



*Crossings Reflection #3*¹

“Tales of a Freshman, or How My Vocation Found Me”

— Micah Weedman, Resident-in-Ministry
Office of Ecumenical & Interfaith Programs
University of Indianapolis

On a warm morning in August of 1999, I took a phone call I didn't want to take. It was Jo Ellen's fault—she answered the phone, and instead of letting me off the hook, she got me out of bed, on my day off, to speak with the admissions counselor at the seminary to which I had recently been accepted. I was supposed to have called the man two weeks ago, to decline my acceptance and pass on the seminary education. But, I had put it off—I had family ties to this place, knew these people well, and was, well, a little embarrassed that I wasn't going to attend. Finally, though, I was going to have to confront this and move on. As I took the phone, cleared my throat and fought my grogginess, the man quickly said, “Micah, sorry to call so early, but I wanted to let you know that we've decided to award you a full tuition scholarship to Emmanuel School of Religion.”

Now, I have not ever been much of a believer in signs from God. Or, I should say, while I'm sure God gives signs to people, I rarely see them. However, the “reason” I had decided not to go to graduate school was because I didn't want to take out the necessary loans to pay for it. There were other reasons, of course, but this was the one I thought no one would argue with.

So it occurred to me that this phone call might, in fact, be a sign. For the next couple of days, my wife and friends and family and I prayed and talked and stressed about making a decision, and within a week, I quit my management job and was enrolled in a full load of classes.

I understand, of course, that as far as signs go, this one is not very exciting. It was no burning bush; I didn't get swallowed by a whale; I wasn't accosted by a homeless man in such a way that I devoted myself to a life of poverty and service. It was just a scholarship, which though full-tuition, was relatively small, and to a rather tiny seminary affiliated with the Independent Christian Church/Churches of Christ. So let me back up a few years and tell you about another sign I got—this time *in the mail*.

My freshman year of college had been, I like to say, lackluster. Though never a stellar student in high school, I did manage to participate in enough good academic and extracurricular activities to gain acceptance to an honors program at an up-and-coming Christian liberal arts college in West Palm Beach, Florida. I chose the school in part because of the solid marine biology program it had. I chose the school, certainly (I have to admit) because the campus was a mere fifteen-minute walk through the richest island in Florida to the beach. The full-tuition scholarship that came with the honors program, however, sealed the deal.

In August, after my graduation, my mother and I crammed everything dear to me, namely my stereo and a few books, into my tiny car and made the seventeen-hour drive to school. I was like most freshmen—excited and a bit nervous. I had recently decided to abandon marine biology in favor of English, and then back to biology with a look toward medical school. My father, who was at the time a college administrator, used to joke to his incoming students that the average college student changed their major four times before graduating, but not to worry, because his own son changed it three times before leaving home. So, it's safe to say that I was a little unsure what I wanted to do.

¹ *Crossings Reflections* are occasional essays by members of the University community on various topics that contribute to reflection about questions of vocation, professional identity, and human flourishing in the context of the University's motto of “Education for Service.” Copies of these occasional papers published by *The Crossings Project* are available upon request for use on and off campus.

You can probably predict what's coming next. The combination of sun, surf, and being away from home—in addition to an overall lack of direction—turned out to be a bad combination, and before long I found myself in a pretty serious funk. I found it easy to sleep in rather than go to class. The beach often seemed a more useful location than the library. Christmas vacation was a nightmare—my grades had come, and they showed signs that I wasn't taking school all that seriously. I promised my parents over and over that I would shape up, that spring semester was going to be better, and off I went at the end of January.

Spring semester was worse.

I wish I could say that I did poorly my first year of college because I spent so much time partying or surfing (which I wasn't very good at) or something exciting. But, the truth is, I had no idea what I wanted out of college, and realized that I really couldn't care less what college wanted out of me. I did horrendous things, academically speaking. I decided to skip a biology lab one day in order to go to the record store with my roommate, only to find out later that day that I had skipped our mid-term exam, one of two major grades for the class. Needless to say, I withdrew from that class. I overslept for my rhetoric final, leaving myself only twenty minutes to write a five-page essay in class.

The associate provost, who was also one of my professors, actually called me into his office at the end of the semester and suggested that I try being a truck driver for a while, "to get some perspective." (One would think that was a pretty good sign, but it didn't phase me.) When my grades came, after I had gone home for the year, I am proud to say that my GPA was a whopping 1.7 (after all, I had failed my music appreciation class). But, I swore to everyone that I was fine, I knew what I was going to do, and next year would be better.

And then, about a week after my grades came, I got a letter in the mail. I should have saved it, but I've lost it. But the gist of the letter was something like this:

Dear Mr. Weedman,

Considering your recent academic performance, we have decided to revoke your place in the honors program, including your full-tuition scholarship. While you still have the option to return as a regular student next fall, we suggest that you evaluate your priorities and goals before doing so.

So much for convincing everybody that next year was going to be fine. I had just been invited not to come back to college. Although I didn't know what to do, this was definitely a sign that it was time to figure it out.

I considered quitting school altogether or taking a year off before going back. However, everyone I knew who had done this never quite made it back. I considered declaring academic bankruptcy and starting all over again until my dad told me I would have to wait several years. I did, in fact, briefly entertain the truck-driving gig but realized I would still have to go to school to get a license. In the end, I decided to live at home and attend the small Christian liberal arts college at which my dad was the dean, and then only reluctantly. It would be much harder, I knew, to slack off with my dad watching over me. This became crystal clear when I got a letter in the mail from my dad—acting as my dean—stating that I was only conditionally accepted into Milligan College, and my enrollment would be reevaluated after my first semester. I am, as far as I know, still the only student ever to be admitted to Milligan already on academic probation.

Now, I understand that this is not the most dramatic "rock-bottom" story anyone has ever told. I did not wake up in a gutter; I did not lose any family members or close friends. I did not overdose on anything. I had simply lost my way. That having been said, the transformation from a rebellious, rock-and-roll listening, disillusioned "Gen-Xer" to a seminary student was an amazing one, in that it had almost entirely to do with my college experience. What is important, then, is what about this experience brought me to that phone call I described earlier.

(As an aside, I feel it important to confess that while my attempts to be "rebellious," have, for the most part, subsided, as has my self-created disillusion, I am still an avid and unapologetic listener of rock-and-roll music.)

I think three aspects of my college experience helped to me to determine my vocation as a theologian and minister. First, attending a small, Christian liberal arts college forced me into situations that required a more serious analysis my own faith in God. Second, through a variety of activities, I became, sometimes in spite of myself, a member of a community of students that held me accountable, both academically and personally. Finally, the combination of these, plus my ever-increasing determination to do well, challenged me to really look at myself, to be honest about who I was, and to begin to develop an authentic sense of identity. Let me speak briefly about these aspects.

I always considered myself a Christian, but in part it was to keep my parents off my back. So I wasn't too thrilled to take the required Old Testament/New Testament Survey classes at Milligan College. Since I grew up in the church, though, with a very active church-going family, I wasn't too worried about the courses, either. I knew that I could sleep my way through them and escape rather unscathed. However, in spite of myself, I found myself drawn to this new kind

of study to the Bible. Perhaps it was the professor. Given my love of books as physical entities, perhaps it was my shiny red *New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha*. At any rate, I found myself actually paying attention in class, and working hard (or, as hard as I ever worked) on my homework, and in general, enjoying my increasing command of historical-critical studies of Biblical texts.

Of course, a couple of “Intro to the Bible” courses do not a theologian make, but I have to admit this study of Scripture led me closer to an honest evaluation of my own faith in God than had anything else so far. It was with a considerable amount of surprise that I found myself not only actually going to chapel twice a week, which was required, but also attending Sunday night Vespers on campus, which wasn’t required.

Of course, there was this really good-looking girl who also went to Vespers service, but more about that in a bit. . . .

My other classroom studies began to have an impact on me as well, and after taking two introductory economics courses, I decided to take the plunge and declare a business major. What is most significant about this aspect of my education is the overwhelming amount of group projects it entailed. Simulated management groups, marketing groups, brokerage groups, and “investing funds” on the stock market put me in constant contact with people, and those people, I realized, were counting on me to hold my own.

And so, I found myself invited over to residence halls and houses to work on our projects, which led to invitations to work on other homework assignments, which led to movie nights, which led to nights on the town, which led to moving out of my parents’ home and into a house with some fellow business majors. This, not surprisingly, given their serious faith and hospitality, led to many late-night discussions about faith and God and life. In the space of a year, I had gone from being a wannabe loner (who truly wants to be alone?) to a member of a dedicated and fun-loving community of friends who were and are still part of the plan to form me more in the image of Christ.

It wasn’t long, then, before I found myself wanting to deepen my faith, and so I began attending not one, but two different churches. One was the classic evangelical church, the other a quirky Protestant church that paid attention to the liturgical calendar and brought cookies to your house after you visited. The first one offered a huge, intense Sunday school class for college students, the second an intimate worship service with a variety of age groups. The first one challenged me to take very seriously my own personal commitment to faith; the second offered a new look at the very tradition I had grown up in.

Oh, and the first church, the one with the big Sunday school class, also offered the chance to get to know that really good-looking girl from the Sunday night Vespers services, but again, more on that in a bit. . . .

I could go on forever about this, but the point is, I found myself in a variety of communities that supported and challenged my faith in God and my understanding of myself.

The final aspect of my college experience can be summed up in a three-hour, one-semester capstone course, required of all seniors, called “Christ and Culture.” Now, I know it’s a bit hokey to claim that one class Changed My Life Forever, but this class nearly did. In it, we were taught to truly attempt to engage our faith to an understanding of our life. We learned about the value and impact of community, not just through reading (though there was plenty of that) but also through journaling with our small groups. We learned about vocation, we learned about pop culture, we learned how to give up worrying about our grades (since we never were told how they were determined), rather about our education.

I was hooked. In many ways, this truly was a capstone for me, a finishing touch on what seemed like a long building process. What I realized was that in fact, one could be very seriously engaged with the world—with culture, communities, all of reality, not *in spite* of one’s faith but directly *because* of one’s faith. And for a formerly directionless, disillusioned slacker, this was gospel news indeed.

Now, there are certainly more stories to tell—for example, my last semester of college was spent studying abroad in England, and not only that, but the story of how *that really good-looking girl from Vespers and Sunday school came to visit me for a week in London, how she came to be my fiancée, how she came to be my wife, and, most excitingly, how four years after becoming my wife she gave birth to my first child in May of 2003*—there are certainly more stories, but what I hope is that I provided enough to make something clear: *That phone call wasn’t a shock for me*. I wasn’t surprised. I knew I was going to seminary, although I was still “me” enough to try and stop it. So the scholarship didn’t surprise me—not because I was so smart or because I really deserved it, but because I knew there was just no getting around it. I had discovered my vocation, or it discovered me, and so I accepted my second full-tuition scholarship—this time, however, with the intention of taking every advantage of the opportunity.

Now, as an afterword, there are a few things I should add to this story. First, and perhaps most importantly, my seminary education was in and of itself a time of great discovery and challenge. I did not always have a clear picture of where I would end up, or how (or, sometimes, if) I would use it all. And I certainly cannot claim

to have taken advantage of every opportunity. In some ways, my seminary experience was even more challenging because it was here that I discovered, not necessarily the exact plan for my life, but that vocation involves not just self-reflection and growth, but service to the wider community.

This meant, unfortunately, having to choose between churches. I chose the smaller one, mostly because I wanted to better understand the tradition that had shaped both my family and me, and this church sat very deliberately and thoughtfully in that tradition. And here I was truly given the opportunity to serve. I began teaching Sunday school to high-schoolers. I presided at the Lord's Supper. I became involved with a refugee service and actually was blessed to share my apartment with a Bosnian refugee for four months. My wife and I became very active in an interfaith network of communities dedicated to fighting homelessness among families.

This kind of service began to affect my education. While I loved greatly the academic coursework that I was taking in seminary, I began to take just as seriously the classes on spiritual formation—not just my own, although there was and is still plenty of forming to do—but also on the formation of fellow “brothers” and “sisters” in Christ. I spent a semester working with a group of students to find meaningful internships with community organizations dedicated to serving the poor and marginalized in our area. The more time I spent in the classroom the more I realized that I loved it—not just

the debates and lectures and reading, though I do in fact thrive on these—but also the unique spiritual formation and community that seminary education provides.

And this story is continuing. My vocation is *still finding me*, as I suspect it will continue to do for quite some time. The challenges I now face at the University of Indianapolis are *vocational*: vocational in the sense that I am here because of who I am called to be, because of the story I have just told, because my past experiences have led me here and prepared me for my work and life here. But vocational also in the sense that being a part of a community of learning always stretches us, causes us to reflect over and over about our God, our communities, and ourselves.

Like a muscle that grows by being stretched and pushed, our sense of who we are and where we are going grows stronger as we grapple with God, community, and self—a grappling that occurs, this University's motto tells us, through “Education for Service.”

Whether or not I am successful in my role here remains to be seen, of course. But I am learning that my own success depends a great deal on the community that counts on me and on which I count. So I am not worried, because I have every reason to believe that this community of learning will afford me many opportunities to be educated and to serve—and thus continue to allow my vocation to keep finding me.



UNIVERSITY *of*
INDIANAPOLIS®