

### *Evoking Places: Vocation, Roots, and Routes*

#### **Abstract**

Discerning our partnerships with God's work in the world (our vocations), knowing where we dwell, and embracing ways we can fulfill those vocations are rarely easy. Such discernment is hindered by a failure of vocational imagination that affects clergy and laity alike. Failed vocational imagination constrains our ability to sense God in our midst and dis-places us from the enfolding Kin-dom of God. My argument is that we need to give close attention to the places in which we dwell. The dynamics of place (its intersectionality) evokes and inspires the stories that form identity and vocation. Taking place seriously fosters robust vocational imagination.

#### **Identity, Vocation, and Place**

Finding a storyline for identity and purpose within Christian traditions requires facing the questions of *whose* we are and what vocation we claim as ours.<sup>1</sup> The answers to these questions are deeply and profoundly intertwined with place.

Naturally, the primary theological answer to whose we are is that we belong to God our creator. We are creatures of God. An equally important, and theological, answer is that we also belong to *places*—the contexts and relationships in which God's creating call arises. Saying that we belong to place is not some form of romanticized parochialism; rather it is a way of naming the embodied human, ecological, physical, and spiritual relationships that constitute our identity. God's creative work of forming life from the soil of Eden continues to this day. In each moment of experience, God offers the most redemptive and life-giving way to form our past and the elements gathered by place into relationships that make us who we are. We are creatures of place. We can only know our vocations if we see them embedded in places—making a difference in those places.

Place is not simply the setting in which identity and vocation are expressed nor is it the backdrop to the divine-human-creation drama—place is the fabric of the drama itself, the unfolding web of relationships between God, humans, and creation. Place evokes us into identity and partnership with God. Place and vocation are intertwined in a rhythm of form-giving in which place gathers local elements of experience and vocation responds to God's vision for these elements to become life-giving relationships. We are in *vocation*, have purpose, as we respond to and partner with God's continual creating, redeeming, and sustaining work that forms the elements of place into relationships increasingly reflective of God's Kin-dom. Attributed to Ada María Isasi-Díaz, "Kin-dom" emphasizes the just relationships in God's reign in contrast to the patriarchal rule of territory that "Kingdom" connotes.<sup>2</sup> Kin-dom is an apt term in this project since place is an arena of meaningful relationships rather than a controlled space. Place gathers together a certain set of

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<sup>1</sup> James Fowler, *Becoming Adult: Becoming Christian* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass 2000), 75.

<sup>2</sup> See Ada María Isasi-Díaz, *En La Lucha* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 4.

people, creatures, plants, climate, and physical structures. The relationships between these take particular forms such as a home, workplace, school, or outdoor area. God is active in places leading them toward the Kin-dom. When we encounter God in a place, calls us to be more than a spouse, co-worker, student, or recreationalist. Our partnership with God evokes us to form relationships in place that are redemptive, sustaining, just, and loving.

### **Failure of Vocational Imagination: Limited and Displaced**

Discerning the forms of our partnerships with God's work in the world (vocation) and knowing where we dwell are rarely easy because they involve deep commitments, complexities, and life implications. Too often, vocational imagination fails because we look for abstract answers for all time, rather than an embedded call for a particular time and place. Clergy, church professionals, and laity alike unintentionally fall prey to a failure of vocational imagination—it is not a conspiracy but an accumulated habit of mind.

Vocational imagination, like faith itself, is a way of being in the world. Imagination is about recognizing connections between things in the world and giving relationships meaningful form. "Place" is the way we imagine the web of relationships in particular areas and the relationship between God and the world in those areas. "Vocation" is the way we imagine God's relationship with the world, God's work in the midst of the world, and ways to partner with it. Failed vocational imagination constrains our ability to sense God in our midst and dis-places us from the enfolding Kin-dom of God.

Failed vocational imagination has several indicators:

- Vocation is equated with career, profession or paid employment.
- Vocation is compartmentalized into isolated roles and statuses.
- Vocation seems to be static and a thing to possess.
- There is a sense that the roles and responsibilities one has in various places are in competition with each other, especially when we identify vocation with only one of these places.
- The vocations of persons with disabilities are dismissed.
- The vocations of children, youth, and older adults are disregarded.
- Attention is limited to human need to the exclusion of the rest of creation.
- Persons fail to recognize the intersections of social, ecological, economic, and personal dynamics.
- Vocation is disconnected from place.

### **Vocational Tensions**

To revitalize vocational imagination, we need to consider several tensions woven into the concept of vocation itself. I wish to focus on three major tensions in vocation (some having tensions within them as well) and respective neglected aspects that diminish vocational imagination.

*Tension 1: Following in Discipleship ⇔ Partnering in Vocation.* In its fullest expression, **discipleship** involves serving others and one could rightly argue that vocation is encompassed by such discipleship. Unfortunately, discipleship is too frequently embraced as individualistic spirituality and is framed primarily as **followership**. Several dynamics in the United States context fosters such a framing:

- Individualism in US Christianity shapes discipleship into a personal and inward spiritual journey
- Within such individualism service is framed as an expression of spirituality and discipleship
- As an expression of spirituality, expectations to serve may become contingent on reaching certain levels of faith development
- Within the pervasive clergy paradigm and professional model, discipleship is implicitly cast as followership of congregational leaders with varying degrees of lay passivity

When discipleship is not held in tension with the core concept of **partnership** found in **vocation** we err on the side of passivity rather than initiative in lived faith. When partnership is not held in tension with following the way of Jesus we err on the side of assuming our actions are God’s will.

*Tension 2: Vocational Continuity ⇔ Vocational Evolution.* The problems of understanding faith as a noun is a common topic in faith development theory. As a noun, faith easily becomes an object of cognitive belief, something to hold, rather than a way of being in the world (John Westerhoff)<sup>3</sup> and a process of meaning-making (James Fowler).<sup>4</sup> Vocation suffers from a similar objectification into a static noun—a misplaced concreteness that makes vocation a static thing to possess. Think of the ways we refer to vocation as something one “has” and one “seeks to find.”

The claim that objectification of vocation is a mistake is rooted in the assumption that the world is in a continuous process of becoming moment by moment.<sup>5</sup> We arise in a moment, the moment ends and we arise again in the next moment. In each moment of experience, we sense our past and that of the world about us—both **human and non-human**. God participates in each moment of experience of each part of the world offering, luring, propositioning...**calling**...with a way to weave together our past and our radical interrelationships. That proposition from God offers the most redemptive and life giving option for us individually and the world as a whole in the moment. God’s offering is not coercive—there is radical freedom in each moment to reject in whole or part the proposition from God. Despite such radical freedom, the reality is the weight of past experiences and decisions creates a trajectory, inertia, habituation to replicate prior ways of being and responding to God. In working with each moment God is calling toward a consistent vision for the wholeness and flourishing of the world but the advance toward that future involves many embodiments in the dance with the world.

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<sup>3</sup> John Westerhoff, *Will Our Children Have Faith?* (Harrisburg: Morehouse Publishing, 2000), 87.

<sup>4</sup> James Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1981), 91.

<sup>5</sup> I am working largely from a Whiteheadian process theology perspective.

The process of becoming moment by moment means that our self and vocation are in constant process as well. *Vocation is not a thing we possess, but rather the shape of our continual responses to God and our relationships (human and non-human). Consistency and continuity of responses in the past and of anticipation of responses in the future can mislead us into objectifying vocation into something to “have”—a situation of “misplaced concreteness” in process philosophy terms.* The implication is that over our life span the embodiments of vocation (responses and partnerships with God) will change and evolve even though we can recognize a trajectory between those embodiments.

When vocational continuity is not held in tension with vocational evolution (the arising of vocation in each moment and place), vocation becomes a station or function to hold. When we do not hold vocational evolution in tension with vocational continuity, we risk losing the contributions of prior experience, learning, gifts, and graces to our current partnership with God.

God’s participation in each moment of becoming means that everyone experiences the opportunity to be in vocation—we need only say “yes.” If nothing can separate us from the love of God, nothing can separate us from the lure/call of God. So, vocation is not reserved for clergy, not just for those mature in faith or human development (vocation is intergenerational), and not just the saved and sanctified. The depth and consistency of responsiveness to partnership with God may differ significantly between these groups but not the fact of being summoned by God.

*Tension 3: Personally Based ⇔ Contextually Evoked.* A third tension in understanding vocation is between vocation as personally based and contextually evoked. Many discernment processes related to vocation (and career) make extensive use of various inventories to assess individual attributes. They may cover personality types, strengths, spiritual gifts, aptitudes, psychological dynamics, conflict management styles, learning styles, intercultural competency, multiple intelligences, and the like. I think these are very important and helpful in understanding oneself and the capacities one brings to partnership with God. *Their use is also an indicator of the extent to which we understand vocation as rooted in the person.*

The tension between personally based and contextually evoked vocation shapes how we perceive our personal uniqueness. A beloved biblical passage for many is Isaiah 43:1, “...I have called you by name, you are mine.” (NRSV) Vocation here is a cherished gift of one’s personal relationship with God and indeed it is since it reflects God’s calling us into being in every moment—uniqueness of vocation is personally based. However, individual uniqueness arises from contextually rooted vocation as well. God calls us into being each moment from the webs of relationships in which we find ourselves—our places. No one exists in the same set of relationships whether in the mode of receiving blessings or of giving service—uniqueness of vocation is contextually rooted.

When we do not hold the personal base of vocation in tension with contextually rooted vocation, context and place become backdrops to individual action—persons seek a place to express their

gifts; persons bring their vocation to a place (gift or baggage). In this framework, either the task is to find a location in which a pre-determined vocation fits or ways a pre-determined vocation can be “contextualized” (adapted) to a setting. Here, we risk conflating personal needs with needs of others and distorting vocation into subjective spirituality or worse yet a personality cult. When we do not hold the contextual evocation of vocation in tension with personally based vocation, the demands of context and place overshadow passion, and vocation can become sacrificial duty. Here, we risk numbness to prophetic voices, ambivalence to the stranger, and disinterest in confirming giftedness.

### **A Revised Understanding of Vocation**

I wish to offer a general definition and description of vocation that addresses some of these issues. The broad nature of the description has a purpose—to act as a stimulus for dialogue and a foil for raising awareness of vocational assumptions regardless of whether the ideas presented are embraced in part or whole.

The work of James Fowler influences my understanding of vocation. I think it is a helpful reference point in reconsidering vocation because it offers a broad framework that can be helpful across theological divides, conceptually connects faith and vocation, and centrally positions the role of partnership in vocation. Stemming from his work on faith development, Fowler came to recognize that *vocation* was how he talked about the vision a particular faith community held for the end of development while he used the term *faith* relative to a universal human process of meaning-making. In brief, Fowler defines vocation as the “...response a person makes of their total self to the address of God and to partnership with God.”<sup>6</sup> A more extensive definition found in Fowler’s *Weaving the New Creation* is:

Vocation, as set forth here, involves a process of commitment, and ongoing discerning of one’s gifts and giftedness in community, and of finding the means and settings in which those gifts—in all the dimensions of our living—can be placed at the disposal of the One who calls us into being and partnership.<sup>7</sup>

***Vocation is partnership with God’s work in and for the world within particular places. The call to partnership comes from God but the places in which we dwell and between which we move evoke it. Rooted in the concrete elements of a place, vocation responds to God’s vision for forming relationships reflective of God’s Kin-dom. Vocation is a relational and communal way of being in the world animated by a variety of passions. Redemptive and prevenient grace makes both our giftedness and limitations resources for vocation. Over time and across the places of daily life and our lives, we come to recognize a pattern and trajectory to the forms of our responsive partnerships. Partnership is possible at any point in life, but grows in depth and consistency with education and nurture.***

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<sup>6</sup> Fowler, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian*, 95.

<sup>7</sup> James Fowler, *Weaving the New Creation* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 121. This definition seems to assume that vocation is something one has and one needs to find a setting in which to express and embody it.

*Partnership with God's work in and for the world.* Partnership names a relationship. It does not mean we are on equal footing with God nor that it diminishes God's sovereignty. The witness of scripture and the saints is that God chooses to work with and through human agents. Knowing the heart and will of God, the One with whom we partner, is a fundamental task for our journeys and our ministries of discipleship.

*God calls but place evokes vocation.* In the ongoing process of creation, God continually calls us into being and partnership. The graces and needs of place also evokes us into being and partnership—we are the histories and relationships that place gathers. The complex ways that these graces and needs come together in both oppressive and liberative ways (intersectionality) puts a claim on us.

*Vocation is a way of relationally being in the world.* With God and place evoking identity and vocation, responsiveness to others (service) is constitutive of who we are and not just an expression of spirituality. Vocation is an expression of topophilia involving love, empathy, and care for place. ***Such care means giving forms to relationships that are redemptive and life generating—a relational integration of the Great Commission and the Great Commandment. This relational form-giving work is central to vocation and is a reason that place is central to vocation.*** Often we think of vocation as what we do for others, but the relationality of vocation demands mutuality where we receive as well. Without mutuality in vocation, others become merely the objects of our work.

*Vocation weaves together personal and communal.* We are persons-in-community, so our interconnectedness means that our vocations arise together—God is calling the one and the many at the same time. In this light, we can understand place as a web of vocations. Using vocation as a way to make ourselves feel like unique individuals, different from the rest, rends this web. While our vocational distinctiveness has roots in our personal histories and relationship with God, distinctiveness also arises from the uniqueness of one's location in place. No one shares the same history or locus of relationships in place as I, nor the same opportunities for collaborating in communal vocation.<sup>8</sup>

Vocation in community raises issues of organization, roles, accountability, and authority—matters of ecclesiology beyond the scope of this project. Here vocation falls on rocky ground because we do not have adequate ways of talking about the range of ways Christians are in partnership with God. Too often vocation refers in a limited way to those ordained. We become confused in the categories of professional, volunteer/worker, staff, certified in (\_\_\_\_), etc. We must find ways to create order that fosters freedom of vocational imagination.

*Vocation involves various forms of animating passions.* The etymology of passion goes back to the late Latin *passionem* which denotes suffering and enduring. The suffering in passion is not a masochistic one. Pain is evitable when we care about others, communities, and the world —

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<sup>8</sup> I need to explore Lutheran understandings of this aspect of vocation.

when see brokenness and injustice. It is also the pain of birthing and creating. Emotion is something closer to the center of our selves than mere feelings. Passion—suffering, joy, endurance, emotion, and desire—is a dynamo for who we are. Without it, we go through the motions: assignments, graduation, ordination, licensing become hoops through which to jump.

We experience joy and bliss when we are in harmony with our truest self—when we do “what I was born to do.” We suffer when we face aspects of our own brokenness (whether from our choices or actions of others) and the brokenness of our places. The desire to alleviate suffering can motivate the work of redemption, healing, mercy and justice. We have longings to pursue powerful visions of the ways things could be—life questions of “what if?”<sup>9</sup> We fall into awe and wonder as we encounter beauty, creativity, love, courage, and the face of God in the world. Sometimes passion is the compulsion to do what must be done in the face of fear, hardship, pain, and danger.

Passions are poured into particular forms of vocational activity manifest across all that one does and all the places one dwells. Passion for beauty, wholeness, justice, or faithfulness finds embodiment in various ways at office, clinic, church, school, recreation, home, and public space. Collapsing vocation to one aspect of our life pits that aspect over against the rest of our life creating a divided self.

*Vocation is a grace holding together our giftedness and limitations.* In choosing to work with and through human agents, God gets a mixed bag. While our weaknesses and failings do make us reliant on God’s strength, we should not let this fact diminish our responsiveness to partnership with God. Our limitations are not just the results of sin and brokenness—we are simply finite creatures. Our capacities for partnership varies because of developmental stage, abilities, health, resources, and the like. God’s redemptive creativity allows God to use whatever we have, wherever we are. In using our limitations, God redeems them in vocation thus making them a grace to accompany our gifts. We also encounter a form of prevenient grace as we encounter *I AM—PLACE* in the places we dwell. If place is the ground of calling, it is also the ground of grace. God does not call without liberating and empowering, nor blessing us with co-workers. Partnership is a possibility at any point and in any place of life.

*Vocation is a growing freedom of responsiveness.* Being in vocation across the whole journey of life and discipleship only requires the capacity to respond—even taking the next breath is a response to God’s call to life. Hopefully, the depth, consistency, and freedom of response to partnership with God’s work in the world grows over time. Such growth can happen when developmental stages, education, and discipleship add knowledge, skills, and attitudes available for vocation and place. Sometimes we must begin by removing obstacles to vocational growth created by personal choices and social injustice. Growth in vocation is a process of sanctification as we experience freedom *from* the intention and desire to sin and freedom *for* deepening consistency to say “yes” in the moment to God’s lure of partnership. Vocation is not deferred to

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<sup>9</sup> Thanks to Dr. Lisa Withrow of Methodist Theological School in Ohio for this insight.

adulthood, abandoned at retirement, or blocked by disabilities. While the robustness and consistency of service may vary, the option to be responsive partnership with God's work in the world does not.

*Vocation connects past and future in the now of place.* We have a tendency to use a future tense in the way we speak of vocation—it is something out there that we pursue. On the other hand, we can fall prey to thinking that the ways we have been in partnership during the past defines our vocation. While there is anticipation and preparation for vocation in the future and there is faithfulness in the vocation of the past, the now of place is where our vocation is experienced and embodied. If we cannot be in partnership with God in the present, how can we expect to be in the future?

### **Relationality in Vocation and Place**

When I have explained my writing project to people, they quickly resonate with the vocational issues raised but show puzzlement with the connections with place—the awkward pause or befuddled look give it away. The puzzlement reflects differences between how place is commonly understood and how persons across many disciplines are rediscovering the richness of the concept “place.” I will address several common assumptions about place needing reconsideration, but highlighting one in particular may be helpful. ***Place is a particular collection of formative relationships rather than merely a location in space—it is the web of relationships from which we come to be and to which we contribute.*** Place is a fundamental way to experience and understand embodied human, ecological, physical, and spiritual relationships. We cannot exist apart from place—we become who we are from what places gather and from our ongoing encounters with God (*I AM—PLACE*).

Relationships are central to our identities and at the heart of our vocational partnerships with God. As the collection of relationships in which we exist, place then too is at the heart of our vocations. We are tethered, however tenuously or problematically, to the places evoking our identities and vocations. In turn, we partner with *I AM—PLACE* to evoke places reflecting the Kin-dom of God. Place is a new way of recognizing interdependence within parishes of our vocations.

### **A Working Definition of Place**

***Place is a continual process of gathering particular sets of people, creatures, plants, climate, and physical structures—it is the unfolding web of relationships between God, humans, and creation. Shaped by culture and practices, “place” is the way we imagine this localized web and our position in it—our relational way of being in the world. Habits in the process of forming relationship between elements give places their character. Places are full of assets, hindrances, and graces for flourishing.***

*A process and history of gathering events.* We sometimes talk about certain locations as “gathering places,” but *gathering* is a key dynamic of every place. Tim Cresswell quotes Edward Casey:



...places gather things in their midst - where 'things' connote various animate and inanimate entities. Places also gather experiences and histories, even languages and thoughts. Think only of what it means to go back to a place you know, finding it full of memories and expectations, old things and new things, the familiar and strange, and much more besides. What else is capable of this massively diversified holding action? ... The power belongs to place itself, and it is a power of gathering.<sup>10</sup>

Assemblage theory informs thinking about the gathering power of place. This is different from systems theory. Cresswell describes assemblage as:

...a unique whole 'whose properties emerge from the interactions between parts.' Assemblages are distinct from organic structures which are also assembled from parts but depend on each part in order to exist. In an organic structure, if you take away a constituent part the structure would cease to exist in a recognizable way. With an assemblage constituent parts can be removed and replaced. The parts can then enter other assemblages and contribute to new 'unique wholes'.<sup>11</sup>

Gathering is not a one-time event. "Places are never 'finished' but always 'becoming.'"<sup>12</sup> The elements place gathers change constantly through new experiences, seasons, evolution, decay, and movement. The event of gathering happens over and over again—it is an ongoing process. Place involves an ongoing series of gathering events, but this does not mean that it is fleeting. The gathering process has a history and pattern to it. Cresswell notes:

As Arturo Escobar has argued 'places gather things, thoughts, and memories in particular configurations.' Place in this sense becomes an event rather than a secure ontological thing rooted in notions of the authentic. Place as an event is marked by openness and change rather than boundedness and permanence.<sup>13</sup>

*A way of making the world meaningful.* Place is more than a simple geographic location or area. Place is a fundamental way of making meaning from localized human and nonhuman relationships. If asked where we are from or where we dwell, our response is not a set of coordinates—a city is not a place because it is locatable by GPS. Our answers involve a name that stirs up meanings for those acquainted with it in terms of geography, demographics, history, culture, economics, personal connections, or some other category. If another is unacquainted with our city, or reflects what we take to be a misrepresentation of it, we explain the meanings of the relationships we have with the people, land, creatures, and the natural and built environment. Place enables us to give meaning to a local set of relationships. Tim Cresswell describes place as "...how we make the world meaningful and the way we experience the world. Place, at a basic level, is space invested with meaning in the context of power."<sup>14</sup> Place, in contrast to space or mere location, is neither an objective thing in itself nor a characteristic of things in the world but

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<sup>10</sup> Tim Cresswell, *Place: An Introduction* (Chichester, West Sussex UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 52.

<sup>11</sup> Cresswell, 52. Cresswell is quoting Manuel De Landa, *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity* (London and New York: Continuum, 2006), 5.

<sup>12</sup> Cresswell, 65.

<sup>13</sup> Cresswell, 71.

<sup>14</sup> Cresswell, 19.

rather “...an aspect of the way we choose to think about it—what we decide to emphasize and what we decide to designate as unimportant.”<sup>15</sup>

*Stuff of what we are.* Place gathers and presents to us the raw material for constructing our identity and vocation—we are the histories and relationships that place gathers. We take what place offers and weave it into who we are in ways that are novel, conformist, antithetical, or a bit of each. It is amidst the relationships gathered by place that we continually come into being and contribute to the becoming of others—both place and that which it holds are in processes of becoming at the same time. Cresswell notes:

...place is made and remade on a daily basis. ...Place is the raw material for the creative production of identity rather than an *a priori* label of identity. Place provides the conditions of possibility for creative social practice.<sup>16</sup>

Jeff Malpas also argues place precedes subjectivity:

Place is instead that within and with respect to which subjectivity is itself established - place is not founded on subjectivity, but is rather that on which subjectivity is founded. Thus one does not first have a subject that apprehends certain features of the world in terms of the idea of place; instead, the structure of subjectivity is given in and through the structure of place.<sup>17</sup>

The connections between identity and place that Cresswell, Malpas, and Martin Heidegger describe seem consistent with process theology. The self is a continuity of individual moments of experience...a continuous process of becoming moment by moment. We arise in a moment, the moment ends and we arise again in the next moment. In each moment of experience, we sense our past and that of the world about us both *human and non-human*.<sup>18</sup> It makes sense to speak of place as the gathering of what we sense. This means we are radically interrelated with others and the world...we arise along with the world, we arise in a web of relationships. God participates in each moment of experience of each part of the world offering, luring, propositioning with a way to weave together our past and our relationships. That proposition from God offers the most redemptive and life giving option for us individually and the world as a whole in the moment. The assemblage of elements (creatures, plants, land, climate, built environment, culture, habitat...) that constitute place are internally related and are co-constituting. Any one element arises from its relationships with other elements in a place. At the same time place is the assemblage of these elements. In working with each moment God is luring toward a consistent vision for the wholeness and flourishing of the world but the advance toward that future involves many embodiments in the dance with the world.

*Roots, routes, and nested places.* While place endures over time it is also dynamic and while place is localized it is also open and interconnected. These claims point to the ways that identity and vocation have roots in particular places while at the same time they transcend particular

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<sup>15</sup> Cresswell, 18.

<sup>16</sup> Cresswell, 70-71.

<sup>17</sup> Cresswell, 50. Cresswell quoting Jeff Malpas, *Place and Experience: A Philosophy of Topography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 35.

<sup>18</sup> Need to address the problem of anthropocentrism when talking about the relationships from which we arise.

places as the routes of life take us between places. Over the course of life, we dwell in different places. Within daily life, many of us move between the places of work, school, home, marketplace, and play. We move between different cultural places in privileged and disadvantaged ways. Networks of family, friends, and associations may cause us to travel between places. As Doreen Massey suggests, we encounter both the roots and the routes of identity and vocation in relation to places.

*Formed by practices, power, and intersectionality.* Social and relational systems shape the meanings that transform space into place through narratives and practices. Practices enculturate us into a *habitus* or lasting dispositions that function “at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions.”<sup>19</sup> Cresswell writes,

Places are never finished but always the result of processes and practices. As such, places need to be studied in terms of the ‘dominant institutional projects,’ the individual biographies of people negotiating a place, and the way in which a sense of place is developed through the interaction of structure and agency.<sup>20</sup>

Practices condition but do not determine how persons experience and construct place—freedom to improvise is also part of how practices work.

Hierarchies and power mark the terrain of social and relational systems as well. Drawing on Henri Lefebvre, Cresswell observes:

Clearly the things people do in place...are not always the result of free will. Some actions are freer than others and it is therefore necessary to take into account restraints on action that are the product of social hierarchies and power relations within society. ...A given social order, [Lefebvre] argues, imposes its rhythms onto the bodies of people.<sup>21</sup>

When people do not conform to imposed norms, they are viewed as transgressors and labeled “out of place.”<sup>22</sup> The terrain of power in place is complex and many layered—we lose track of where we are when we focus on a single layer of gender, race, class, or ability. Place is an encounter with intersectionality. The primacy of place means that “[place] is a force that cannot be reduced to the social, the natural, or the cultural. It is, rather, a phenomenon that brings these worlds together and, indeed, in part produced them.”<sup>23</sup>

### **Vocational Imagination and Place Evoking Vocation**

Several lenses seem important for reflecting on vocational imagination and places evoking vocation:

*Gathered by and in place.* The lens of gathering focuses on knowing the places we dwell and our movements between places. This is both a prayerful and a studied knowing. Prayerful, in that we focus our attention (Simone Weil) on the activity of the Spirit, signs of the Kin-dom, graces

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<sup>19</sup> Mary McClintock Fulkerson, *Places of Redemption: Theology for a Worldly Church* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 210), 35. Fulkerson quoting Bourdieu.

<sup>20</sup> Cresswell, 68.

<sup>21</sup> Cresswell, 65.

<sup>22</sup> Cresswell, 42.

<sup>23</sup> Cresswell, 47. Cresswell on Robert Sack.

embodied, and brokenness displayed. Studied, in that we draw upon diverse tools to recognize the many layers personal, social, and ecological layers of place. Through prayer and study, we not only know place but also begin the process of valuing and transforming it.

*Intersectionality.* We experience the relationships in place through structures of society, culture, and power. Systems such as racism, sexism, classism, anthropocentrism, heterosexism, and ableism often distort the terrain of relationships. The lens of intersectionality brings the relational terrain of place into focus, or more accurately, brings out what hidden dynamics there may be. We will need practices that open up intersections of relationships (human and ecological) for transformation: hearing into voice (Nelle Morton), seeing into visibility (Mary McClintock Fulkerson), and crossing borders into understanding.

*Identity and Vocational Narratives.* Part of what place gathers is our personal history—our sense of who we are and our purposes in life. Identity and vocational narratives hold together the experiences in our personal history. These narratives mark the trajectory of gifts and brokenness we bring to places. As places and our movements between them evoke us into being and vocation, they continually recreate these narratives in ways that succumb to the inertia of the past and yield to God’s creative call.

*Place-making.* Not only do places evoke us, we evoke places. Place-making is an empathetic response to tend the gifts and brokenness of place in light of God’s work in the world. Tending to place means fostering a gratitude that makes manifest and nurtures the graces woven into places by God. Tending to place means participating in continual valuing, revaluing, and reforming of relationships toward flourishing—that is, sharing in re-deeming work. Being equipped for place-making draws deeply on our formation as disciples of Jesus: knowing scripture and our heritage, fruits of the spirits, spirituality, prayer, worship, community, and servanthood. Place-making also requires a commitment to our own transformation as we encounter the relationships of place and expand our responsiveness to vocation—in essence our deepening sanctification. In place-making, we practice both the Great Commandment and the Great Commission as dimensions of the Kin-dom of God.

*Topophilia.* Knowing places does not necessarily mean that we identify or have solidarity with them. Lacking such connection, places and movement between them lose their evocative vocational power to lay claims on us. In fact, we need to think of place and vocation in terms of empathy, mutuality, and love. I wonder at times if we lose sight of empathy and solidarity in the ways we utilize praxis as a methodology for practical theology and religious education in North America. Has problem posing morphed into objectification of situations and seeking a fix for them?

In many ways, my hope for renewed vocational imagination is that it calls us to love, identify with, have empathy for, and care for all that place gathers. I find it meaningful to adopt *Topophilia* as a name for such a call. The term combines the Greek *topos* (place) and *philia* (affectionate regard and friendship). Yi-Fu Tuan introduced the concept of Topophilia in the field of humanistic geography: “The word ‘topophilia’...can be defined broadly to include all of the human being’s affective ties with the material environment.” Jim Cresswell notes this is essential to “place as a ‘field of care.’”<sup>24</sup> The lens of topophilia focuses on empathy and mutuality as part of belonging to God and belonging to places and routes between them. Topophilia is an important dimension to maintain in the ongoing cycle between action and reflection on situations/actions (praxis). Topophilia is also a part of fulfilling the Great Commandment to love God completely and our neighbors (inclusive of creation) as ourselves, for place gathers all that makes us who we are and all that we are to love.

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<sup>24</sup> Cresswell, 35.