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## A Meditation: Why Teach?

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## A Meditation: Why Teach?

Joanna Smitherman Trapp

What makes teaching a vocation that continues to draw smart and talented people even though the pay can be less-than-great, the workload damaging, and the rewards from societal and political opinion currently nonexistent? Frederick Buechner, a presbyterian minister, talks about the notion of vocation in his well-known book, *Wishful Thinking*. Our English word “vocation” comes from *vocare*, a Latin word meaning “to call,” and Buechner further defines the word as signifying “the work” we are “called to do” (118). I’m always amazed at my university that teachers haven’t heard about this idea. To them, vocation smacks of career-mindedness and doesn’t fit very well with a liberal arts impulse.

But Buechner rehabilitates the word, making it soar above the mundane meaning of modern usage. And you don’t have to be a person of faith to understand this at all. Consider these further comments he makes. The kind of work we ought to do (we are called to do, in his words) is the “kind of work (*a*) that you need most to do and (*b*) that the world most needs to have done.” To Buechner, how we choose to work and live is two-pronged and best expressed by his most famous statement: “The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet” (119).

In my experience, the younger generation of teachers entering the academy are quite exceptional in their ability to communicate ideas, in their desire to serve the institution, and in their passion for research. The academic job, however, is not without its complications. Researchers report that negative attitudes in a competitive job climate often speak to job dissatisfaction, loss of job security, and the unkind and or harsh working environments that many teachers in our fields experience. Yet, I meet teachers who demonstrate a genuine love of what they do all the time. How is it possible that a profession so full of troubling trends can still claim people who are committed teachers? Some of this answer might lie in Buechner’s idea of vocation.

We notice other illustrations of *vocare* around us in other fields. Teaching isn’t the only profession peopled by passionate practitioners. My son is an artist. He works two other jobs to have money to live so that he can spend his free time doing his art. After a day of working in elementary education, he goes to his tiny, cluttered artist studio in downtown Fort Collins, Colorado, and sketches and colors. He attends conventions and other artsy-fartsy events to sell prints and promote his work. He works on weekends at an artist supply store, probably spending much of his money from that job on supplies. His Christmas wish list for the family always includes expensive markers and art boards.

In him, I see joy and excitement, love and passion. The kinds of values that only a true doer of the art could manifest. He has a real *vocare* for art. I get that because (most of the time) I feel the same way. Even when I’m exhausted because I stayed up until three in the morning responding to student writing, even when my paycheck doesn’t make it to the end of the month, even when I get so upset with a class that I want to yell at them, even then—I still know that I have a joyous vocation.

Of course, I have met teachers who cannot live in the same heart-space. And for reasons that make good sense in this current environment. Perhaps for them, teaching

goes hand-in-hand with something else they love to do—research or engaging in public debate or dialog, for example. Around my college, those of us who geek out about teaching find each other. We are the ones who show up for pedagogy workshops or teaching tools demonstrations. We're the ones in the halls after class who have to find someone to share "what just happened in my class" stories. You can't shut us up. We babble on about something we tried that was cool. We incessantly chatter away about our funny and brilliant students. And we diligently seek help for our student in trouble, worrying into the night about how to make a difference for that individual.

Yes, we are an annoying lot. We are like my son who can't wait to show a new caricature he has done, looking eagerly into your face to see what you think, hoping to catch a light in your eyes of recognition or appreciation. We may find satisfaction in college service or in our research, but at heart, we recognize that we are teachers, and that is our *vocare*.

That is not mere career-mindedness! Buechner gives us a heuristic about how to make some sense of the joy we experience in our art of teaching. That passion is not self-serving. Yes, we can take pride in our work and feel confidence that we know our field and our students, but more importantly, it is satisfying because it serves the great hunger we feel exists in this world. We are teachers. And nothing that is said or done in the political world can diminish the deep gladness we experience in the midst of such doing.

And for those of us who are called to be teachers and are finding the current situation challenging or are experiencing a sense of defeat or loss, we also realize that teaching doesn't just happen in the academy. Teachers who communicate well and care about the world and its hunger are needed in all professions everywhere. The best leaders and shapers of community in this world are people who can talk to others and help them learn.

I'm so grateful for everyone with a call for teaching, whether you are in the academy or finding other ways and venues to make a difference. The world needs you.

### Work Cited

Buechner, Frederick. *Wishful Thinking*. HarperOne, 1993.