The Wild Hope Project

Nourishing the Search for Vocation

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In 2001 the university had an opportunity that seldom comes along that could easily have been overlooked. The Lilly Endowment Inc. put out a call for institutions of higher education to apply for ambitious grants of up to $2 million for the "theological exploration of vocation." In previous years the endowment's call had been misperceived as asking for something too narrow to be the sufficiently good fit with PLU to warrant the immense amount of work of an application. This time around, however, several faculty and administrators took a closer and more imaginative look at the opportunity. PLU had recently, under the leadership of President Loren Anderson, come to a revitalized sense of its character as a progressive Lutheran institution in the Pacific Northwest, where intellectual excellence intersects with commitment to service, leadership, and care in a way attractive to its student body, faculty and staff. In the context of this newly sharpened understanding of the university, the "theological exploration of vocation" in a Lilly Endowment-funded project could be interpreted to apply to the whole campus, nurturing all students in the search for meaning and purpose in their lives. And because the search for meaning and purpose requires acute analysis and understanding of the world in which students live out their lives, such a project could – no, it would have to – centrally involve faculty, not just campus ministry and student life staff.

What would eventually become PLU's Wild Hope Project thus began. The university received a small planning grant from Lilly to do its fundamental conceptual homework and assemble the many ingredients of an application for a full five-year grant. From the start, PLU's planning process reflected the conviction that any project, to elicit real campus energy and be effective, would have to be inclusive, be built from the ground up, and have the enthusiastic support of many parties, including the president. The eight-member planning team consulted substantially with more than a hundred faculty, administrative staff, and students in thinking out its proposal to Lilly. The project ultimately proposed was ambitious in its scope, modern in its thinking. It would *"challenge* students, faculty, and staff to grapple with the meaning of vocation in ways … both intellectually rich and world-engaged … , *nurture* students … to articulate and claim meaning and purpose for their lives," and *cultivate* the greater competence in faculty and staff needed to do that.[1] The understanding of how to nurture students was rich and integrative: to engage, simultaneously, four dimensions of a student's life – the life of the mind, connections with the outside world, personal development and faith. Such a project would be a tall call, involving a transformation of how the university saw itself and the lives of its students. It would represent a core element of Lutheran tradition applied to the diverse and relatively un-churched Pacific Northwest: the charisma of reformation in the larger society.

Lilly did choose to award PLU $2 million for 2003-2007. The project would demand a lot, from many. Unlike many schools receiving Lilly funds for "vocation" projects, PLU was not going to channel the grant's resources to a distinct or new organizational entity within the university to house and drive the project. The project was instead, institutionally "organic." A variety of activities for faculty, staff, and students would be carried out with a range of leaders for different activities: faculty and staff study seminars, student retreats, "returner reflection" groups for students returning from often life-changing international study, etc. With the assistance of the planning team, two faculty and one administrator led the project, all part-time in their project responsibilities. Paul Menzel, professor of philosophy and former provost, would serve as project director and faculty director; Patricia Killen, professor of religion (and future provost), as director of theological reflection; and Kathleen Farrell, a dynamic young leader in PLU's Student Life division, as director of student engagement.

At this time the project had no name beyond the generic and relatively deadly "Lilly vocation grant." Dissatisfaction with this soon came to a head. Almost in desperation, the project planning team chose to step back and brainstorm about deficiencies in American culture that might discourage individuals from a sense of meaning and purpose. Hope, one member suggested, is a badly missing virtue in the prevalent contemporary culture of organizations and businesses. They proudly announce their missions and manifest confidence and hype, but they – and we, most of us – have lost sight of hope. *Hope* is more sober and resilient, as well as more imaginative. "Ah yes, *wild* hope," another team member chimed in, remembering out loud the poem by Mary Oliver that jolts the reader back from wonder at the beauty and integrity of the life of an insect with the bracing question, "… and what will you do with your one wild and precious life?"[2] The name was there: the Wild Hope Project.

The new name did its job. It intrigued many and puzzled others, in either case often prompting them to ask questions or to read further on the project's website. And it resonated with students. One of the initial fears of project leaders had been that students would be put off or intimidated by the challenge to do this very big and adult thing – already, at a traditional student age, try to find and claim meaning and purpose for their lives. "Just let me graduate and get my credential (and of course have fun along the way) – don't bother me with your Big Life stuff" was the student reaction feared. As it turned out, that was not at all the typical reaction. Overwhelmingly students responded with quiet excitement. They attended and applauded events – the "Explore!" retreats for first-year students, for example, led by their older peers along with faculty and staff. Notably, an enthusiastic team of students formed to plan a "vocation conference" in which students would engage with each other, with returning alums who would tell their "found my vocation in life" stories, and with performers who could speak to meaning and purpose in life. Two of these students entered a routine meeting one afternoon singing the refrain to a hit song by Switchfoot, "… *we were meant to live for so much more* …." Meant To Live immediately became the conference name, and the event became annual.

Faculty and staff, too, energetically embraced their roles. The ultimate rationale of the

activities designed for them was the necessity to have a faculty and staff who understood the search for vocation in one's life if that was going to be nurtured in the deepest, most mature ways in students. From 2004 to 2008, 48 faculty participated in yearlong study seminars, and 32 persons participated in equivalent administration/staff seminars. The seminars involved substantial reading about parts of Lutheran tradition, wide-ranging intellectual inquiry about the complex challenges modern society posed to discerning meaning and purpose, and personal discussion and writing. Follow-up assessment revealed participants' deep appreciation for the opportunity, rare in their pressured lives at the university, to explore with each other questions related not only to students' search for meaning and purpose but their own sense of vocation, and to do that in a sustained way.

Wild Hope's basic purpose was to improve the quality of student reflection on vocation, to better help students become the thoughtful, contextually aware, committed, creative leaders the world needs. Doing that requires situating educational and life choices within the frame of broader questions of meaning and purpose. Such "big enough questions"[3] spur us onto passion and commitment, to expanded understanding of ourselves and the world in which we grow and work and live: Who am I – *who are we – among these stars? What beauty inspires me, and why? Who is my neighbor, and who and what is suffering? What are my gifts and talents that pull me, my weaknesses that should warn me?* All point to the especially big question, paraphrasing Mary Oliver, which became a well-known tagline for the project: What am I going to do with my one wild and precious life?

Vocation in this sense is not narrowly focused on occupation, piety or personal happiness, three prominent contemporary misunderstandings. In the occupational misconception, finding meaning and purpose is construed primarily as deciding on a career. To be sure, profession-aimed education is important in an intentionally vocation-nurturing university, but finding one's vocation is far more than finding an occupation, even one referred to as a "profession." Gaining a sense of one's purpose and role in life applies both within one's career and outside it – "outside" it both in respect to important extra-professional aspects of one's life, and in respect to one's obligation to understand and examine *critically* the larger role a particular profession plays in human life.

Concern for vocation is also not sufficiently captured by pietistic conceptions. Thinking and speaking of "God's calling for my life" may be a typical and powerful way of phrasing the search for vocation in the context of certain theological beliefs, but in an educational institution like PLU, any process of coming to recognize such calling needs to be far more than simply personally or directly "getting straight with God" about what to do. One has to encounter challenging intellectual and social questions and bump up against the messy, complex world people have made for themselves down through the ages before one can find well-grounded meaning and purpose in life. That's why a Lutheran *university* must have as part of its mission the cultivation

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of vocation, and it's in part why Lutheran churches sponsor first-rate, intellectually and socially no-holds-barred universities to begin with.

Nor is concern for vocation the search for personal happiness – "discovering your bliss."[4] To be sure, living with meaning and purpose manifests the joy of being alive, but it is more than that. It is living with the discernment that something *truly makes sense* for a person. And it makes sense even after all the searching, critical examination of life and society that comes with a liberal education. The stakes in what one lives for are too big – for oneself and for the world – for one not to use the best critical faculties human beings have to discern what is truly worth living for. Sometimes this process is uncomfortable, even painful. It can be hard work.

President Anderson not only understood this bigger and more complex picture of vocation. He articulated it effectively, held it up for all prospective and actual students, praised faculty for nurturing it, connected it with the university's increasing efforts and achievements in international education, lauded it to alumni, and helped to raise money to sustain its pursuit at PLU in perpetuity. Indeed, Dr. Anderson and his spouse, MaryAnn, generated continued enthusiasm for the Wild Hope Project among alumni and donors. In 2008, 67 members of the Class of 1958 contributed to a gift of $107,000 for the Wild Hope Project, in particular, its Meant To Live conference at which a distinguished university alumnus/a speaks on his or her vocational path. In 2011, Dr. Anderson announced the reception of a $500,000 gift for the project from Linda and Chuck Barbo.

In the same year, the university faculty approved a motion to request the establishment of the Wild Hope Project as the Center for Vocation. In May 2011, the university's Board of Regents unanimously approved the faculty motion, making the project a permanent center for reflection and action in the life of the university. Dr. Lynn Hunnicutt (Economics) was appointed Director of the Center, with Dr. Eva Johnson (Dean of Student

Development) representing Student Involvement and Dr. Samuel Torvend (Religion) serving as Director of Vocational Reflection. Other offices in the university represented on the center's steering committee included Academic Advising, Alumni and Constituent Relations, Campus Ministry, Career Development, the Center for Public Service, Development, the First-Year Experience Program, Residential Life, and Student Involvement and Leadership. In addition, two faculty members with experience in Wild Hope programs were selected to serve on the steering committee.

During the academic year 2010-2011, Dr. Anderson announced the reception of an anonymous gift of $1 million which enabled the university to establish a University Professorship in Lutheran Studies, a professorship housed in the Department of Religion and linked to the Center for Vocation where the incumbent would contribute to Lutheran reflection on vocation through seminars, workshops, publications and public presentations. Within a year, Dr. Anderson reported the reception of a second anonymous gift of $1 million which enabled the professorship to become an endowed chair, the fourth in PLU's recent history. His support of the Center for Vocation and the University Chair in Lutheran Studies expressed his profound commitment to Lutheran higher education and its distinctive educational mission of linking learning, vocation and service in a global context.

As the Center came into existence, Lilly Endowment funding for the project was coming to a close. By 2012, a number of the campus-wide initiatives sponsored by the Wild Hope Project (now the Center for Vocation) were incorporated in offices across the university. Other initiatives came under direct supervision of the center. For students, these initiatives included the Explore! retreat for first-year students (an initial exposure to reflection on vocation), Psychology 113 and 213 courses which include a particular focus on the vocation of a student, the Meant To Live conference which takes place during the annual Homecoming celebration, service learning opportunities in academic courses with a vocation emphasis, ministry reflection groups for students considering ordained ministry, workshops for first-year students discerning a major area of study and for senior students preparing to graduate from PLU.

Given the development process of young adults, many Wild Hope initiatives have encouraged students to ask "Big Enough Questions" – questions that move beyond the acquisition of information to those questions large enough to welcome the challenges of leading a life marked by meaning and purpose in a world that needs informed and imaginative leaders. Indeed, the very notion of asking questions was and remains a hallmark of Lutheran higher education. The reform of church and society, initiated by Martin Luther in the 16th century, began with his questioning of the status quo, of what most people considered "normal" and thus normative in religious and social life. In this respect, the project is firmly rooted in the university's educational mission of "educating for lives of thoughtful inquiry." When students begin to ask "why?" and "how?," a more resilient and richer form of inquiry can take place, a kind of questioning that is honored and protected in a university committed to freedom of inquiry.

The capacity to ask "Big Enough Questions" has been stimulated by the project's sponsorship of distinguished speakers who have made public presentations for students, staff and faculty. These have included Dr. Anne Jones (on civil rights), Anne Lamott (on autobiographical writing), Anne Lappe (on food production and sustainability), Dr. Hubert Locke (on the Holocaust), Dr. Martha Nussbaum (on liberal education and global citizenship), Mary Oliver (on poetry), Sr. Helen Prejean (on Christian responses to the death penalty), Dr. Peter Singer (on commitments to end global poverty), the Rev. James Willis (on Christian sources of peace-making), and Michael Walker (on the Lutheran Volunteer Corps). The Meant To Live conference, which takes place during Homecoming, has welcomed Reed Timmer (extreme weather meteorology), Jim Walker (graphic design and film-making), and Charlene Tachibana (nursing) to speak with students, faculty and alumni about the big questions which continue to shape their distinctive vocational paths.

Staff members have also benefitted from the Wild Hope Project. Since its inception on the campus, they have been invited to participate in the Wild Hope staff seminar on vocation, a seminar on Lutheran higher education, workshops on mentoring students, advising retreats, Wild Hope seminar reunions, and workshops on vocation within humanistic and religious traditions. Staff participants in the very popular Wild Hope seminar represent every office across the campus, from custodial services to alumni relations. Indeed, the project's emphasis on "pausing to ponder" one's vocation has been and remains one of the rare opportunities for staff to consider the vocation of mentoring students with colleagues and skilled leaders.

The project also focused its energies on university faculty by establishing the ongoing Wild Hope faculty seminars, Wild Hope development workshops, seminars on Lutheran higher education, workshops on nurturing vocation in the major, service learning minisabbaticals and development workshops on service learning, participating in new faculty orientation, and soliciting faculty advice concerning speakers to be invited to the campus. The rare opportunity to meet with other faculty across a range of disciplines has nurtured a stronger sense of community and enabled faculty to discuss at length the vocations of teaching and research.

While some universities and colleges that received Lilly Endowment support for the exploration of vocation elected to focus their funds and initiatives on students or faculty alone, the framers of the project at PLU insisted that initiatives supporting reflection on vocation be dispersed throughout the university among students, staff, and faculty. This wise approach yielded hearty praise from Lilly Endowment officials and ensured that an "intellectually rich and world-engaged" exploration of vocation within a Lutheran educational context would grow, as Dr. Patricia Killen once noted, "like wild grass – like crabgrass –throughout the university."

One significant dimension of the project's work, unknown to many, is the research completed on the project itself. As the Explore! retreat for first-year students gained energy, Dr. Wendelyn Shore (Psychology) led a team of student researchers who used survey material drawn from first-year retreat participants to assess the event's effectiveness in communicating a "curriculum" focused on vocation and asking "Big Enough Questions." This research project was completed in 2010; its results were then published by Dr. Shore, Dr. Eva Johnson, and Ms. Amber Dehne (Explore! retreat coordinator) as "The Pedagogy of Event Planning: Facilitating First-year College Students' Reflective Learning."[5] In 2011, Dr. Shore completed a second research project focused on the Wild Hope faculty seminar. This project assessed participants' engagement with six seminar themes: personal growth, building community, mentoring, teaching, life-long learning, and the Lutheran tradition. In addition to these two important research projects, the staff and faculty leaders of the Project have produced annual assessments of every initiative sponsored by Wild Hope. Together, these detailed reviews have allowed project leaders, university administrators, and the Lilly Endowment officials to gain a remarkable sense of the challenges, growth, and diffusion of the project's mission throughout the university and now among its alumni.

The university is not a citadel of unchanging knowledge in which faculty simply transmit their expertise on to the *tabula rasa* of young minds. Rather, it is a living and organic network of relationships committed to learning, research and service; an intellectual "ecology" which draws students, faculty and staff into lives of learning for the sake of something greater than the self alone. The project's focus on vocation, on the discernment of what might be a number of callings throughout life, underscores what has become one of the most distinctive elements of the PLU experience. This sense of vocation, of a life shaped by meaning and purpose, is a living tradition within Lutheran higher education. Indeed, Luther's understanding of vocation was complemented by his claim that each human being can serve as a "mask" or agent of God's creating, saving and sustaining presence in the world. In this regard, Luther argued that human life on this earth mattered enormously. As a Christian, he held firmly to the ancient conviction that unseen God has been revealed in Jesus of Nazareth, a first-century Palestinian Jew. For Luther, the function of religion was *not* to get people out of a messy, beautiful and conflicted world but to immerse them more fully in it as educated and world-engaged leaders who employ their God-given abilities for the sake of others.

The challenge that faced the Project from its inception and remains central to its work is the need to welcome a diverse student body, faculty and staff into this robust sense of vocation, one that is rooted in realistic hope within a rapidly changing world. Here in the relatively non-parochial Pacific Northwest, PLU is setting a promising, widely applicable precedent for the future of church-related higher education. Indeed, as one member of the university regents noted after the approval of the Center for Vocation, "Our most distinctive marks seem to be excellence in teaching, in the face-to-face encounter between students and professors, and our commitment to a vital sense of vocation." The Center for Vocation will soon enter its second decade focused on the vocations of learning, teaching, research, administering and mentoring – an ambitious program, yet one that has drawn participants into a growing community of persons whose capacity to speak about vocation has become a mark of distinction at PLU – a mark of distinction rarely found at other colleges and universities in the West.

END NOTES

1 From the Implementation Grant proposal to the Lilly Endowment, Inc., by Pacific Lutheran University, "Building Capacities for Critical Understanding, Contextual Sensitivity, and Personal Maturity – a Lutheran Approach to the Theological Exploration of Vocation" (August 30, 2002), pp. 1-2.

2 "The Summer Day," in Oliver's *House of Light* (Beacon Press, 1990), p. 60.

3 Sharon Daloz Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Young Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith* (Jossey-Bass, 2000), pp. 137-138.

4 Samuel Torvend, "Professing the Heart's Deep Gladness," *Teaching and Learning Forum* (newsletter of the Center for Teaching and Learning, Pacific Lutheran University), Fall 2003.

5 *Journal of College and Character* 11:4 (2010): 1-12.