Cather and Keizer), answers of a sort were found in taking up residence (however briefly) in an unfamiliar place. Write a 2-3 page thought paper analyzing the contribution of relocation to the quest for truth. Include examples from the essays, from your own life, or from other sources.

Journaling/Reflection

- Who is your “tribe”? Do you feel any sense of commitment to the needs and desires of that community? Describe the way in which those voices of recruitment have affected you.
- In Cather’s story of Thea Kronberg’s odyssey into Panther Canyon, the following line appears: “The personality of which she was so tired seemed to let go of her.” Can you relate to that description from your own experiences? If so, write about what memories, thoughts or feelings are stirred in you.
- Keizer speaks of the vocation of simply loving oneself and accepting that God desires our freedom to choose. What response does this stir in you?

Activities

- As individuals or as a group, arrange for a weekend retreat, preferably in a monastic setting of natural beauty. Follow the rhythms and practices of the community, and/or avail yourselves of opportunities for wise counsel. Go with a serious question in your heart, whether it is a question of vocation or something else. When you return, find an appropriate opportunity to share your experiences.

Movies

- ***Kundun*** (Buena Vista, 1997, PG-13, 134 minutes). The story of the 14th Dalai Lama of Tibet, who was forced into exile after China’s invasion of Tibet. Link: <http://imdb.com/title/tt0119485/>
- ***Joy Luck Club*** (1993, R, 139 minutes) The life histories of four Asian women and their daughters reflect and guide each other. Link: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0107282/>
- ***Whale Rider*** (New Market, 2002, PG-13, 101 minutes). Pai, an 11-year-old girl in a patriarchal New Zealand tribe, believes she is destined to be the new chief. But her grandfather Koro is bound by tradition to pick a male leader. Pai loves Koro more than anyone in the world, but she must fight him and a thousand years of tradition to fulfill her destiny. Link: <http://imdb.com/title/tt0298228/>
- ***Five Easy Pieces*** (1970, R, 96 minutes) A trashy oil rigger returns home to comfort his dying father, where he is confronted with the past he ran away from: a successful career as a classical pianist.

Link: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0065724/>

- ***Malcolm X*** (Warner Bros., 1992, PG-13, 202 minutes). Director Spike Lee's Oscar-nominated drama illuminates the life of civil rights leader Malcolm X, following him from his early days as a prison-bound gangster to his conversion to Islam, marriage to Betty Shabazz and discovery of the Nation of Islam writings of Elijah Mohammad. When Malcolm turns his back on the Nation of Islam (following a pilgrimage to Mecca), he becomes a murder target. Link: <http://imdb.com/title/tt0104797/>
- ***Gandhi*** (1982, PG, 188 minutes) Biography of Mahatma Gandhi, the lawyer who became the famed leader of the Indian revolts against the British through his philosophy of non-violent protest. Link: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0083987/>
- ***Motorcycle Diaries*** (2004, R, 126 minutes) The dramatization of a motorcycle road trip Che Guevara went on in his youth that showed him his life's calling. Link: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0318462/>

Session 14

Can I Control What I Shall Do and Become?

Readings

- Introduction
- William Ernest Henley "Invictus"
- Thomas Lynch "Passed On"
- Stephen Dunn "The Last Hours"
- The Book of Jonah
- Sullivan Ballou, A Letter to His Wife, 1861
- Yevgeny Yevtushenko "Weddings"
- Thomas Merton from *Thoughts in Solitude*

Questions for Discussion

- Based on the readings in this section, what differences arise in how we approach our lives based upon whether we sense little control or much control over "our own destinies"?
- How do you personally understand or rationalize the matter of control in human existence and destiny? How do these beliefs affect the choices you make or your responses to outcomes? What societal structures or traditions have nurtured your perspective on control?
- Is control, finally, a matter of attitude? Is the attitude of being in control beneficial, irrational, courageous, arrogant, or what? How does your religious tradition address this matter?
- How could one derive meaning for living in the face of severe contingency; e.g., a disability, a natural disaster, or a war?
- Where does the poet Henley ("Invictus") perceive the locus of control to reside? Do you detect any sense of ultimate control in the poem?
- What is the benefit of defying uncontrollable circumstances as conveyed by Henley's poem? Is defiance, in any way, adaptive?
- What question is at the heart of Lynch's musings about the sense of calling that ran through generations of his family?

- Is it possible that there is another side to the story of “grandsons and granddaughters...graduating from mortuary school and joining the family firm of funeral directors”? What might that be?
- The poet Dunn in “The Last Hours” appears to make his decision based on gut-level feelings about his job. Drawing from the description of the “last hours,” what were some of those feelings? Are feelings ever a reliable basis for vocational discernment? Are there times when they are not? Justify your answer.
- In thinking about Jonah, is happiness or contentment necessarily a part of calling? Discuss the real but problematic connection between a sense of calling to a task and the unpleasant nature of that task. Do people take on such tasks? How do they avoid discouragement, burnout, anger or despair, or do they?
- What is the nature of Jonah’s distress while he is in the belly of the whale? Is distress an important signal? Should it turn us back?
- Jonah experienced a drastic turning point. What, ultimately, turned him around—towards God’s calling? What does the metaphor of this turning point offer you?
- Why was Jonah angry with God at the end? How does it feel to work yourself out of a job? Can you understand Jonah’s frustration? What would you like to say to Jonah at this point?
- Could Jonah have controlled his destiny? Does he try? Does he ever cease trying? This story is framed within a strong Hebrew tradition of direct contingency (covenant) between God and human beings. To what extent is this belief prevalent in your thinking? Do you see any flaws in such “if-then” thinking?
- If a person’s sense of purpose and direction has potentially significant negative implications for others (as acknowledged in “A Letter to His Wife, 1861”), should that person reconsider? How would you weigh the implications of such a decision to make your decision?
- In Yevtushenko’s poem “Weddings,” what human responses to inevitability emerge? What comfort or help do they offer?
- What attitude or inner spirit is evident in Merton’s prayer? What attributes of God are acknowledged? How does Merton’s attitude depend on his beliefs about God?

Writing Assignment

- Read or research stories about Jews in Germany or Eastern Europe during World War II; e.g., Anne Frank, Simon Wiesenthal, Elie Wiesel, Victor Frankl. How did they survive the crisis of existential meaning during those days in which they had no control over what was happening to them? Summarize what you learn.
- Father Thomas Merton's life as a monk provided the world with great personal insight about the vulnerability of simply being a human being. Do some research on Merton, reading from his works, and analyze what it means to accept one's humanity, and why this might be the ultimate vocation.
- Research the psychological concept of "locus of control." What predictions are put forth about how human beings respond to outcomes in their lives? Develop a brief thought paper on this topic, including a comparison with perspectives from your religious tradition.

Journaling/Reflection

- Write about a significant event in your life over which you had little control? How did it affect your perspective on your life—purpose, direction, calling, if at all?
- Reflect on your sense of inter-generational calling. Are there qualities or talents that appear to have been passed on in your family that could guide you in vocational discernment?
- Have you ever wanted to just quit something on which you were working; e.g., a project, job, or major endeavor? Did you? Why or why not? What guided your decision? Can one be called to quit or leave, as in "The Last Hours" or is quitting always a defiance of calling as in the story of Jonah?
- What potential callings have you considered and then gone running, like Jonah, in another direction? Why did you run? Where are you now in your thinking about those other callings?
- Have you ever done the right thing for the wrong reasons and been disappointed in your success? Write about such a time in your life and what lesson it taught.

- Has a decision you made about your life ever caused difficulty for others, as in the letter Ballou wrote to his wife? How did you justify your decision to yourself? To others?
- Pray the Merton prayer aloud. Does it fit you? Write about the feelings, memories or images the prayer evokes in you.

Activities

- Just for fun, and the learning it can bring, divide the group into acting troupes of about five or six players. Have each troupe present the Jonah story—made contemporary—to the group. What fresh perspectives emerge from this exercise?

Movies

- ***Diary of Anne Frank*** (1959, NR, 180 minutes) The story of a young Jewish girl who, with her family and their friends is forced into hiding in an attic in Nazi-occupied Amsterdam.
Link: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0052738/>
- ***Sophie's Choice*** (1982, R, 150 minutes) Sophie is the survivor of Nazi concentration camps, who has found a reason to live in Nathan, a sparkling if unsteady American Jew obsessed with the Holocaust.
Link: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0084707/>
- ***The Miracle Worker*** (1962, NR, 106 minutes) The story of Anne Sullivan's struggle to teach Helen Keller how to communicate.
Link: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0056241/>

Session 15

How Shall I Tell the Story of My Life?

Readings

- Introduction
- Robert Frost "The Road Not Taken"
- Mary Catherine Bateson "Composing a Life Story"
- Wendell Berry from *Jayber Crow*
- John Steinbeck from *East of Eden*
- Dan McAdams "An American Life Story"
- Michael T. Kaufman "Robert McG. Thomas, 60, Chronicler of Unsung Lives"

Questions for Discussion

- How are the stories we tell about our lives affected by the passing of time? How are they affected by the listening audience? Think, for example, of how, when and to whom you might tell the story of your decision to attend a particular college or take a particular job.
- In Frost's "The Road Not Taken," what purpose was served by the narrator's thought that he might save the first path "for another day"? How realistic is such a thought? Explain. Does this kind of thinking about difficult choices seem familiar to you?
- Does the metaphor of "two roads" that diverge ring true for you as an image of vocational discernment? If not, why not? If so, what is helpful about this image?
- Do you think the poet believes that the narrator of the poem really did make an either/or choice that day in the woods? Consider how the narrator, telling the story years later, looks back "with a sigh." Might he have told this story differently at other points in his life?
- According to Mary Catherine Bateson, how might a life be like a work of visual art and how like a musical composition? How does the focus change for each of these similes? Which do you find more helpful in thinking about your life? Why? What additional help does life-as-story add?

- Does American culture have a paradigmatic story line to which we all, in one way or another, tend to subscribe? Think about our various cultural heroes and heroines.
- What difference does it make whether we tell the stories of our lives as continuous (linear, progressive) or discontinuous (unpatterned, circular)? Does it change anything about us? Is continuity a myth or a norm?
- What are the characteristics of a “conversion” narrative and how do they compare with the characteristics of a “redemptive” narrative? (Consult Bateson and McAdams for background.) What descriptive and/or utilitarian purpose does either perspective serve in the composition of a life-story?
- Jayber Crow (Wendell Berry) uses a loosely religious framework to tell his story. What benefit does he derive from viewing his life as a pilgrimage, often mistaken and surprising to him, but also “led”?
- Does retrospection change one’s view, as it does Jayber’s? Compare with Frost’s poem “The Road Not Taken.” Which end of time, so to speak, is more “true” –the immediate or the long range—when composing a life?
- What universal human motive does Steinbeck identify to support his notion that we all live within one story—the struggle between good and evil? Explain the connection. Why does everyone not do good then?
- Would you characterize the story of humanity differently from Steinbeck? How would you frame the universal composition? Is such a notion helpful in the understanding of individual lives?
- Is the duality (good versus evil) proposed as the one-story framework for human beings culture-bound (western) or is it a universal motif? Offer examples.
- According to Steinbeck, how ought one to lead a life that matters? Do you agree? Are there persons whose lives were not mourned at the time of their deaths, but were later revered?
- Have you ever felt relieved when someone died, or can you imagine that feeling? What circumstances lead to those kinds of feelings?
- Do you agree with McAdams that “redemptive narratives” are exuberant and distinctively American? How so? Is there a peculiarly American redemption story line that may not resemble stories of redemption in

other cultures? If so think so, what are the features of American versions of redemption? What do “good” Americans do, according to McAdams? Can you relate to these ideas? Why or why not?

- What is the meaning of “generativity,” Erik Erikson’s name for the chief developmental concern of people in mid-life? In what ways is generativity healthy and mature, and in what ways a virtue? Are all aspects of generativity positive, or does it also carry some negative pressures and consequences?
- Is suffering generally redemptive and generative? Does this perspective provide any kind of motivation for individuals or for societies who are suffering? What is problematic about telling one’s story this way?
- What role does ideology (religious or other) play in the lives of highly generative persons? What inner conflicts may emerge from this focus on ideology?
- How is the issue of personal control played out in the lives of highly generative persons? Is guilt an important motivator for these persons?
- What, in McAdams’ analysis, is the “dark side of American redemption”?
- In Kaufman’s obituary of Robert McG. Thomas, why are the deeper truths of people’s lives sometimes invisible to others until highlighted at their death?
- To what life legacies was Robert McG. Thomas particularly attentive, judging by the selections shared from obituaries he wrote?
- What was distinctive; i.e., what mattered, about Robert McG. Thomas’ life—as told by Michael Kaufman? Do you sense a particular narrative framework; e.g., pilgrimage, redemption, comedy, tragedy, etc.?
- How do you fit the idea of “truth” into the notion of constructed narratives about our own lives or the lives of others? Beyond basic facts, how can we get closer to what is true about our own lives or another’s?

Writing Assignments

- Following Mary Catherine Bateson’s ideas about “composing a life story,” write a vocational narrative of your life or that of someone you know well. That is, describe the meaning, purpose and direction of a life as it is taking form. Choose a title that captures the dominant theme of that life.

- Research the public response to the death of someone publicly held up as evil; e.g., Hitler or Timothy McVeigh. Summarize your findings, analyzing the nature of the responses to someone whose death was not mourned by many.

Journaling/Reflection

- Write about a major decision that you made in the past. Try writing different paragraphs to different persons in your life—your parents, your friend or partner, your teacher, a stranger, and see how you tweak the description. Then write someone else’s description (from your imagination) of the same event.
- What narrative genre best fits the way you see your life story? For example, is your life primarily comedy or tragedy? Conversion or redemption narrative? Mystery, adventure or pilgrimage? Reflect on your answer with some examples.
- Think of your life, for the moment, as a pilgrimage (similar to Jayber Crow). What quest or life lesson seems to be at stake?
- Write about someone whose death affected you deeply. Looking back from their death, how would you tell their story to others? Does it fit, in any way, in the “one story” of humanity (Steinbeck)?
- Describe a person you know to be highly generative. Does McAdams’ description of highly generative people fit with your personal experience? How do you see yourself in this light?
- Create a Robert McG. Thomas-style obituary for someone you know (not necessarily dead or dying). What ordinary or invisible features will you seek to make visible? Why are those important?

Activities

- Introduction stories: Have each member of your group (or teams) design an interesting ice-breaker that could be used for introducing a group of strangers to each other. Try to elicit short but revealing narratives by means of the game. Try these out in the group, and enjoy the variety of narratives that emerge. Even if you know each other well, you may learn something new!
- Life plots: Taking a sheet of blank paper, plot your lifeline, starting from the lower left edge. Include turns and curves, steps, hills, ravines, circles,

backtrackings and forward movement, or whatever else strikes your imagination. Enhance your drawing with labels, signs, landmarks, etc., that help to tell your life story. Share these pictures with your group and discuss the continuous or discontinuous sense of patterning. Reflect on the “art” and “music” of your composition.

- Watch *The Color Purple* as a group and discuss it as a redemptive narrative. Who is redeemed and how? Is this a helpful narrative framework for Black Americans or other under-represented groups?
- Collect obituaries that contain some details of a person’s life story. (You may have done this for an earlier assignment.) As a group, look for elements of these personal stories that may have been relatively invisible until brought to light at the person’s death. What narrative genres seem to emerge?

Movies

- ***The Color Purple*** (1985, PG-13, 154 minutes) The life and trials of a young African American woman.
Link: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0088939/>
- ***The Apostle*** (1997, PG-13, 134 minutes) After his happy life spins out of control, a preacher from Texas changes his name, goes to Louisiana and starts preaching on the radio.
Link: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0118632/>
- ***The Straight Story*** (1999, G, 112 minutes) An old man makes a long journey by tractor to mend his relationship with an ill brother.
Link: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0166896/>
- ***Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*** (2004, R, 108 minutes) A couple (Jim Carrey and Kate Winslet) undergo a procedure to erase each other from their memories when their relationship turns sour, but it is only through the process of loss that they discover what they had to begin with. Link: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0338013/>
- ***Saint Maybe*** (1998, PG) A lonely teen (Thomas McCarthy) troubled by a past family tragedy is suspicious of his sister-in-law (Mary-Louise Parker), believing she is being unfaithful. His confrontation with his brother sets off a series of tragic events. Link: <http://imdb.com/title/tt0168156/>