

12. POSTSCRIPT (OVER COFFEE A WEEK LATER)

Vocation is not a theoretical thing. It is lived, often messy, and it is worked out in the real lives of real people. One of the things I love most about my own vocation is listening to others as they explore theirs. So, imagine we have met for coffee a week or so after the panto and begin to hear each other's own experiences of vocation. This is the conversation with which I want to leave you before we finish: I am really not interested in just writing an interesting book or offering a new idea: the reason I have written is with the little hope that God may do massive things in you and this conversation may be a small part of that. There is a dying world in desperate need of Jesus' gift of hope, forgiveness, and reconciliation, and God is recruiting team members from and for every walk of life.

Various folk have agreed to share something of their own journey with you, and I share these cuttings from our shared scrapbook of vocation with the hope that you will spot something of yourself in one or more of my friends. (There are three examples here, I plan to have others available on the website as well. The link to this is at the back of this book along with a QR code.)

All of these stories are unfinished (as is mine, and yours), and I am really grateful to everyone who has been willing to share their experience. If they are half as much of a blessing to you as each of them is to me then I can think of few better ways to end this book.

Meet Bernie

My name's Bernie and I have always ended up with jobs where I could help people in practical ways to achieve their goals. I was not a Christian until I was 38, so my life before this was not directly shaped by me trying to follow God. I didn't make all the decisions myself, exactly, if things felt natural I believed they were right.

I grew up on a small-holding miles from the sea and always wanted to experience something different in life. I was the adventurous one in my family, I suppose, and I ended up serving in the Navy for 22 years, but it wasn't a direct 'I am going to join the navy', really. I had wanted to join the services at 18, but my dad had put me off.

When I was 21 I went into Lincoln and walked down the street with all the recruiting offices on it. The Navy one was the first one I found. That was how I came to be in the Navy; I just wanted to experience a bit more of life and worldwide places.

When I first joined it was just a job, sort of, but it became more than this once I had finished my training. It was enjoyable, learning things I knew nothing about; I became an aircraft engineer and the Navy became more than a job, it was a life.

I was still in the Navy when I became a Christian, through the Naval Christian Fellowship in Portland with Padre Ray Jones. I think that being a Christian did make a difference to the way I was at work. It introduced me to like-minded Christians that I didn't know existed, and made me more tolerant of people

who would have irritated me before, and less tolerant of bad language.

When I left the Navy I did a bit of work as a Home-Help and also trained as a driving instructor. The thing that drew me to driving instructing was working with people and helping them to achieve their goals. The same sort of thing with Home-Help, really, I was supporting people in need.

The thing was, though, that I didn't like sitting in the car all day as a driving instructor. I am more of an active person than that, so when I was sat in church one day and saw an advert for a caretaker job, my wife and I prayed about it and we decided that I would take on the job. I loved that job. I was serving God and meeting lots of people I could encourage and serve in practical ways. I helped them and saw God at work and good things happening and that was very satisfying.

I haven't thought that much about it being a vocation, but I believe God has put me in places where I have been able to help people and make a difference to their lives. He was guiding me before I knew He was. It is not so much that God has ever said to me 'do this' or 'do that', but I have found God where I am; there are lots of things within His plan for my life, I'm sure. Sometimes we want God to take control, but He gives us a choice and meets us there.

The advice I would give to a new Christian in terms of finding God's plan or purpose for your life is to follow your passions (so long as they are not illegal!) and be willing to test things out. You will often find that you are good at things you had no idea

you would be good at. God may not reveal the whole future to you. And pray, of course, and by following God's Holy Spirit, who is within you.

I now know it is that feeling of right and wrong, reflecting how God is leading us by His Holy Spirit and it is all about knowing God and the life that He wants us to live. This means you begin to feel uncomfortable if you start to stray from what He wants.

In terms of mistakes: be careful of being drawn into the wrong kind of company. Sometimes you know it is the wrong company, but you still go there and then you end up doing things that you don't really want to do.

I am a practical person more than a head person. God needs all sorts of people to serve him and I am glad He uses me and my gifts.

Meet Rachel

Hello hello! I'm Rachel (the Rachel you have already read about, except an altogether less polished version from my perspective).

When I was growing up, I always loved meeting up with family members and old friends, but used to dread the inevitable question "So, what next?". Will you go to University? What will you study? What then? What next? I never knew. My A-Levels were a 50:50 split Arts and Sciences (I wanted to keep my options open) and I picked a degree at Uni that would allow me to study three subjects concurrently (our course hoodies had a slogan on the back which read 'Indecision is a decision too'). I have never known what I want to be 'when I grow up' (other than a Blue Peter presenter, but then who doesn't want to be one?).

When people asked, I would have loved to have been able to say, 'I'm going to Uni to study Medicine so I can be a doctor' – but for some reason I didn't feel I could commit to pursuing such a career, so the answer instead was always 'I'm not really sure'. As I reflect back on that period now, I can see that although I may have felt adrift and unsettled (or occasionally panicked) because I didn't 'have a plan', the time was characterised more by a contented peacefulness (except when I could see someone with a 'and after that...?' tripping off their tongue. Panic ensues). Now, I think I can attribute the peacefulness to my learning to trust God; that He would point

me in the right direction, clearly leading the way to whatever was right.

Maybe what has felt to me like indecision has allowed God to direct my vocation (vocation being a word I had only really associated with vicars or the vocational career paths I was always so wary of...). I look back on what seemed to be entirely random and coincidental job offers and realise how I 'just happened' to be in the right place at the right time. I can see how I had been growing, learning, and gaining experience in each role, all of which would lead me to where I am now. God had prepared the way entirely without me realising and I'm convinced the journey itself (with its bizarre mix of peace and panic) has been an important part of my vocation. Most recently, He prodded me to apply for a job I felt entirely unqualified for (and He seemed to nudge those who appointed me to take a chance on an enthusiastic but inexperienced newbie too). Is this my 'vocation'? Not fully I don't think (job and vocation are not quite the same thing), but it is definitely part of it.

I know I am in the right place and I am ridiculously happy in this role, but even here I would be giving a dishonest and unhelpful picture if I pretended it was all simple and straightforward. Sometimes I wonder if people really value the work I do or see me as 'only' an administrator. I can find myself thinking that I am the least important person in the room (even when others seem to value me) because that is the stereotype associated with the role. I am no stranger to imposter syndrome (when others describe their imposter

syndrome I even manage to wonder if I am an imposter in the imposter syndrome club). Following Jesus vocationally doesn't stop these inner doubts or unhelpful views, but it does give me somewhere to take them.

Amazingly though, more often I am blown away by how remarkable it is that I love my role as much as I do. I have genuinely never woken up and dreaded going to work (I understand from friends that this is rather exceptional). For me, part of embracing vocation has been about turning away from judgements and expectations (of my own and the world) and stepping into the place that God has mapped out; where I feel at home when I sit down at my desk, where I find myself laughing often and easily, and where I challenge myself to do better every day out of a love for the team, the role and the way it enables me to serve God and His church. I have been abundantly blessed to learn that work sometimes (if you're really lucky, often) doesn't feel like work at all.

Now, if I ever find myself speaking to a young person or new Christian thinking about their vocation, I make a conscious effort to try and have a helpful and encouraging conversation, rather than one that feels like a test. It can't just be me whose toes used to curl at the 'So, what next?' question (and I always thought it was dreadfully unfair that grown-ups could ask that of me, but it would seem impertinent for me to ask it back...). I hope that asking about their strengths, gifts and what brings joy will be a far more enjoyable (and, I'm sure, beneficial) conversation for all involved.

I still don't really know what I want to be when I grow up, but I'm confident that I can trust the God who knows me better than I know myself to point me in the right direction. Right now, that is here. I might, or might not, still doing this job in 20 years' time, but I am sure I will look back and see how this has been part of a vocational journey which is far bigger than any one task, time, or role.

And if God ever nudges me towards a Blue Peter application form, the pen will be ready...

Meet Reb

My name is Reb, I am 23, and I spend most of my time working as a Research Assistant in a university laboratory. I really enjoy my work, which comes from a fascination with the intricacies of life and the freedom of creativity and innovation that scientists have to try new experiments and discover new things. By training, I am a scientist. It began when I was at school; a crazy science teacher helped me to work out that I could do and love Biology and Chemistry. I love to learn, a value that has been instilled by and grown alongside watching the way my parents do life, so it makes sense that I should enjoy a career where learning is never over.

Since finishing a degree in Biology, I have worked in amazing labs doing really cool frontline science. Every day, I am surrounded by incredibly talented people whose brains can both store an inordinate amount of information and churn out imaginative idea after idea. It is daunting and an absolute honour to be surrounded by all of these people. However, I keep finding that I don't quite fit in. I am frequently confronted with thoughts that question my legitimacy as a scientist, my lack of drive to work all hours of the day towards a discovery, and my failings as I try to embrace an intellect-focussed career with my people-minded personality.

Do you know what I love? Making people cups of coffee. I love the look on their faces when they realise you've remembered how they like it and made it for them at the time of day when

they like it. I love smiling and saying hello to people as I walk around the building. The more I think about it, the more things I find that set my heart alight. Inviting lots of people over for a meal and discussing the difficult things in life, crying and laughing together. Going round to friends who are struggling with the capacity to do life's menial tasks and cooking for them and folding their laundry. Inviting a refugee to stay in my home. Caring for children who believe themselves unwanted. In my perfect life, I have time for everyone who needs someone, always have the kettle boiling and always have a spare bed for someone who needs it. Maybe I am a pastor? Or a pastoral figure? I wonder if that is my vocation.

In practice, this is not what my life looks like. For most of my week, I work. I intersperse it with church commitments, running, and visiting friends and family. Sometimes this is really quite dissatisfying. On other days, I remember that my vocation is not limited to a space or occupation; being available for my colleagues may sometimes be where God wants me more than anywhere else. The beautiful thing about my vocation is that it is valuable everywhere. What makes it hard is that it is really difficult to be everyone's person all at once, especially with a full-time job and all the rest.

I was challenged by Mark's contrasts (page 157) and realised that I have a lot to learn on the 'Rushing' v 'Patient' axis. I think I love that vocation is a lifelong lesson. Maybe one day I will be pastor-ing full-time, or maybe I will find a way to host and love people without rushing around like a headless mother hen. I trust that God refines us as we lean into him,

which is why listening to his voice on vocation is so important. Ultimately, vocation all points back to him.

To those wondering about vocation, I would encourage spending time over the questions on the previous pages, really meditating on them and not allowing time pressure to become a burden. It is a wonderful journey realising the things that both lighten your soul and terrify you, noticing as you do the ways God has been changing your heart as you have walked with him. I am blessed to call Mark and Lindsay godparents, and have discussed many of these thoughts and worries with them in the last few years. Finding life-giving folk who root for you in all seasons is a rarity but often breeds the most beautiful discourse. Vocation wonder-ers would do well to plough energy into identifying and investing in such people.

A pastoral scientist – not what I expected as a young 15-year-old expecting all the world to be her oyster. An unfinished story this most certainly is, but what a blessing it is to trust all that God still has in store.