



Parker J. Palmer

Author of The Courage to Teach

LET YOUR LIFE
SPEAK

Listening
for the Voice
of Vocation



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A Hidden Wholeness

The Courage to Teach

The Courage to Teach: A Guide for Reflection and Renewal

(with Rachel Livsey)

The Active Life

To Know As We Are Known

The Company of Strangers

The Promise of Paradox

Caring for the Commonwealth (coeditor)

Parker J. Palmer

Author of *The Courage to Teach*

LET YOUR LIFE
SPEAK

& LISTENING
FOR THE VOICE
OF VOCATION

Published by



JOSSEY-BASS

A Wiley Company
989 Market Street
San Francisco, CA 94103-1741

www.josseybass.com

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Credits are on page 117.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Palmer, Parker J.

Let your life speak: listening for the voice of vocation /

Parker J. Palmer.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0-7879-4735-0 (acid-free)

1. Vocation—Christianity. I. Title.

BV4740 .P35 2000

248.4—dc21

99-6467

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*For Heather Marie Palmer
my granddaughter*

May you always treasure true self . . .

With the exception of Chapter I, every chapter in this book originally appeared as an essay in some other publication during the past decade. I have rewritten all the essays, most of them substantially. My aim has been to create a real book—not just a collection of articles about vocation, but a coherent exploration of a subject that engages many of us for the better part of our lives.

I mention the provenance of these pieces partly because I believe in truth in labeling and partly because the people who invited me to write the original essays, with all the trust that implies, are valued partners in my own vocation.

Chapter II, “Now I Become Myself,” was originally given as the G. D. Davidson Lecture at Warren Wilson College in Swannanoa, North Carolina, and published by the college as a pamphlet.¹ The unusual charge that accompanies the lectureship helped frame this book: reflect on your life story through the concept of vocation—“including lessons learned

from disappointments and failures as well as successes”—and do so in a way that might speak to younger as well as older adults. I am grateful to my friend Doug Orr, president of the college, for extending the invitation; to Don and Ann Davidson for endowing a lectureship that invites this sort of reflection; and to the entire Warren Wilson community for receiving my words with such deep hospitality.

Chapter III, “When Way Closes,” was originally written for *Weavings*, a quarterly journal of spirituality, at the request of its editor, John Mogabgab.² John, my good friend for many years, is one of the best companions a person could have along the way, and *Weavings*—the journal he has raised up from its infancy—is widely regarded as one of the finest periodicals of its kind.

Chapter IV, “All the Way Down,” was originally written for a special issue of *Weavings* on the theme of the “wounded healer” in memory of Henri Nouwen.³ Henri was a treasured friend and mentor to both John Mogabgab and me, and this chapter is testimony to the transcendent power of friendship. It explores my experience with depression, a subject I could not have dealt with so openly except for the support of friends still living and the spirit of a friend now gone.

Chapter V, “Leading from Within,” was originally given as a speech for the Indiana Office of Campus Ministries, which published it as a pamphlet.⁴ I am grateful to my friend Max Case, executive director, for his invitation and encouragement. Indeed, I am grateful to the many campus ministers, priests,

and rabbis across the country who helped me take first steps toward my calling thirty years ago, at a time when few in the academy were willing to entertain spiritual questions, at least not in public—a situation that is, blessedly, different today.

Chapter VI, “There Is a Season,” was written at the request of Rob Lehman, president of the Fetzer Institute and my good friend and co-conspirator in vocation, to help dedicate Fetzer’s retreat center, Seasons. The Institute published this essay as a pamphlet that is placed in the bedrooms at Seasons to invite guests into reflection.⁵ I think of that pamphlet as Fetzer’s equivalent of the Hilton’s “pillow mints”—and I think of Rob Lehman as a pioneer in empowering so many of us to explore the complex connections between inner and outer life.

Special thanks go to Sarah Polster, my editor at Jossey-Bass. She was the first to see that the question of vocation was at the heart of many of the essays I have written in recent years and to believe in their potential to become a real book. Her skillful editing has helped bring these essays together in a fabric more tightly woven than I could have achieved on my own.

My thanks also go to the other members of the Jossey-Bass staff who have been such superb partners in publishing: Carol Brown, Joanne Clapp Fullagar, Paula Goldstein, Danielle Neary, Johanna Vondeling, and Jennifer Whitney.

Much of the personal journey I trace in this book was made in the company of, and with the support of, members of my family, past and present. I did not include them in my narrative simply because their stories belong to them alone;

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

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