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The Courage to Teach
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(with Rachel Lively)
The Active Life
To Know As We Are Known
The Company of Strangers
The Promise of Paradox
Caring for the Commonweal (coeditor)

Parker J. Palmer

Author of The Courage to Teach

LET YOUR LIFE
SPEAK

& LISTENING
FOR THE VOICE
OF VOCATION

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the only tale I know how to tell, or have a right to tell, is my own. But I thought of my family often and with deep gratitude as I was writing about the parts of the journey we shared.

To Sally Palmer, Brent Palmer, Todd Palmer, and Carrie Palmer: thank you for all the love you have given me along the way.

To Heather Palmer: thank you for the new love and laughter you have brought into my life—though I'd be grateful if you would stop reminding me to eat my vegetables!

To Sharon Palmer: thank you for your gifted editing that is vital to my vocation as a writer and for the love that sustains me as I learn how to let my life speak.

Madison, Wisconsin
July 1999

Parker J. Palmer

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GRATITUDES

CHAPTER I

Listening to Life

Some time when the river is ice ask me mistakes I have made. Ask me whether what I have done is my life. Others have come in their slow way into my thought, and some have tried to help or to hurt: ask me what difference their strongest love or hate has made.

I will listen to what you say.
You and I can turn and look

at the silent river and wait. We know the current is there, hidden; and there are comings and goings from miles away that hold the stillness exactly before us.

What the river says, that is what I say.
—William Stafford, "Ask Me"¹

"Ask me whether what I have done is my life." For some, those words will be nonsense, nothing more than a poet's loose way

with language and logic. Of course what I have done is my life! To what am I supposed to compare it?

But for others, and I am one, the poet's words will be precise, piercing, and disquieting. They remind me of moments when it is clear—if I have eyes to see—that the life I am living is not the same as the life that wants to live in me. In those moments I sometimes catch a glimpse of my true life, a life hidden like the river beneath the ice. And in the spirit of the poet, I wonder: What am I meant to do? Who am I meant to be?

I was in my early thirties when I began, literally, to wake up to questions about my vocation. By all appearances, things were going well, but the soul does not put much stock in appearances. Seeking a path more purposeful than accumulating wealth, holding power, winning at competition, or securing a career, I had started to understand that it is indeed possible to live a life other than one's own. Fearful that I was doing just that—but uncertain about the deeper, truer life I sensed hidden inside me, uncertain whether it was real or trustworthy or within reach—I would snap awake in the middle of the night and stare for long hours at the ceiling.

Then I ran across the old Quaker saying, "Let your life speak." I found those words encouraging, and I thought I understood what they meant: "Let the highest truths and values guide you. Live up to those demanding standards in everything you do." Because I had heroes at the time who seemed to be doing exactly that, this exhortation had incarnate mean-

ing for me—it meant living a life like that of Martin Luther King Jr. or Rosa Parks or Mahatma Gandhi or Dorothy Day, a life of high purpose.

So I lined up the loftiest ideals I could find and set out to achieve them. The results were rarely admirable, often laughable, and sometimes grotesque. But always they were unreal, a distortion of my true self—as must be the case when one lives from the outside in, not the inside out. I had simply found a "noble" way to live a life that was not my own, a life spent imitating heroes instead of listening to my heart.

Today, some thirty years later, "Let your life speak" means something else to me, a meaning faithful both to the ambiguity of those words and to the complexity of my own experience: "Before you tell your life what you intend to do with it, listen for what it intends to do with you. Before you tell your life what truths and values you have decided to live up to, let your life tell you what truths you embody, what values you represent."

My youthful understanding of "Let your life speak" led me to conjure up the highest values I could imagine and then try to conform my life to them whether they were mine or not. If that sounds like what we are *supposed* to do with values, it is because that is what we are too often taught. There is a simplistic brand of moralism among us that wants to reduce the ethical life to making a list, checking it twice—against the index in some best-selling book of virtues, perhaps—and then trying very hard to be not naughty but nice.

There may be moments in life when we are so unformed that we need to use values like an exoskeleton to keep us from collapsing. But something is very wrong if such moments recur often in adulthood. Trying to live someone else's life, or to live by an abstract norm, will invariably fail—and may even do great damage.

Vocation, the way I was seeking it, becomes an act of will, a grim determination that one's life will go this way or that whether it wants to or not. If the self is sin-ridden and will bow to truth and goodness only under duress, that approach to vocation makes sense. But if the self seeks not pathology but wholeness, as I believe it does, then the willful pursuit of vocation is an act of violence toward ourselves—violence in the name of a vision that, however lofty, is forced on the self from without rather than grown from within. True self, when violated, will always resist us, sometimes at great cost, holding our lives in check until we honor its truth.

Vocation does not come from willfulness. It comes from listening. I must listen to my life and try to understand what it is truly about—quite apart from what I would like it to be about—or my life will never represent anything real in the world, no matter how earnest my intentions.

That insight is hidden in the word *vocation* itself, which is rooted in the Latin for "voice." Vocation does not mean a goal that I pursue. It means a calling that I hear. Before I can tell my life what I want to do with it, I must listen to my life telling me who I am. I must listen for the truths and values at

the heart of my own identity, not the standards by which I must live—but the standards by which I cannot help but live if I am living my own life.

Behind this understanding of vocation is a truth that the ego does not want to hear because it threatens the ego's turf: everyone has a life that is different from the "I" of daily consciousness, a life that is trying to live through the "I" who is its vessel. This is what the poet knows and what every wisdom tradition teaches: there is a great gulf between the way my ego wants to identify me, with its protective masks and self-serving fictions, and my true self.

It takes time and hard experience to sense the difference between the two—to sense that running beneath the surface of the experience I call my life, there is a deeper and truer life waiting to be acknowledged. That fact alone makes "listen to your life" difficult counsel to follow. The difficulty is compounded by the fact that from our first days in school, we are taught to listen to everything and everyone but ourselves, to take all our clues about living from the people and powers around us.

I sometimes lead retreats, and from time to time participants show me the notes they are taking as the retreat unfolds. The pattern is nearly universal: people take copious notes on what the retreat leader says, and they sometimes take notes on the words of certain wise people in the group, but rarely, if ever, do they take notes on what they themselves say. We listen for guidance everywhere except from within.

I urge retreatants to turn their note-taking around, because the words we speak often contain counsel we are trying to give ourselves. We have a strange conceit in our culture that simply because we have said something, we understand what it means! But often we do not—especially when we speak from a deeper place than intellect or ego, speak the kind of words that arise when the inner teacher feels safe enough to tell its truth. At those moments, we need to listen to what our lives are saying *and* take notes on it, lest we forget our own truth or deny that we ever heard it.

Verbalizing is not the only way our lives speak, of course. They speak through our actions and reactions, our intuitions and instincts, our feelings and bodily states of being, perhaps more profoundly than through our words. We are like plants, full of tropisms that draw us toward certain experiences and repel us from others. If we can learn to read our own responses to our own experience—a text we are writing unconsciously every day we spend on earth—we will receive the guidance we need to live more authentic lives.

But if I am to let my life speak things I want to hear, things I would gladly tell others, I must also let it speak things I do not want to hear and would never tell anyone else! My life is not only about my strengths and virtues; it is also about my liabilities and my limits, my trespasses and my shadow. An inevitable though often ignored dimension of the quest for “wholeness” is that we must embrace what we dislike or find shameful about ourselves as well as what we are confident

and proud of. That is why the poet says, “ask me mistakes I have made.”

In the chapters to come, I speak often of my own mistakes—of wrong turns I have taken, of misreadings of my own reality—for hidden in these moments are important clues to my own vocation. I do not feel despondent about my mistakes, any more than the poet does, though I grieve the pain they have sometimes caused others. Our lives are “experiments with truth” (to borrow the subtitle of Gandhi’s autobiography), and in an experiment negative results are at least as important as successes.² I have no idea how I would have learned the truth about myself and my calling without the mistakes I have made, though by that measure I should have written a much longer book!

How we are to listen to our lives is a question worth exploring. In our culture, we tend to gather information in ways that do not work very well when the source is the human soul: the soul is not responsive to subpoenas or cross-examinations. At best it will stand in the dock only long enough to plead the Fifth Amendment. At worst it will jump bail and never be heard from again. The soul speaks its truth only under quiet, inviting, and trustworthy conditions.

The soul is like a wild animal—tough, resilient, savvy, self-sufficient, and yet exceedingly shy. If we want to see a wild animal, the last thing we should do is to go crashing through the woods, shouting for the creature to come out. But if we are willing to walk quietly into the woods and sit silently for an

hour or two at the base of a tree, the creature we are waiting for may well emerge, and out of the corner of an eye we will catch a glimpse of the precious wildness we seek.

That is why the poem at the head of this chapter ends in silence—and why I find it a bit embarrassing that as this chapter ends, I am drawing the reader not toward silence but toward speech, page after page of speech! I hope that my speech is faithful to what I have heard, in the silence, from my soul. And I hope that the reader who sits with this book can hear the silence that always surrounds us in the writing and reading of words. It is a silence that forever invites us to fathom the meaning of our lives—and forever reminds us of depths of meaning that words will never touch.

CHAPTER II

Now I Become Myself

A VISION OF VOCATION

With twenty-one words, carefully chosen and artfully woven, May Sarton evokes the quest for vocation—at least, my quest for vocation—with candor and precision:

Now I become myself.
It's taken time, many years and places.
I have been dissolved and shaken,
Worn other people's faces. . . .¹

What a long time it can take to become the person one has always been! How often in the process we mask ourselves in faces that are not our own. How much dissolving and shaking of ego we must endure before we discover our deep identity—the true self within every human being that is the seed of authentic vocation.

I first learned about vocation growing up in the church. I value much about the religious tradition in which I was raised: its humility about its own convictions, its respect for the world's diversity, its concern for justice. But the idea of "vocation" I picked up in those circles created distortion until I grew strong enough to discard it. I mean the idea that vocation, or calling, comes from a voice external to ourselves, a voice of moral demand that asks us to become someone we are not yet—someone different, someone better, someone just beyond our reach.

That concept of vocation is rooted in a deep distrust of selfhood, in the belief that the sinful self will always be "selfish" unless corrected by external forces of virtue. It is a notion that made me feel inadequate to the task of living my own life, creating guilt about the distance between who I was and who I was supposed to be, leaving me exhausted as I labored to close the gap.

Today I understand vocation quite differently—not as a goal to be achieved but as a gift to be received. Discovering vocation does not mean scrambling toward some prize just beyond my reach but accepting the treasure of true self I already possess. Vocation does not come from a voice "out there" calling me to become something I am not. It comes from a voice "in here" calling me to be the person I was born to be, to fulfill the original selfhood given me at birth by God.

It is a strange gift, this birthright gift of self. Accepting it turns out to be even more demanding than attempting to

become someone else! I have sometimes responded to that demand by ignoring the gift, or hiding it, or fleeing from it, or squandering it—and I think I am not alone. There is a Hasidic tale that reveals, with amazing brevity, both the universal tendency to want to be someone else and the ultimate importance of becoming one's self. Rabbi Zusya, when he was an old man, said, "In the coming world, they will not ask me: 'Why were you not Moses?' They will ask me: 'Why were you not Zusya?'"

If you doubt that we all arrive in this world with gifts and as a gift, pay attention to an infant or a very young child. A few years ago, my daughter and her newborn baby came to live with me for a while. Watching my granddaughter from her earliest days on earth, I was able, in my early fifties, to see something that had eluded me as a twenty-something parent: my granddaughter arrived in the world as *this* kind of person rather than *that*, or *that*, or *that*.

She did not show up as raw material to be shaped into whatever image the world might want her to take. She arrived with her own gifted form, with the shape of her own sacred soul. Biblical faith calls it the image of God in which we are all created. Thomas Merton calls it true self. Quakers call it the inner light, or "that of God" in every person. The humanist tradition calls it identity and integrity. No matter what you call it, it is a pearl of great price.

In those early days of my granddaughter's life, I began observing the inclinations and proclivities that were planted in

her at birth. I noticed, and I still notice, what she likes and dislikes, what she is drawn toward and repelled by, how she moves, what she does, what she says.

I am gathering my observations in a letter. When my granddaughter reaches her late teens or early twenties, I will make sure that my letter finds its way to her, with a preface something like this: "Here is a sketch of who you were from your earliest days in this world. It is not a definitive picture—only you can draw that. But it was sketched by a person who loves you very much. Perhaps these notes will help you do sooner something your grandfather did only later: remember who you were when you first arrived and reclaim the gift of true self."

We arrive in this world with birthright gifts—then we spend the first half of our lives abandoning them or letting others disabuse us of them. As young people, we are surrounded by expectations that may have little to do with who we really are, expectations held by people who are not trying to discern our selfhood but to fit us into slots. In families, schools, workplaces, and religious communities, we are trained away from true self toward images of acceptability; under social pressures like racism and sexism our original shape is deformed beyond recognition; and we ourselves, driven by fear, too often betray true self to gain the approval of others.

We are disabused of original giftedness in the first half of our lives. Then—if we are awake, aware, and able to admit our loss—we spend the second half trying to recover and reclaim the gift we once possessed.

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LET YOUR LIFE SPEAK

When we lose track of true self, how can we pick up the trail? One way is to seek clues in stories from our younger years, years when we lived closer to our birthright gifts. A few years ago, I found some clues to myself in a time machine of sorts. A friend sent me a tattered copy of my high school newspaper from May 1957 in which I had been interviewed about what I intended to do with my life. With the certainty to be expected of a high school senior, I told the interviewer that I would become a naval aviator and then take up a career in advertising.

I was indeed "wearing other people's faces," and I can tell you exactly whose they were. My father worked with a man who had once been a navy pilot. He was Irish, charismatic, romantic, full of the wild blue yonder and a fair share of the blarney, and I wanted to be like him. The father of one of my boyhood friends was in advertising, and though I did not yearn to take on his persona, which was too buttoned-down for my taste, I did yearn for the fast car and other large toys that seemed to be the accessories of his selfhood!

These self-prophecies, now over forty years old, seem wildly misguided for a person who eventually became a Quaker, a would-be pacifist, a writer, and an activist. Taken literally, they illustrate how early in life we can lose track of who we are. But inspected through the lens of paradox, my desire to become an aviator and an advertiser contain clues to the core of true self that would take many years to emerge: clues, by definition, are coded and must be deciphered.

Now I Become Myself

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Hidden in my desire to become an "ad man" was a lifelong fascination with language and its power to persuade, the same fascination that has kept me writing incessantly for decades. Hidden in my desire to become a naval aviator was something more complex: a personal engagement with the problem of violence that expressed itself at first in military fantasies and then, over a period of many years, resolved itself in the pacifism I aspire to today. When I flip the coin of identity I held to so tightly in high school, I find the paradoxical "opposite" that emerged as the years went by.

If I go farther back, to an earlier stage of my life, the clues need less deciphering to yield insight into my birthright gifts and callings. In grade school, I became fascinated with the mysteries of flight. As many boys did in those days, I spent endless hours, after school and on weekends, designing, crafting, flying, and (usually) crashing model airplanes made of fragile balsa wood.

Unlike most boys, however, I also spent long hours creating eight- and twelve-page books about aviation. I would turn a sheet of paper sideways; draw a vertical line down the middle; make diagrams of, say, the cross-section of a wing; roll the sheet into a typewriter; and peck out a caption explaining how air moving across an airfoil creates a vacuum that lifts the plane. Then I would fold that sheet in half along with several others I had made, staple the collection together down the spine, and painstakingly illustrate the cover.

I had always thought that the meaning of this paperwork was obvious: fascinated with flight, I wanted to be a pilot, or at least an aeronautical engineer. But recently, when I found a couple of these literary artifacts in an old cardboard box, I suddenly saw the truth, and it was more obvious than I had imagined. I didn't want to be a pilot or an aeronautical engineer or anything else related to aviation. I wanted to be an author, to make books—a task I have been attempting from the third grade to this very moment!

From the beginning, our lives lay down clues to selfhood and vocation, though the clues may be hard to decode. But trying to interpret them is profoundly worthwhile—especially when we are in our twenties or thirties or forties, feeling profoundly lost, having wandered, or been dragged, far away from our birthright gifts.

Those clues are helpful in counteracting the conventional concept of vocation, which insists that our lives must be driven by "oughts." As noble as that may sound, we do not find our callings by conforming ourselves to some abstract moral code. We find our callings by claiming authentic selfhood, by being who we are, by dwelling in the world as Zusya rather than straining to be Moses. 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?"

Everything in the universe has a nature, which means limits as well as potentials, a truth well known by people who

work daily with the things of the world. Making pottery, for example, involves more than telling the clay what to become. The clay presses back on the potter's hands, telling her what it can and cannot do—and if she fails to listen, the outcome will be both frail and ungainly. Engineering involves more than telling materials what they must do. If the engineer does not honor the nature of the steel or the wood or the stone, his failure will go well beyond aesthetics: the bridge or the building will collapse and put human life in peril.

The human self also has a nature, limits as well as potentials. If you seek vocation without understanding the material you are working with, what you build with your life will be ungainly and may well put lives in peril, your own and some of those around you. "Faking it" in the service of high values is no virtue and has nothing to do with vocation. It is an ignorant, sometimes arrogant, attempt to override one's nature, and it will always fail.

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. As we do so, we will not only find the joy that every human being seeks—we will also find our path of authentic service in the world. True vocation joins self and service, as Frederick Buechner asserts when he defines vocation as "the place where your deep gladness meets the world's deep need."

Buechner's definition starts with the self and moves toward the needs of the world: it begins, wisely, where vocation begins—not in what the world needs (which is every-

thing), but in the nature of the human self, in what brings the self joy, the deep joy of knowing that we are here on earth to be the gifts that God created.

Contrary to the conventions of our thinly moralistic culture, this emphasis on gladness and selfhood is not selfish. The Quaker teacher Douglas Stere was fond of saying that the ancient human question "Who am I?" leads inevitably to the equally important question "Whose am I?"—for there is no selfhood outside of relationship. We must ask the question of selfhood and answer it as honestly as we can, no matter where it takes us. Only as we do so can we discover the community of our lives.

As I learn more about the seed of true self that was planted when I was born, I also learn more about the ecosystem in which I was planted—the network of communal relations in which I am called to live responsively, accountably, and joyfully with beings of every sort. Only when I know both seed and system, self and community, can I embody the great commandment to love both my neighbor and myself.

JOURNEY INTO DARKNESS

Most of us arrive at a sense of self and vocation only after a long journey through alien lands. But this journey bears no resemblance to the trouble-free "travel packages" sold by the

tourism industry. It is more akin to the ancient tradition of pilgrimage—"a transformative journey to a sacred center" full of hardships, darkness, and peril.⁴

In the tradition of pilgrimage, those hardships are seen not as accidental but as integral to the journey itself. Treacherous terrain, bad weather, taking a fall, getting lost—challenges of that sort, largely beyond our control, can strip the ego of the illusion that it is in charge and make space for true self to emerge. If that happens, the pilgrim has a better chance to find the sacred center he or she seeks. Disabused of our illusions by much travel and travail, we awaken one day to find that the sacred center is here and now—in every moment of the journey, everywhere in the world around us, and deep within our own hearts.

But before we come to that center, full of light, we must travel in the dark. Darkness is not the whole of the story—every pilgrimage has passages of loveliness and joy—but it is the part of the story most often left untold. When we finally escape the darkness and stumble into the light, it is tempting to tell others that our hope never flagged, to deny those long nights we spent cowering in fear.

The experience of darkness has been essential to my coming into selfhood, and telling the truth about that fact helps me stay in the light. But I want to tell that truth for another reason as well: many young people today journey in the dark, as the young always have, and we elders do them a disservice when we withhold the shadowy parts of our lives. When I was

young, there were very few elders willing to talk about the darkness; most of them pretended that success was all they had ever known. As the darkness began to descend on me in my early twenties, I thought I had developed a unique and terminal case of failure. I did not realize that I had merely embarked on a journey toward joining the human race.

The story of my journey is no more or less important than anyone else's. It is simply the best source of data I have on a subject where generalizations often fail but truth may be found in the details. I want to rehearse a few details of my travels, and travails, extracting some insights about vocation as I go. I do so partly as an offering of honesty to the young and partly as a reminder to anyone who needs it that the nuances of personal experience contain much guidance toward selfhood and vocation.

My journey into darkness began in sunlit places. I grew up in a Chicago suburb and went to Carleton College in Minnesota, a splendid place where I found new faces to wear—faces more like my own than the ones I donned in high school, but still the faces of other people. Wearing one of them, I went from college neither to the navy nor to Madison Avenue but to Union Theological Seminary in New York City, as certain that the ministry was now my calling as I had been a few years earlier about advertising and aviation.

So it came as a great shock when, at the end of my first year, God spoke to me—in the form of mediocre grades and massive misery—and informed me that under no conditions

was I to become an ordained leader in His or Her church. Always responsive to authority, as one was if raised in the fifties, I left Union and went west, to the University of California at Berkeley. There I spent much of the sixties working on a Ph.D. in sociology and learning to be not quite so responsive to authority.

Berkeley in the sixties was, of course, an astounding mix of shadow and light. But contrary to the current myth, many of us were less seduced by the shadow than drawn by the light, coming away from that time and place with a lifelong sense of hope, a feeling for community, a passion for social change.

Though I taught for two years in the middle of graduate school, discovering that I loved teaching and was good at it, my Berkeley experience left me convinced that a university career would be a cop-out. I felt called instead to work on "the urban crisis." So when I left Berkeley in the late sixties—a friend kept asking me, "Why do you want to go back to America?"—I also left academic life. Indeed, I left on a white horse (some might say a high horse), full of righteous indignation about the academy's corruption, holding aloft the flaming sword of truth. I moved to Washington, D.C., where I became not a professor but a community organizer.

What I learned about the world from that work was the subject of an earlier book.¹ What I learned about vocation is how one's values can do battle with one's heart. I felt morally compelled to work on the urban crisis, but doing so

went against a growing sense that teaching might be my vocation. My heart wanted to keep teaching, but my ethics—laced liberally with ego—told me I was supposed to save the city. How could I reconcile the contradiction between the two?

After two years of community organizing, with all its financial uncertainties, Georgetown University offered me a faculty post—one that did not require me to get off my white horse altogether: "We don't want you to be on campus all week long," said the dean. "We want you to get our students involved in the community. Here's a tenure-track position involving a minimum of classes and no requirement to serve on committees. Keep working in the community and take our students out there with you."

The part about no committees seemed like a gift from God, so I accepted Georgetown's offer and began involving undergraduates in community organizing. But I soon found an even bigger gift hidden in this arrangement. By looking anew at my community work through the lens of education, I saw that as an organizer I had never stopped being a teacher—I was simply teaching in a classroom without walls.

In fact, I could have done no other: teaching. I was coming to understand, is my native way of being in the world. Make me a cleric or a CEO, a poet or a politico, and teaching is what I will do. Teaching is at the heart of my vocation and will manifest itself in any role I play. Georgetown's invitation allowed me to take my first step toward embracing this truth, toward a lifelong exploration of "education unplugged."

But even this way of reframing my work could not alter the fact that there was a fundamental misfit between the rough-and-tumble of organizing and my own overly sensitive nature. After five years of conflict and competition, I burned out. I was too thin-skinned to make a good community organizer—my vocational reach had exceeded my grasp. I had been driven more by the “oughts” of the urban crisis than by a sense of true self. Lacking insight into my own limits and potentials, I had allowed ego and ethics to lead me into a situation that my soul could not abide.

I was disappointed in myself for not being tough enough to take the flak, disappointed and ashamed. But as pilgrims must discover if they are to complete their quest, we are led to truth by our weaknesses as well as our strengths. I needed to leave community organizing for a reason I might never have acknowledged had I not been thin-skinned and burned-out: as an organizer, I was trying to take people to a place where I had never been myself—a place called community. If I wanted to do community-related work with integrity, I needed a deeper immersion in community than I had experienced to that point.

I am white, middle-class, and male—not exactly a leading candidate for a communal life. People like me are raised to live autonomously, not interdependently. I had been trained to compete and win, and I had developed a taste for the prizes. But something in me yearned to experience communion, not competition, and that something might never have made itself known had burnout not forced me to seek another way.

So I took a yearlong sabbatical from my work in Washington and went to a place called Pendle Hill outside of Philadelphia. Founded in 1930, Pendle Hill is a Quaker living-and-learning community of some seventy people whose mission is to offer education about the inner journey, nonviolent social change, and the connection between the two. It is a real-time experiment in Quaker faith and practice where residents move through a daily round of communal life: worshipping in silence each morning; sharing three meals a day; engaging in study, physical work, decision making, and social outreach. It is a commune, an ashram, a monastery, a zendo, a kibbutz—whatever one calls it, Pendle Hill was a life unlike anything I had ever known.⁶

Moving there was like moving to Mars—utterly alien but profoundly compelling. I thought I would stay for just a year and then go back to Washington and resume my work. But before my sabbatical ended, I was invited to become Pendle Hill’s dean of studies. I stayed on for another decade, living in community and continuing my experiment with alternative models of education.

It was a transformative passage for me, personally, professionally, and spiritually; in retrospect, I know how impoverished I would have been without it. But early on in that passage I began to have deep and painful doubts about the trajectory of my vocation. Though I felt called to stay at Pendle Hill, I also feared that I had stepped off the edge of the known world and was at risk of disappearing professionally.

From high school on, I had been surrounded by expectations that I would ascend to some sort of major leadership. When I was twenty-nine, the president of a prestigious college visited me in Berkeley to recruit me for his board of trustees. He was doing it, he joked, because no one on that board was under sixty, let alone thirty; worse still, not one of them had a beard, which I could supply as part of the Berkeley uniform. Then he added, "In fact, I'm doing this because some day you'll be a college president—of that I'm sure—and serving as a trustee is an important part of your apprenticeship." I accepted his invitation because I felt certain that he was right.

So half a dozen years later, what was I doing at Pendle Hill, a "commune" known to few, run by an offbeat religious community that most people can identify only by their oatmeal—which, I hasten to add, is not really made by Quakers?

I'll tell you what I was doing: I was in the craft shop making mugs that weighed more and looked worse than the clay ashtrays I made in grade school, and I was sending these monstrosities home as gifts to my family. My father, rest his soul, was in the fine chinaware business, and I was sending him mugs so heavy you could fill them with coffee and not feel any difference in weight!

Family and friends were asking me—and I was asking myself—"Why did you get a Ph.D. if this is what you are going to do? Aren't you squandering your opportunities and gifts?" Under that sort of scrutiny, my vocational decision felt wasteful and ridiculous; what's more, it was terrifying to an ego

like mine that had no desire to disappear and every desire to succeed and become well known.

Did I want to go to Pendle Hill, to be at Pendle Hill, to stay at Pendle Hill? I cannot say that I did. But I can say with certainty that Pendle Hill was something that I *couldn't not do*.

Vocation at its deepest level is not, "Oh, boy, do I want to go to this strange place where I have to learn a new way to live and where no one, including me, understands what I'm doing." Vocation at its deepest level is, "This is something I can't not do, for reasons I'm unable to explain to anyone else and don't fully understand myself but that are nonetheless compelling."

And yet, even with this level of motivation, my doubts multiplied. One day I walked from Pendle Hill through the woods to a nearby college campus, out for a simple stroll but carrying my anxiety with me. On some forgotten whim, I went into the college's main administration building. There, in the foyer, hung several stern portraits of past presidents of that institution. One of them was the same man who, as president of another institution, had come out to Berkeley to recruit me for his board of trustees—a man who, in my imagination, was now staring down at me with a deeply disapproving look on his face: "What do you think you're up to? Why are you wasting your time? Get back on track before it is too late!"

I ran from that building back into the woods and wept for a long time. Perhaps this moment precipitated the descent into darkness that has been so central to my vocational

journey, a descent that hit bottom in the struggle with clinical depression that I will write about later in this book. But whether that is the case or not, the moment was large with things I needed to learn—and could learn only by going into the dark.

In that moment, all the false bravado about why I had left academic life collapsed around me, and I was left with nothing more than the reality of my own fear. I had insisted, to myself as well as others, that I wanted out of the university because it was unfit for human habitation. It was, I argued, a place of corruption and arrogance, filled with intellectuals who evaded their social responsibilities and yet claimed superiority over ordinary folks—the very folks whose lack of power and privilege compelled them to shoulder the responsibilities that kept our society intact.

If those complaints sound unoriginal, it is only because they are. They were the accepted pieties of Berkeley in the sixties, which—for reasons I now understand—I eagerly embraced as my own. Whatever half-truths about the university my complaints may have contained, they served me primarily as a misleading and self-serving explanation of why I fled academic life.

The truth is that I fled because I was afraid—afraid that I could never succeed as a scholar, afraid that I could never measure up to the university's standards for research and publication. And I was right—though it took many years before I

could admit that to myself. Try as I may, try as I might, I have never had the gifts that make for a good scholar—and remaining in the university would have been a distorting denial of that fact.

A scholar is committed to building on knowledge that others have gathered, correcting it, confirming it, enlarging it. But I have always wanted to think my own thoughts about a subject without being overly influenced by what others have thought before me. If you catch me reading a book in private, it is most likely to be a novel, some poetry, a mystery, or an essay that defies classification, rather than a text directly related to whatever I am writing at the time.

There is some virtue in my proclivities, I think: they help me keep my thinking fresh and bring me the stimulation that comes from looking at life through multiple lenses. There is non-virtue in them as well: laziness of a sort, a certain kind of impatience, and perhaps even a lack of due respect for others who have worked these fields.

But be they virtues or faults, these are the simple facts about my nature, about my limits and my gifts. I am less gifted at building on other people's discoveries than at tinkering in my own garage; less gifted at slipping slowly into a subject than at jumping into the deep end to see if I can swim; less gifted at making outlines than at writing myself into a corner and trying to find a way out; less gifted at tracking a tight chain of logic than at leaping from one metaphor to the next.

Perhaps there is a lesson here about the complexity, even duplicity, we must embrace on the road to vocation, where we sometimes find ourselves needing to do the right thing for the wrong reason. It was right for me to leave the university. But I needed to do it for the wrong reason—"the university is corrupt"—because the right reason—"I lack the gifts of a scholar"—was too frightening for me to face at the time.

My fear of failing as a scholar contained the energy I needed to catapult myself out of the academy and free myself for another kind of educational mission. But because I could not acknowledge my fear, I had to disguise that energy as the white horse of judgment and self-righteousness. It is an awkward fact, but it is true—and once I could acknowledge that truth and understand its role in the dynamics of my life, I found myself no longer embarrassed by it.

Eventually, I was able to get off that white horse and take an unblinking look at myself and my liabilities. This was a step into darkness that I had been trying to avoid—the darkness of seeing myself more honestly than I really wanted to. But I am grateful for the grace that allowed me to dismount, for the white horse I was riding back then could never have carried me to the place where I am today: serving, with love, the academy I once left in fear and loathing.

Today I serve education from outside the institution—where my pathology is less likely to get triggered—rather than from the inside, where I waste energy on anger instead of

investing it in hope. This pathology, which took me years to recognize, is my tendency to get so conflicted with the way people use power in institutions that I spend more time being angry at them than I spend on my real work.

Once I understood that the problem was "in here" as well as "out there," the solution seemed clear: I needed to work independently, outside of institutions, detached from the stimuli that trigger my knee-jerk response. Having done just that for over a decade now, my pathology no longer troubles me: I have no one to blame but myself for whatever the trouble may be and am compelled to devote my energies to the work I am called to do!

Here, I think, is another clue to finding true self and vocation: we must withdraw the negative projections we make on people and situations—projections that serve mainly to mask our fears about ourselves—and acknowledge and embrace our own liabilities and limits.

Once I came to terms with my fears, I was able to look back and trace an unconscious pattern. For years, I had been moving away from large institutions like Berkeley and Georgetown to small places like Pendle Hill, places of less status and visibility on the map of social reality. But I moved like a crab, sideways, too fearful to look head-on at the fact that I was taking myself from the center to the fringes of institutional life—and ultimately to a place where all that was left was to move outside of institutions altogether.

I rationalized my movement with the notion that small institutions are more moral than large ones. But that is patently untrue—both about what was animating me and about institutions! In fact, I was animated by a soul, a “true self,” that knew me better than my ego did, knew that I needed to work outside of institutional crosscurrents and constraints.

This is not an indictment of institutions; it is a statement of my limitations. Among my admired friends are people who do not have my limits, whose gifts allow them to work faithfully within institutions and, through those institutions, to serve the world well. But their gift is not mine, as I learned after much *Sturm und Drang*—and that is not an indictment of me. It is simply a truth about who I am and how I am right-fully related to the world, an ecological truth of the sort that can point toward true vocation.

SELFHOOD, SOCIETY, AND SERVICE

By surviving passages of doubt and depression on the vocational journey, I have become clear about at least one thing: self-care is never a selfish act—it is simply good stewardship of the only gift I have, the gift I was put on earth to offer to others. Anytime we can listen to true self and give it the care it

requires, we do so not only for ourselves but for the many others whose lives we touch.

There are at least two ways to understand the link between selfhood and service. One is offered by the poet Rumi in his piercing observation: “If you are here unfaithfully with us, you’re causing terrible damage.”⁷ If we are unfaithful to true self, we will extract a price from others. We will make promises we cannot keep, build houses from flimsy stuff, conjure dreams that devolve into nightmares, and other people will suffer—if we are unfaithful to true self.

I will examine that sort of unfaithfulness, and its consequences, later in this book. But a more inspiring way of understanding the link between selfhood and service is to study the lives of people who have been here *faithfully* with us. Look, for example, at the great liberation movements that have served humanity so well—in eastern Europe, Latin America, and South Africa, among women, African Americans, and our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters. What we see is simple but often ignored: the movements that transform us, our relations, and our world emerge from the lives of people who decide to care for their authentic selfhood.

The social systems in which these people must survive often try to force them to live in a way untrue to who they are. If you are poor, you are supposed to accept, with gratitude, half a loaf or less; if you are black, you are supposed to suffer racism without protest; if you are gay, you are supposed to

pretend that you are not. You and I may not know, but we can at least imagine, how tempting it would be to mask one's truth in situations of this sort—because the system threatens punishment if one does not.

But in spite of that threat, or because of it, the people who plant the seeds of movements make a critical decision: they decide to live “divided no more.” *They decide no longer to act on the outside in a way that contradicts some truth about themselves that they hold deeply on the inside.* They decide to claim authentic selfhood and act it out—and their decisions ripple out to transform the society in which they live, serving the selfhood of millions of others.

I call this the “Rosa Parks decision” because that remarkable woman is so emblematic of what the undivided life can mean. Most of us know her story, the story of an African American woman who, at the time she made her decision, was a seamstress in her early forties. On December 1, 1955, in Montgomery, Alabama, Rosa Parks did something she was not supposed to do: she sat down at the front of a bus in one of the seats reserved for whites—a dangerous, daring, and provocative act in a racist society.

Legend has it that years later a graduate student came to Rosa Parks and asked, “Why did you sit down at the front of the bus that day?” Rosa Parks did not say that she sat down to launch a movement, because her motives were more elemental than that. She said, “I sat down because I was tired.” But she did not mean that her feet were tired. She meant that her soul

was tired, her heart was tired, her whole being was tired of playing by racist rules, of denying her soul's claim to selfhood.⁸ Of course, there were many forces aiding and abetting Rosa Parks's decision to live divided no more. She had studied the theory and tactics of nonviolence at the Highlander Folk School, where Martin Luther King Jr. was also a student. She was secretary of the Montgomery chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, whose members had been discussing civil disobedience.

But in the moment she sat down at the front of the bus on that December day, she had no guarantee that the theory of nonviolence would work or that her community would back her up. It was a moment of existential truth, of claiming authentic selfhood, of reclaiming birthright giftedness—and in that moment she set in motion a process that changed both the lay and the law of the land.

Rosa Parks sat down because she had reached a point where it was essential to embrace her true vocation—not as someone who would reshape our society but as someone who would live out her full self in the world. She decided, “I will no longer act on the outside in a way that contradicts the truth that I hold deeply on the inside. I will no longer act as if I were less than the whole person I know myself inwardly to be.”

Where does one get the courage to “sit down at the front of the bus” in a society that punishes anyone who decides to live divided no more? After all, conventional wisdom recommends the divided life as the safe and sane way to go: “Don't

wear your heart on your sleeve." "Don't make a federal case out of it." "Don't show them the whites of your eyes." These are all the clichéd ways we tell each other to keep personal truth apart from public life, lest we make ourselves vulnerable in that rough-and-tumble realm.

Where do people find the courage to live divided no more when they know they will be punished for it? The answer I have seen in the lives of people like Rosa Parks is simple: these people have transformed the notion of punishment itself. They have come to understand that *no punishment anyone might inflict on them could possibly be worse than the punishment they inflict on themselves by conspiring in their own diminishment.*

In the Rosa Parks story, that insight emerges in a wonderful way. After she had sat at the front of the bus for a while, the police came aboard and said, "You know, if you continue to sit there, we're going to have to throw you in jail."

Rosa Parks replied, "You may do that . . ." which is a very polite way of saying, "What could your jail of stone and steel possibly mean to me, compared to the self-imposed imprisonment I've suffered for forty years—the prison I've just walked out of by refusing to conspire any longer with this racist system?"

The punishment imposed on us for claiming true self can never be worse than the punishment we impose on ourselves by failing to make that claim. And the converse is true as well: no reward anyone might give us could possibly be greater than the reward that comes from living by our own best lights.

You and I may not have Rosa Parks's particular battle to fight, the battle with institutional racism. The universal element in her story is not the substance of her fight but the selfhood in which she stood while she fought it—for each of us holds the challenge and the promise of naming and claiming true self.

But if the Rosa Parks story is to help us discern our own vocations, we must see her as the ordinary person she is. That will be difficult to do because we have made her into superwoman—and we have done it to protect ourselves. If we can keep Rosa Parks in a museum as an untouchable icon of truth, we will remain untouchable as well: we can put her up on a pedestal and praise her, world without end, never finding ourselves challenged by her life.

Since my own life runs no risk of being displayed in a museum case, I want to return briefly to the story I know best—my own. Unlike Rosa Parks, I never took a singular, dramatic action that might create the energy of transformation around the institutions I care about. Instead, I tried to abandon those institutions through an evasive, crablike movement that I did not want to acknowledge, even to myself.

But a funny thing happened on the way to my vocation. Today, twenty-five years after I left education in anger and fear, my work is deeply related to the renewal of educational institutions. I believe that this is possible only because my true self dragged me, kicking and screaming, toward honoring its nature and needs, forcing me to find my rightful place in the

ecosystem of life, to find a right relation to institutions with which I have a lifelong lover's quarrel. Had I denied my true self, remaining "at my post" simply because I was paralyzed with fear, I would almost certainly be lost in bitterness today instead of serving a cause I care about.

Rosa Parks took her stand with clarity and courage. I took mine by diversion and default. Some journeys are direct, and some are circuitous; some are heroic, and some are fearful and muddled. But every journey, honestly undertaken, stands a chance of taking us toward the place where our deep gladness meets the world's deep need.

As May Satton reminds us, the pilgrimage toward true self will take "time, many years and places." The world needs people with the patience and the passion to make that pilgrimage not only for their own sake but also as a social and political act. The world still waits for the truth that will set us free—my truth, your truth, our truth—the truth that was seeded in the earth when each of us arrived here formed in the image of God. Cultivating that truth, I believe, is the authentic vocation of every human being.

CHAPTER III

When Way Closes

WAY WILL OPEN

By the time I began my sabbatical at Pendle Hill—the year that stretched into a decade—I had been in Washington, D.C., for five years, growing more fearful every day that I was living a life not my own. I was thirty-five years old and had a Ph.D. and decent references, so finding a new job would have been no great problem, not in that place and time. But I wanted more than a job. I wanted deeper congruence between my inner and outer life.

I had worked in Washington as both a community organizer and a professor, an activist and an intellectual—without feeling at home in either of those worlds. If you buy the scurrious notion that "those who can, do, and those who can't, teach" (which I may have half-believed at the time, mired as I was in a slough of despond) you will understand why it felt like I had exhausted all possible vocations!