



**ATFE**

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**IDENTITY, VOCATION, AND  
DISCERNMENT: BUILDING THE  
FOUNDATIONS FOR FORMATION**

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## **Identity, Vocation, & Discernment: Building the Foundations for Formation**

How might a sense of self-identity shape vocation? What could this sense of self-identity offer in discernment processes? How can we help students discover and articulate their sense of self-identity during their formation?

This workshop offers a transformational process for goal setting to be used by Field Education students that helps them articulate a sense of self-identity grounded in their experience of Jesus. The recognition of this self-identity is at the core of formation work and has potential beyond the academic tasks of goal setting and evaluation to become a tool for ongoing discernment in ministry and life.

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In this workshop today I'd like to share with you a tool that I am in the process of developing to use with ministry students as a point of focus for their personal development and goal setting, particularly during the Field Education experience. I believe it has wider potential for formation in general terms, such that with the right application, it can become, for the individual, a key aspect of their ministry identity and a touchstone for them in self-reflection, evaluation, and discernment. After some introductory comments I'd like to take you through the exercise as an experiential activity, and then we can open up the experience in discussion together.

People come to study theology for all sorts of reasons. The whole process at the seminary we know has the goal of formation, or more correctly perhaps, transformation – helping people to grow in their experience and understanding of God so that they can be more free, more faithful, and more fruitful in what they do with their lives, be that paid ministry or not.

Every theological academic field would I think agree with that, be it biblical studies, systematic theology, history, languages, and our own area of practical theology.

But of course we know that this need for formation, for transformation, really comes to the fore in Field Education, where we are working with students as they reflect upon their ministry, what they do, how they do it, why they do it. And not just upon their ministry practice but upon their own inner dynamics in this mix.

Goal setting at the beginning of the Field Education unit is a particular area where the self-reflective dimensions of this are set and refined for students.

I'm going to share with you some of my experience about goal setting and how it is changing for me. Goal setting with students has been a frustrating process for me to date. Some students are weary of goal setting. Other students have never had to be deliberate about goals – and have no idea about how to make them specific, concrete and measurable. All of them come somewhat hesitantly to the table. Most can name or create goals, but I often have had the sense they have been made up to meet the academic requirements. They are not aware that the goals they set might actually become a tool in their ongoing formation, not just while at the seminary, but in their ministry and life.

I have spent a lot of time and energy reworking goals with students, to try and help them shape their goals into a form we will be able to access together at the end of the academic year. And even then we are likely to end up with a set of tasks they can tick off – hopefully with a new and healthy habit formed – but with little understanding about what has happened for them selves in the process.

So goal setting has not been one of my favourite tasks. It is labour intensive and brings little sense of satisfaction. This sense is reinforced when we get to the assessment process. I realise that little seems to have shifted within the student in terms of coming to understand more of themselves as a person in ministry. They may have some new insights about themselves, but I have not often seen something of the trans-formation and grounding in an authentic identity that I would hope for them.

I don't just want students to achieve a set of tasks, no matter how commendable these tasks might be. I want them to learn about themselves, especially about their inner dynamics.

- What works for them?
- What stops them achieving the goals they have set?
- What helps them in achieving these goals?
- How might these insights help them in the future?

I want them to learn about the process, not just the outcomes they may or may not achieve by the time the assessment process comes around. I want them to finish the year able to articulate more of who they are called to be as a person in ministry. I want them to move from being reactive in ministry to being reflective and responsive. I want them to grow in their relationship with Jesus, and to find in this relationship the source from which all ministry and life flows.

The words '**Identity, Vocation, & Discernment**' are very important to me. Personally, my sense of my identity is something that has been forged in the fires of self-reflection, through supervision and spiritual direction, reflecting in depth about where and how God works in me and in my experiences. My sense of my vocation, my calling, flows directly for me from my self-identity, and this sense of self-identity is key for me in the practice of discernment. It is for me a 'tap-root' of my being, grounded in God.

Thomas Merton,<sup>1</sup> Henri Nouwen,<sup>2</sup> and others, have written about the need to live and minister from our 'true self', the person God created us to be, not the person we think we need to be. Herbert Alfonso calls it 'The Personal Vocation'.<sup>3</sup> Agnes Sanford called it the 'Name of Grace'.<sup>4</sup> I think there are resonances too in the principles of Bowen Family Systems Theory that we have just been hearing about.

This true self, my identity, is not a secret hidden from me by God. It is God's image uniquely imprinted in me. My identity is something I discover in the pattern of my life, a particular set of characteristics embedded in me, qualities that shine through whatever masks/roles/personas/tasks I am undertaking.

My identity is who I am. My identity is how I am, how I live my life. We each have within us a unique expression of life, of potential, and this unique expression is not just for the purposes of our own self-realisation.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation* (Wheathampstead, Hertfordshire: Anthony Clarke, 1961) Chapter 5.

<sup>2</sup> Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved: Spiritual Living in a Secular World* (New York: Crossroad, 1992).

<sup>3</sup> Herbert Alphonso S.J., *Discovering Your Personal Vocation: The Search for Meaning through the Spiritual Exercises* (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> Agnes Sanford, *Sealed Orders* (Plainfield, NJ: Logos International, 1972).

We are the body of Christ, together as a community. And who we each are individually, uniquely, is a particular aspect of Christ that we each carry. It is useful to consider, 'What is the unique aspect of Christ that I bring to the whole body?' I am most myself when I find this core within and live from this place of my true self, my identity in Christ. To put it another way, we are each a particular, unique expression of the Divine life – a God's gift of love and life to the world that only we can offer.

Jesus knew this sense of identity, his identity, the beloved Son – expressed for us in his manifesto in Luke 4:18-19. He didn't finish the quotation from Isaiah, and that in itself was an indication of his uniqueness. It articulates who he was, how he was called to be in the world, and from this place his ministry was shaped by this identity / he lived out this identity in what he did. The story in Luke also highlights that it is a risky business to live out your identity as truly as Jesus lived his – it will be confronting to others and it takes courage to live it out

Our individual identity, our true self, cannot be given to us through doing a psychological profile or gifts inventory, as helpful as these can be towards its particular expression. I believe it is something that needs to be discovered, discerned through reflection upon the patterns of our life and experience. In my experience contemplative prayer has been very significant in this process, but it needs a process to help it be brought to the surface where we can engage with it, usually with a spiritual director or skilled supervisor.

So I want to help people, particularly our ministry trainees, learn ways in which they can begin to discover their unique identity, to articulate this, and then to be able to use it intentionally in reflecting upon their ministry and discerning how best to live out their identity as part of the body of Christ.

My original theological formation is in contemplative spirituality as a spiritual director. Prayer is where this begins for me, and so now I want to lead you in a process of prayer and reflection that explores this in your own life and experience. What we are going to do is just a quick introduction. The activity here has been compressed due to time constraints. Ideally this needs a couple of hours just in the reflective process. All I can do today is point you in the direction and you will hopefully get a sense whether this is something that you'd like to explore further for yourself and for your students. Remember that we cannot send our students onto journeys that we ourselves have not undertaken.

I have a handout that you can pick up after this which outlines the process we are going to do – so you don't need to take notes about the process, just let yourself be guided through it for now.

### **INCARNATIONAL GOAL SETTING<sup>5</sup>**

1. Before you begin this prayer, you will need 2 pieces of paper. Divide your first page into three columns.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. (Jn 1:14)

2. Become still and centre yourself. In your imagination, look at Jesus the man, at his life, and note the qualities that draw you to him. Don't try and think your way into this, let your experience arise from within and trust what happens in this place of prayer. Focus

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<sup>5</sup> A copy of the handout is attached.

on Jesus, on the human qualities as you would of a good friend (not those qualities that we would ascribe to his divinity)... Write these qualities in the first column of your page.

Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness...' (Gen 1:26)

3. Reflect now upon your life story. In the second column note where and how you have experienced these qualities you admire in Jesus within your life or situation.

I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly. (Jn 10:10)

4. Reflect on these two lists, the qualities that draw you to Jesus, and the ways in which you have experienced them. Which of these qualities has the strongest appeal for you? Which of them holds the most energy for you? Which offers you a sense of lightness, joy, freedom, etc? Which draws you forward NOW into a greater sense of the fullness of God's life? Mark these on your sheet.
5. On your second page, complete this sentence using the quality in Jesus that you have identified: 'Jesus is a man who ...'

And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit. (2 Cor 3:18)

6. Complete this sentence by naming the same quality in the same words; 'I am a wo/man who ...' (also on your second page).
7. Sit with these two statements for a few minutes. Let yourself feel the impact of these. What do you notice within yourself as you sit with them? Make note on this second page of the feelings or inner dialogue that comes – this is data that may indicate inner resistance or affirmation of this identity to explore later with your spiritual director).

Share these 2 statements in your small group – without comment or response, just read what you have written and let the others receive it.

What is it like for you to name them to the group, and to hear other people name their statements?

The qualities that attract you to others are quite particular. You are a unique individual, and the way you express and experience any of your friendships is a unique experience between you and your friend. The qualities that you identify here in Jesus are, I suggest, particular qualities that he draws out in you. These may be qualities that you easily recognise and identify, or they may be still embryonic, calling for growth and expression in you. They are not theoretical, but a real expression of the fullness of life that Jesus now invites you to live into. What you may become aware of is not only how these qualities have been experienced, but maybe how they have been repressed in your experience.

8. How would you like to work within your current situation with the quality held in this identity statement? What would you like to do to further develop this within your life? Make notes of this in the third column of your first page.

9. Choose two of these possibilities that you would like to have as goals for this academic year – one personal and one ministry related. Using the format of *The Examen Questions*<sup>6</sup> (also known as the *Awareness Examen*, *Consciousness Examen*<sup>7</sup>) or shape these qualities into two questions for your ongoing self-reflection and prayer.
10. Shape them into goals that will help you to intentionally explore these qualities this year. State the goal in concrete, specific and measurable terms. Include in the goal the processes of self-reflection.
11. A suggested format:
  - the quality that you wish to develop (your identity statement);
  - background to the goal – why this is important to you at this time;
  - the steps you will take to achieve this goal, for example:

*I will develop a set of identity statements that I believe will guide my ministry and life and present these to ... by ...*

*To do this I will reflect upon (the quality named in identity statement) in my life / ministry / relationships  
in these ways (journaling / prayer discussion / verbatim presentations)  
at these times (daily / weekly / monthly)  
using these two questions: (The Examen Questions)  
and record what I notice.*

*I will explore these reflections with (supervisor / spiritual director / mentor) identifying what helps and what hinders the growth of these qualities in me, and present a summary of this to my peer group and supervisor in my final evaluation.*

Goal setting not out of deficiency or neediness – but related to giftedness, identity, call to live out the particular aspect of the divine life that I carry within me. We each hold a unique Spark of the Holy Spirit – to be flamed into life. The development of a sense of self-identity is a process of self-discovery undertaken in relationship with God. The identity statement is therefore a statement of the experience of God's particular naming and invitation for the individual. The identity statement becomes a touchstone for discernment

### **Concluding comments:**

This exercise in discovering self identity is a bit like the ice-berg analogy. What we touch upon at first is perhaps a bit like a 2 dimension drawing. We can see some of the peaks. But we know that looking at a different angle will show different aspects, other peaks and valleys that are hidden from the side view. And of course, the majority of the iceberg is underwater, out of view, and only discovered with patient exploration. For me, this self identity is something that once I get sense of it, I want to know more. I want to track it down, explore it fore fully, come to

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<sup>6</sup> Dennis Linn, Sheila Fabricant Linn, and Matthew Linn S.J., *Sleeping with Bread: Holding What Gives You Life* (Mahwah, New York: Paulist Press, 1995).

<sup>7</sup> Alphonso S.J., *Discovering Your Personal Vocation: The Search for Meaning through the Spiritual Exercises*, George Aschenbrenner S.J., "Becoming Whom We Contemplate," *The Way Supplement* 52, no. Spring (1985), George Aschenbrenner S.J., "Consciousness Examen: Becoming God's Heart for the World," *Review for Religious* 47, no. 6 (1988), Brian Gallagher, *Pray. . . As You Are*, 2nd ed. (Melbourne: Nelen Yubu Missiological Unit, 1999).

know its gifts and its vulnerabilities for me. And then bring these to the fullness of Christ's body, the church, through all I do and am.

The process here is a tool that some people have found helpful. I am excited by the possibilities that this process offers and I want to explore how it might be further integrated into the supervision process of ministry students. This coming year I running a new supervisors' training program, and I want to explore with these new supervisors how they can use the material generated in this process to help the students deepen their self awareness and ground their sense of identity in Christ, and see what fruit this might generate for them.

This process for goal setting

- starts from the prayer experience of the individual, focussed upon their particular relationship with Jesus.
- It calls the students to recognise the particular qualities in Jesus that might hold for them the clues to the fullness of life to which God calls them, their particular identity or expression of God's life in them and for the world.
- It introduces them to a patten of Examen that is key to the practice of discernment in everyday life.
- It incorporates steps that will provide a means of evaluating their progress at the end of the academic year
- It offers a process for depth learning that is at the heart of action-reflection models of adult education.

I look forward to continuing my exploration of this with students and supervisors, and welcome any feedback you might have about this tool and how you might use it in your situations.

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<sup>8</sup> Director of Field Education, Whitley College, a Recognised Teaching Institute within the Melbourne College of Divinity (MCD). This material is still in developmental phase.

10. Choose two of these possibilities that you would like to have as goals for this academic year – one personal and one ministry related. Using the format of *The Examen Questions* shape these qualities into two questions for your ongoing self-reflection and prayer.
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### ***The Examen Questions***<sup>9</sup>

For what moment today am I most grateful?

For what moment today am I least grateful?

When did I give and receive the most love today?

When did I give and receive the least love today?

When did I feel most alive today?

When did I most feel life draining out of me?

When did I have the greatest sense of belonging to myself, others, God and the universe?

When did I have the least sense of belonging?

When was I happiest today?

When was I saddest?

What was today's high point?

What was today's low point?

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<sup>9</sup> Linn, Dennis, Sheila Fabricant Linn, and Matthew Linn S.J. *Sleeping with Bread: Holding What Gives You Life*. Mahwah, New York: Paulist Press, 1995, pp 5-7.