Visions of Vocation: Common Grace for the Common Good

By Steven Garber

Chapter 1: To Know the World and Still Love It?

There are days we remember to remember for the rest of our lives. We see something of unusual beauty or heartbreaking sorrow. We hear news of wonder and glory or of unbearable sadness. Or perhaps we heard or read something that we know is very important, and because of solidarity with history and the human condition, we know that we cannot walk away from it.

The way that Clydette Powell lives her life makes all of us stop. Several years ago she was asked by USAID and the White House to travel to Africa and spend three months assessing the impact of famine and drought on disease. A physician by training, she had taught at Harvard Medical School before deciding to live for many years in Cambodia, offering her medical skills through the work of World Vision. She eventually returned to the States, taking up the position of physician at USAID, responsible for all US programs for tuberculosis throughout the world. As she explained, "Why this matters now is that most who die of AIDS, die of tuberculosis." So in the early days of Bono's advocacy for AIDS in Africa and of the Bush administration's decision to give $15 billion toward that need, Clydette's judgments were crucial in the calculus of America's response.

It was Christmastime when she returned. As she was a dear friend, we invited her to join us for lunch one day. Our tree was still lit, the fireplace aglow, and big, fluffy snowflakes were falling outside the bay window in our living room—the one our children called the "Peter Pan window." After we sat and chatted for awhile, she began to tell us of the horrors she had seen.

"It was outrageous!" she said again and again and again. I remember her words because the contrast was so stark. Christmas glory—and the greatest grief. How do you hold both in your heart? As I listened to Clydette, I wondered how she could know what she now knew and still choose to love her work and the world?

Washington, D.C., is my city. For years I have lived and moved and had my being in what has been the capitol city not only of the United States but of the world. One hundred years ago it was not, and one hundred years from now it is unlikely that it still will be. As Rome was, as Constantinople was, as London was, Washington is. For now it is the city where Bono must come to plead for Africa, not Dublin, not London, not Paris, not Beijing, not New York, not Los Angeles. Washington is where decisions are made about the way the world will respond to the AIDS crisis and it is to the White House and the World Bank that Bono has to make his case.

But if power is the coin of the realm, then cynicism is the atmosphere breathed. People with all sorts of hopes and dreams come to my city, putting their shoulders to history, working to bring their visions of the way the world ought to be into reality. "Potomac fever" is in the air—but with the potential for powerful work to be done, there is also the potential for cynicism to be born.

More often than not, people want to do the right thing. They want their lives to matter, their visions to shape the way the world works for the common good, at least as they understand the good. In a thousand different ways they want their ideas to have legs. That is what makes Washington, Washington.

Several years ago I was sitting in the Senate Dining Room in the Capitol building talking with the novelist Tom Wolfe, and a few of us were asking questions about his life and work. One longtime journalist in the city asked, "What is the difference between Washington and New York?" Without a blink, Wolfe, a New Yorker, responded, "Washington is the city of ideas. People come here because of ideas, to debate ideas, to see ideas become reality." That seemed remarkably perceptive.

But because that is true, it is likely that those who come to the "city of ideas" will join the generations before them that realized the sober truth that the work of Washington is a very messy business too. As Lord Bismarck noted several generations ago, "If you want to respect law or sausage, then don't watch either being made."

Ideas about who we are and how we live together is the stuff of this city. Laws are imagined, laws are debated, laws are legislated. And it is like making sausage—very messy, very ugly and very smelly. For good-hearted people it is very difficult to know this city and to still love it. In fact I would argue that it is the most difficult task anyone who lives here faces.

Which is why, of course, hearing Clydette's account of her months in Africa weighed upon me so heavily. Now that she had seen so much, could she, would she, still give herself to the vocation of loving and serving God and his world "with gladness and singleness of heart," as the Book of Common Prayer calls us?

A Good Question—No Cheap Answer

A few days later I was at a college in the Midwest, speaking at a Veritas Forum. My conversation with Clydette still heavy on my mind, I chose to speak about the task of learning in a world that is marked by very difficult realities than what we're familiar with. I began with Clydette's story, our dinner with her and her repeated words, "It was outrageous!" I asked the students to consider the connection between education and vocation, in particular wanting them to ponder if what they were learning about the world had the intellectual substance that years of living in the world would require of them. Were their ideas strong enough, real enough, true enough, for the complex challenges of the world?

I showed some of the movie film *Magnolia*, at the time one of the most fascinating films among university students. Brilliantly-imagined, the story is about the nature of the universe, whether it is one of chance and coincidence, or of choices and consequences. But written into its heart is the question, *Can you know the world, and still love it?* Or, very poignantly, *Can you know me, and still love me?*

And to press the point, I asked, "Will you be able to know the world, as my friend Clydette knows it, and still choose to love it?" Were they learning in such a way that their disciplines would form the foundation for a life of engagement, of stepping into the mess of the world, understanding it and choosing to serve it?

After the lecture, I noticed some young men who were a bit older than the typical undergraduate. They were a group of musicians who called themselves Jars of Clay. I knew of them, but did not know them, and they had their own questions to ask. So we talked and a conversation began that continues to this day. Over the months, they asked about books and essays to read and I was increasingly impressed with their moral seriousness. One day we talked about Africa and their desire to put their creative energy behind an effort to address its complex need for clean blood and water.

And then months later we talked again. They were on their tour bus and were making their way through concerts along the West Coast. They told me that they just played guitars and keyboards, and while they had an honest concern for Africa, they just did not know what to do about it, given their gifts and time. Did I have any ideas? I told them that a week earlier I had been in Phoenix, Arizona, speaking at a conference called "The Faces of Justice," and had met a young woman named Jena Lee from Whitworth College who had impressed me with her articulate passion for Africa. Since they were going up the West Coast to Washington on their tour, I suggested they meet my young friend, which they did.

It is a long story, but when Jena graduated that spring, she moved to Nashville to work with the Jars of Clay guys to begin Blood:Water Mission. Those early months were hard ones for everyone—especially Jena. There were many tears and heart-searching questions about the very idea. *Could we? Is it really possible? This is so much harder than I wanted it to be!* And it was. But she held on, and slowly the vision was born.

Years later there are more than a thousand different projects in Africa that have grown out of the Blood:Water Mission's work. Jena has done a remarkable job, taking the band's life and hopes, connecting them to hers, and birthing an organization that is healthy and responsible. The board has grown, and one of its prized members has been Clydette, who is still at USAID doing her work on the global threat of tuberculosis. She has brought all that and more to bear for the sake of the vision and work of the Blood:Water Mission, with gladness and singleness of heart marking her vocation.

To know the world and still love it? There is not a more difficult task that human beings face. If it is one thing to hope for Africa, to be willing to step into its dreams and needs, it is something else altogether to have the staying power to keep at it over time. If it is

admirable to respond to the needs of a village in western Kenya, afflicted by deaths from AIDS and absolutely no access to clean water—and in the physiology of health and disease, they are integrally related—then it is something else altogether to continue to care for the people and their needs when it moves from vision to reality. The complexity of responsible love in the name of justice and mercy leaves you with no cheap answers to any of the important questions.

To Teach What It Means to Know

How do we see what is awful and still engage, still enter in? How can we have our eyes open to reality, and understand that we are more implicated, for love's sake, now that we see? As Clydette and Jena have been my teachers, so has Simone Weil. In the 1940s, on the last night of her life, she wrote, "The most important task of teaching is to teach what it means to know."

They are weighty words. To say something is "the most important" is to commit oneself. We judge and evaluate, and then we step in, arguing that when all is said and done we believe that *this* matters more than anything else. In politics and love, in economics and education, in the whole of life, we live by our judgments.

To teach what it means to know? Found in the journal at her bedside, these were the final words of Simone Weil, the French philosopher who died in the 1940s. While her social position would have allowed otherwise, her own passions and commitments led her to the decision that while others suffered during the war years, she would eat only that which was available to the ordinary people of France. And simply said, she starved herself to death.

Not a suicide—that would make it something other than it was. It was more that she was not a healthy person; her friends saw her as frail. And while in a different day under different conditions she might have made other choices, with an unusual starkness grounded in love she decided to live very simply, as simply as those who suffered. In the quietness of her own room, still very much alive to the world and all that it required of her, she became increasingly weak until one night, after writing in her journal, she went to sleep and never woke up.

Where did this seriousness of heart come from? Why did she see the world as she did? Why did the weightiness of the world mean so much to her? And why would *knowing* become that which mattered most?

Weil was born to a prominent Jewish family in the early years of the twentieth century. By age ten she had decided that she was a communist. Whatever we now think a century later about the Marxist legacy, at the time it meant that she was surprisingly thoughtful and passionate, especially about the needs of those who suffered and groaned. It did not seem right to her that some should have so much, and some should have very little.

As she grew older, eventually studying at the Sorbonne, her beliefs in the communist vision deepened. She read with passion, wrote with eloquence, and finished as the best

student in her class, outpacing even the brilliance of Simone de Beauvoir, who later came to prominence herself as both a philosopher and the lover of Jean Paul Sartre. Weil knew, however, that as committed as she was she had yet to even meet a flesh and blood communist. So when Leon Trostky came through Paris that summer, it seemed to the young Weil that all her dreams would be satisfied.

But the night he spoke became a line in the sand moment for her. The longer she listened the more sure she was that, while he was a visionary for her cause ("Trotsky, after all!"), he loved his ideas more than he loved people. He seemed to be enamored with "humanity," but was indifferent to the lives of ordinary men and women, the proletariat of her own passions. The following day she left Paris and her communism.

Weil spent the next years getting to know the farmers and factory-workers of France, the ones whose hopes and dreams her communism was to have defended. She persistently stuck by her commitments, but over time she wanted something more—a more sustainable reason to love the dispossessed. If the ideas of Marx and Lenin and Trotsky failed her and her country, was there an answer to be found anywhere?

She discovered it finally in the God who cries, the God who has tears.

A strange answer? Perhaps, but for her it finally satisfied the deepest longings of her heart—she wanted a good reason to love what she knew. Her passion was imbued with new meaning and she began to write, putting together a body of work that will stand for generations to come.

Among many essays that she wrote, there is one that I have loved most called "On the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God." The title seems unusual to us, I admit, but its insights are profound, speaking to all of us, whether we see ourselves as students or as lifelong learners, as the vocation of student starts at the beginning of life and continues on to the end of life—at least if we are people with ears that hear and eyes that see. Weil argues that it is in learning to *pay attention* that we begin to understand the meaning of life and of learning. What does she mean?

To pay attention is to see what matters and what does not matter. It is to discern rightly, to choose well. Yes, it is to *know* as we ought to know, to know in a way that leads us to love. She calls this kind of study *sacramental*, as it is a kind of learning that is born of a love of God for the world—and in it a calling to love as God loves because we know as God knows.

Her vision is formed by the story of the Good Samaritan, because in it she sees the primary issue as one of having learned, or not learned, to *pay attention* to things that matter. The novelist Walker Percy might have called it "The Story of the Man Who Got All A's and Who Still Flunked Life," as its meaning is cross-cultural and cross-generational, an affliction of everyone's soul. The story of the Good Samaritan is told within a conversation between Jesus and an expert in the Judaic law. This man begins by asking questions that are not fully honest, as he himself knew the answers to his own

questions. In response to Jesus' assertion to "love your neighbor as yourself," the expert asks, "So, who is my neighbor?" And Jesus says, finally, "While I am not interested in this kind of conversation, at all—because you don't seem morally serious—I will give you a story."

So he tells of a man on his way to Jericho, who while walking down through the hills east of Jerusalem is beaten and robbed. Two religious leaders, men much like the expert in the law, walk by and do not see a neighbor. They see a man, but do not see a neighbor—someone their law requires them to care for—and they pass by, having justified their indifference religiously, historically and sociologically. They had not learned to pay attention.

In contrast, the Samaritan does see a neighbor and stops to care for him because he has learned to pay attention, to understand what he sees and why it matters. Weil also calls this kind of seeing *sacramental*, because it is a kind of learning that connects heaven to earth. Sacraments always do that—they give us the grace to understand that the universe is coherent, that things seen and unseen are equally real, equally true. And they allow us to understand that the most ordinary elements of life can be made holy—even our learning, even our labor, even our love.

When we see all of life as sacramental, as the graceful twining together of heaven and earth, then we begin to understand the meaning of vocation, which in their very different ways are what the stories of Clydette, Jena and Simone Weil are each about. We can begin to see that all of life, the complexity of our relationships and responsibilities—of family and friendships, of neighbors near and far, of work and citizenship, from the most personal to the most public—indeed, everything is woven together into the callings that are ours, the callings that make us *us*.

The "Come and See" Pedagogy

This is a book about the most difficult task, the most important task. There is nothing we are asked to do that requires more of us than to know and to love at the same time. Mostly we choose otherwise. Mostly we choose to step away, now knowing as we do. Whether it is in the most familiar of relationships, as in marriage, or in the most far-reaching of responsibilities, as in the global AIDS crisis, when we begin to really know what someone is like or what something or someplace is like, the calculus of our hearts more often than not leads us to conclude that it will no longer be possible to love. How can we, after all? Now we know!

But this book is also about the people I know, my community of friends, some in Washington and others in many places beyond the Beltway. One of my deepest commitments is to "the come-and-see pedagogy" of the gospels. When the rabbi Jesus was asked about his life, he often responded, "Come and see." We learn the truest truths, the most important things, only when we look over the shoulder and through the heart, only when we can see that ideas have legs and that worldviews can become ways of life.

So when I travel around the country and beyond, I talk about people I know who in their

very different ways are connecting what they believe with the way that they live in and through their vocations. In fact, they are showing that it is possible to honestly know and to responsibly love as they take up the callings and careers that are theirs. And so time and again, I will say to those who have asked me to speak, "Come and see." Yes, come and see that what I am saying is possible. People actually do live like this—and you can too.

It is possible to live with your eyes open to the realpolitik of this life and to still love what you know. We do not have to play games with ourselves or with history, pretending that the world is a nicer place than it ever can be, that somehow really awful things do not happen, that horribly sad moments are not ours to live with and through.

We do not have to decide that the only livable responses are the most perennial responses, the ones that human beings have made since the beginning of time, that of cynicism and stoicism. Both of course are ways of protecting our hearts from being hurt again, ways of "knowing" that do not ask us to love what we know. Rather they are ways of knowing that allow us to step away from history and from our responsibility for the way that history unfolds. They give us the ability to say no to the tragedies and heartaches of life, and to protect ourselves from being hurt by becoming too close to what will inevitably bring pain.

We can choose to know what is going on in the world and still love the world. But we need good reasons to do so. We are no different than Simone Weil. As we know, the romanticism that was at the heart of Marx's utopian vision eventually imploded. She understood it earlier than most as she saw it painfully incarnate in Trotsky.

She was also right about the God who has tears.

The Complexity of Our Tears

One day I was teaching on Capitol Hill and at the end of the afternoon one of my colleagues asked me if I knew a particular woman. I said that I did and he told me that she had been found murdered in her apartment that morning, just a few blocks from where I was standing. I fell back against the wall, screaming inside, *NO!*

Over the next few days, I found myself rethinking everything that mattered most to me. I still loved my wife, but I thought about her differently—that she was alive and very tender to me. I still loved my children, but I thought about them differently—I wanted to protect them from a murderous world, and was sure that in the end I couldn't. I still loved my work, but I thought about it differently—would I be able to teach my students to honestly step into the sordidness of the city and world, knowing that they too might suffer?

What I wasn't sure about was God. Those were dark days for me, as it seemed that I had now seen enough to know that what I had believed about faith and hope and love was not sustainable. This was one too many stories of horrible sorrow. How could it all still be true in the face of a friend being stabbed to death? And I began to wonder, *Is there*

something that is more true, than what I have believed? Is there an account of the universe that makes more sense of griefs like this?

We gathered together to mourn our friend's death, and we cried and cried. While the days are a blur in some ways, I still remember wondering about God and the world, perplexed as to what could be honestly believed.

In those same weeks, *Harper's* magazine featured an evening-long conversation between two professors, Neil Postman and Camille Paglia, about the meaning of television for persons and for polities. Yes, the stakes were raised by the technology of TV: was it a social good, or not? At that time, Postman was the most honored and widely-read observer of technology and its meaning for who we are and how we live; Paglia was a celebrated feminist philosopher with sometimes surprising views of the way the world is and ought to be. He was critical of television, and she was not.

The magazine gave them a glorious meal together, a multicourse dinner—and recorded every word of their conversation. So from appetizers to salads and soups, onto the main dishes and desserts, *Harper's* allowed us to listen in as these two remarkably bright people debated the virtues of a television-shaped society.

Toward the end of the meal, Postman made on observation that summed up his criticism, "How is it possible to watch the evening news, and in five minutes hear about a plane crash in India, an earthquake in Chile, a rape in Central Park, that the Mets beat the Cardinals, and finally an ad for hemorrhoids medicine—and somehow take it all in?" He argued that as human beings we cannot do so, and we choose to step back, unable to respond to the torrent of information, poignant and horrific, playful and commercial as it is. Paglia responded, "But Neil, that's the way the world is. Buddha smiles at it all."

When I read her words, I recoiled, knowing that was not an adequate response to my friend's murder. How could it ever be? There was a profound moral and metaphysical equivalency in her judgment, and it seemed completely out-of-touch with the painfulness and evil of cold-blooded murder. But I realized she was not alone in her conclusion. Reflecting on what I knew of the world and the worldviews of it, I knew that one of the deepest streams in the human heart is stoicism, and that its vision of life under the sun is manifest in both the East and the West, in pantheism as well as materialism.

I also found myself thinking again about God and what in fact his tears mean. About fifteen years earlier I had read an essay by Benjamin Warfield, a professor at Princeton Theological Seminary at the turn of the twentieth century. In the first paragraphs of "The Emotional Life of Our Lord," he argues that the gospels were written within a Stoic culture, so that the incarnation must be seen as an alternative account of that universe. In particular, he maintains that the incarnation is a counter-argument to stoicism.

Paglia's "Buddha smiles at it all" seemed a million miles from Warfield's reading of the gospels, especially his lengthy account of John 11 and the response of Jesus to the death of Lazarus. That biblical story was significant to me even then, but the murder of my

friend pushed me to the wall and forced me to ask, *Does this still make sense of what I see and hear? Does it still make sense of the world as I know it?*

Warfield lingers, theologically speaking, over the time when Jesus enters into Bethany, hearing the wails of the village and especially of his friends Martha and Mary. John does record, "Jesus wept," but Warfield digs deeper and opens windows into the heart of God, incarnate in Jesus, who twice is said to have "groaned severely in his spirit." He does what a good reader of the text will always do and asks about the meaning of John's words. What he found surprised me. The very words that are used are the same ones that Greek poets used to describe a war horse ready to enter battle, a stallion rearing on his hind legs, nostrils flaring, angry at what he sees and ready to enter the conflict as a warrior himself, even as he carries a warrior in armor on his back.

That Jesus responded like this matters immensely. There are moments when we can do nothing else than cry out against the wrongs of the world. *It is just not the way it is supposed to be! Outrageous, it is outrageous!* Tears matter, and sometimes they are very complex.

Come and See

We all cry—but what is important here is why we cry and when we cry and what our crying means for who we are and how we live.

As a father of young children, I saw lots of tears. Each one—Eden, Elliott, David, Jessica and Jonathan—moved from the innocent tears of their early weeks to the stubborn and selfish tears of their early years. And along with way, with each one, I tried to explain that tears were good gifts to us, so that we needed to take care of them, "saving them for when we really need to cry someday—so don't use them all up right now, because someday you will need to cry." Even for the littlest ones among us, tears are complex.

And they only become more so. Most who know anything at all about the Oxbridgian professor C. S. Lewis know that he wrote two books on pain and sorrow. One is more an apologetic on the nature of suffering, *The Problem of Pain,* and another he wrote after watching his wife Joy die of cancer, *A Grief Observed.* They are two different readings on the same human heart, trying to understand what we do with the wounds of the world.

A caricature of Lewis is portrayed in the film *Shadowlands* as an academic who had lived his whole life in an ivory-tower, limiting his knowledge of sorrow to the theoretical. But the truth is that Lewis had known unbearable pain from his boyhood on: from his mother's death when he was ten, his horribly lonely adolescent years of schooling in Dickensian places of pedagogical horror, to his wounding in World War I and more. Because these experiences were true of Lewis, I have been able to learn from him, knowing that he knows.

Most of life is autobiographical for all of us—and so it was for Lewis. Growing out of his years of sorrow, especially the ones of watching his mother become sick and die, in *The Magician's Nephew* he tells the tale of a boy named Digory who enters into the world of

Narnia on the day of its creation. He has mixed motivations, which is the way it is for all of us. On the one hand, it is for his friend Polly's sake that he takes up the adventure that leads him into Narnia, sure that she is in distress and wanting to help. But on the other it is because of his mother's sickness and his own great grief that he is willing to do anything for anyone that might make her better.

Aslan, the lion who is king of the new world of Narnia, draws Digory into a conversation. In his heart, Digory begins to imagine that he can make a deal with Aslan: *I will do this for him if he does this for me*. But the closer he gets to the great lion, the more sure he is that no deals can be struck. It is then that he looks up at the lion and sees tears streaming down his tawny face. Lewis writes that Digory was then "sure that the lion cared more about my mother than I did myself." And knowing that to be true opened his heart to the calling that became his, as Aslan had work for him to do in addressing the heartaches of that very new world.

"A children's story which is enjoyed only by children is a bad children's story. The good ones last," Lewis once wrote. Over the years, in the moments when life seems bleakest, when I can only sigh or groan, I have come back again and again to *The Magician's Nephew*. Not unlike the insights of Weil and Warfield, Lewis gives us an image that is profoundly rich and wonderfully tender. We need both.

The tears of God are complex. They must be tears of sympathy, even empathy, as Aslan weeps for Digory's mother and as Jesus weeps with his friends at the death of their brother. But sometimes they are also tears of anger at the unnaturalness of death, at the distortion of death, at the skewing of human hopes, as Jesus "groaned severely in his spirit" at the death of Lazarus.

As the days passed from my friend's murder, I entered again into the tears of God. It mattered, supremely, that Jesus wept, tearful about our sorrows, weeping with those who wept, *and* that he groaned severely, being angry at the distortion of life that death is. Years have come and gone since those weeks of great sadness and there have been other days of tragedy, as there will be in the days to come. But I am sure now that I need John 11 to be in the Bible. I need for God to have tears, even and especially, complex tears because some days I do too.

So, reader, come and see. In these next pages, you will meet my friends from near and far, men and women who incarnate the reality that we can know and still love the world, even in its wounds—perhaps especially in its wounds—whether they be in family or friendship, psychological or sociological, in economic life or political life, in the arts or in education, in small towns or on complex continents. As the poet Bob Dylan once sang, "Everything is broken." Yes, *everything*, and so we must not be romantics. We cannot afford to be, just as we cannot be stoics or cynics either.

But the story of sorrow is not the whole story of life either. There is also wonder and glory, joy and meaning, in the vocations that are ours. There is good work to be done by every son of Adam and every daughter of Eve all over the face of the earth. There are

flowers to be grown, songs to be sung, bread to be baked, justice to be done, mercy to be shown, beauty to be created, good stories to be told, houses to be built, technologies to be developed, fields to farm, and children to educate.

All day, every day, there are both wounds and wonders at the very heart of life, if we have eyes to see. And seeing—what Weil called learning "to know, to pay attention"—is where vocations begin.
