

ADULT DEVELOPMENT THEORIES AND THE CRISIS OF VOCATION

The Crisis in Vocational Ideals

The Shorter Westminster Catechism begins with this question: “What is the chief end of man?” Its answer, learned by twenty generations of the theological heirs of John Calvin, states: “The chief end of man is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.”¹ In a broad sense, this is a *vocational* question. It asks, “What are human beings here for? In what consists the virtue or excellence of human beings?” Any culture shaped around this vision of the human calling would have clear notions and practices regarding childrearing, schooling, ethical norms, and what occupations and services are most valuable.

A vital key to understanding any society can be found in the range of vocational ideals it recognizes and toward which it nurtures its members. For tightly knit societies like Calvin’s Geneva (or the Scottish villages where the Westminster catechism has been taught for hundreds of years), one central vocational ideal may be enough. This is true particularly for those who, like Calvin, partake deeply of the belief in a sovereign yet merciful God. But consider some other cultural vocational ideals from different societies and eras.

In Aristotle’s *Nichomachean Ethics*, we encounter the ideal of the *megalopsychos*, the “high-minded man,” whose virtues, habits of taste, and artistry in friendship and public life make him truly worthy of respect and emulation. The Stoics offered the image of the rational man, who avoids excesses of passion by aligning his reason with the rational structure believed to lie at the heart of the universe. Early Christianity offered

the model—which included women as well as men—of the disciple and member of the *ekklesia* (church) and, eventually, the models of the monastic, the martyr, and the saint.

When the divine right of kings found new life in Europe as a rationale for royal authority, there emerged with it the vocational ideal of the Christian King. (In the seventeenth century this model began to include Christian Queens as well.) Among the Knights Templar of the Crusades, the model of the “soldier-saint” became vital, and it has reappeared regularly, in many guises, in Western nations. Likewise, in Eastern societies we see, in many forms, the vocational ideals of the sage, the monastic, and the bureaucratic statesman. In Japan we see an Eastern version of the soldier-saint, the samurai.

Such vocational ideals not only shaped the lives of those who played those roles. They also gave rise to more or less hierarchical patterns by which the lives of persons who played many roles in society were given shape, coherence, and accountability by the culture’s leading images of the purposes and virtues of human life.

In modern societies we notice everywhere the proliferation and secularization of vocational ideals. From the emergence of the traditional professions (religion, medicine, law, education, and government), with their prescribed roles and privileges, we see both a diversification and a flattening of life models. In societies like our own, the moral and religious overtones of vocational ideals have largely been secularized and relativized. An obvious shift has occurred. Previously people were notable and admired as vocational models because of their virtues and usefulness in service to society. Now, admiration is more likely inspired by the appearance or reality of success and wealth, by fascination with power and its exercise, and by the name and face recognition that comes with celebrity or notoriety. With such shifts in the focus of social recognition and rewards, the value systems, roles, and exemplars that receive respect and interest change significantly. Hence in our society we accord powerful (if transient) fascination and rewards to the vocational models of the rock star, the movie celebrity, the sports idol, the eccentric billionaire-adventurer, and, not infrequently, the spiritual guru or guide.

Images of the Good Man and Good Woman in Ferment

To say that we are experiencing a societal crisis of vocational ideals is to suggest that our normative models of what it means to be a good woman or a good man are in considerable ferment. Let’s consider some of the principal reasons for this. Across many parts of the planet, people today

can count on living much longer lives than could adults who lived a century ago. In 1900 in the United States the average life expectancy of males was forty-seven, and for women it was only slightly higher—fifty. There were as many single-parent households in this country then, per capita, as there are today. Rather than separation and divorce, however, the most frequent cause was the death of one of the spouses.²

Because of greater life expectancy, coupled with astonishing breakthroughs in dietary science and medicine, many citizens of affluent countries have the sense today that human life is less precarious than it was in earlier times. For reasonably well off folk, a long and healthy life is now expected as an entitlement. This mood leads to a decided shift toward “this-worldly” criteria for describing a well-lived life.

It is difficult to know to what degree the hope of eternal life or the desire for personal immortality has waned as a source of courage and a motive for ethical and religious seriousness. It does seem certain, however, that as the new millennia opens, many persons carry the hope and expectation of living a long and full life. Relative to previous centuries, this expectation has modified, both personally and culturally, people’s sense of time and timing in the “seasons” of our lives. It has also shifted the horizons of values and possibilities that frame our reflections on a good or well-lived life.

A second factor that contributes to ferment regarding our cultural images of the good man or good woman derives from mobility. Physical mobility has characterized this nation of immigrants from its beginnings. From the development of steam power for trains and ships to the laying of the interstate highways beginning in the 1950s, this has been a nation of travelers and movers. In addition, a worldwide military presence and the globalization of business and commerce have rotated American men and women onto virtually every continent since World War II. Opportunities for American students and faculties of American colleges and universities to study and teach abroad have proliferated in the last quarter century, and the literature and religious traditions of other societies have become readily available in good, inexpensive translations.

More pervasive in evoking changed outlooks and experience, however, have been developments in electronics and telecommunication. Most homes have multiple televisions, many served by cable or direct satellite connections, making accessible literally hundreds of local and international channels. The four or five channels of the seventies have given way to specialty channels of all sorts, bringing a pluralistic riot of possible stopping places, national and international, to choose from. Such channels as MTV and CNN, with their around-the-clock availability and their

mixture of creative commercials and programming, have blurred traditional distinctions between news and entertainment.

In recent years, access to personal computers in the workplace, in homes, and in libraries and schools has opened up multiple ways to enter various spheres of virtual reality. The Internet offers an extraordinary variety of niches in cyberspace where one can create virtual personas, shape virtual games and ventures, and bring to vivid life the most sublime, ambitious, or destructive imaginations of the heart. Making these created spaces accessible to others—from a few individuals to millions of them—provides virtual meeting places for unaccountable interactions that can reshape consciousness and reframe the patterns of ordinariness.³

As we register the impact of new technology on our image of the good woman or man, we need also to recall developments in the last half of the twentieth century that provided new contexts and methods for intentional work with the self. Daniel Yankelovich, in his 1981 book *New Rules: Searching for Self-Fulfillment in a World Turned Upside Down*,⁴ documented a cultural shift from an ethic of self-denial, which characterized American society through the end of World War II, to an ethic of self-fulfillment, which became dominant beginning in the fifties. An entire people, having come through the stress of the Depression and having mobilized in an unprecedented and heroic way to defeat a truly worldwide threat in World War II, began to find the space, the time, and the means to get on with the tasks of marrying, establishing families, continuing or completing educations, and pursuing life's satisfactions and happinesses. And in the course of following those pursuits, people began to come to terms with long-postponed tasks and challenges of their inner lives.

When we reflect on the flood of techniques for self-examination and growth that became available to Americans in the sixties and seventies, we recognize that there must have been a deep and pervasive social readiness for new dimensions of intimacy. Sensitivity training, therapy sessions, encounter groups, and a variety of other techniques inspired by humanistic psychology created a new ethos of introspection, instant self-disclosure, and the sharing of oneself. The spoken and unspoken promise underlying intensive self-reflective experiences and marathons was that of transformation: new dimensions of self-discovery, new depths of honesty in relationships with others, new sensitivity and authenticity. There was the promise of new richness for lives capsulated in routine and jaded by conventional values and lifestyles.

During this same period, with psychiatric services increasingly paid for by health insurance plans, access to many forms of personal therapy was opened up for middle-class America. In this era, theological seminaries,

in cooperation with the burgeoning field of clinical pastoral education, built pastoral counseling into their curricula as a central focus. This not only contributed to the development of a new specialization in ministry but also opened, through churches and pastoral counseling centers, new contexts for personal growth and change, sanctioned by the church. Through courses in organizational and personal development, industry widely appropriated and taught the new techniques and value systems of what we came to call the human potential movement.

Traditional images of good manhood and womanhood underwent “dis-establishment” in the contexts of sensitivity and encounter groups. In the interest of spontaneity and the discovery of one’s deeper or “true” self, people were led to loosen their hold on images of the self fashioned after traditional models and roles. The goal was to learn to recognize and claim one’s “needs,” or as the cliché went, “to get my needs met.” Experiences designed to alter people’s relations to their bodies and to widen the range of their emotional and intuitive responses to self and others sanctioned a frankly open and experimental approach to sexuality and to issues of commitment and lifestyle.

As we enumerate background movements that contributed to contemporary experiences of ferment regarding vocational ideals and cultural images of good womanhood and manhood, we need to include the successive (and simultaneous) waves of liberation movements that transformed older patterns of sexual, racial, gender, political, and religious relations. Taken individually and as a whole, movements for inclusion and justice for minorities, women, and gays and lesbians have fundamentally altered and enriched this society’s previous consensual images of beauty, excellence, and the virtues of good womanhood and manhood.

Finally, I must say something, in a preliminary way, about the changed and changing role of religious authority with respect to our definitive images of vocational ideals. The interplay of all the factors suggested in this brief historical discussion create a complex picture. Nowhere is that complexity more evident than in the areas of religion and spirituality. Certainly the starting point and most visible symbol for sketching changes in this area was the Second Vatican Council of the Roman Catholic Church. Protestants and Reform and Conservative Jews have experienced equivalent transformations, but theirs were less visible because they were more institutionally plural. But with Vatican II we beheld the spectacle—truly remarkable—of an international communion of faith solemnly and publicly going through the anguish of fundamentally altering its self-definition and its structures of authority. From a church defined by the hierarchy and its authoritative control of scripture and tradition we saw a move toward

a church defined as the “people of God.” Within limits that have been continually contested, “the people of God” were given access to scripture and tradition and called to personal responsibility, along with the hierarchy, for shaping faithful lives and institutions in an acknowledged pluralistic world. Confusing to many Catholics, liberating and exhilarating to many others, the normative images of Christian adulthood fostered by the church became more pluralistic. Individual Catholics and local congregations were freed—and burdened—to take responsibility for implementing the teachings and guidelines of significantly reworked doctrinal and social-ethical teachings of the church. This experience, for many, led to a kind of “vertigo of relativity.” As many laypersons put it, “If the Church can change the rules about not eating meat on Fridays and about saying the Mass in Latin, what *can’t* be changed?” Many devout Catholic families found that, intergenerationally, they were loyal to two different churches—one pre-Vatican II, the other post-Vatican II. Since his installation, Pope John Paul II has labored consistently and effectively to reinstate more traditional, centralized authority on doctrine and practices in the church. While he has had some success in reestablishing centralized authority and maintaining a male-dominated church, this has not been accomplished without the alienation of millions of thoughtful and faithful Catholics around the world whose faith had developed to the individuating-reflective stage or beyond.⁵

I have used the Catholic experience to illustrate a broader movement among all churches and synagogues. A significant number of adherents in all of these communities have claimed personal responsibility for their appropriation of the traditions of which they are a part and have taken authority for how they integrate religious teachings into their lives. They have based their faith stance to a significant degree on their own reflective judgments and experiences. The recent emergence of the term *spiritual* as an adjective to describe one’s personal religious or faith orientation in large measure reflects a commitment to the ideal of a postconventional claiming of authority for one’s own religious and ethical orientation and practices.

Inevitably, these developments have altered the role of clergy and theologians as authorities. They have opened the way for struggles over what will be the normative images in religious communities of the virtues and character of the good woman and good man.

From “Ideological Tepee” to Proteus: Continuity and Change

The interreacting factors discussed in the previous section, plus many others I did not describe, help to explain a fundamental shift that has occurred in this culture’s images of adulthood in the past half century. Many

persons over fifty can remember childhoods in stable environments—whether urban, rural or small-town—where adulthood appeared to be and was experienced as a fairly static condition. Some years ago my mentor and friend Carlyle Marney offered a graphic image of this older, more static image of adulthood. He called it the “tepee model” of adulthood.⁶

When you build a tepee, you fix a number of poles in a circle and then bring them together, resting one against another, at the top. You bind the poles together firmly where they meet and then stretch skins or canvas tightly over the frame. The tent poles, in this analogy, represent a set of ideological commitments or assumptions that one assembles in the process of becoming an adult.

By the time most people are in their late teens or early twenties, they had begun settling a number of matters regarding values and lifestyle. They may have put in place a tent pole for their career or occupation. They may have established a pole for marriage and place of residence. They may have embraced a particular ideology or identified themselves with a particular region, integrating the meaning and loyalties related to being a Democrat or a Republican, a Down East Yankee, a Hoosier, or a Texan into their adult identity. They may have erected another pole dealing with sex roles, providing them with clear values and images concerning what it means to be a man or a woman. Other poles in the tepee are derived from their economic and educational status, and so on. Typically there is also a religious pole (or an antireligious one), made visible by membership and identification with (or rejection of) a church or temple. There are also poles for people’s racial and ethnic identifications and the accompanying social meanings.

Once a young adult had assembled these ideological tent poles, Marney suggests, he or she binds them together in an often tacit, or unexamined, unity. Then a covering is stretched over the structure, and the young woman or man enters this ideological hut to dwell, never needing to come out again.

In this older, more static image of adulthood, it was expected that the essential structure would be in place by the mid to late twenties. If one reached thirty without having built it, people would say, “He has not found himself” (implying that the self is analogous to a Platonic ideal form, waiting somewhere in the darkness to be found and embraced). Or if in the late thirties or forties the ideological tepee should begin to be buffeted by the changes and struggles of life—the tent poles rattling, the cover flapping—people would say, “She seems to be having a nervous breakdown.” Character, in this view of adulthood, meant consistency, predictability, and stability of values, attitudes, commitments, and lifestyle. Often it also meant the expectation of continuity in one’s place of residence and relationships.

Of course, the tepee model is a caricature, too extreme in its depiction of an older, more static image of adulthood. But it may prove a helpful image in our effort to grasp and characterize the present ferment surrounding normative images of adulthood. Let me invite you to consider another, more contemporary caricature of adulthood, this time from the opposite end of a continuum of stability and change.

Robert Jay Lifton pioneered the study of psychohistory, which he defines as inquiry into the relationship between large-scale historical change and individual patterns of adaptation. Among other interests, in his early career Lifton studied the survivors of catastrophic disasters. He coined the now familiar term *survival guilt* to describe a complex of feelings characteristic of those who have the burden of making sense of terrible events in which friends, loved ones, and others were obliterated but they themselves were spared. Lifton, who conducted much of his early research in the Far East, spent considerable time in Japan in the early sixties. There he devoted many hours to interviewing young adults who as children had survived the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

As Lifton analyzed the stories of these young adult survivors in Japan, he began to note a pattern of commitment and change in their lives that arrested him. Again and again he saw that in their teens and early adulthood they seemed to have rapidly made, and then changed, a series of fundamental relational and ideological commitments. He was surprised by the intensity of their commitments and then by their frequent withdrawals and turns, often in diametrically opposed directions. As Lifton pursued research with other survivors—victims of Chinese brainwashing or thought control experiments who escaped to Hong Kong—and with American students who had been caught up in the turbulence of the sixties, he began to see that this pattern could be generalized. To link this pattern to a name and an image, Lifton reached into Greek mythology. Proteus was a minor god in the court of Poseidon, the god of the sea. “Proteus,” said Lifton, “was able to change his shape with relative ease—from wild boar to lion to dragon to fire to flood. But what he did find difficult, and would not do unless seized and chained, was to commit himself to a single form, a form most his own, and carry out his function of prophecy.”⁷

In the sixties, some social commentators, including Lifton, began to suggest that perhaps Proteus and the protean style of malleability and continual change held together the elements of an adaptive way of responding to an era of unrelenting and accelerating change. According to that view, it is virtuous to be fluid, flexible, and ready to change fundamental convictions and ideological outlooks frequently. Lifton felt that two major historical factors helped account for the emergence of the protean pattern:

The first is the worldwide sense of . . . *historical* (or *psychohistorical*) *dis-location*, the break in the sense of connection which men have long felt with the vital and nourishing symbols of their cultural tradition—symbols revolving around family, idea-systems, religions, and the life-cycle in general. . . . The second large historical tendency is the *flooding of imagery* produced by the extraordinary flow of post-modern cultural influences over mass-communication networks. These . . . cause (contemporary persons) to be overwhelmed by superficial messages and undigested cultural elements, by headlines and by endless partial alternatives in every sphere of life.⁸

In 1993 Lifton embarked on a longer and more systematic examination of the protean self and of proteanism in postmodern societies. In *The Protean Self* he suggests that in the thirty years since he wrote about survivors of the atomic holocaust at Hiroshima and Nagasaki and about survivors of the Chinese government's "thought reform" program, the protean self has appeared in many settings around the world, in both developed and developing societies. There are features of protean selfhood that represent resilient, adaptive responses to disequilibrating experiences of trauma or to contexts of radical change and discontinuity. Protean selfhood may be called for in response to experiences of radical confrontation with evil or with "otherness." At points he acknowledges that the protean self is adaptive and is, in fact, "appropriate to the restlessness and flux of our time."⁹ He makes an important disclosure, however, in response to those who might be inclined to take the protean self as normative and inevitable for the coming era:

I must separate myself, however, from those observers, postmodern or otherwise, who equate multiplicity and fluidity with disappearance of the self, with a complete absence of coherence among its various elements. I would claim the opposite: proteanism involves a quest for authenticity and meaning, a form-seeking assertion of self. The recognition of complexity and ambiguity may well represent a certain maturation in our concept of self. The protean self seeks to be both fluid and grounded, however tenuous that combination. There is nothing automatic about the enterprise, no "greening of the self," but rather a continuous effort without clear termination. Proteanism, then, is a balancing act between responsive shape shifting, on the one hand, and efforts to consolidate and cohere on the other.¹⁰

Like the image of the ideological tepee, the protean self, as a pure type, is something of a caricature. But perhaps the two caricatures, taken as

extremes on a continuum, will serve to suggest something about the shift, within the lifetime of many of us, from a largely stable, not to say static, image of adulthood to one that, in its extreme form, manifests great fluidity and instability. I believe that the tepee and the protean model depict, in polar tension, two yearnings and realities that pull powerfully at each other in the hearts of each of us and in the culture of which we are a part. These yearnings and realities—the experience of relentless change and the longing for continuity and stability—persist and conflict in the midst of the shifting tectonic plates of values and convictions underlying our societal and cultural life.

One of the principal reasons for the present widespread acceptance and embrace of psychological theories of adult development, I believe, is that they provide us with narrative frameworks for holding together our profound experiences of change and continuity—and the attendant tensions. In this and in other ways that I shall consider with you now, they provide normative and descriptive images of adulthood that uniquely and powerfully speak to the situation of cultural ferment and confusion over vocational ideals in our society today.

Adult Developmental Theorists as Philosophers and Gossips

Theorists of adult development have come to play the role in our society that storytellers and mythmakers once played in primitive and classical cultures. They have taken on many of the functions that philosophers and theologians performed in the twelfth through the nineteenth centuries. In our time of fractured images of the human vocation and fragmented religious and cultural symbols, a group of philosophical psychologists has helped us gain a holistic grasp of the course of human life. Using the organic root metaphor of development in a variety of ways, their research and theories offer empirically grounded chartings of predictable patterns and turnings in human life cycles. Seventeenth-century Protestant theologians wrote and taught about what they called the *ordo salutis*—the path or steps to salvation. It may not be going too far to suggest that philosophical theorists of developmental psychology are offering, in formal and mainly secular terms, contemporary versions of an *ordo salutis*. This parallel makes more sense if you recall that in Latin, *salus*, the root of *salutis* (and the English word *salvation*), means “wholeness” or “completion.”

Consider these further contributions of philosophical adult developmental psychologists. They name and map our experiences of personal change, providing reassurance that many of the crises we experience can

be understood in developmental terms. They help us reduce our reliance on classifications and diagnostic terminology derived from the study of pathology. They enable us to see that much of our dis-ease can be understood as “sickness unto new health”—a developmental transition—rather than as “sickness unto death.” Providing a language for our experiences of change, they also offer normative depictions of the *telos* or goals of human life. Their theories provide benchmarks or blazes by which we can determine where we are on the human life course. They provide guidance and encouragement regarding the direction and challenges of the next step.

In Chapters Two and Three I invite you to examine with me the perspectives of four philosophical theories of adult development. In Chapter Two, the theories of Erik Erikson, Daniel Levinson, and Carol Gilligan will receive our attention. In Chapter Three, I shall try to deal in a similar way with the theory of faith development for which I and my associates have been the principal researchers. Although we shall give attention to the research and empirical foundations of these theories, our principal interest, for the purposes of this book, will focus elsewhere. Our main concern will be to clarify the theories’ images of the human being struggling toward psychological and ethical maturity—their images of human movement toward wholeness and completion. We shall treat these developmental theories as narrative structures, as myths of becoming, that elaborate both the quality and the direction of human growth and development.

As contemporary myths and philosophical statements, current theories of developmental psychology deserve both our attention and our critical evaluation. Our evaluation must focus on their claims to descriptive adequacy—that is, their claims to be the results of scientific research. But equally important, and more so for this particular project, we must engage these myths of becoming with criteria of ethical and theological adequacy. In other words, we must treat these theorists as quasi-ethicists and quasi-theologians.

But why do I refer to adult developmental theorists, including myself, as gossips? This reference began as a humorous recognition of the fact that part of what makes these writings attractive to wide audiences is their interesting and extensive use of case materials from research. In our transient contemporary life we miss the leisure and continuity of community and relationship with neighbors that made gossip not only a dubious form of entertainment but also an important source of life insight and wisdom. One day, I decided to look up the derivation of the word *gossip* in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. There I found reason to take my reference to adult developmental theorists as gossips more seriously. *Gossip* derives from the two roots *god* and *sib*, the latter meaning “akin,” or “related.”

Put together, these roots meant “one who has contracted spiritual affinity with another by acting as a sponsor at baptism.” Hence a gossip was originally a godfather, godmother, or other sponsor of someone about to be baptized. From this rather surprising sixteenth-century understanding of gossip, the term degenerated to today’s common usage: “a person of light and trifling character, especially one who delights in idle talk, a rumor-monger, a tattler.” One final use of *gossip* refers to gossip as a medium: “easy, unrestrained talk or writing, especially about persons or social incidents.”¹¹

To refer to adult developmental theorists as gossips is to reclaim the original meaning of the word, to refer to one who serves as a sponsor in a critical rite of passage. It is to suggest that the narrative frameworks of developmental theories provide support and clarification for the passages of our lives. It is also to acknowledge that we do learn a great deal about life from looking deeply into the lives of our contemporaries and forebears. The disciplined manner of investigating and reporting their findings that characterizes these theorists maximizes the possibility that the study of lives can yield wisdom. Moreover, the methods of research employed by adult developmental theorists, involving lengthy interviews and relationships of co-inquiry with their subjects, provide unique and humane modes of access to sources of insight for living our lives.

NOTES

1. James R. Boyd, *The Westminster Shorter Catechism*, 2nd ed. (New York: M. W. Dodd, 1856), with analysis, scriptural proofs, explanatory and practical inferences, and illustrative anecdotes.
2. See Arlene Skolnik and Jerome Skolnik, eds., *Intimacy, Family and Society* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1974), 15–16; and Tamara K. Harevan, “Family Time and Historical Time,” *Daedalus* 106, no. 2 (Spring 1977): 62–63.
3. See the stimulating reflections on these matters offered by Tom Beaudoin in *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998).
4. Daniel Yankelovich, *New Rules: Searching for Self-Fulfillment in a World Turned Upside Down* (New York: Random House, 1981).
5. The reference to the individuating-reflective stage of faith anticipates Chapter Four of this book, where an account of research and theory on faith development is offered.

6. I heard Marney use this metaphor in oral presentations at Interpreters' House, Lake Junaluska, N.C., in 1968 and 1969. I have not found references to it in his writings. For a biography of Marney see John J. Carey, *Carlyle Marney: A Pilgrim's Progress* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1980).
7. Robert Jay Lifton, *History and Human Survival* (New York: Vintage Books, 1971), 319.
8. Ibid., 318.
9. See Robert Jay Lifton, *The Protean Self: Human Resilience in an Age of Fragmentation* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 1.
10. Ibid., 8–9.
11. *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*, vol. 1 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 1179.