

## Vocation: A multi-dimensional and interfaith approach

Missional commitments to “the faith and values of the Lutheran church” and to “intentional diversity” enable Augsburg University to remain rooted in a robust tradition while being open to insights from other faith and non-faith traditions.<sup>1</sup> Augsburg learns from other religious perspectives on vocation *because*, not *in spite of* its Lutheran roots.

Prompted by insights from other faith traditions, many of them represented in its various constituencies, Augsburg offers a series of metaphors to talk about calling: place, path, people, lens, and story. None of these metaphors is exclusive; rather, each enriches the others. Though many metaphors appear in each tradition, one dominates.

**Vocation as place:** The metaphor of **place** is most at home in the Lutheran tradition, reflecting Martin Luther’s (1483-1546) revolutionary argument that God equally values all roles, that of parent as well as priest, that of shoemaker, brewer, baker as well as monk or nun.<sup>2</sup> The metaphor place underscores the importance of **roles** that one inhabits, along with their attendant responsibilities. Understanding this dimension of vocation cultivates the sense that “I’m in the right place.”

Vocation as place appears on the vPortfolio as a tab linking to a **resume** or **curriculum vitae** listing roles with their attendant responsibilities. E.g., Assistant buyer at Target from 2012-2014 with the following duties....”

**Vocation as path:** The metaphor of path surfaces more prominently elsewhere. If Jesus is “the Way,” his disciples want to be on it. North African bishop Augustine of Hippo regarded the whole of the Christian life as pilgrimage (*peregrination*), and the founder of the Society of Jesus (the Jesuits) Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556) integrated the metaphor of pilgrimage into his order. Ignatius designed the *Spiritual Exercises* as a way of imaginatively placing disciples on the journey with Jesus. Hopefully, they “catch the rhyme” between their own experience and the one whom they follow.

Islam identifies pilgrimage as one of the five pillars of the faith, the *hajj*. Commended to every Muslim once in the course of her lifetime, the *hajj* retraces the journeys of Hajar, Ishmail, and Ibrahim. The “way of the Prophet,” the *sunnah*, a summary of the teachings of Mohammed, becomes a way of life for his followers.

In this paradigm, the journey is as important as the destination. Knowing next steps matters. Vocation as path emphasizes the importance of **goals**, short-term, mid-range, and long-term goals. Understanding this dimension of vocation cultivates the sense that “I’m on the right path....”

Vocation as path appears on the vPortfolio as a tab identifying the candidate’s short-term, mid-range, and long-term **goals**, as well as the strategies in place to implement these goals.

**Vocation as people:** This metaphor refers to the relationships or communities that claim us, as well as the relationships or communities that we claim. This metaphor of people might be more at home in a Confucian worldview, where it exists at the interface between the two virtues of *ren* and *li*. Combining the two Chinese characters for “two” and “person,” *ren* describes five relationships ingredient in Confucian culture, that between parent and child, older and younger siblings, husband and wife, older and younger friend, ruler and subject.

*Li* then depicts what constitutes “right conduct” in each of these relationships: kindness in the parent and filial piety in the child, gentility in the older sibling and respect in the younger; affectionate behavior in the husband and sincerity in the wife; human consideration in the older friend and deference in the younger, benevolence in ruler and loyalty in subjects. Together, these two virtues shape Confucian society.

Understanding this metaphor of vocation invites reflection on relationships, specifically family, advisors, mentors, coaches, or guides who might then be approached as **contacts** for recommendations or networking. Understanding this dimension of vocation cultivates the sense that “You the people who have helped me be my best self.”

Vocation as relationships appears on the vPortfolio as a tab listing **contacts, networks, recommendations**, prompting the candidate to reflect about what each contact might add to the whole picture.

**Vocation as lens:** The metaphor of lens might be more at home in Hindu and Buddhist worldviews, underscoring the point-of-view one has on the world. Hinduism offers a bi-focal angle of vision, bringing both individual and cosmos into view. The *Bhagavadgita* stresses the “fit” (*svabhava*) between identity and action, i.e., “who I am” and “what I do.” At the same time, the *Gita* speaks of the “fit” between the individual and larger networks of belonging: the family, society, the earth, even the cosmos (*svadharma*). Disciples train their eyes to see from both perspectives simultaneously.

Buddhism offers the lens of compassion as a means of transformation: “to change the world, you need to change the way you look at the world.” The Noble Eightfold Path functions as a series of eye exercises which train disciples in compassion for all beings. Through the lens of compassion, one awakens to the interdependence and inter-being of the whole of life.

This metaphor emphasizes **identity** or angle-of-vision, asking the candidate to reflect on where she stands and what she stands for. Understanding this dimension of vocation cultivates the sense that “This is who I am; this is what I stand for; this is who I stand with.”

Vocation as lens appears on the vPortfolio as a series of tabs: Introduction or Home, Personal Mission Statement, Skill & Strengths – with evidence.

**Vocation as story:** Finally, the metaphor of story plays into the narrative arc of many traditions. “In the beginning, God....” begins the first creation story in the Hebrew Bible. The Torah goes on to narrate the covenants between God and God’s people,

covenants with Noah, Abraham, and Moses. Alongside laws governing relationships to God and humans (*halakah*), Jews have stories (*haggadah*), literally, “the telling.” In absence of a stable homeland, Jews locate themselves in stories. The story of the exodus from Egypt is re-told and re-enacted every year at Passover around a meal. Remembering this story of liberation, Jews are re-membered into a community of promise.

Understanding this dimension of vocation offers an invitation to take agency and be the author of one’s own story. To do that, people must first discover they have a story to tell. Authoring one’s own public leadership narrative creates **agency**. It comes at the intersection of three stories: the story of self, the story of us, and the story of “the fierce urgency of now” (MLK Jr).<sup>3</sup>

Vocation as story appears in the vPortfolio as a tab marking the candidate’s Public Leadership Narrative, a brief introduction to the story leaders tell others about their own lives and motivations to lead.

Place, path, people, lens, and story: no one of these metaphors captures the thick language of calling embedded in these traditions, but all can be deployed to help illumine students better understand the role of vocation in their own lives.

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<sup>1</sup> Key Lutheran theological values of “epistemological humility,” the conviction that one tradition does not and cannot have all the answers, and the call to be “always in the process of being reformed” (*semper reformanda*) ground an institutional ability to be both “rooted and open.”

<sup>2</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer identified these roles as “places of responsibility,” where one might serve both God and neighbor.

<sup>3</sup> We have found Marshall Ganz’s work and workshops helpful in developing these three narratives. Cf., Ganz, “Why Stories Matter,” (*Sojourners*, March 2009).

[https://sites.middlebury.edu/organize/files/2014/08/Ganz\\_WhyStoriesMatter\\_2009.pdf](https://sites.middlebury.edu/organize/files/2014/08/Ganz_WhyStoriesMatter_2009.pdf)

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