CHAPTER 9

# LEARNING TO BLOOM WHERE YOU'RE PLANTED

## *Adapting Vocation to the Specifics of Place*

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In the winter of 2008 I experienced something I never expected: a vocation crisis.[1] I'm one of those folks who has everything planned out long-term. I knew I wanted to be a history professor from my first days of college. After a lifetime in the Catholic ghetto in Detroit, I knew where I would teach too: a Jesuit school—not too conservative, relatively close to my family. I allowed for the fact that I couldn't choose the exact spot; I did have a Ph.D. in the humanities after all. But there are twenty-eight Jesuit colleges and universities in the United States. Surely I would land at one of them.

But in the winter of 2008, two years out from my time as a Lilly Fellow at Valparaiso University, I wasn't at a Jesuit school, or even a Catholic school. I was at Roanoke College, a nominally Lutheran, small liberal arts college in Southwest Virginia. And I had just realized that I had not been invited to a campus interview for my dream job. I was devastated. At that point, I didn't know how I could make my vocation work in this place that seemed so unsuited to it.

Before I go any further, I want to interject here that my job is a great one by any standard. Roanoke College is vibrant, and I have great freedom in what I teach and when. It is also located in one of the most beautiful regions of the country. This isn't a cry for help; thankfully, my vocation crisis ended well. This is, instead, a story about how one lowly Christian teacher/scholar, who thought she knew everything

1 This essay originated as a talk given at the 2010 Lilly Postdoctoral Fellows reunion conference at Valparaiso University. Henold was a Lilly Fellow from 2003 to 2005.

there was to know about her vocation, came to realize that she didn't know jack. At the center of that story is the concept of "place."

My story starts in the winter of 2008 with my teaching. Serendipitously, at the same time as my vocation crisis, I was undertaking two new teaching projects that were separate, but related. The first was a senior research seminar with the theme, "City and Suburb." In it we traced the history of urban and suburban spaces in America, particularly nineteenth- and twentieth-century suburbanization and urban decline. At the same time, I was prepping a three-week May term course called "History Detectives," in which we explored the history of one of Roanoke's historic neighborhoods by researching the histories of individual houses and the people who had lived in them. Now, neither of these subjects are what I studied in graduate school, but they are intriguing to me, so I started to read. To teach these classes I needed to dip my toe into (what I would come to learn was) a vast literature in the fields of cultural geography, spatial history, and the history of landscape, among others. As I read and planned and taught, I saw connections between my vocation issues and this new way of looking at my discipline and, indeed, the space around me.

In my seminar we started with two very basic concepts. The first can be found in a quotation from the book, *Key Thinkers on Space and Place*: "Culture not only takes place, but makes place."[2] This quotation, from three cultural geographers, argues that human culture not only "takes place," that is, exists in time, but "makes place," that is, imprints meaning on the spaces it encounters. Our actions define what a place is, with the caveat that such definitions are relative, ever changing, and heavily influenced by the exercise of power.

The first concept, then, invites students to analyze places to reveal specific cultures and how they change over time. But the second concept offers a different challenge to students. Undoubtedly, people make places by giving meaning to the spaces they encounter and live in, but the reverse is also true: Places make us. The character of a space, the choices we make to shape a space, the meanings we impose upon spaces—ultimately, these shape our own behavior. A classic example of this is the attached garage. Created for convenience sake, the attached garage has certainly kept many a suburban commuter dry and comfortable, but that architectural choice also has contributed to a de-

2 Phil Hubbard, Rob Kitchin, and Gill Valentine, eds., *Key Thinkers on Space and Place* (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2004), 7.

cline in community. Who knew that the twenty steps from your car to your front door could be so crucial to maintaining connections with your neighbors? So one of the concepts my students and I wrestled with was the fact that constructions of place can affect behavior.

So, what does this second concept have to do with vocation? This is going to be a bit circuitous, but bear with me. When I was a Lilly Fellow at Valparaiso University, my cohort had many, many conversations about the nature of vocation. These discussions, some formal, many informal, helped me refine my own specific vocation as a teacher/scholar who hoped to teach in a Catholic institution. By necessity, these conversations were completely divorced from the concept of place. We didn't know where we were going to end up (if we were going to end up anywhere). So I did an awful lot of supposing. Not inclined to think about worse case scenarios, as this would just send me over the edge, I built up in my mind a complete picture of my vocation in a Catholic school. That was what I felt called to, and, in the absence of further information, that was what I was going to go with.

When I look back on it, I am reminded of an image described by landscape historian John Brinckerhoff Jackson in his essay, "A Sense of Place, A Sense of Time." He talks about recent efforts to reclaim downtowns and recreate a sense of place. But, he says, imagine you're in one of these downtowns late at night, and you are in your car sitting at a red light: "The dominant feature of the scene is not the cluster of magnificent forms and spaces; it is the long and empty view of evenly spaced, periodically changing red and green traffic lights. . . . The sameness of the American landscape overwhelms and liberates you from any sense of place."[3] Jackson was commenting on the generic nature of our grid system, but for me the image becomes a metaphor. The Lilly Fellows program was my red light, another stop—a welcome one, certainly—on the long open road to my vocation.

Being a Lilly post-doc fellow liberated me from the specificity of place and the complications it brings, at least temporarily. I saw in front of me a series of pauses; maybe I wouldn't get that perfect job right away, but I would get there eventually. I saw no places on the road because I didn't think they could change what I knew God wanted me to do. Wherever I landed was going to be the right place for me or it wasn't, and if that was the case, I would expect to leave it. Grant-

3 John Brinckerhoff Jackson, *A Sense of Place, A Sense of Time* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 152.

ed, this isn't what I *said out loud*. You can't say that out loud and get a job. What I said was: "I'll bloom where I'm planted." And I said this often, to others and to myself. But I know now that I didn't really mean it. I was sure that God was going to get me to the right place (aka the place I wanted) eventually.

The problem with this approach was made clear to me in a rather dramatic fashion when I sought some help to deal with my vocation crisis that winter. I'll have you know, it's a measure of the impact that the Lilly Fellows program had on me that I went to the college's Lutheran chaplain for help. Understand that we had never even had a long conversation, certainly not a personal one. He was coming at this having no preconceptions based on a shared history. And so I sat in his office with a box of tissues and poured forth my tale of woe. I don't remember exactly what I said, but I'm sure it went something like, "But I'm not supposed to be here! I'm supposed to be at a *Catholic* school." When I was finished he let the silence fall for a second, and then he said, "So let me get this right—you've been assuming all this time that you're going to be called home to work in the mothership." An odd metaphor, but I nodded. "But" he said, "Mary, what if you're not called to be in the mothership at all. What if you're called to be a missionary?"

I think my jaw actually dropped open. This was an insight that broke my world wide open, mainly because it hit me in the middle of my enormous blind spot about place. I knew what it meant to have a vocation in the Catholic mothership; I'd talked about that endlessly at Valparaiso. But what did it mean to be a missionary? Neither he nor I viewed it in the sense of a call to proselytize. Rather, he was inviting me to consider that God might not be calling me to do my work in a place that is familiar and comfortable, chock full of people like myself. God might be inviting me to come to my work as a stranger in a strange land—alive to a new landscape and the possibilities that come with it; forced to look for opportunities to live out my vocation and start something new, rather than settle into my expected path; invited to listen and learn from this new place and the people in it; and most important of all, *allowing this place to change me*.

I always presumed that my vocation would *fulfill* me—and those are the terms in which I thought about it—but it was an entirely new, and very risky, proposition to think that the places our vocations take us will *change us* as we grow into them, particularly if, at first glance, your new place doesn't seem to fit you. The notion that the place you

land in could change your vocation may seem obvious, but it wasn't to me. I had rooted my vocation in the weakest kind of faith, based on a foundation of certainty. I knew what God wanted for me. But what I really needed as a foundation for my vocation was meditation on God's *mystery*. I wish I had been praying to welcome the unknown and unknowable, the possibility of being turned into someone I could not yet understand, by God's grace.

This was the starting point for the reassessment of my vocation. With the help of the chaplain, I felt I was ready to start adapting to Roanoke as the place where my vocation would be rooted. But I was rather at sea about how to adapt a vocation to a specific place. I'm sure there's a book somewhere that could have helped me with it, but at the time I was on my own. What do you do when you find yourself a stranger in a strange land, vocationally speaking, *and you realize that you're not going anywhere*? For the remainder of the essay I'm going to answer this question by sharing from my own experience. The easiest way to do this is to talk about the problems I faced and continue to face, and how I've worked to address each one through the process of adapting my vocation to the specifics of place.

*Problem #1: The tools I need to fulfill my vocation as a Catholic teacher/scholar are not here.*

Here's how I would have described my imagined vocation while I was at Valpo: I would work in a Catholic university where I'd be immersed in Catholic tradition, culture, and politics. Ever present, these would continually inform my teaching and research. The majority of my students would probably be Catholic, so we would be working from a base of shared experience. My teaching would be coming out of my abiding love of my church mixed with my deep anger and frustration with it. My goal would be to teach young Catholics, particularly Catholic women, to consider their faith and community honestly and without fear, facing what needs to be faced in pursuit of justice, while embracing what is life-giving about their faith.

In my first few years in Roanoke, one of the biggest challenges I faced was that I felt almost completely cut off from Catholic culture, or at least Catholic culture as I knew it. I live and work in Southern Baptist country, in a Lutheran school. While religious faith certainly is present at the college, it's not a prominent aspect of campus life. Moreover, there are only four Catholic parishes in the Roanoke Valley. I have always lived in the North, where there were dozens of parishes

from which to choose, allowing for Catholics to sort themselves out by politics. The four parish options in town appeared to me to range from moderately conservative to very conservative indeed. I tried not to panic.

My first strategy was to remind myself that I don't need to be in a Catholic place to pursue my vocation. After all, I was brought to Roanoke College to teach American history, which was my first love as an academic. I'm not teaching explicitly about faith most of the time, but my goals are still similar. I'm teaching young people to look more closely at their expectations and assumptions, to question what they know, to observe how people have treated each other in the past and how my students relate to others in the world now. I still teach about justice and injustice. I try to help them understand what is broken in our world and aspire to repair it, to find what is beautiful in human history and celebrate it. Spending more time thinking about what's at the center of my vocation helped.

But I still felt a desire to teach and talk about Catholicism with Catholic students. Here the solution was opening my eyes and paying attention to what was actually on my campus instead of moping. One of the first things the chaplain asked was whether I had tried to reach out to the Catholic students on campus. Although they weren't very active, Catholic students made up 19 percent of the student body at that time and represented the largest denomination on campus. Rather embarrassed, I admitted that I hadn't. In the following year, I happened to spend a day on Catholic women in a women's history class; three students seemed particularly interested. I emailed the students, all Catholic as it turned out, and asked if they'd want to meet regularly outside of class to do readings on the history of Catholic women. That tentative email led to one of the most fulfilling teaching experiences of my career thus far. I met with these three women every two weeks for three years, watching them mature, change, and grow in faith. What started as something academic morphed through their initiative into what they needed—a faith-sharing group where they could talk with me and each other about their lives and faith in the context of their education. They too were strangers in a strange land, and they needed me. I take the lesson they taught me as a gift: If I am open to the possibilities that Providence might put in my way, I will have chances to live out my vocation as a Catholic teacher/scholar at a Lutheran institution.

But this still left the question of the lack of a larger Catholic community for my family outside of the college. As it turned out, I had

dismissed the Roanoke Valley's Catholic community too quickly. We spent seven years at a parish that had much to teach us about diversity and service. We then discovered that a second parish, one that we rejected as untenable after a single visit when we first arrived, was actually a pretty good fit for our family. Now that we have settled in, I've come to appreciate how the limited number of parishes forces Catholics of different mindsets to worship together. Less isolated and insular, we are called to make peace and truly enact Christian community. What at first seemed frightening, a problem of scarcity, has turned out to be a blessing.

Finally, I realized that I needed to have a lifeline to Christian teacher/scholars in the larger academic community. I am a representative to the Lilly Fellows National Network, and attending the annual conferences rejuvenates me. I also chose to get back on social media after a lengthy absence, mainly so that I could stay connected with other Catholic teacher/scholars around the country who share my interests and my vocation. When I lose focus, forgetting at times that I have my own unique call to fulfill in this place, these connections remind me who I am and what I'm about.

*Problem #2: This place is Lutheran. I'm not Lutheran.*

When you accept a Lilly Fellows post-doc, you are committing to being trained in a very particular skill set. Our training prepares us to go into all sorts of institutions of higher learning and be a bit of a nudge. We are to listen, ask questions, and most important, facilitate conversations. Someone in the faculty needs to keep an eye on the ball, that is, to ask *what is this institution actually doing?* Is it fulfilling its promises? Is it following its mission? Is it fostering good will and charity in its faculty, students, and staff? Is it living up to its best principles? How can we help faculty, students, and staff realize this mission better?

One of the challenges I faced, which was a factor in my vocation crisis, was that I did not know how to be that presence as a Catholic, not only at a Lutheran institution, but also at one that did not have a strong religious identity. I knew that the then president and dean saw my background as a Lilly Fellow as an asset, but that others on campus were wary of any effort they might construe as trying to make the campus "more Lutheran." This all seemed perplexing to me since I was the last person with the ability to make any campus more Luther-

an; I knew next to nothing about Lutheranism. One of the great ironies of my last year at Valparaiso was that my dear friend in the program, a Lutheran theologian, landed at a Jesuit school, and I, with a Jesuit education and a specialty in Catholic history, ended up at a Lutheran school. (Where is the plan here, God?) I didn't see how I could be the kind of person that Roanoke College needed; the situation was too complicated and fraught. I didn't know how to proceed, and leaving to go to the mothership seemed much easier.

Once again, though, the new space—this Lutheran space—was going to help me adapt. Once I knew I was going to stay, I tried to pull together what I knew about being Lutheran, mainly from observing the Lutheran academics who have mentored me. It is at this point that I will disclaim any pretense of expertise in Lutheran theology. I do this on purpose, not only because I don't want to be taken to task later for anything I say, but also because I want to demonstrate that lack of knowledge cannot be a barrier to engaging in conversations about Lutheran academic communities if you find yourself in one, nor would any Lutheran I know want it to be.

In my time in Lutheran institutions I have picked up two ideas that helped me, as a Catholic, contribute to my new community. The first is about vocation. In my second and final year at Valparaiso University, I was teaching a seminar called"1970s America" in Christ College, the honors college. As is typical, on the first day I asked the students to tell me why they were in the class. The first student, a senior, said in her most jaded tone, "It was the only one without 'vocation' in the title." The whole room erupted in laughter, myself included. In Catholic culture, the word is mainly associated with the call to vowed religious life. Laypeople also have vocations, of course, but this parlance reinforces the idea that a vocation is a "higher calling," reserved for special individuals. No such restrictions could be seen at Valparaiso, where an awareness of vocation was taught not only to the Lilly Fellows, but across many levels, particularly in Christ College. All were encouraged to tease out their callings, to find the work to which they were best suited and which met the needs of the world. And while my student revealed some communal eye-rolling on the topic after four years of intense exposure, no doubt the students were deeply affected by the challenge to view their futures in the light of God's unique call. I may not have understood the intricacies of Lutheran theology, but helping

others think more deeply about their vocations was a project I could support enthusiastically.

The second idea is certainly not limited to Lutheranism, but it is how I have seen the faith lived in practice as I have taken up residence in Lutheran spaces. Time and again I have been extended invitations to engage in ecumenical dialogue and form community. The Lilly Fellows Network itself was an invitation, conceived by a Lutheran over twenty-five years ago, for people of different faiths to gather in conversation and through those conversations, strengthen their own missions. I was invited, as an ecumenically-ignorant Ph.D., to enter such a conversation for two years, and it transformed me. Another Lutheran, my mentor at Valpo, invited me to teach my research on Catholics in this Lutheran setting; he himself is a Lutheran who spent his whole career in the field of Catholic studies. He showed me how to exist in multiple worlds and find bridges between them. When I had my crisis, it was Roanoke's chaplain who reminded me that my call might be to connect with people unlike myself. He was calling me to let the mothership go, and again step into ecumenical dialogue.

I realized that my call in this place was to start a Mentoring for Mission program, a program to mentor new faculty and assist other faculty members to engage with the college's mission. My status as a "stranger" was an asset in this project, not a liability. As a Catholic, I could lead discussions about the college's Lutheran heritage as an outsider, a non-threatening way to invite the other, almost entirely non-Lutheran faculty, to consider how they might connect with this tradition. We designed the program as a series of conversations, of which Lutheranism was only one component. Together we discuss questions fundamental to our work: What does it mean to educate the whole person? How can we live out our vocations as teacher/scholars? How can we forward questions of vocation for our students? Leading this program has been a way to promote meaningful conversation about work, community, and the future of our institution. And I thank the participants at the end of every year with these words: "In taking the time to talk about your own vocations, you are helping me fulfill my own."

*Problem 3: I'm a stranger here, and I do not yet love this place.*

I was so busy in my first three years, between working for tenure and having my first child, that I didn't have a lot of energy to explore. Consequently, I felt disconnected in Roanoke and still, literally, out

of place. The solution crept up on me, and, surprisingly, it originated with my teaching. I fell in love with the history of my community, and, through that, the place became my own. It was really teaching my neighborhood history class that did it. I took students into my own neighborhood to discover its history. I didn't actually know that history myself beyond the basic outlines, so it was a journey of discovery for all of us. As my students worked in the archives, uncovering the history of the houses they'd chosen and each inhabitant, I was doing the same for my own 1925 home. I learned the story of Mae, a single teacher who had the house built, her elderly mother, and later her husband the landscaper. I learned also of the brother who moved in during the 1930s after his wife died, bringing his young daughter with him. (And I kept looking around at my three-bedroom house wondering where they all slept!) I learned all this from the census, deed cards, and city directories. Then I happened to chat about this one day with my elderly next door neighbor. "Oh, sure," she said. "I knew Mae." And then she proceeded to tell me everything I had already learned and then some. "Your peonies over there, Mae planted those. And her husband put in your giant magnolia. And the brother, Edison, he built the back stairs" (which actually explained a lot). By teaching the history of the place, I began to claim it. My love of history made this space a place in which I could do meaningful work.

Roanoke College is actually ideally suited for this to happen. It is more conscious of its history than any campus I've ever seen. Students and new faculty are given a very funny lecture and tour focusing on the college's history in orientation. All sorts of rituals exist around certain monuments on the quad, which are passed from student to student. Students and faculty actually know the words to the alma mater and sing it. This strong sense of history was one of the things that drew me to the college in the first place. I'm not suggesting that history will be the means to accomplish this for everyone. I merely suggest finding what it is that binds you to a community that might be made stronger through the act of teaching.

*Finally, Problem #4: "It's only temporary."*

You may think that this problem solved itself; after all, I wasn't going anywhere. But while the reality of the situation now seemed clear, psychologically my husband and I just weren't there yet. When the dream job didn't materialize, my husband and I realized that our mindset had been pretty unhealthy. We'd been living in the future, refusing to put

down roots in Roanoke because we wanted to leave, answering every question about the future with, "Well, *if* we're here two, or three, or five years from now . . ." It became a secret to conceal, our refusal to commit to the community in which we lived. We had also become wrapped up in our own little family, an easy thing to do with a newborn.

We sat down and talked, deciding that we would go on from this point assuming that Roanoke would be our permanent home. That was the solution. It cost a lot to do that, not just dreams of teaching in a Catholic school, but also dreams of moving back to Rochester where we met. But the payoff was worth it. My husband could now settle into *his* teaching job, at a Catholic grade school he really liked, with the knowledge that I wouldn't drag him away from it. Again. We began reaching out to our neighbors, even the ones who, on the surface, had little in common with us. We started planting perennials in our garden and fruit vines that can't be harvested for two or three years. The act of committing made all the difference.

Four major problems, four solutions derived from the unique place I inhabit, a vocation now very much in process. By allowing my vocation to change with the specificity of place, I believe I can say—with honesty now—that I learned to bloom where I was planted.

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## Questions for Discussion

1. How did you come to work at a Lutheran college or university? In what ways were you drawn to it—or not? In what ways are you growing into it—or not?
2. How might (re)connecting vocation with place help the vocational discernment of your students, or your own sense of being called?
3. Henold writes of coming to appreciate her vocation "as a stranger in a strange land." What "outsider,""different," or even "strange" perspectives do you bring to Lutheran higher education? What do these perspectives enable you to see or do regarding the mission of your school or the vocation of Lutheran higher education?
4. How does your own discipline or the particular courses that you teach inform the teaching of (or your understanding of) vocation?