

Book review: Palmer, P. J. (1999). *Let your life speak: Listening for the voice of vocation*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

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Whereas 'The Courage to Teach' focuses on the importance of the integrity and identity of the teacher, this short book takes a broader perspective. Rather, it encourages readers to investigate what path they should be following. 'Our deepest calling is to grow into our own authentic selfhood, whether or not it conforms to some image of who we OUGHT to be' (p. 16). Instead of looking to others for guidance about the direction we should take in life, we should investigate who we are, and what our bodies, minds and spirits are suggesting should be our path.

This is no 'six-quick-steps-to-finding-your-true-vocation' type of manual. Palmer's approach is much more individualistic and honest. He reflects on conflicts in his own life as a teacher in an institution, between his values and his heart, and how he was expected to practise. He describes having become so disturbed by the misuse of power in the institutions where he worked that he spent more time being angry about that than he did pursuing his real work. This conflict eventually became so severe that he had to withdraw from a formal teaching-situation altogether and go into a retreat for many years to recover from the deep depression that had overtaken him.

Having listened to what his body, mind and spirit were telling him, but still feeling strongly drawn to education, Palmer's resolution was to 'live divided no more' (p. 32) and work outside of institutions. To achieve this accommodation took considerable self-reflection, 'acknowledging and embracing [his] own liabilities and limits' (p. 29) but also recognising that self-care is needed in any vocation. Progress is also achieved by noting and accepting 'closed doors' as well as more positive signposts.

For Palmer, vocation is obviously much more than a job. As he commences the book, he asks: 'The deepest vocational question is not, 'What ought I to do with my life?' It is the more elemental and demanding, 'Who am I? What is my nature?'(p. 15). Unless this investigation is undertaken, people 'conspire in their own diminishment' and, according to Palmer, this is a dreadful punishment that can be avoided. Conversely, great rewards are gained from 'living by our own best lights' (p. 34). It may take the eyes of others to help us to discern our gifts, however, despite the book's overall emphasis on self-searching. He claims that 'our strongest gifts are usually those we are barely aware of possessing' (p. 52).

Growth in vocation is likely to be an ongoing journey. Palmer uses the metaphor of seasons to indicate this, describing through anecdotes from his own and others' lives how we can go through periods of fertile growth, the fruitfulness of autumn, or the seeming stagnation but compulsory rest-period of winter.

I would recommend this book to anyone who is wondering whether they are on the 'right path' for them, whether it is in education or elsewhere. While it is anything but a 'how to' manual, it does provide one way of honestly investigating options, and coming to a healthy and productive resolution of the question, 'What should I do with my life?'