

Must They Go Sadly Away? Consumer Culture and Adolescent Vocational Imagination

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“As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: ‘You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.’” He said to him, “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.” Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.”

-Mark 10: 17-22 (New Revised Standard Version)

The Rich Young Man: Exploring a Dual Crisis of Meaning and Agency

The rich young man in this pericope is experiencing a moment of vocational crisis. He truly longs to participate in a fully God-centered life. Yet, the story ends tragically as the young man, unable to release himself from the need to own many possessions, turns sadly away from this vocation, at least within the confines of the narrative. The young man approaches Jesus with a question about meaning (his understanding of eternal life) and agency (wanting to know what to do to be included in it). Jesus reassures him that his meaning framework is adequate, but their interchange highlights his lack of agency to live fully into that meaning.

This story has become somewhat emblematic for me of many young people I have encountered in my work as a religious educator. Many times adolescents formed in the Christian tradition truly desire to live out a vocation that expresses their love for God and neighbor, yet they find themselves co-opted by social scripts that emphasize their own potential for success as indicated by the accumulation of wealth, status, and possessions. Often, their dreams of living out a God-centered vocation are pushed to the side by the concerns of an alternative definition of success (a failure of meaning). Alternatively, they continue to articulate meaning statements that are couched in the language of Christianity, and they organize their behavior and living situations in ways that express a different set of values¹. Only by compartmentalizing the various meaning structures to various elements of their lives are they able to function in both meaning worlds simultaneously. While some find this compartmentalization adequate for organizing their life meaning, others struggle with the inconsistencies between the values expressed in their life structure and those they would consciously name as most important to them (a failure of agency).

I’ve often wondered how this encounter between Jesus and the rich young man might turn out differently in a modern context. How might someone be transformed so that she is not imprisoned in the grasp of her possessions, but rather is free to respond to the call of God and move into a life that more fully embodies the love of God and neighbor? More specifically, how might North American adolescents who are deeply shaped by the context of aggressively

¹ For an insightful and deeply nuanced discussion of this phenomenon, see Brian J. Mahan, *Forgetting Ourselves on Purpose: Vocation and the Ethics of Ambition*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2002. My own thinking on this topic has been deeply influenced by Mahan’s work.

targeted marketing and recruitment into the role of consumer be given the space to make vocational choices that do not merely replicate the social scripts of success through wealth accumulation, but rather open up the possibility of a variety of ways of defining and living into a meaningful life path for themselves?

The generating problem of this paper is a theological problem with strong ethical components posed by a United States context, namely, the development of Christian vocation in adolescents in the midst of a strong alternative formation of vocation offered by the cultural-economic system of consumer capitalism. It is my assumption that participation in the cultural context of the United States provides powerful vocational social scripts in which working to make great sums of money to buy many things becomes a vocational end in itself. While the content of the Christian tradition broadly conceived would challenge this abbreviated understanding of human vocation, my experience with fairly well-traditioned Christian adolescents indicates little or no intersection of the meaning worlds of the two trajectories within their vocational framework. This may result in a crisis in which persons find their life practice and occupation shaped in one meaning world and their stated life purpose and commitments languaged in another meaning world.

Adolescence, Vocational Imagination and Consumer Capitalism: A Powerful Collision

Clearly, the generating problem I am addressing affects not only adolescents but also adults across the life span in the U.S. context. While I recognize that this issue needs to be addressed with adults as well, late adolescence is a time of intense vocational preparation around economic life in terms of occupational discernment, high school education, and preparation to attend college or enter the work force. Additionally, it is a time in which identity is being consolidated through the critique and appropriation of cultural social scripts. Because later adolescence is such a period of intensive involvement in preparation for economic life, it seems a prudent time to address issues of vocational discernment in religious educational efforts. Also, adolescents are an increasingly aggressively targeted market, and in many cases they are already expressing concern about their own participation in this system².

Vocation in its religious meaning, or the sense that one's life work has more significance than the amount of money it generates, has become a foreign concept even to many who participate in faith communities regularly. A recent article in the Faith and Values section of the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* proclaimed "Work: It's not just way to a paycheck" and traced the protestant reformers' understanding of vocation from Luther and Calvin. The title of the article indicates that, for many, work has lost meaning beyond being the source of income. The broader theological understanding of vocation is often largely invisible even in local Protestant churches.

Within a Christian theological framework, vocation depends heavily upon the partnering relationship between humans and God that serves as the primary source of meaning. This relationship provides an ordering of the daily decisions and life path upon which a person embarks. Here, I am drawing heavily on the work of James Fowler, who defines vocation as follows:

"Vocation is the response a person makes with his or her total self to the address of God and to the calling to partnership. The shaping of vocation as a total response of the self to the address of God involves the orchestration of our leisure, our relationships, our work, our private life, our public life, and the resources we steward, so as to put it all at

² See, for instance, the documentation of the resistance movement of young people against corporate takeover of public space provided by Naomi Klein in *No Logo. New York: Picador, 1999.*

the disposal of God's purposes in the services of God and the neighbor³.”

Fowler's definition points to the breadth of the meaning of vocation as impacting all areas of the self. For the purposes of this paper, I am focusing largely on a particular aspect of vocation, the choices made around adult economic life. Often in my work with older adolescents, I have been perplexed to hear young people who otherwise expressed theologically complex understandings of God, the world, and themselves indicate that they would be following one of a few standard career paths associated with the professional middle class: lawyer, doctor, etc. When pressed as to why those choices had been made, often they had more to do with the income level and respect garnered from those positions than their relationship to the young person's faith life.

The concept of vocation includes at least two important elements: meaning and agency. Meaning expresses the larger categories by which a person defines their sense of the world and their own participation in it. In lived experience, meaning resides in both conscious and unconscious awareness. It is a complex interweaving of emotion and cognition that often lies imagistic and unarticulated, even as it provides the criteria⁴ or emotiologic by which decisions and choices are made. The world of meaning inevitably connects the individual to a wider social realm because the ways in which an individual makes sense of the world draw upon the linguistic, social, and environmental categories of the society in which they are born. Agency, as the second element, arises within the choices and judgments one makes in light of one's sense of what is meaningful. Agency values intentionality of action, often expressed as being the subject of one's own life and not the object of others' control. Agency connotes a life shaped, but not fully determined, by outside forces. Vocation, then, is the lived expression of one's life (agency) in response to the call of larger meanings. Within vocation, agency and meaning are irrevocably interwoven. The idea of agency presupposes a sense of meaning toward and out of which behaviors are expressed. Conversely, meaning has limited significance in the life of an individual if that individual has no agency to express the meanings that are held.

A sense of vocation is crucial to the theological understanding of human identity. Who humans understand themselves to be has everything to do with what they understand their calling to be. Developmental psychologist Erik Erikson understood adolescence as the period of normal human development in which there is an increasingly consolidated and emergent sense of ego identity. There is a growing conviction "...that one is developing a defined personality within a social reality which one understands⁵.” For Erikson, the development of identity that consolidates in adolescence is related to the social institution of ideology, by which Erikson means "...some inspiring unification of tradition or anticipated techniques, ideas, and ideals⁶” that are offered to youth for their development and integration by the older generations.

In the beauty of Erikson's cyclical understanding of the generations, this necessary integration of ideology into ego identity allows social systems to enter into the fiber of the next

³ Fowler, James. *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000 p. 77, emphasis original.

⁴ "Criteria" perhaps communicates a more cognitive and rational mode of decision-making than what I am describing. See Alison M. Jaggar "Love and Knowledge: Emotion in Feminist Epistemology" for a discussion of the way affective and cognitive elements combine to inform human behavior in emotion. "Emotions, then, are wrongly seen as necessarily passive or involuntary responses to the world. Rather, they are ways in which we engage actively and even construct the world. They have both 'mental' and 'physical' aspects, each of which conditions the other; in some respects, they are chosen, but in others they are involuntary; they presuppose language and a social order. Thus, they can be attributed only to what are sometimes called 'whole persons,' engaged in the ongoing activity of social life" (391). In *Feminist Social Thought: A Reader*. Ed. Diana Tietjens Meyers. New York: Routledge, 1997.

⁵ Erikson, *Identity and the Life Cycle*. New York: Norton, 1959. p. 95.

⁶ Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis*. New York: Norton, 1968. p. 130.

generation even as the next generation serves to reject or rejuvenate them. He notes: “Adolescence is thus a vital regenerator in the process of social evolution, for youth can offer its loyalties and energies both to the conservation of that which continues to feel true and to the revolutionary correction of that which has lost its regenerative significance⁷.” As such, adolescence could be understood theologically as a period of life whose members serve a prophetic function for the whole of humanity. The understandings of the meaning and value of life, of human vocation, and of relational structures that adolescents confirm or deny will be those that are offered to future generations. Because of the close relationship of cultural ideology and identity in adolescents, adolescents are particularly vulnerable to participation and furtherance of sinful structures that are proposed to them by their elders. Adolescents are thus poised to provide prophetic voices for the renewal of understanding of human vocation and at the same time are subject to the deep influence of sinful structures lived out by their forebears. This provides a unique moment of educational intervention around issues of vocation in adolescence, particularly in the cultural context of consumer capitalism.

In *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian* Fowler describes a vocational crisis in contemporary times related to the ascendancy of consumer capitalism as an ideology of meaning:

“Previously people were notable and admired as vocational models because of their virtues and usefulness in service to society. Now, admiration is more likely inspired by the appearance or reality of success and wealth, by fascination with power and its exercise, and by the name and face recognition that comes with celebrity or notoriety. With such shifts in the focus of social recognition and rewards, the value systems, roles, and exemplars that receive respect and interest change significantly⁸.”

Fowler’s concern relates to the young people that I worked with who suffered from what I would consider a dearth of vocational imagination.

Imagination as a concept captures and expresses two aspects of understanding. First, imagination is often used by educators to refer to the capacity to draw upon conditions and possibilities that are not yet realized in order to inform actions that are novel within a current context. For example, Maxine Greene asserts that education must provide opportunities to develop imagination, which is a key tool of human meaning-making to make present what is absent, or “to summon up a condition that is not yet⁹.” Second, imagination often refers to a kind of knowing that draws upon images, complex gestalts of information informed by affective, cognitive, sensory, and bodily information. In *The Meaning of Revelation*, H. R. Niebuhr explores the transformative effect of imagination, particularly the way that reason and imagination inform each other in the interpretation of our world. He uses images (and later, in the Cole lectures, symbols) as a way of talking about the almost preconscious way we grasp meaning through reason-full images before we can begin to articulate this information discursively. Images are emotionally-valenced, metaphoric wholes that capture complex information about the way that we see the world and our place in it.

In *Seeing Through the Media*, Michael Warren explores the relationship between media advertising, imagination and vocation during the adolescent years. He notes:

“During the teen years, young people try on various ‘imagination’ of themselves in an effort to find one that fits. These imaginations are part of a broader project in young people’s lives: they are trying to imagine the kind of person they wish to be, what their

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 134.

⁸ Fowler, James. *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000. p. 2.

⁹ Greene, *Dialectic of Freedom*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1988. p. 16.

future life will be like, and the kind of person they wish to share it with. If the process of establishing an identity is, in part, a process of imagining for oneself possible forms of behavior, possible attitudes and values, possible goals, and ultimately, a possible future, then those who propose those imagined possibilities wield special influence¹⁰.”

Thus, the connection of vocation and imagination is a particularly significant one in the period of adolescence as young people are beginning to envision possible vocations, that is, patterns of living and ways of being in response to the larger realities in which they find themselves. As Warren points out in this text, the media-saturated realms of consumer capitalism provide a constant stream of images and imaginations to adolescents of what it means to be human in contemporary society.

In modern economies, the period of preparation and education necessary to participate in the work force has delayed adulthood more than a decade by comparison with earlier societies¹¹. This shift added an entire period of the “teenage” or “adolescent” years to the course of human development (which now often runs into the mid-twenties, excepting those who commit violent crimes or give birth to children during this period). Adolescents are not only a product of changing economic situations, they are particularly targeted within the realm of consumption as a lucrative market. Teens are the fastest growing population group in U.S. society, and as such they spend enormous amounts of money: “Last year, Americans ages 12-19 spent \$170 billion dollars on everything from jeans to lipsticks, according to Teenage Research Unlimited, a Chicago market research firm that works with such companies as Nike, MTV and Coca-Cola. . . . With the current teen population at 32 million, the research firm expects 3 percent growth for 2002 based on an increase in population.¹²” The very existence of Teenage Research Unlimited, founded in 1982, the first marketing research firm to be established that focuses solely on the teenage market, indicates the importance of this market. For a substantial fee, some 150 brand marketers, advertising agencies, and media companies subscribe to TRU in order to receive biennial reports which include 1000 pages of analysis such as “Coolest Brand Meter,” “TRUScore celebrity ratings” and other indicators of what teens will buy and why¹³.

Advertisers are also particularly keen to target adolescents because of the belief that adolescents develop brand loyalty that will keep them using a product for life. This is a somewhat twisted form of Proverbs 22:6 “Train children in the right way, and when old, they will not stray.¹⁴” An example of this can be seen in the efforts of sports marketers to reach the kids market. Segmented targeting of younger consumers has become important in many professional sports as marketers “. . . realize that children will become fans and the season ticketholders of the future¹⁵.” Efforts such as children’s areas in professional stadiums, allowing children to run the bases after games, and promotional giveaways for children are developed to cultivate a life-long market. This wisdom informs the desire of television advertisers who primarily target younger viewers, and it explains why television programming is regularly skewed towards the tastes of younger audience members.

¹⁰ Warren, Michael. *Seeing Through the Media*. Harrisburg: Trinity Press, 1997. p. 9.

¹¹ For a history of the relationship between economic developments and the institution of the “teenager,” see Hine, Thomas. *The Rise and Fall of the American Teenager*. New York: Avon Books, 1999.

¹² “Teen Sheens: Cosmetics Firms targeting girls, their wallets” in *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, Wednesday, April 24, 2002.

¹³ For more information, see website at <http://www.teenresearch.com>.

¹⁴ New Revised Standard Version.

¹⁵ Shank, Matthew D. *Sports Marketing: A Strategic Perspective*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1999. p. 200.

Across the retail spectrum, children and teenagers have become increasingly singled out as profitable markets over the last twenty years. This shift has occurred as advertisers, often with the assistance of child psychology professionals, have realized that children can and do influence strongly the buying choices made by their parents. New child-oriented commodities such as school supplies, clothing, toiletries, foods, and toys connected to popular brands such as Barbie or media events such as the Star Wars movies create an endless presence of commodities in children's lives. A recent *PBS Frontline* special about marketing to adolescents indicated that the average American adolescent experiences approximately 3000 discrete commercial messages everyday¹⁶.

Mixed Messages About Vocation

Five high school students sitting around a table in a diner:

"Guess what? Calbie got into Harvard."

"Must have aced his scores."

"780 Verbal. 765 Math."

"You know what a Harvard MBA makes in his first year? 40 Grand."

"Well, I've got a cousin who went into dermatology. First year, over 60 Grand."

"Just for squeezing zits?...."

"Listen to you guys. I mean, doesn't anyone want to accomplish anything, or do we just want to make money?"

"Make money."

"Just make money."

"Yeah."

"Make a lot of money."

"What about you, Joel?"

(Pauses, then seriously) "Serve my fellow mankind."

(All throw food at him). "Puh-leeze." "Aw, c'mon." "Get out of here."

(Joel joins in the general laughter).

-Risky Business (1983)

This summer I had the opportunity to interview 12 rising high school seniors about their sense of vocation and the values they draw upon to make vocational decisions. These young people were participants in the summer academy of Emory's Youth Theological Initiative. Participants are not representative of the general teenage population, particularly because this is a subgroup who are willing to give up a month of their summer to intense theological study. However, the sample included persons from a variety of ethnic, economic, and denominational backgrounds, so they could be considered to be a group of particularly religiously attuned young people who otherwise represented a broader sample of older U.S. adolescents. Within these interviews, we asked the young people to reflect on the messages about what it means to have a "good or successful" life that they were receiving from various persons in their lives¹⁷. While this was only an initial study, some interesting patterns emerged in the responses to these questions.

Greed is good

Much like the scene above taken from the 80's teen movie satirizing greed in the American suburbs, all of the interviewees, when asked how success was defined in broader

¹⁶ *PBS Frontline: The Merchants of Cool*. Originally aired 2.27.2001.

¹⁷ A schedule of the basic questions for the interviews is found in Appendix A. The responses informing this paper generally came to questions 1, 2 and 8.

American culture, named getting rich and having lots of things as crucial. Many of the participants expressly linked this understanding to advertising and mass media messages. Several expressed disdain for the adequacy of this construction of what it means to have a good life, although a few indicated that acquiring a lot of money was an important factor in their own vocational decision-making. Quite a few indicated that most of their friends/peers at school held with this definition of the good life. One participant noted her friends would define a good life as "...anything you can get rich from. Whether you go to school or don't go to school. Some way where you can make money fast and be happy." While few of our participants explicitly held this kind of crass commercial gain as an adequate criterion for vocational decision-making, several stated that their peers did consider this an adequate criterion. All described the pull in U.S. culture towards the definition of a good life as owning good stuff.

The party line: whatever makes you happy

Another point of convergence in the interviews was that all of the participants indicated that the significant adults in their lives (often named by participants as their parents, teachers, and counselors) did not care what they did in their lives, as long as they were happy. Often, this covered all kinds of choices, from what career paths they followed to choices about marriage, having children, and lifestyle. This *laissez faire* approach was universally characterized as positive by the teenagers we interviewed. A few spoke of friends or peers they knew whose parents had scripted their vocational choices with sadness. One participant summed this up in the following words:

What about friends or peers?

Most of my friends from school, [it's] a preppy private school, so a lot of them have parents who have their lives planned out for them. After you go to this school for college you'll be a doctor. But with my friends, we all have the same sense that whatever each of us does its fine. It won't affect us in any way. If someone ends up the president and someone a social worker, it would never affect the friendship.

What about school teachers or counselors?

Counselors are the most open people of any I've ever met. You say you want to be something and they're like, great! I think sometimes they say the same things over and over to everybody.

This young man eventually went on to reflect that it might be nice if the counselors and teachers in his school provided a bit more individualized attention to the appropriateness of what students felt called to, but he was primarily relieved that nobody was telling him what to do with his life.

Even when we pressed participants to name what their pastor or adults in their faith community would define a good or successful life for them, this language of personal happiness prevailed. Only the participants with more radical and extensive religious formation, including education in a parochial school (Evangelical, Quaker, and Jesuit), began to name explicitly religious criteria for a life well lived. This was often the case even in participants who began the interview with a religiously explicit definition of vocation. The overwhelming response was that our participants felt that the messages from significant adults were that they had been called to be happy.

The shadow values: being "responsible" and "comfortable"

After we had conducted a few interviews in which "whatever makes me happy" was inevitably the response to the question about what messages were given to them, we began to ask participants to guess what they thought the adults thought would make them happy. Here we began to hear a wider variety of responses from our participants, who often named such things as having a family and participation in fulfilling or meaningful work. One participant responded:

My mom would probably say finishing college, going into a good career, she wouldn't have a definite preference, and if I did get married, that it would be a Christian man. That'd probably be about it.

If she said good career, what would make it good?

Something that I'm satisfied with and makes enough money to live comfortably. Most of our participants indicated that making "enough money to be comfortable" was a crucial element of the messages they were receiving about having a good life. Almost all indicated that they did not need to be "rich," but that they did not want to have to struggle for money. They understood that it was not desirable to be economically dependent on anyone but themselves. It would be irresponsible not to enter into a profession where they could take care of themselves and their dependents. Here, the caveat was added to "whatever makes you happy," which was "as long as it makes enough money for you to be comfortable."

Utilizing gifts and talents wisely

Finally, in talking about how they understood vocation, many of our participants used the metaphor of "fully utilizing their God-given gifts and talents". Most felt that the way to discern their calling was to discern the particular gifts and abilities that God had given them. Many also said that they felt responsible to God in vocational decision-making as the source of their gifts and talents. When explaining why they worked so hard in advanced placement classes and why they were planning to attend college, several noted that not to pursue these courses would limit their options later, and their parents, counselors and teachers did not want them to limit their options. This was also the justification given for wanting to apply to the "best" colleges and universities. To not do so would be to waste the possibilities that God had set before them.

This particular religious encoding of vocation was striking to me because it is an economic metaphor of stewardship, but of stewardship without the concept of participating in God's larger purpose in bestowing those gifts. To borrow Frederick Buechner's famous quotation on vocation, "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."¹⁸ Missing from many of the participants' descriptions of their sense of vocation was the criteria of the world's deep hunger, the kingdom of God, God's will, love of God and neighbor, or any way of expressing the reasons for these gifts. Only a few of the participants, when asked to whom they felt responsible in vocational decisionmaking, listed anyone or anything other than God and themselves. The content of their responsibility to God was often limited to an understanding something like "God created me as I am, and not to fully realize that potential would be to dishonor God." However, the content of what that potential would look like when fully realized was often fed by imaginations of their future that were not primarily funded by the Christian tradition.

Reflections on Educational Responses to Consumerism

Many critical theorists and educators have explored the pervasive pedagogy of consumer capitalism and its impact on adolescents, their identity, and commitments. A key figure in this conversation is Henry Giroux, particularly his recent work on youth, corporate power, and the politics of culture entitled *Stealing Innocence*. In this work, Giroux describes how youth are shaped within a social order that is increasingly "...a culture of violence that cares more about profits than human needs and the public good"¹⁹. Giroux wonders: "Where can children find narratives of hope, semiautonomous cultural spheres, discussions of meaningful differences, and non-market-based democratic identities?"²⁰. Giroux is particularly concerned with the increasing influence of corporate power in commercializing youth, in elimination of noncommercial public

¹⁸ Buechner, Frederick. *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*. New York: HarperCollins, 1973. p. 95.

¹⁹ Giroux, Henry. *Stealing Innocence*. New York: St. Martins Press, 2000. p. 23.

²⁰ *Ibid*, p. 11.

space, and the driving of institutions of education by imperatives of the market²¹. Giroux is but one example of many educators, both religious and secular, who are concerned about the relentless pedagogy of consumer capitalism. For example, Maxine Greene notes, “Little is done to counter media manipulation of the young into credulous and ardent consumers—of sensation, violence, criminality, things. They are instructed daily, and with few exceptions, that human worth depends on the possession of commodities, community status, a flippant way of talking, good looks²²”. Similar concerns are lifted by religious educator Michael Warren in *Seeing Through the Media* and *At This Time, In This Place*. Anthropologist Elizabeth Chin cautions that to spin consumer capitalism as only a hegemonic force deserving condemnation is to ignore the ways in which it also serves as “...a realm in which people exercise considerable power and creativity”²³. That said, as a religious educator, it seems important to consider the ways in which consumer capitalism funds the vocational imagination of adolescents and ways in which space could be created for adolescents to consider a broader sense of their vocation that the one that is offered by consumer capitalism.

Earlier in this paper, I asserted that vocation contains elements of both meaning and agency. It seems to me that educational efforts designed to counter the formative power of consumer culture often focus on either meaning issues or agency issues in their design. On the one hand, addressing the meaning side of the issue, religious educational efforts work to form participants in an alternative Christian meaning-world through increased participation in communal faith practices or deeper participation in the Christian narrative. Drawing heavily on the insights of Alasdair MacIntyre and others who emphasize lived communal practice as a crucial element of the formation of individual moral action and lived faith, methods such as embodied storytelling, participation in traditional liturgical and spiritual discipline practices in community, and efforts to become steeped in the Christian narrative mark an attempt to shift the dominant meaning world which funds the imagination of the individual. While these efforts correctly emphasize the social formation of the individual and the importance of the relational and symbolic contexts which form the milieu from which a person emerges, it seems to me that they often pay insufficient attention to the power of conflicting formation. If we remember back to the nearly 3000 discrete commercial messages bombarding adolescents every day, it is hard to imagine the volume of Christian formative practices necessary to even the score. Additionally, while the theorists are often more complex, particularly Margaret Miles with her constructive retrieval of the ancient Christian practices of ascetism, in practice this often seems to focus on additive or enrichment Christian practices without an emphasis on self-critical practices to counter the formation in other world-views.

On the other hand, those who address the agency side of the equation focus on critical awareness, the ability of students to “read the world” in which they participate, to be able to name social and cultural dynamics that inform their unspoken assumptions about the world and how it works. Henry Giroux is a clear advocate of this approach. Initially I was quite attracted to the liberative educational philosophy of Paulo Freire as a possible means to address this issue. I wondered if the process of conscientization through communal political action might provide a helpful model for developing resistance to social vocational scripts of consumerism and for allowing alternative imaginings of human vocation. However, the difference in context between

²¹ *Ibid*, p. 26.

²² Greene, Maxine. *Dialectic of Freedom*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1988. p. 12.

²³ Chin, Elizabeth. *Purchasing Power: Black Kids and American Consumer Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001. p. 10.

Freire's work with Brazilian peasants and my own work with middle-class North American teenagers raises some critical issues for a strictly Freirian pedagogy. To state it briefly, Freire was able to assume that once participants in culture circles become able to name their own oppression there would be motivation to resist this oppression through collective action. However, in the case of participation in hegemonic structures of meaning embodied in the cultural-economic system of consumer capitalism, awareness of our "caughtness" in this system through its shaping of our aesthetic sensibilities and desires often seems to engender feelings of guilt or powerlessness rather than motivation for resistance. We benefit from, enjoy, and are moved by the images of consumption that we are surrounded by. Simply knowing about how they work, knowing the cost of consumption to the environment and to the producers of the goods we enjoy, does not provide adequate motivation for resistance. To address either meaning issues or agency issues in educational efforts without addressing both over time fails to provide adolescents the space to negotiate alternative vocational paths to that of consumer.

V. I want to be an organic farmer! A Tale of Vocational Clarity

Turning back to the young people in the interviews, I want to use the story of Lydia²⁴ to illustrate how one adolescent was given the space to negotiate an alternative vocational path through religious educational efforts that addressed both agency and meaning issues. Lydia is the daughter of two physicians. Her family has attended an Episcopalian church sporadically throughout her life, but Lydia claims that her primary religious formation has occurred in the Quaker school that she has attended since age three. We chose Lydia as an interview participant because she listed "organic farmer" as what she wanted to be when she grew up in the midst of all of the doctors, lawyers, ministers and teachers. During her interview, Lydia linked her theological understanding of creation, her environmental commitments, her sense of God's call to love her neighbor as her self, her love of working with her hands, and her critique of consumption as she described why she had decided that being an organic farmer was the path for her. She had completed a summer internship as a laborer on an organic farm, and she was currently negotiating with her parents about whether or not she would attend college or just move into an apprenticeship to learn how to be an organic farmer.

What struck me as Lydia told her story was her ability both to critique the cultural and economic formation of consumer capitalism and to express with devotion an alternative symbolic system out of which she was shaping her life's journey. Lydia's parents had limited her participation in consumer symbolic formation by limiting the practice of watching television in the household. As a teenager, Lydia had experimented with television watching (with her parents' permission) and chose to continue to limit her exposure to commercial messages. At the same time, her parents had chosen to enroll her in a school that would allow for and encourage formation into specific practices around community, peacemaking, and other Quaker religious values through worship and service experiences. Several of Lydia's teachers had explicitly shared their own passions for the environment and their commitments to justice that had inspired Lydia and given her models for alternative ways of defining a successful life. Her parents also mentored her in intentional vocational decision-making as they were open about the reasons for their commitments to serve the particular populations that they did as doctors. Both parents and teachers had helped Lydia through experiential and other forms of education to name and critique to role of consumer capitalism in U.S. and global economies, the formation of desires, and the limitations of the definition of the good life that it offers.

²⁴ Her name has been changed.

Lydia's story illustrates the intensity of effort that went into the gift of her vocational clarity and expression. Her interior struggle and the conflict with her parents over whether or not she should attend university demonstrates that this was not by any means an easy or completed process. However, by attending to both issues of meaning and agency, Lydia was given the space to respond to the formation of consumer capitalism and forge an alternative path funded by a rich religious imagination.

Appendix A

Youth Theological Initiative, July 2002 Vocational Imagination Interview Questions Developed by Katherine Turpin and Charles Hooker

1. When I say the word "vocation," what does it mean to you?
For the purposes of this interview, we are going to be talking about vocation in the sense of its root word, the latin *vocare* "to call." So what we want to explore in the next hour or so is your sense of your calling. Or, in other words, your vision of who you will be and what you will do in your life.
2. Have you ever thought about yourself as someone with a calling? Why or why not?
What is your current sense of what you are meant to be and do?
3. I want to make this pretty specific. If you imagine yourself as a thirty-five year old person, what do you imagine your life looking like?
(let them describe first without prompting to see what they include, then prompt for the others)
 - Where can you imagine living? What lifestyle do you imagine for yourself?
 - What kind of relationships do you imagine yourself being in? Describe the social landscape?
 - What sources of support do you imagine for yourself?
 - What do you imagine yourself doing, career-wise?
 - How do you plan on getting to this place in your life?
 - What do you imagine the biggest barrier will be?
 - If this is a difficult or unusual path, what are your strategies for sustaining it?
4. If you had to name what or who has shaped these visions of your future self, what would have contributed?
5. When you think about major life decision points you're going to come to in the next years, such as deciding whether or not to go to college, choosing a college, choosing a major, choosing a first job... what values or criteria will you use to make those decisions? (again, let them answer and then prompt the ones not included).
 - Personal Happiness?
 - Sense of Accomplishment, Fulfillment?
 - Respect of Others?
 - Money?
 - Religious values?
 - Social values? (non-religious)
 - Other?
6. If you had to name the source of these values or criteria that you have named, where would you say they came from?
7. When you think about making decisions about the shape of your life, is there anyone to whom you feel responsible?
(again with the wait first and then prompt)
 - Parents?
 - Self?
 - God? Or faith community?

- Surrounding culture/society?
- Other adults?
- Future spouse or children?
- Peers?
- World at large?

8. I'm going to say the name of several groups of people. When I name the group, could you tell me what it means to have a "successful or good" life in their eyes, particularly if they were asked to give you guidance?

- important adults in your life (have them identify who these would be)
- friends/peers
- school teachers/counselors
- Faith community/pastor
- broader American culture

Are there conflicts for you in these messages? How do you sort them out in your own life?

9. Have you been given space to think seriously about these issues before? Where?

- Are there people you talk to about these issues?
- Have you read anything about these issues?

10. Do you see your faith life and your career decisions as being related? Why or Why not?

11. Many times we talk about vocation in terms of future tense...but what is your sense of what you are called to be and do right now?