An Essay on Lost Arts and Common Callings

Brian T. Johnson
I. INRODUCTION

In a culture inundated with conferences and consultations, it is a rare and privileged experience to be present at a gathering when an idea is birthed into meaning. "The Future of Callings" was one such experience. A sense of urgency pervaded the discussions. Presenters and participants engaged in critical dialogue, while embarking on an important path. This meeting of professionals representing varying disciplines and fields marked the beginning of a critical process for our shared future.

It is more difficult, however, to measure the immediate results of the conference. No definitive conclusions were reached nor specific plans for the future determined. Yet, a pervasive and intuitive sense of value and purpose emerged. This essay seeks to attend to and elaborate on two such intuitive gleanings by which I hope to capture a sense of the spirit of the gathering.

† Brian T. Johnson serves as a chaplain at Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peter, Minnesota. B.A., Gustavus Adolphus College, M. Div., Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary, M.A in Liturgical Studies (in progress), St. John's University.
II. LOST ARTS

At the conference late one afternoon, near the coffee pot during a break, several of us were lamenting the decline in the education of students in each of our respective professions. One of the lawyers in the group turned to me, a member of the clergy stationed at a liberal arts undergraduate institution, and said, "Well, Padre, what are you going to do about it?" That question became fundamental to the purpose of the conference. What was the "it" that needed changing? What were the assumptions behind that brief conversation? And why had nearly one hundred professionals decided to give up valuable time to discuss the future of callings?

The pre-conference writings began to address the changes in American society and culture which have contributed to professionals feeling "beleaguered by the constraints they face and public disapproval they often experience.¹" Included in this edition of the William Mitchell Law Review are more offerings to these questions by the conference speakers. What I would like to reflect on, however, is the unrecorded and ephemeral conversations within and between the members of the various professions present at the meeting.

What seemed to be underlying the uneasiness of the participants was a deep and pervasive issue, the education of the professional as a lost art. The best way to describe this devolution dwells in concepts and ideas that live in the language of poetry and passion. It is present, for instance, in the words of renowned architect, Frank Lloyd Wright:

The song, the masterpiece, the edifice are a warm outpouring of the heart of man—human delight in life triumphant: we glimpse the infinite. That glimpse or vision is what makes art a matter of inner experience—therefore sacred, and no less but rather more individual in this age, I assure you, than ever before.²

Wright's use of language to describe an architectural principle

---

². FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT, IN THE REALM OF IDEAS 19 (Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer & Gerald Nordland eds. 1988).
utilizes imagery and propositions outside of the normal, prescribed way of knowing often inculcated in the academy. He appropriately notes that in this era, the individual is paramount. Ironically, Wright's way of understanding knowledge is lost as the individual takes precedence over the idea, and this epistemology shifts from being poetic and passionate to utilitarian and scientific.

Some have come to describe this way of knowing as soft which has been lost as the academy absorbed the education and training for all the professions. Apprenticeship, characterized by a lengthy close relationship with a trusted practicing professional as the primary model for learning, was replaced by relationships with institutions. In the former model, the apprentice encountered decision making in the context of a relationship that could address daily the nuances of the human heart with depth and clarity. Matters of professional ethics, commitment to the common good, inculturation into a network of professionals, and space to consider the relationship with the infinite could be discussed and rehearsed. This contributed to the formation of a whole person who would be more than simply a careerist with a collection of essential skills, but rather an individual with professional sensibilities tempered by both hard and soft knowledge.

During the 1700s and 1800s, for example, medical training consisted of apprenticeships lasting at least three but as many as seven years. This was also the practice in dentistry, architecture, theology, the arts, and other trades. By failing to include apprenticeship in the requirements for licensing in 1858, reformers of the educational process for physicians effectively put the apprenticeship practice on the road to extinction, although it lingered on for a number of years. The other professions followed this practice as well, with the exception of architecture and a few of the fine arts.

4. See New Catholic Encyclopedia 845-848 (1967). The medieval guilds were predecessor collections of individuals in various fields that oversaw the master/apprentice relationship. See id. These guilds evolved into distinctive disciplines with defined expectations that delineated the length of study as well as time spent in apprenticeship. See id. See Milton B. Asbell, A Century of Dentistry (1977), Spiro Kostof, The Architect: Chapters in the History of the Profession (1977), and H. Richard Niebuhr and Daniel D. Williams, The Ministry in Historical Perspectives (1956), for examples in dentistry, architecture, and the ministry.
5. See Bonner, supra note 3, at 195.
6. See generally Edgar Tafel, Apprentice to Genius: Years with Frank Lloyd
Internships and mentoring relationships then emerged to address the losses. Courses recently have been added to professional programs in an attempt to incorporate the study of ethics into curricula that otherwise ignored questions of ethics, beliefs, and values. For a period of time, the strengths inherent in apprenticeships were marginally addressed by the presence of a more open expression of faith perspectives in the academy. But these strengths have been lost in the last fifty years with the increased separation in the academy between issues of faith and knowledge. The result has been a movement away from training professionals with a shared sense of the common good nurtured by relationship and cultivated by inter-connectedness.

The demise of apprenticeship represents only one of the changes in patterns of learning that contributed to the erosion of the relationships between members within and outside of the professions. The purpose of developing this argument is not to suggest that the professions were taught better in another day—though they might have been—or that apprenticeships were without fault—which they were not. What is being proposed, however, is that as a change in pattern occurred that favored an emphasis on learning and acquisition of knowledge as a "hard" scientific endeavor, the other "softer" contributions cultivated in relationships between master and apprentice were lost. Once this trajectory began, the professions lost their sense of themselves as an art. It was then simply a matter of time before individual students filled this vacuum with an emphasis on success and achievement, while the relationship with the public good became overlooked or was at the least attended to after "work was done."

What has happened is that individuals are called into the knowledge of a profession and a relationship with institutions rather than being called into a professional community that dwells

WRIGHT (1979). Two contemporary and local manifestations of this apprenticeship model can be found in the studios of ceramist Richard Bresnahan, St. John's University, and bronze sculptor Paul Granlund, Gustavus Adolphus College.

7. On the one hand, professional training occurs at the post-graduate level in large university settings. Some smaller, undergraduate, church-related institutions, on the other hand, have attempted to maintain a closer intersection between faith and knowledge.

8. See generally DOUGLAS SLOAN, FAITH AND KNOWLEDGE: MAINLINE PROTESTANTISM AND AMERICAN HIGHER EDUCATION (1994). Sloan traces the changes in the relationship between faith and knowledge in American higher education and consistently argues that issues of faith have been progressively and sequentially ignored during the last fifty years. See generally id.
in the midst of a people to whom they are responsible and responsive.

III. COMMON CALLINGS

If it is true, as Sharon Parks, educator and ethicist, and others have suggested, that we have moved from a commons that marked the center of a shared world and are now ambivalent inhabitants of a new global commons, 9 then this profound shift has increased the difficulties inherent in educational systems. It was clear at the conference that this complex context was assumed normative, and the participants seemed to have similar inclinations and perspectives toward what options lay ahead. Repeatedly, in a variety of discussions, a mutually held expression emerged: members of the professions know that the common good is not only at risk, but in actual peril, and that professionals are uniquely positioned to contribute to healing the chasm between what is and what could be. All of the professions have this common calling.

To be called into a profession means that an invitation has been extended to which a response can be made, and this invitation is to more than just the expected work of the professional. The invitation is clear and much wider. Anonymity and separateness describe the nature of American society, and in some ways the rest of the world. Professionals are invited out into this world that is longing for connections that run deeper and are more significant than the shallow and brief encounters prevalent in our post-modern milieu. To the professionals at this conference, it seemed clear that to serve the common, public good was not only an ideal to strive for, but more importantly, is an essential focus for the survival of human community. In this way, it might be said that whatever the profession, there is the common calling of a vocation of service in the world.

Professional vocations vary significantly. For one professional, it is to contribute to the creation of public spaces that are planned with an ecological stewardship of creation. For another, it is to grapple with the ethical dilemmas emerging with respect to genetic engineering, while keeping in mind the specific individuals who

9. LAURENT A. PARKS DALOZ, ET AL., COMMON FIRE: LIVES OF COMMITMENT IN A COMPLEX WORLD 3-5 (1996). The authors write convincingly about the significance of mentoring communities and relationships as key in the development of professional life. See generally id. The authors dedicate a portion of the epilogue to suggestions for professional education. See id. at 225-227.
might be affected. For yet another, it means modeling healthy relationships in the boardroom and in the home, in a marriage, or in a friendship. Both hard and soft knowledge are required to make informed decisions. Many artificial boundaries have been constructed between our various spheres of living. It is becoming clear, however, that there is little separation and, in fact, the vocation to serve crosses all divisions. The call is common—to serve the public good.

This is a significant shift in understanding. In the past, public service was voluntary and secondary to a sense of calling in a profession. Now, professionals are called to make their work for the common good intrinsic and present in their daily agenda. What was once done on the edges of a profession to serve the public good must now be embraced as the central and guiding principle. No longer is there the option to add public service after the day's tasks are completed. Rather, the day's tasks are intricately linked in a complex web of decisions that must take into account the collective needs of the society.

Compartmentalization and individuation complicate the problem. What was witnessed at this conference is the unanimity of agreement regarding the common vocation of the professions to address the inter-connected and multilayered issues of society within the confines of daily work.

IV. A FINAL WORD

As we consider what has been lost and have perhaps found a preliminary sense of united purpose, the "it" of the coffee break question becomes more pertinent. For as we consider how professionals function in society, we must also consider the educational process required to become a member of a profession. This is more than tinkering with requirements and developing new courses to address what has been lost. To prepare professionals to be leaders in the twenty-first century, the academy must fundamentally rethink how life is to be lived and also rethink the impact that question has on the academic mission.

Last fall, as students were gathering at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge, a new course proposal created spontaneous campus conversation. Dr. Anne Foerst, a professor at MIT, began to teach a course called, "God and Computers: Minds,
Machines, and Metaphysics," to consider how assumptions about God and religion affect artificial-intelligence research. This course caused much heated debate and controversy. The intersection of faith and knowledge has long been suspect and questioned for its potential threat to serious scholarship. Yet, as Parker Palmer, senior research associate at the American Association of Higher Education in Washington has suggested, "There is a quest for the deeper religious underpinnings... of knowing, learning, and teaching." This new movement is gaining momentum across curricula at colleges and universities all over the United States. The question is being asked, "is there a role for issues of faith inside the classroom?" Even though I believe that this is an important question to be asking, it points more dramatically toward the pervasive sense of loss in the formation of professionals: a formation that could include matters of faith, yet should not be limited to this question.

This is the issue that seemed to be at the heart of the matters addressed in the conference. The problems of the post-modern world need an educational process that considers meaning and purpose, value and understanding, and the search for relationships of trust and civility, integrity and longevity. Holistic educational experiences are gaining momentum precisely because students are longing for an opening up of the whole self, not just the intellectual and academic self. A resulting sense of wonder and imagination can assist in connecting the profession to the rest of the world. The formation of the professional as a lost art, the common calling of professionals to a vocation of service in daily life, and an agenda for the reformation of the mission of the academy: this was the matrix of ideas birthed at the conference. In the minds and hearts of the participants, momentum for carrying the discussion further was also birthed. For each of us, and certainly for me, a chaplain situated at an institution which takes seriously the nurturing of the life of the spirit and the life of the mind, the path is calling.

11. Id.