

Finding Our Paths

Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation by Parker J. Palmer.

San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. © 2000. 128 pages. ISBN 0-7879-4735-0.

Let Your Life Speak is a book about vocation—about the decisions we make that lead us to destinations that sometimes turn out to be unfulfilling and disappointing. Parker Palmer's theme that we should live and make decisions based on inner truth and awareness rather than on outer "oughts" weaves throughout this gentle, reaffirming work. As Palmer (4) notes, "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." He insists that our nature (the "Who Am I?" issue) should point to our authentic life path. When we fit ourselves forcibly into vocations not suiting our nature, we feel empty and dissatisfied. Often, we burn out.

Palmer experienced such dissatisfaction in the 1960s, moving from teaching at the University of California at Berkeley to the selflessness of working as a community organizer in Washington, D.C. It was there that he first experienced a sense of "urban crisis." He then accepted an invitation to join Georgetown University's faculty, eager to involve students in his inner-city work. Though he was committed to helping his community, he sensed no "fit" between his nature and what he was doing; consequently, he experienced burnout and depression. Palmer was disappointed in himself for not measuring up to standards that, really, were not his own. Finally, his frustration became unbearable. He left

Georgetown, going to a Quaker learning community; there, he focused on the Quaker concept of the "inner journey." Palmer stayed there for ten years—coming to terms with his "liabilities and limits" (29). In the process, he discovered that wherever he was, whatever he was doing, he taught. His vocation from within was to teach. As Palmer (21) relates, "Teaching is at the heart of my vocation and will manifest itself in any role I play."

Each of us, in our darker moments of self-doubt, has asked, "Why isn't my life working?" As Palmer (41) observes, "Sometimes the 'shoulds' do not work because the life one is living runs crosswise to the grain of one's soul." He admonishes us not to violate our natures. As Palmer (49) explains, "Burnout results from trying to give what I do not possess." He wants us to honor our created nature—which includes our limitations as well as our potential.

The author vividly and openly describes what it is like to be in deep depression, calling that experience a spiritual journey. He came eventually to realize that he had lived his entire life by the dictates of what he imagined he "ought" to do rather than relying on his true self. As Palmer (87) notes, this sense of "identity does not depend on the role we play or the power it gives us over others. It depends only on the simple fact that we are children of God, valued in and for ourselves." When we take our vocation from the wisdom of our inner

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voice, we can impact that world authentically and in joy.

This unique book is for introspective educators who wonder whether they may have missed a turn on their life's road. In a time of focusing on the outer world of goals, strategies, and unending need, the simplicity of Palmer's message is both healing and

reassuring. *Let Your Life Speak* offers the voice of one who has asked our heavy questions—and found answers that can help us all. *Let Your Life Speak* is written in a relaxed, gentle style that may prompt you to get a cup of tea and take it to your secret spot for a good think. To those so inclined, I recommend this book highly.

The reviewer, Janet S. Richards, is Adjunct Professor of Education at Azusa Pacific University in Azusa Avenue, California. A veteran of more than 20 years in the classroom, she is completing her doctoral studies in educational leadership. Her research interests include teacher/administrator relationships, teacher satisfaction and burnout, and a positive school environment.



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