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## **Introduction: Listening**

In Listening Hearts: Discerning Our Call in Community, a guide book about vocation and spirituality, the four authors of the book write: “unlike the boy, Samuel, who said, ‘Speak, Lord, for your servant listens’ (1 Sam. 3:10), we often pray ‘Listen, Lord, for your servant speaks.’ But prayer, especially prayer for discernment, involves listening” (32). This year as Lilly Vocational Intern has been, for me, a year of listening. And through listening—to my co-workers in collaborative efforts; to students as I helped them discern their post-graduate plans or connected them with civic engagement activities; to mentors and those I look up to; to my own vocational inklings and callings—I have been able to set a solid intellectual, spiritual, and civic foundation on which I can build the rest of my professional and personal aspirations.

My work at the Center for Experiential Learning fell mostly under the auspices of the Career Connections and Civic Engagement program areas, though I often collaborated with the other two program areas of the CEL, Internships and Entrepreneurship/Social Innovation. The first task handed to me this year was to figure out what the Lilly Vocational Intern position would look like, as this was the first year of the Sustainability Grant—no small task for a recent college graduate trying to navigate the throes of the post-college world!

As I put together plans for workshops, ongoing appointments, retreats, and civic engagement activities, it became clear to me that this undertaking was the ultimate exercise in listening. I listened to the mission of the CEL: “to create and facilitate experiential learning that complements the St. Olaf curriculum to enrich students' academic programs and guide students in the process for pursuing vocational goals.” I listened to vision of the Lilly Sustainability Grant, which seeks to “help the College transition and institutionalize some of the vocational exploration programs and services instituted during the original grant period.” I also had to listen to the ways the different programs in the CEL had worked together in the past, how they sought to work together in the future, and how I might fit into these frameworks that already existed. I listened to students' needs and desires, especially in the planning of retreats and activities.

Finally, I listened to my own ideas and strengths, intertwining my own calls to service and the needs of students and programs. On our CEL staff retreat, we took and discussed Gallup's StrengthsFinder inventory, and worked throughout the year to use our top strengths (my top three were empathy, positivity, and “developer”) in all the work that we did. To me, this was an exercise in exploring vocation, and embodied the CEL's integration of vocation in all that it does. In discovering a new way to look at my strengths and see how they could be used in my work, I was able to live out Frederick Buechner's well-known concept of “[my] deep gladness meet[ing] the world's deep need.”

## **Programmatic Connections**

I have divided the programmatic work I did this year into two sections—Career Connections and Civic Engagement—because, as mentioned above, these are the two program areas with which I

most frequently collaborated. However, it was sometimes difficult to tell which was which, as I often tried to bridge aspects of the two programs and sought the collaboration and insight of co-workers from other CEL programs. Finally, I will discuss my work in the CEL that fell solely under the auspice of vocational exploration, an important aspect of my work with students and my own development.

### *Career Connections*

Working with the Career Connections program this year solidified my vocational calling to, as Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, “help [students] become the people they are capable of becoming.” My favorite part of this work was individual appointments or small group work with students, during which I could help students find a spark, a strength, an interest, or a vocational inkling, and help them find the tools to realize their visions. Sometimes this involved a heavy dose of reality (there is a career *path* to becoming the director of a non-profit—it doesn’t happen the year after you graduate), other times it involved freeing a student’s imagination (there are many ways to use your skills as a social entrepreneur), and other times it involved familiarizing a student with his or her own strengths or making concrete plans for the future. All were rewarding.

I found that I was able to connect this way with students in workshops as well, but on a broader and more basic level. I collaborated with career counselor Kirsten Cahoon on a workshop called Identifying and Searching for Careers in Nonprofits, which took place both fall and spring semesters, and with career counselor Raschel Rask on the Identifying Vocational Interests workshop series. Working with Kirsten and Raschel on these workshops empowered me to gain expertise on vocation and nonprofit and social service careers, and encouraged students to seek me out for individual counseling appointments or further conversation. I also put together a workshop on Vocational Discernment and Post-Graduate Service in the fall, and collaborated with student groups and academic programs in the spring to host a Feminist and Social Justice Careers workshop (collaboration with V-Week student group), a Volunteer Network career panel (collaboration with Volunteer Network student group), and the Social Work and Family Studies Career Night (collaboration with Social Work and Family Studies academic department).

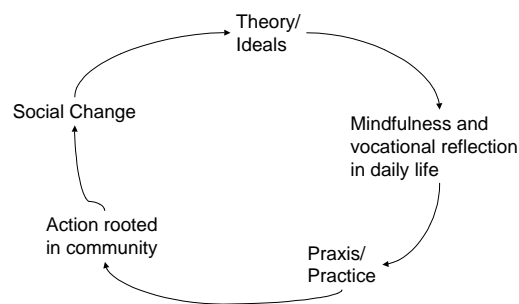
During January, I worked with an interim term class, Social Work 120: I Want to Help People. This academic connection had been established in previous years by career counselor Kirsten Cahoon, and I accompanied Kirsten on classroom presentations and the final retreat, co-presenting and working with students. As part of my own vocational development, I would often sit in on the class and listen to guest speakers, and I accompanied the class on such field trips as a homelessness immersion day at St. Stephen’s Human Services in Minneapolis and a Homeless Connect event in Faribault. Through all these activities, I developed an ongoing relationship with the class, mentoring and guiding students as they explored their vocation and interests—many of them for the first time in their lives. Working with these students was exciting; I could humbly share my own experience, offer resources and knowledge from a staff perspective, and guide discussion to help students with their own exploration. This particular class combined my two interests—vocation and social justice—and allowed me to help students make the connection between the two as well.

Part of my work with Career Connections was administrative and employer-oriented. I had the opportunity to help with non-profit and social service recruiters who visited campus in the fall, arranging visits and hosting information sessions. I was a part of the planning committee for the Idealist Nonprofit Career Fair and Working for Change Conference, a collaboration of Minnesota colleges and universities that was hosted at the University of Minnesota, and I organized and implemented the Peace Fair (usually known as the World Wide Service Fair, but done this year in collaboration with the Nobel Peace Prize Forum). Working with employers and colleagues at other schools gave me confidence in my own networking skills. Before these experiences, I was afraid of networking; like many people emerging from college into the non-profit and service sector, I saw networking as “for business people and politicians only,” and was timid to step out of my humble, Minnesota-nice persona. Through this work, however, I learned that networking is really just connecting with people who share your interests—it’s hearing others’ stories and sharing your own, and having a sense of curiosity about the world and the people in it. Being able to articulate this change in my own attitude toward networking in turn helped me communicate its value to the students with whom I worked, and has helped me gain confidence in my professional and personal life. Through all my work with the Career Connections program, I was able to connect profoundly with students, help them along their vocational journeys, and develop my own confidence and authority in the non-profit and social service sectors.

### *Civic Engagement*

Through my work with the Civic Engagement program, I was able to engage the part of myself that constructs theories, analyzes social problems, and develops concrete solutions and plans to move forward. These theoretical concepts grounded my work with students, and together we melded the concept of vocation or calling with the concept of civic engagement and social justice.

As a student at St. Olaf, I created a major through the Center for Integrative Studies titled “Social Justice Studies,” and I constructed a circular model of social change as part of my senior project. The model integrates vocational reflection in daily life before action takes place:



Working with the Civic Engagement program allowed me to put this model into action and help students engage in its processes, but it also put the model into critical perspective. At the final reflection lunch for the Lilly Vocational Intern position, my mentors and I observed that these lines are not merely cyclical, but are rather inextricably intertwined. A person may engage in

community and praxis as they are simultaneously reflecting and being mindful, or praxis may encourage further reflection before it results in community action and larger social change.

In all my civic engagement work this year, I collaborated with students and co-workers, integrating reflection and discussion into each event. The second annual Transforming Privilege Retreat was my first large stab at collaboration, event planning, and facilitating, and it proved to be another exercise in listening. I listened to Associate Director for Civic Engagement Nate Jacobi about what went well last year, how he and students had organized the retreat, and a time frame (I listened to Nate a lot this year, but he also listened to me—a hallmark of the respect and collaboration that is ever present at the Center for Experiential Learning). I met with students who had attended the retreat last year, and formed a student leadership team with whom Nate and I met once a week to collaboratively plan the events of the retreat. These students led major portions of the retreat, and through their leadership, became more confident in their leadership skills, ability to reflect, and own call to civic engagement and service. We also hired local activist and facilitator Julia Uleberg to help with the first half of the retreat. Working with so many individuals to plan the retreat required attentive listening, but also synthesis of information—I needed to balance the needs of students, the desires of an outside facilitator, and my own strengths in drawing together a group of students and helping them engage with one another. The greatest success of the retreat was exactly that—the sense of solidarity and community that the students formed through reflection. They stayed in touch long after the retreat, participating in subsequent civic engagement activities through the CEL and in their classes.

While the Transforming Privilege Retreat served to get students interested in reflecting on social issues, various other civic engagement seminars and events helped sustain that energy with a wider audience. I helped three students organize a Homelessness Awareness Sleep-out and Vigil during Homelessness Awareness Week in the fall, and engaged with a newly-formed student group to co-host events for Poverty Awareness and Action Week (PAAW) in the spring. The Homelessness Immersion and “Unnatural Causes: Is Inequality Making Us Sick?” film showing that the CEL hosted during PAAW generated profound discussion among students as they reflected on the world and its social issues. However, I felt the excitement about civic engagement on campus most profoundly during one Civic Engagement event: “Break Out of the Bubble.” Nate and I helped the Civic Engagement Peer Advisors, the leaders of the student group Volunteer Network, and some other interested individuals organize this event focused on local civic engagement, and over 45 students came to collaborate and brainstorm about civic engagement in the Northfield community. Through my engagement in these and other student-focused civic engagement seminars and events, I felt again as though I was solidifying my calling to help students become the people they are capable of becoming. Nothing was more satisfying to me than to see student leaders emerge, forming their own ideas about justice and vocation, and pushing them to think more deeply or widely about an idea. In doing so, I challenged my own notions of vocation and civic engagement, pushing myself to think more deeply and widely as well.

The highlight of my involvement with the Civic Engagement program this year was my participation in the formation and implementation of an Integrative Studies class, *Ideals to Action: Cultivating Social Change*. Professor of History Eric Fure-Slocum and Social Innovation and Entrepreneurship Coordinator Kris Estenson wrote the proposal for the course, and met with

Associate Director for Civic Engagement Nate Jacobi, Professor of History Jim Farrell and Professor of Social Work Mary Carlsen, and me to plan the course syllabus, readings, and civic engagement projects. Kris, Nate and I actively participated in the class, each connecting with a cohort of students and helping them develop their social change projects. These projects ranged from local environmental efforts with youth to international health initiatives, and I most enjoyed the opportunity to help students as they formed ideas, connected with the local community, and learned about paths to social change in the process. I enjoyed sharing students' excitement about ideas and community-oriented change, and although my next educational step is to pursue a Master of Social Work degree, I could envision myself obtaining a PhD after that and becoming a professor. I was truly inspired by the passion, creativity, and ability to make change that these students embodied, and was honored to have helped them reflect on the connections between vocation and civic engagement and put their ideals into action.

### ***Vocational Exploration***

Although the concept of vocation has been integrated into all my activities this year as Lilly Vocational Intern, I engaged in a few activities focused solely on this notion. I organized and facilitated a retreat with Pastoral Intern Bethany McCaughan called "Moving Forward While Standing Still: a day of reflection for discernment of strengths, vocation, and direction present in our lives today as we prepare for tomorrow." We reflected with students using the aforementioned StrengthsFinder inventory, Parker J. Palmer's book Let Your Life Speak, and a tree metaphor for vocation where the trunk is a student's strengths and innate talents, the roots are activities and ideas that feed those strengths, and the branches are products of those strengths in the world. Connecting with these students, allowing them to share their stories and personal journeys, and helping guide them in the direction they want to go, was a true joy, and Bethany and I have maintained contact with many of the students who participated in the retreat.

My own notion of vocation is embodied by the Parker J. Palmer quotation "Before you tell your life what truths and values you have decided to live up to, let your life tell you what truths you embody, what values you represent." Opportunities to share my own notion of vocation with students and engage them in dialogue about their own vision of vocation has been extraordinarily rewarding, and I strove to integrate a conversation about vocation into all the career counseling and civic engagement initiatives I participated in this year.

### **Personal Discernment and Reflection**

As I helped students discern their vocational callings in light of career or civic engagement opportunities, I in turn discovered a lot about my own vocational callings. Through my work with students, engagement with the local community, and ongoing conversations with supervisors, co-workers, and faculty mentors, I found the support I needed to explore how my own strengths and vocational callings related to my career, personal life, and community engagement. I owe much to my faculty mentors, Professor of Social Work Mary Carlsen and Professor of Religion David Booth, in the way of vocational reflection. My conversations with Mary inspired me to become involved with social work majors on campus, participating in and facilitating events and learning about social work perspectives on vocation and justice. I hope to pursue a Master of Social Work degree in 2010, and Mary has helped solidify this educational

calling, challenging me with new ways of thinking about the world. David has also challenged my thinking about the world, justice, vocation, and civic engagement. Our conversations have ranged from the value of growing in community to consumerism and productivity to gender and sexuality. We discussed the subject of care at length, visioning and re-visioning ways of thinking about vocation and caring for the world. These conversations with both Mary and David helped ground me in both theoretical and practical aspects of vocation, service, social justice, and civic engagement.

My continuing education and community involvement also influenced the way I think about vocation and community. I volunteered once a week at Faribault's McKinley Early Childhood Center, exploring my interest in early childhood issues and connecting with community members. Working with these children gave me great joy, and in combination with the Developmental Psychology course I took last semester, allowed me to see the importance of laying a solid foundation in early childhood. Although my next immediate career step will not involve early childhood, I am still fascinated by this period of life and will integrate my value for emphasis on early childhood into my vocational journey, whether through parenthood, social work, or community involvement.

I also connected to other local community efforts, including Thursday's Table (a local free meal and conversation for those who need it), a grassroots transit initiative, and TORCH (Tackling Obstacles Raising College Hopes), an organization working for college access for Latino youth in Northfield. Through these efforts, I was able to make connections between the College and the local community, but in my own evolving understanding of vocation, I was able to see the variety of approaches that people use to serve and address social needs. I saw people truly living out their light, their vocational calling, in writing grants to assist at-risk youth; I saw people with a free Thursday night give their time to wash dishes for Thursday's Table; I met City Council members who wanted to write equality into city plans; I met social entrepreneurs, child care providers, parents, and money grantors who all lived out their call to service in unique and profound ways.

Through listening to all these voices on vocation, career, and civic engagement—and discovering my own voice to add to the choir—I have had the opportunity to discern and process my own thoughts about vocation and service. In the summer of 2007, I participated in a Lilly international service learning trip to Honduras, and came back brimming with ideas about service. I began to re-think my own notions of service—before going to Honduras, I strove to find the “best” way to serve, looking for the ways in which I might affect the *most* social change. During the service learning trip, we studied different theoretical and practical models of serving, reflecting on where we might all fit into the world.

After returning, I worked to find my own strengths, abilities, and vocational calling and work from there. I attended workshops through the CEL my senior year of college, taking personality and career inventories to begin my vocational search. I knew that I worked well with people, and decided that my ultimate goal was to pursue some sort of counseling-related career. At the beginning of my internship, I identified social work as a field that blended my commitment to individual people and to the broader vision of social justice, and set out down that career path. My faculty advisor, Mary Carlsen, connected me with early childhood work (above) after a

conversation in which she asked me “what need in the world breaks your heart, and how can you work to heal it?”

Throughout the year, I heard many individuals talk about their vocational journeys toward service—many of them social workers, counselors, and people who worked with students. Listening to others’ stories—hearing about how their social location, upbringing, and life events affected their sense of vocation and service—was one of the most valuable aspects of this year. Through hearing others’ stories, I could root my own vocational calling in my life experience and see how living in rural Iowa, Atlanta, and Northfield, having two pastors as parents, and my education have all influenced who I am and who I want to become. As my one of my academic advisors asked me my senior year of college, “where are you in this project, Miriam? Because if you aren’t present in your work, it’s not sustainable.”

Throughout most of the year, I defined young children as the population with which I wanted to work, but for now, I’m open to admitting that I am still an emerging adult with a broad range of interests. I have gotten in touch with profound parts of myself through reflecting on my call to serve through counseling, but I still feel called to do some developmentally appropriate exploration of how I want to counsel and what populations I want to work with. I am still letting go of the self-righteous idea that there is *one* best way to serve, grappling with the many paths that there are and exploring the many systemic and intimate ways in which they work together. I am learning which parts of my vocation I want to explore through my career, and which parts of my calling I want to fulfill in other ways.

I am opening up to the idea that I don’t have to set out a singular path for myself—in terms of my career and my other vocational callings—and that opportunities may arise that might be outside my realm of vision at the moment. This year has taught me that whatever I do, my own passions, skills, and gifts will be used fully, and that my commitment to justice, service, and vocation will stay with me wherever I go.