

At This
Time and In
This Place

Vocation and Higher Education



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5

Stories of Call

FROM DRAMATIC PHENOMENA TO CHANGED LIVES

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WHEN BLACK ELK was a young man, he heard voices. "It was like somebody was calling me, and I thought it was my mother, but there was nobody there. This happened more than once, and always made me afraid, so I ran home." One day, when Black Elk had grown old enough to carry his grandfather's bow and ride on horseback, he saw a kingbird. As he prepared to shoot it, the bird spoke:

"Listen! A voice is calling you!" Then I looked up at the clouds, and two men were coming there, headfirst like arrows slanting down; and as they came they sang a sacred song and the thunder was like drumming. I will sing it for you. The song and the drumming were like this: "Behold, a sacred voice is calling you; All over the sky a sacred voice is calling."¹

Sitting in a cave at age forty, Muhammad suddenly felt a formidable presence telling him to "Proclaim! (or Read!) / In the name / Of thy Lord and Cherisher, / Who created— / Created man, out of / A leech-like clot: / Proclaim! And thy Lord / Is Most Bountiful,— / He Who taught / (The

use of) the Pen,— / Taught man that / Which he knew not" (Sura 96:1–5). Muhammad was terrified; in his horror, he ran from the cave but was unable to escape the strange presence. According to Ibn Ishaq's record of Muhammad's recollection of the event,

When I was midway on the mountain, I heard a voice from heaven saying, "O Muhammad! Thou art the apostle of God and I am Gabriel." I raised my head towards heaven to see who was speaking, and lo, Gabriel in the form of a man with feet astride the horizon . . . I stood gazing at him, moving neither backward or forward; then I began to turn my face away from him, but towards whatever region of the sky I looked, I saw him as before.²

These two episodes illustrate the experience of "receiving a call." As the stories show, this experience can involve intense drama. It spans religious traditions—in this case, Islam and Lakota religious beliefs—but it also includes those traditions more familiar in the West, including Judaism and Christianity. In these traditions, too, a call can be dramatic: Moses is stopped in his tracks by the strange sight of the burning bush; Paul, at that time still known as Saul, is struck blind by a blazing light while traveling along the road.

These different cases of "receiving a call" can be investigated primarily as *phenomena*—that is, as narrowly circumscribed events in time and space that have common features. So, for instance, one might observe that for both Black Elk and Muhammad, voice and vision come together. In both cases, the sky is involved; a calling presence is spread out everywhere and cannot be escaped. Such an analysis, focused solely on the phenomenological experience, might prove fascinating.³ However, in order to understand key elements of "receiving a call" displayed in these remarkable stories, we must proceed with caution. Accounts of receiving a call cannot be lifted from their context in religious traditions and separated from the lives and characters these traditions honor.

2. Ibn Ishaq, *Sirat Rasoul Allah*, Internet Archive, p. 21, <http://www.archive.org/details/Sirat-lifeOfMuhammadBy-ibnIshaq> (accessed November 8, 2014).

3. Rudolf Otto builds his famous *The Idea of the Holy* around the elements of mystery, fear, and fascination that he believes permeate encounters with the holy. His book is primarily a phenomenological exploration. In it he considers some biblical stories of call, such as Moses's at the burning bush. Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W. Harvey (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), 127.

1. As narrated to John G. Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1932), 19. A phrase in this quotation becomes the title for John Neafsey's *A Sacred Voice Is Calling: Personal Vocation and Social Conscience* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006), see especially pp. xi and 23.

chapter concludes with a very brief reflection on how call can lead to friendship.

Open to a call: humility and attention

In the modern era, most of us doubt we will receive any sort of call that resembles those in the stories we enjoy hearing—whether ancient ones, like those of Moses or Muhammad, or relatively recent ones like Black Elk on horseback or Mother Teresa on the train. Of course none of these people expected they would receive the calls they did. Black Elk at first doubted the call, assuming that his mother was calling. The biblical judge Gideon was highly skeptical when he was called, asking for a sign (indeed, many signs) that “it is you [the Lord] who speaks to me” (Judges 6:17). Moses doubted as well: “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” (Exod. 3:11). Call, in other words, hardly eliminates doubt; indeed, the two are fairly consistent companions.

Still, the doubt that accompanies call in these classic stories is different from our modern doubt about call. The subjects seem to doubt their own ability or worthiness to receive a call, whereas modern people tend to doubt the very possibility of an audible or visible call. Moreover, in the great call stories, doubt is almost always accompanied by something else: *fear*. As already noted, Muhammad was terrified and ran from his call. Moses hears the Lord speak from the bush and hides his face, “for he was afraid to look at God” (Exod. 3:6). When the angel appears to announce the birth of Jesus to the shepherds in the field, “they were terrified” (Luke 2:9). A few verses earlier, the angel seems to assume that Mary’s call will induce fear, insofar as it begins with the words “Do not be afraid” (1:30).

In contrast, in our time, this twinning of doubt with fear is relatively rare. If anything, modern doubt is more frequently mixed with confidence, the self-assertion of certain knowledge about what is or isn’t possible. This is not to say that fear has disappeared from our modern world; if anything, it is more pervasive. John Paul II began his papacy with the phrase, which he repeated almost daily, “Do not be afraid.”⁶ He believed a spirit of fear characterized the modern age, concerned as it is with security and protection, and formed in the suspicions that accompany them.

6. See John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, ed. Vittorio Messori (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1994), esp. 3–12.

As we doubt differently, so also do we fear differently. Moses’s whole existence was not characterized by fear; according to the story he was busy tending the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, leading the sheep “beyond the wilderness” (Exod. 3:1). This small but vital task of daily life is interrupted by the burning bush and the voice of God, and the interruption causes Moses to fear. The same can be said of the shepherds or Gideon or Black Elk. In all these stories, the call is deeply close and personal; precisely this is what occasions fear. By contrast, pervasive fear in the modern age lacks a specific target. We do not know what we fear, or, perhaps better, we fear what we *cannot* know: the unnamed, impersonal abyss that is beyond our access.

The difference between these two types of fear can be tested by their relation to *love*. If we fear a personal presence that suddenly confronts us in the form of a burning bush or a talking bird, and then discover as we engage with it that it confronted us out of love, we lose our fear: “perfect love casts out fear” (1 John 4:18). Our dominant modern fear, however, is not so easily addressed, for how could the unknown, impersonal abyss confront us out of love?

Peter Berger spoke of a “sacred canopy”⁷ that once shielded the whole world—from human life to the life of Jethro’s sheep, and even the mountain of God that Moses traverses in the desert. The canopy placed human activity in the context of a mysterious, but meaningfully ordered, sacred universe. While the sacred purposes laced within the mystery remained largely hidden, they could blaze forth at any time. People knew this sacred order because they felt themselves participants in it. Jethro’s sheep needed grass, and so Moses led them; Black Elk needed food to sustain his family’s life, and so he hunted. In the case of each man’s call, one purposeful and ordered activity is interrupted and transformed into another by a sacred voice that suddenly comes close and lays out a new unexpected direction.

Our ancestors tended to understand their everyday work—whether as hunters, shepherds, or seafarers—as part of a larger universe of order and purpose. In contrast, we typically conceive of our lives as enclosed structures that provide space for the meanings we ourselves make. Here, perhaps, lies the greatest modern impediment to the notion that a sacred

7. *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Anchor Books, 1967).

voice is calling each of us: we are less likely to experience the world as arranged according to larger purposes into which our smaller purposes need to fit.

Some will claim that our modern way of seeing is more accurate; for them, the sacred canopy was lifted for good reason, in that it was based upon a fiction. If held consistently, this view closes off the very possibility of a call. But before rushing to this view, we should consider whether our modern versions of doubt and fear have tended to distort our readings of call stories like those we have just briefly considered. For the modern age, any rigorous examination of “call” will require *preparation*, which includes some degree of “unlearning” certain impeding assumptions. Two capacities are of particular importance in this regard: *humility* and *attention*.⁸

Humility relates to *humus*; by it we are reminded that our lives arise from the ground, and will return to it. Humility has a de-centering effect, opening us to an awareness of the limits of our control; we begin to perceive how much of our life is consumed with the feverish attempt to build ourselves up into something larger than we are. “Attention,” as Simone Weil describes it, opens us to communication with the divine, to prayer. Its awakening comes as we learn to give our close and undivided attention to something—for Weil, almost anything at all. This prepares the mind to turn in its highest reaches to its highest object: God.⁹ As A. J. Conyers interprets Weil, attention means “the overthrowing of ‘vain imaginations,’ the disposal of a self-centered view of existence.”¹⁰

For our purposes in this book, these two capacities are particularly important as we consider the idea of “calling” in the context of higher education. Arguably, the modern university is structured to keep humility at abeyance. If knowledge is conceived as something to possess, and if its possession is conceived as a means to power, then as the purveyor of knowledge, the university trains us to achieve in such a way as to dominate others. This is the very opposite of humility. Furthermore, the task

8. On humility, see the comments at the end of chapter 6; on attention, see the comments on “hearing” in chapter 12. Both of these capacities might also be understood as virtues, as that language is developed in Part Three of this book; see especially the comments on memory and teachability in chapter 9.

9. Simone Weil, “Reflections on the Right Use of Social Studies with a View to the Love of God,” in *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Gruafurd (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1952), 51–57. This essay is excerpted in Placher, ed., *Callings*, 400–404 (see chap. 4, note 10).

10. A. J. Conyers, *The Listening Heart: Vocation and the Crisis of Modern Culture* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2009), 121.

of *study* in the modern university is in danger of coming uncoupled from the “attention” that Weil considers essential to it. So Conyers believes that, increasingly in our time,

whether one receives something of value from the subject depends on whether it is instantly accessible to the mind. So the student who wants to convey the idea that he has a high “I.Q.” claims hardly to study at all. . . . Or a student claims not to have an aptitude for something if it requires effort to understand. This is the obverse side of the same attitude—mental achievements are worthy in inverse proportion to the effort required.¹¹

Such an attitude is the inverse of Weil’s “attention.”

Yet while this is a *temptation* of the modern university, it is not a *necessity*. If the college or university is rather a place where we are schooled in practices that open us to greater truths than we might imagine, it can still be a place of attention. It can also be a place of humility if, in presenting these truths, it can remind us that we are limited creatures, dependent on the wisdom of others, and that we can still fix our minds on things that are above us, coming gradually to know and even to love them.¹² As a place where we learn both humility and attention, the university can clear space in which to listen carefully for our calling.

But how do we start, particularly when we have been schooled in habits and attitudes that oppose both humility and attention? In one poignant biblical story we hear of Naaman, a Syrian general, who “was a great man,” “in high favor,” and “a mighty warrior”—but he was also a leper (2 Kgs. 5:1). The story of Naaman’s healing from his leprosy is also a story of his humbling. And as he is humbled he learns to pay attention to voices he would have otherwise ignored.

Propelled by his need to be healed of his leprosy, Naaman listens to the advice of an Israelite slave girl in his service who tells him he can find healing in Israel. Armed with gifts and an official letter, he visits the king of Israel, whom Naaman presumes (through long-practiced habits related to his high status) must be running the show. But the Israelite king suspects a Syrian plot with which he will have nothing to do. Luckily,

11. Conyers, *Listening Heart*, 119.

12. See the comments on the relationship between love and knowledge in chapter 7.

Elisha the prophet catches wind of the matter and invites Naaman to visit his home. When Naaman arrives, however, Elisha does not come to greet him; instead, he sends a messenger to tell him to wash in the Jordan River. Naaman is incensed, convinced that there are many better, cleaner rivers back in his homeland; he thus “turned and went away in a rage” (5:11). Once again, he is saved by a servant who says, “If the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was ‘Wash and be clean’” (5:13). Naaman listens, washes, and “his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean” (5:14).

Naaman’s healing, however, is not the end of this story. He attempts to offer gifts to Elisha for his health, but Elisha refuses, saying, “As the Lord lives, whom I serve, I will accept nothing!” (5:16). Elisha is adamant about this; he knows that what he has offered—life and health—is not something to be bought. But further, one suspects that his refusal is meant to remind Naaman that the old methods of using power, money, and valor to gain privilege have turned out in this story to be false and empty. This point is reinforced at the end of the story, when Elisha’s servant Gehazi lies to Naaman and collects his money—and later, as a judgment, his leprosy as well. A key to Naaman’s new life will be to recognize his dependency on the mysterious, life-giving gifts of others. So Naaman gathers some soil from Elisha’s yard and returns to his home, pledging to worship only the Lord, the God of Israel (5:17).

We hear no more of how it all went back in Syria, but the implication of the story is that Naaman is reinstated in his old life, himself a new man. His journey, propelled by his need, has led him to see the world in a new way; he has “overthrown his vain imaginations.” A new story opens for him, because he has learned humility. Crucial in this learning was the recognition that he could not *achieve* his life and health. In the process of learning this, and propelled by his need, Naaman was opened up to communication from sources he would otherwise have shut out. By attending to these new sources, he learned to depend on them and to follow their sound advice. He learned to listen, to *attend*.

While Naaman’s story does not relate any special call from God, it is especially instructive in our modern context. Naaman begins with the assumption that through his own effort and with the reputation and resources he has built with those in power he can guide his own life forward to success and security. The leprosy that touches him, though, turns out to be his salvation; it teaches him that what he loves, his life and

health, is sustained by hands that are not his own. Following the advice of others whose lives of service have taught them a wisdom that Naaman’s position has shielded from him, he takes his place in the Jordan, whose dirty waters are precisely what can make him clean.

In our time, we are likely to be guided by the narrative Naaman lived before his sickness. We spend our lives building up the means to secure success—and we counsel and educate young people to do the same. Yet cracks develop within this narrative. Indeed, perhaps we knew vaguely all along that they would—as our modern fears, unnamed yet pervasive, would suggest. Like Naaman, we need something to need—as well as servant voices to help us articulate that need, reminding us how prideful and, actually, silly is the story we are trying to live. We may need something like Naaman’s lesson to develop the listening heart that can open to the sacred voice that is calling. If and when it comes, it will surely frighten us; but as the call stories in the next section suggest, that fear can recede, and even turn to love, as we come to recognize that we do not act alone. Rather, as Muhammad put it, we are (and always have been) in the hands of “the Sustainer, who taught us what we did not know.”

Call in context: location, logic, and scope

If our modern predispositions are not so strong as to close off the very possibility of a call, we can begin to notice its logic—particularly as this is displayed in important call stories of the great religious traditions. These stories do not simply record extraordinary phenomena; they spread out into the whole life of the person who responds to a call. Mother Teresa, for instance, lived the kind of life that supports the story of her call and makes it matter; if we are interested in her call, we must also be interested in her life.¹³ The story of a call therefore reminds us to look, not simply directly *at it*, but *all around it*. In the case of Black Elk, this would mean recognizing that he had developed, even as a young child, an inchoate yet very real sense of a sacred realm that framed his life. That context helps

13. Fr. Langford was perhaps successful in bringing Mother Teresa to speak more openly about the actual experience of her “call within a call” because he came to her with the intention of founding an order of priests related to Mother Teresa’s order of nuns. He wished to know the details precisely so that they could inform the charism of the new order. See Langford, *Mother Teresa’s Secret Fire*, 38–47.

us understand how, later in life, he was able more fully to identify and embrace the sounds that came to him across the sky as a sacred voice calling.

As noted above, it is difficult to make sense of the notion of calling if one supposes there is no such realm from which a call might come. Or, put more precisely: *if someone is called, it seems that there must be a caller who solicits his or her attention.* While the next chapter will take up this question in more detail, we can here note that the story of a call functions in part to reveal something of the caller's character and purposes; this is necessary because the one who is called does not yet know who the caller is. This is why the occasion of the call elicits questions from the called to the caller about identity. "Who are you Lord?" asks Saul, when he is struck to the ground by a blinding light (Acts 9:5). If the one called holds suppositions about the caller, the call itself is sure to put them to the test. In this sense, a call is rightly positioned in the middle—partway between a settled denial of the existence of a caller, and complete certainty about the caller's nature.

This point helps uncover another feature of the logic of call. To whatever extent a call story is taken to imply the presence of a caller, its power to do so is based not in argument but in *personal witness in the form of a story.* For example, Saul had a particularly vivid experience of being called even while on his way, as a zealous young Jew, to arrest Christians in Damascus. This experience changed his life dramatically; as Paul, he became Christianity's chief evangelist to the Gentiles. In the course of his preaching, he frequently told the story of this experience; it was his way of witnessing to what he had come to believe. His call story matched his life—both supported the other. Again, call stories become worthy of our attention insofar as they are lived. And, indeed, if we notice a life (like Paul's or Mother Teresa's), we wonder what made it possible. In this way, call becomes plausible through the witness of a life.

Thus, call importantly *ties the experiences that we have to the work that we do.* We cannot know the significance of the call without the work to which it led; yet at the same time, we cannot know the significance of the work itself unless our understanding of it is informed by the call. This may become clear only in hindsight, and perhaps only as the call narrative is told or written. We should not assume that every call will lay out a precise path forward. Call must open *some* sort of path; if it does not eventually yield work, it is useless. However, not all call stories come with clear

instructions for moving forward, and the relationship of the work and the call may take some time to emerge.

Religious traditions such as Christianity or Judaism carry along call stories, many of them quite dramatic. But the stories are not told and retold simply to inflame all believers with a yearning for similar call experiences. Rather, the stories are most valuable as they provoke a personal response that reaches out to do work that is both like and unlike the work of the one called in the story told. So a Christian might say: since Paul was called to preach to the Gentiles, perhaps God is also calling me to some related but also different work—one especially well suited to me at this time and in this place. This means that a call is tied, not principally to the experience of being called and its accompanying phenomena, but rather to how the experiences of our lives point (or pointed) to the work or tasks that are (or were) set before us.

Within a religious tradition, call stories encourage analogical thinking. The analogy assists in *the task of discernment*, which is a necessary feature of the call. Call implies discernment precisely insofar as it links inherited understandings of the one who calls and of the work that the call invites people to undertake. Discernment about call draws us into the tradition at the same time that it affirms our distinctive role within it.¹⁴ So in discerning her call, a Christian can rightly say: since the same God who called Paul calls me, then the work that this God offers in my call will be like Paul's in some ways—but surely also unlike it, especially since so many differences stand between me (at this time and in this place) and Paul (in his time and place). The analogy emphasizes a connection between the two stories, but also allows for the unique, the particular. As Karl Barth has said, "vocation is the whole of the particularity, limitation and restriction in which each human being meets the divine call and command, which wholly claims him in the totality of his previous existence, and to which above all wholeness and therefore total differentiation

14. More than any other, St. Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Jesuits, has codified the process of discernment as Christians might carry it out as they consider their decisions and callings. Indeed, when Pope Francis, a Jesuit, was asked how his Jesuit training most informed what he brought to his new papal role he answered with one word: "discernment." A variety of books trace how Ignatian discernment might inform our lives and callings. See, for instance, Timothy M. Gallagher, *The Discernment of Spirits: An Ignatian Guide for Everyday Living* (New York: Crossroads, 2005).

and specification are intrinsically proper as God intends and addresses this human being and not another.¹⁵

Barth here mentions a “previous” existence that is gathered up in all its particularity and specificity as one is called. In doing so he marks that *call signals a new beginning*. While it certainly is true that call looks forward to and is ratified in the work of our lives, call cannot be entirely merged with the various tasks we have simply in virtue of being human. On Barth’s accounting, call opens us to a certain path of action or work set out for us in particular. Whether or not the identification of this path comes in a dramatic experience, it remains something we discover through call. Understood in this way, in any called life there is a certain “before” and “after” the call.¹⁶

In the biblical narrative, the call of Abram in Genesis 12 functions as the beginning—indeed, the beginning of all other beginnings related to call within the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditions. While we are given only a brief glimpse, it is important that there is a “previous existence” for Abram, the time spent in his father Terah’s household. And, in a deeper sense, the stories of rebellion and dissolution of Genesis 3–11 also function as part of the context of that previous existence.¹⁷ With Abram and his wife Sarai, God begins a new work that responds to this dissolution. God calls, instructing Abram to “go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing” (12:1–2).

As Abram’s call is the first term in a long redemptive work, his response similarly makes possible all other responses: “So Abram went as the Lord had told him” (12:4). Abram’s assent to the call makes space for ours; indeed, as we respond to a call from this same God, we are participants in Abram’s response. Of course, Abram’s call is not ours; we are each different from him. Yet his call still relates to us analogically; in each age, a

15. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III:4 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1985), 599–600; translation modified with attention to Barth’s use of the German *Mensch* rather than *Mann*.

16. This is not to imply that to be called we must be able to identify the moment we were called. In fact, this is rare. Rather, the point is that since call always moves us to a certain work, we can tell a story of our lives that recounts how that work began for us, and how it has changed us.

17. Biblical scholars have pointed out the connection between the attempt at the tower of Babel to “make a name for ourselves” (Gen. 11:4) and God’s promise in Abram’s call to make his name great. The contrast is between human hubris and God’s freely given blessing.

new call is issued that is continuous with the work begun in him, a call to participate with those who have gone before in God’s full redemption begun in the one in whom “all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (12:3). Our call will be a new beginning for us, but it is also a continuation of the work already begun; thus, our call is an offer to contribute in our own unique way to work that is already long underway.

Mother Teresa spoke of her “call within a call” on the train to Darjeeling—by which she meant that her call to serve the poorest of the poor in Kolkata came in the context of an earlier call to join the Sisters of Loretto, who had sent her to Kolkata in the first place. Yet the expression transfers in another sense to all who are called within the context of a religious tradition. Earlier stories of call inform, and to some degree govern, what call can mean for those who follow in the same tradition. Their call is always to be placed within the context of the calls that have preceded it.

This logic is also illustrated by the approach to vocation in early Protestantism, as described in the previous chapter. Luther and Calvin accented the point that all Christians (not just “the religious”) were called by God to particular callings: “each individual has his own kind of living assigned to him by the Lord.”¹⁸ In the generations following, Puritan theologians such as William Perkins came to identify two sorts of callings, general and particular. “The general calling is the calling of Christianity, which is common to all that live in the Church of God. The particular is that special calling that belongs to some particular men: as the calling of a Magistrate, the calling of a Minister” and so on.¹⁹ The bifurcation between these two callings was unfortunate; indeed, as Max Weber argues,²⁰ soon enough the second calling—which urged the one called to take up some function within a social order such as magistrate or minister—broke off from the first calling and cleared a path to our modern circumstance in which “vocation” often stands free of the theological context that birthed it. This was not Perkins’s intention. He held that “every particular calling

18. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill and trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967), 724. For a recent defense and updating of Calvin’s (and also Luther’s) account of vocation, see Douglas J. Schuurman, *Vocation: Discerning our Callings in Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), especially 48–75.

19. William Perkins, *A Treatise of the Vocations* (London: John Haviland, 1631), excerpted in Placher, ed., *Callings*, 265.

20. See Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1958), especially chapter 5, pp. 155–183. See also the discussions of Weber’s work in chapters 1 and 3.

must be practiced in and with the general calling of a Christian.”²¹ Put differently, any claim to have been called by God to pursue this or that way of life, this or that work, cannot stand on its own authority but rather needs to be drawn within the long tradition of call carried along, at least by Jews and Christians, since Abraham.

This last point may seem to limit the applicability of “call” too narrowly for current conditions of religious pluralism. Yet in another very real sense it actually opens it, because calls arising within particular religious traditions can, and often do, *invite others from outside these traditions to join in the work of the call*. Mother Teresa’s Missionaries of Charity serve as a case in point. Their website lists only one requirement for volunteering to help serve the poorest of the poor in Kolkata: “Hearts to love and hands to serve! (Mother Teresa),” and then adds “You are not required to call or write to the sisters ahead of time to go to Kolkata to volunteer. Simply ‘show up’ for Orientation and Registration at 3 PM on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays.”²² The Missionaries of Charity seem not the least interested in limiting the range of call to self-described Christians. For their part, they mean to pursue the particular work they have been called to do by God the Father of Jesus. What would be the reason to refuse others who want to join in the work? Indeed, since the sisters believe Jesus calls us all toward full communion with him “in his distressing disguise” as the poorest of the poor,²³ why not assume that the same call has been heard by anyone who shows up at 3 PM on Monday, Wednesday, or Friday?

In this way call stories that are sustained within various religious traditions can function as an invitation or witness, since they often involve someone whose life was dramatically changed through call. For those who long for such a change in their own lives, these stories attract. This longing is perhaps as present, even more present, in our modern world. So despite modern doubt and modern fear, the call of the Missionaries of Charity can respond to the promptings or yearnings that others may have, Christian or not. They witness to how the Christian tradition conceives of the good of human life and of the one who gives it, and invite others to come develop the skills they need, including attention and humility, to

21. Placher, ed., *Callings*, 269.

22. http://www.motherteresa.org/07_family/Volunteering/v_cal.html#1 (accessed October 5, 2014).

23. See James Martin’s portrait of Mother Teresa in his *My Life with the Saints* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2006), 163.

work in this way. The sisters do not do this abstractly, but rather by doing their daily work with the poor, gathering for prayer, and even by celebrating the story of Mother Teresa’s call on September 10. Remembering her “call within a call” reminds them of why they work as they do, and locates that work firmly with a long tradition that, nonetheless, is open at many points for others who are called in various ways to join.

Responding to the call: conversation, language, future orientation

The foregoing section has already opened the themes of this final part of the chapter, which concerns elements in the *response* to a call. An obvious feature of call stories is that they *assume call will be matched by response*. Call is surely dependent on the one who calls, the sacred voice; but it is just as dependent on the one who is called. A call is, at least sometimes, heard and responded to. The point is initially epistemological: how else could we know that there was a call unless someone listened and responded? But beyond this, the dependence of call on response suggests a certain vulnerability in the caller as well.²⁴ Within the dynamic of response lies the possibility of refusal.²⁵

The Bible relates many stories in which the one who is called resists, or at least attempts to resist, the call: Moses, Gideon, Jeremiah, perhaps even Jesus in the garden. Only on occasion does it tell us of those who reject it altogether—fittingly, since the biblical story is carried by those who respond, not those who turn away. Yet we do hear such stories. Jonah is one such case, although God persists—calling in the form of a violent storm and a big fish. Most notable is the story of the rich young man who questions Jesus about what will bring him eternal life (Matt. 19:16–22). Their exchange winds around until Jesus tells the man to “sell your possessions, give the money to the poor . . . then come, follow me.”²⁶ As

24. It is often assumed that power rests fully with the one in authority, in this case the one who calls. Yet if the logic of authority and obedience is fully probed, we can see a great vulnerability in an authority since it must await a willing response. With call coercion is not an option since it necessarily transforms authority into mere force. See Stanley Hauerwas and Charles Pinches, *Christians Among the Virtues* (Notre Dame, IN.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 133–138.

25. This point will be discussed in more detail in chapter 6; see in particular its reflections on the grammar of the call.

26. Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Collier Books, 1963), 84.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer notes, this brings the man “face to face with Jesus, the Son of God: it is the ultimate encounter. It is now only a question of yes or no, of obedience or disobedience. The answer is no.” In rejecting the call the man rejects Jesus. So he goes away “sorrowful, disappointed and deceived of his hopes, unable to wrench himself from his past.”²⁷ Jesus lets him go, aware of how heavy a weight he carries with all his riches. As Bonhoeffer notes, call ultimately requires surrender—an obedience that must be complete if it is to bring us into right relation with the one who calls. We should not be surprised when a call is rejected.

Yet as many stories in the biblical tradition suggest, even as it moves toward such a confrontation as this, *call invites, even initiates, conversation*. As just noted, Jesus and the rich young man go back and forth in their exchange.²⁸ The call of Moses extends this, to an almost comical degree: his discussion with God about call goes on for almost two full chapters, beginning with the appearance of a burning bush that is not consumed. As Moses moves towards it, God, the first to speak, says: “‘Moses, Moses!’ And Moses said, ‘Here I am’” (Exod. 3:4).²⁹ This response suggests that the two parties have become fully present to one another as the call begins. They are mutually attentive. When God tells Moses who he is—the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—Moses begins to fear, heightening his attention, even if also bringing forth questions and worries. In response, God describes the suffering among the Israelites, as well as the plan to bring them out of captivity and into a land flowing with milk and honey. The explanation undergirds an assignment to do work. “So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt” (3:10).

But this is hardly the end of the conversation, which includes the well-known reply to Moses’s concern about who he shall say sent him: “I am who I am.” God then proceeds to lay out plans for Moses, including leading the people and confronting Pharaoh. But Moses pushes this off, offering various objections. God responds to each in turn, sometimes

27. Bonhoeffer, *Cost of Discipleship*, 84. For further reflections on Bonhoeffer’s contributions to an account of vocation, see chapter 4.

28. Jesus’s call of the disciples (e.g., Matthew 4:18–22) may seem perfunctory, involving very little dialogue. However, this is the exception that proves the rule, in the sense that this call is the beginning of a long conversation that, one might say, extends even until today.

29. Not infrequently the God of the Bible calls by name, sometimes using it twice. “Abraham, Abraham” calls God’s angel as he stays his hand from plunging the knife into his son Isaac (Gen. 22). There, as here, Abraham’s scripted response is “here I am.”

doing tricks for Moses, such as turning his staff into a snake and back again. God seems to be attempting to convince Moses to come along with the plan. The call does not coerce; Moses does not finally refuse it, of course, but the long dialogue suggests he might. Indeed, through the course of the conversation Moses and God seem to begin a kind of friendship, although Moses’ last objection provokes God’s anger.

“O my Lord, please send someone else to do it.” Then the anger of the Lord was kindled against Moses and he said, “What of your brother Aaron, the Levite? I know that he can speak fluently; even now he is coming to meet you, and when he sees you his heart will be glad. You shall speak to him and put the words in his mouth; and I will be with your mouth and with his mouth, and will teach you what you shall do.” (Exod. 4:13–15)

God’s anger here seems to respond to the fact that Moses, after so much discussion about the particulars of the call, should now push it off to someone else. In effect, Moses threatens to break the presence, the attention that has held throughout the course of the call. Moses looks for a way to politely hang up, to end the call.

Yet God does not turn his anger to threat. Rather he contextualizes the call, reminding Moses of his place in relation to others, Aaron in particular, who presumably also has a call, although the Bible tells us no specific story of it. God returns, in effect, to the relations that hold Moses fast, and which support the call in the first place. Moses is an Israelite and shares in their plight. God’s call of Moses is principally about the Israelites; to refuse the role God offers is, in effect, to refuse his place within his people, to pretend not to be their brother. God points to Aaron to remind him that his call is about a common plight. The work that accompanies it is also shared, not only by his brother Aaron, but by God as well.

This discussion between Moses and God can be understood as a very long message to Moses that his call is not principally about him. Indeed, *the call is for others*, a people whom God is inviting Moses to love as God loves them. Perhaps we can take heart in how long God works to bring this point clearly before Moses; it is especially difficult for modern people to comprehend since we conceive of ourselves principally as individuals.³⁰

30. See the remarks on individualism, and how this affects our understanding of call, in chapters 1 and 6 of this volume.

(Indeed, this is why we have by and large replaced the language of “call” with that of “career.”) Yet all biblical calls, as well as the calls of Black Elk and Muhammad, place the one called into a relationship of service to a people. They are called into participation in a larger plan that responds to the needs of others.

Another feature of call, one with important implications for our ability to respond to it, may seem obvious enough but is infrequently noted: *call comes in human language*. Call requires communication; only by means of language does the caller invite, discuss, and lay out a case. There is no biblical call that does not arrive in words; even the simplest, Jesus’s “Come, follow me,” comes in human speech.³¹ This means that even if the call involves instructions that appear rather bizarre—for instance, the instruction that the prophet Hosea should marry the prostitute Gomer—it is nonetheless comprehensible to human beings since it follows the linguistic rules of speech, their manner of communication.³² Call invites the one called to grow over time into its full meaning.

The fact that the call comes in language extends those points just reviewed about response, dialogue, and common connection. Furthermore, it locates the biblical story in terms of its oft-used title: the word of God. As Christians also say, the word became flesh and lived among us (John 1:14). This life of the Incarnate Word stands as witness, the articulation of the purposes of God for the world. And it speaks in human tongue. Like any communication in human language, we may listen, or, like the rich young man, we may turn away.

The call of Saul/Paul on the road to Damascus accents the specific words spoken, yet in complicated ways since different words are used in different accounts. Paul offers an extended recounting of his call before King Agrippa in Acts 26. In it he includes small details, such as that the voice he heard spoke in Hebrew (v. 14). The call here begins with a double address by name, followed by a question that is not merely rhetorical.

31. A possible exception comes in the call of Elisha. He was plowing with twelve pair of oxen when suddenly Elijah appeared and “threw his cloak around him.” What could this mean? Elisha dutifully interprets it as a call, but asks if he might go say goodbye to his father or mother. In his only words in the passage, the caller Elijah dismisses the request with “Go back! What have I done to you?” (1 Kgs. 19:19–20).

32. And this extends beyond the biblical tradition: call, after all, involves a voice. For instance, even the birds speak to Black Elk in human tongue. Moreover, the words of the call must have meaning—not just individually, but together in phrases, if the one called is to be able to consider them and to know what it means to put them into action.

“Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It hurts you to kick against the goads.” Saul answers with a question: “Who are you Lord?” And the reply comes back,

I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and stand on your feet; for I have appeared to you for this purpose to appoint you to serve and testify to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you. I will rescue you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you to open their eyes so they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me. (Acts 26:15–18)

The words of this version of the call are very clear and specific; Jesus not only makes his intentions plain, he concludes with a reason that explains them: Saul is to do work that will open a place for the Gentiles in the community of the sanctified.

This can be contrasted with Luke’s earlier account of the call in Acts 9. There Jesus’s instructions are much abbreviated: “get up and enter the city, and you will be told what more to do” (9:6). The difference suggests something important about call.³³ The directives of the initial account meet Saul when he is not yet prepared to receive the reasons for it—reasons that follow in the account offered seventeen chapters later. In the intervening years, we can suppose, he received the formation he needed to understand his call. He received this formation as he lived out his call. In this way, *call commences a story that cannot be told until the call is lived out in response*. As such, call functions as an invitation into an unfolding adventure whose story can be better told as it unfolds, and fully told only eschatologically.³⁴ At the same time, the call also initiates a form of training into one’s true identity. Those who are called may not know where the call will lead them, but they will be formed by the work that they are given to do, and will thereby learn to understand its significance.

33. It should be evident that our concern here is not which of these accounts more accurately reflects what was said on the road. Both are recorded by Luke; evidently he was aware of the difference, but generously gave us both.

34. Call looks to a future of completion, of perfection, and this cannot come fully come, as Aquinas notes, until the next life. See his *Summa Theologiae*, I–II, 5, 3, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Allen, TX: Christian Classics, 1981).

Vocation, formation, and friendship

If we believe, with Black Elk, that the voice that calls is a sacred voice, then the interruption and reorientation of the story of the life that is called will lift that life up, pointing it toward divine purposes, as these apply in the world in which human life is lived out. The call in this way is not only an invitation to do a higher order of work, a particular work that is especially suited to the one called; it is also an invitation to become one who is worthy of being called, not so much by one's own efforts, but by the formation and friendship that comes in following the call. This formation involves our transformation; as we do the work we are called to do, we are also further schooled in the virtues necessary for the work, including the virtues of humility and attention that first opened our ears to being called. These virtues can deepen as we live out our call, and so we can come more fully to understand its purpose—in effect, we tap into the hidden reasons of the sacred. So it is that with three missionary journeys behind him, Paul can describe his call in the full language of Christ's purposes. Likewise, the disciples of Jesus, first called from their nets with the simple words "Come, follow me," later come not only to describe the new path on which the call has placed them, but also to call others to join it. Call, so mysterious when it first arrives, turns out to be nothing more nor less than God's coaxing us into a friendship wherein we are made capable, not only of following God's purposes in the world, but also of understanding the deeper reasons why following is the only thing that makes sense for us to do.³⁵

35. The point here is little more than a paraphrase of what Jesus says to his disciples in his farewell discourse in the Gospel of John: "I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father" (John 15:15).