

AColyte: A Journal of Faith, Doubt, and Other Things at Austin College
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To Whom It May Concern – The Nautical Theory of Vocational Discernment
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SHERMAN – To Whom It May Concern . . . 250 miles inland . . . Barely close enough to West Texas . . .

*Do you know why the trees bend
At the west Texas border?
Do you know why they bend
Sway and twine?
The trees bend because of the wind
Across that lonesome border
The trees bend because of the wind
Almost all the time.
--Joe Ely*

So it's been a really busy semester. Six trips in ten weeks plus two huge church conferences on the AC campus. It has all been big fun—I've gotten to go to lots of cool places with lots of excellent people (mostly AC students). I've spent time talking about Napoleon Dynamite, the theological implications of *Extreme Makeover*, Zacchaeus, Higher Education Ministry, Sacramental Ethics, and how to live out a college's relationship to the church.

And everywhere I've been—one way or another—one word keeps coming up: **VOCATION**.

"Vocation" is kind of the hot, glamorous, trendy idea in a lot of the rooms I've been in over the last few months. We talk about vocation a lot around here. And similar conversations are happening on campuses like ours all over the country. In fact, my last trip of the Spring had me going to Louisville, Kentucky with **Laura Westerlage** and **Krista Welch** to participate in the *Presbyterian Consultation on the Training and Nurturing of Young Adults toward Religious Leadership*. That's a 13-word title for a conference about vocation.

It was actually a very useful and worthwhile gathering. The most interesting thing to come out of the whole weekend might well have been a list of questions posed to the rest of the group by the 8 or 10 undergraduate and graduate students (including Laura and Krista) who were there.

Here's what they offered to our discussion of vocation:

- *If you reached your vocation, what would that look like?*
- *How would you get there?*
- *What is the relationship between vocation and a moral/religious life?*
- *What is the relationship between vocational discernment and where students are developmentally?*
- *How is vocation dynamic?*
- *How do we deal with those changes?*

When I think back on that conference, my mind always goes back to those questions. Laura, Krista, and their fellow students did a great job of focusing our discussion (or at least my thinking) about this fancy word that we all throw around as if it means the same thing to everybody: "vocation."

*Oh, the South Coast of Texas,
That's a thin slice of life
It is salty and hard,
It is stern as a knife.
Where the wind is for blowing
Up the hurricanes for showing
The snakes how to swim
And the trees how to lean.*

--Guy Clark

All that traveling made me tired. I spent most of my time on campus this Spring engaged in "Guitar Therapy." That involved many hours of hanging out and playing guitar with **Robert Quiring**, **Sam McDonald**, and **Eric Hungerford** (The "Guitar Therapists"). On a related note, we put a new floor in the Small Chapel this Spring and the acoustics in there are fantastic. As the semester wore on, I started hearing those guys in there between classes, playing all kinds of guitar licks that I could admire but never reproduce.

Every now and then, I couldn't stand it any longer and I grabbed my guitar and went in and asked Sam if he minded if we played together. He was very nice—and very patient. We got into the habit of playing songs by the singer/songwriter Guy Clark. Sam's Dad is a big Guy Clark fan and Sam grew up hearing his songs. So we played all the Guy Clark songs that we knew.

There are lots of good Guy Clark songs. He came and performed at AC in 1998 and he's a big-time talent (he wrote famous Texas country songs like *LA Freeway* and *Deperadoes Waiting for a Train*). I also have it on good authority that he was a boyhood friend of AC's Dallas Admissions Director **Jay Evans**.

As we got fairly deep into the Guy Clark pool, I remembered the song quoted above, *The South Coast of Texas*. Guy grew up in Rockport, TX, and that's a song about living on that part of the Texas coast.

That song got me thinking about sailing. Thinking about sailing got us (Sam and me) thinking about Jimmy Buffett. So we started playing Jimmy Buffett songs. We know more Jimmy Buffett songs than Guy Clark songs—so that lasted us for several days. During that time, as I was dredging up old Buffett songs that I used to play a lot when I was a student at AC, I came across the second chorus of his *Son of a Son of a Sailor*:

*Haul the sheet in
As we ride on the wind
That our forefathers harnessed before us
Hear the bells ring
As the tide rigging sings.
It's a son of a gun of a chorus.
--Jimmy Buffett*

I've always loved the imagery in those lines. They capture some sense of the rush of riding on a sailboat that is fully under sail and making elegant progress across the water.

I've never done any significant sailing, but there's something engaging about those lines. Most of us know some similar experience where everything is working together and, at least for a moment, things are going along just right. That's what Buffett is writing about there.

So that kind of stuff was bouncing around in my mind when I went to Bible Study on April 2.

The passage for the night was Psalm 51:1-12. In Eugene Peterson's contemporary translation of the Bible, called the *Message*, that passage ends with the following words:

*...put a fresh wind in my sail.
--Psalm 51:12b (The Message)*

When you put all that together

1. Lots of high-minded discussion of **VOCATION**;
2. Some very helpful and insightful student questions about what we mean when we throw that "V" word around;
3. Guy Clark singing about the wind on the South Coast of Texas;
4. Jimmy Buffett singing about "riding on the wind that our forefathers harnessed before us;" and
5. Eugene Paterson's translation of the second half of Psalm 51:12 as "put a fresh wind in my sail;"

and then add in some interesting ancient language trivia:

1. The Hebrew word *ruach* means “spirit, breath, and wind”; and
2. The Greek word *pneuma* also means “spirit, breath, and wind.”

you (or at least I) end up with

The *AColyte's*
Nautical Theory of
Vocational Discernment

Here's how it goes:

1. Vocational discernment is the process of building and testing out sails until you find the one that most effectively catches the wind (Spirit) that blows through your life.
2. Vocational discernment is not about finding the right harbor in which to drop your anchor. It's about setting your sails to maximize the benefit of the wind that blows through your life. If you do that, you'll end up in the right place.
3. There's not necessarily one particular harbor (another good Jimmy Buffett song) where you are “called” or “supposed” to land. The wind in your life blows you in a certain direction. There might be lots of good moorings on the coast where you're heading.
4. Pettiness, condescension, crude materialism, insensitivity, arrogance, greed, diminishment of others, and selfishness are rips in one's sails. They make your boat inefficient in its effort to catch the wind that blows through your life.
5. You're “there” whenever you find a good place to drop anchor.
6. Your life has mainsails (major, career, etc.) but it also has jibs—smaller sails that help direct the wind into the mainsail. These could be hobbies like art, reading, playing softball, traveling, or playing guitar. They're not necessarily the biggest sails on your boat, but they are useful nonetheless. Tend them.
7. It's always windy at the beach. The wind might help you stay where you are. But it also might pick you up and take you somewhere else.

So that's it. That's the product of a semester's worth of talking about vocation, playing a bunch of old songs, and thinking a little about the Bible.

It's not likely to help you get a job or pacify your parents.

But if it helps you get yourself someday into a situation where you know the feeling that Jimmy Buffet was singing about, then maybe it can be helpful.

Tend your sails, try stuff out, and find the breeze. It's there. Really.

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