

**A Vocation At The Beach**  
**Changing the world at a pace which you can continue**



***To go further, go slower***

I had a funny experience with a sports coach a few years ago. I explained to him that I just wasn't getting any faster and couldn't seem to increase the distance I ran without getting out of breath. He prodded around with a few questions and then gave me his conclusion, which was a total surprise.

*You are running too fast. Run slower!*

He explained that because of my background in cycle racing my eyes were reading the ground speed all wrong and I was basically getting hypoxic. His advice reminded me of another painful life event. At age 28 I had burn out. I felt like I had been in a scene from the Blues Brothers because I thought that my life was on a mission...even a mission from God. But I had ground to a halt. On the day I ground to a halt I picked up a magazine looking for something mindless to read and actually bumped into a letter written by the eighteenth century

preacher from Cambridge, Charles Simeon. It was somewhat freaky, but the letter started with the heading "*Letter to a young Minister*" and opened with the words "*I hear that you are ill and I am not surprised. You have to learn to run at a pace at which you can continue*".

At the same time I hear the recent words of Erwin McManus in my ear. His latest book *The Last Arrow – Saving Nothing For the Next Life* seems to be saying '*spend it all, give all of yourself so there is nothing left to give when you die. Don't waste the time you have in this life. Make it count*'. Distant echoes of the caricature of one organization I knew, where the mantra seemed to be '*Burn out – Don't rust out*'.

So I think there is a dilemma here. Do I live a full out, full on, mission-driven, purpose-driven, 5<sup>th</sup> gear, kind of life, or do I live a balanced life and run at a pace that I can continue? Do I go for the AAA\* life, or is a quality, mindful, B+ life ok? And who actually gets to say what a AAA\* life really is? Achievement? Social, societal and environmental impact? Character growth? Spiritual depth and mindfulness?

The two words that I want to explore are Vocation and Vacation. We will look into them in more depth in a moment, but in essence Vocation answers the question "*what does the world need from you?*" and Vacation is "*what do you need to restore your batteries?*" I'm using the metaphor of being at the Beach to summarise going on Vacation. People have their eyes on their Vacation as the reward at the end of a period of intense hard work. Is life about Vocation, or is it about Vacation, or is life actually about learning how to dance with them both? Can we combine the idea of the Vocation with the idea of Vacation, the Beach?

In search of an answer this dilemma I'm going to explore five ancient words that I think might give us a clue or two.

### ***The 5 key words***

**Resurrection:** When we hear the ancient word resurrection we often think of a historical character called Jesus, who was murdered by crucifixion in Jerusalem in early first century AD and then was reported as coming back to life – resurrected. Whatever the truth of that event, it sits in a much older context. The word resurrection was an earlier Jewish idea that the world needed to be recreated, put back together as it was intended. The argument went “*imagine what the world would look like if a loving Deity was running the show*” and this was then followed by the obvious reflection “*it isn’t like that now; things are not as they should be*”. Now, we only need to look around us in whatever part of the world we live in and see this is true. I’ve just returned from another trip to Rwanda and whilst that country has made amazing progress there are still too many people living in extreme poverty, people are still queuing for hours for water, health is still fragile, security remains a key concern at its borders and education has a long way still to go. The essence of the resurrection was that God is creative and that things need re-creating; everything isn’t ok and the world needs putting back together and people, you and me, made in the image of God are also creative and so our job is to help re-create things as they are meant to be. It’s hard not to agree with the need for Resurrection and it’s an interesting thought that it’s not just some event in the past, but rather something that we get to participate in now.

**Redemption:** If Resurrection was an ancient idea of what needs to happen – the world needs putting back together as it should be – then the word that was used in the ancient world to describe the process of putting things back together was Redemption. *How do we put things back as they should be? How do we recreate what needs to be rebuilt in society and the natural world? We redeem it.* Redemption came from a market term that meant to buy something back for its original purpose. We make an investment of our time and money and resource and we ‘buy back’ what has been ‘sold off’ or lost, so that it can be what it was intended to be. Slavery was an obvious ancient example. Someone who was in slavery was clearly caught under the wheels of someone else’s power-abuse of him or her and they weren’t being the free humans that they should be. Someone

comes along and *redeems* them, pays up at their own cost and buys them back from the power-abuser, gets them out from under the wheels of oppression and the slave is now free to be fully human again.

**Vocation:** Vocation is not seeking to answer the question “what do I want to do in the world that will make me feel good and valuable?” Vocation is our personal response to what the world is asking of us. The needs of the world call out all the time and no one can even begin to absorb all of that need. But, as the world calls out from its need each of us can hear the call to invest, mend, recreate, a small part of it. Every single impactful venture has started because someone heard the call.

*“Those children don't have shoes”* (TOMS shoes)

*“Those children are living on the street”* (Street Child)

*“Those innocents are caught in the tragedy of war”* (MSF; Medair)

*“Those children's lives are being destroyed by war”* (War Child)

*“Those children have been abused as child soldiers”* (Invisible Children)

*“These species are dying”* (WWF)

*“Poverty is crushing these lives”* (Oxfam)

When the world's need makes a specific call on me and I use my abilities and resources to try to do something about that need...that's my vocation. You often hear people who have a clear sense of their vocation say, *“this is why I am here; this is what I'm here to do; its amazing that I get to do this”*.

**Eucharist:** Who does the buying back, the redeeming, the re-creating to get things in society and the natural world back as they should be? It's us. Humans. And we do it by, what the ancients called, a Eucharist. Holy Communion, as practiced by the church, is called a Eucharist. Why? In the Eucharist of Jesus the image is of him pouring out his energy, his time, his reputation, his safety, his body and his blood. *“This is my body...”*, *“This is my blood”* he said. Any serious work of redemption involves a pouring out of body and blood. It's costly. It takes time, money, energy, sometimes reputation or sacrificing career opportunity. Doing something useful in the world costs. Al Gore absolutely created a global

awareness on the issue of climate change. But it came at a great cost to his body of thousands of hours of travelling and untold pressures on his body and family as well as the constant jibing of those who opposed and ridiculed him. Any Aid worker, social worker, humanitarian worker will speak of the physical and emotional cost of bringing about change in any area of a broken world. Just take one social workers visit, on one morning, to one broken family, to seek to help put that broken little community back together. How do they feel at the end of a few hours of visiting? Poured out. Exhausted. Emotionally depleted. That's Eucharist.

The need of the world calls out to all of us and when we hear it call, we can ignore it, we can get overwhelmed by it, or we can respond. Vocation is the name we give to responding. **Vocation** is where I do my **Eucharist**, pour myself out, to **Redeem** a little bit of a broken world to effect **Resurrection**, where things are put back together as they should be.

**Vacation:** We think of vacation as the holiday at the beach, or wherever gives you joy. The ancient Latin root of the word Vacation means two things. Firstly it means freedom from what has been absorbing you every day, day after day. Secondly it means to be empty. When you are full on in Eucharist mode your mind, your emotions, your energy is fully occupied with the Redemptive task. Vacation is where you stop and empty all of that out of your mind, body and emotions. You re-create yourself, hence the word recreation as another name for vacation.

### ***Finding a rhythm in the tension***

We need to find a rhythm where *all* these words are in play in our lives. Miss out any one piece and you don't have a meaningful, purposeful, vital, sustainable life. But finding a rhythm of these five words creates a tension and the danger of identifying any tension is that we want to resolve it....one side or the other. I find myself on some days full-on in Eucharist mode and then I catch the effect of what

its doing to me and I panic and then I want to swing across the full-on Vacation mode and give up on my Vocation. Just Vocation leads to burn out. Just Vocation leads to a loss of an important part of our own meaningful humanity. However, tensions shouldn't always be resolved; they should often just be lived with creatively. Often we use the word "balance". But a balanced life doesn't mean a static life. A balanced life is like riding a bicycle....in order to keep stable, you also have to keep moving. We need to find the momentum of a creative tension among the living out of the five words in our lives.

If I look at the Jesus model of changing the world I see all of the five words in action. Full on engagement in redemptive work – people are getting fed, healed, socially reintegrated. Things are getting put back together as they should be. Yet he seems to constantly be going off to the Beach for hours at a time and telling his followers to do the same. There is a tension between Vocation and Vacation. Vocation, on its own, is unsustainable. Vacation, on its own, goes nowhere meaningful. There is a tension between walking the fields of simply *being*, and buried in the trenches of *doing*. There is something about Being where we know we cant do much to change the world and the world doesn't depend on us to save it on our own and at the same time knowing that you *can* do something for those five kids to get what they need to go to school today. There is a tension between why bother/don't bother/do nothing *and* do something. On the one side is the call, the vocation, the redemption, the pouring out and on the other side are the five existential life-truths<sup>1</sup>

1. Life is hard
2. My life doesn't matter that much
3. Its not about me
4. I am not in control
5. I am going to die

There is a rhythm, rather than a resolution, to the tension. Invest – withdraw – invest – withdraw.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Rohr

### ***Embracing the five challenges***

So the question is how do I live with the tension? How do I embrace the five words in my life – Resurrection, Redemption, Vocation, Eucharist and Vacation? The answer may be to start embracing the five challenges of living a meaningful life.

#### ***Challenge #1 Do something, rather than do nothing.***

When I was a child we used to play party games and in one of those games we used to play “*You cant see me*”. In this game I would cover my eyes and say, “*You cant see me*”. But of course they could see me; the world didn't go away because I covered my eyes. I just pretended to myself that it had gone away. To be human is to be awake and seeing the reality of being part of a whole social, ecological, historical system. Just because I cover my eyes to the needs of the world doesn't make them go away. I am here, now, in this place called earth, with billions of other people. And everything isn't ok. There are something's that are beautiful and there are some things that are seriously broken, that need fixing and only human's can do that. It's a fact. You are a human in this world at this time, so to ignore that is to be less than the truth of who you are. Take someone selling the Big Issue or begging on the street. So often we just tune out to the need of the person in front of us. We dismiss, we rationalize, we look away, or we walk on fast past them. Whatever the story behind every beggar or Big Issue seller, there is a story. We could do something or we could ignore them.

Ignoring is just one reason to do nothing. The other reason is being overwhelmed with the level of need and feeling like little me can do nothing. In my work with Emerging Leaders I often feel this very real feeling of overwhelming. Of course that isn't true. It's a feeling; it isn't the reality. Overwhelming pushes us to do nothing but we can all do something. We can all save the price of a bottle of wine or a few Latte's and put one child through school, buy them shoes or put clean water into their mouths.

So we can all do something rather than nothing in the redemptive process of living.

## **Challenge #2 What is that something?**

Once I've owned the challenge that I can do something rather than doing nothing, then the next challenge is to find out what that something is. This is where the word Vocation helps us. We don't need to run around trying to think of what we can do to make the world a better place. We actually need to stop. Stop and look and listen to the world around us and see what it is that is calling to us.

Something will.

Getting girls in school

Stopping child trafficking

Better justice system

Equal opportunities for educational access

Clean water

Shoes

Education

Healthcare

Something.

Sometimes we need to embrace the emptying and freedom of the Beach so that we can see and hear what the world is asking of us, in a way that we can't hear in our normal busy lives. Sometimes we need to go, like a friend of mine just did and visit Mozambique with her daughters to see what life actually looks like for some people. Sometimes we need someone who has been on life's front lines to tell us about it, so that we know what is possible to engage with. They act like an unknowing 'broker' to discovering our vocation. A good example of this 'brokering' is Nicholas Kristoff and Cheryl WuDunn, from the New York Times, in their book *A Path Appears*. Kristoff and Cheryl WuDunn broker the desperate needs in the world to us who haven't seen what they have seen, but in their practical book they show us what we can do about it. My vocation was initially brokered by a friend. Over a cup of coffee with Ian in London, I saw the need of a school in a slum in Lusaka. I listened to him tell me of the needs that he

had seen first hand. Responding to that first 'call' led me a year later to go and actually stand in the slum and see the need for myself. In a long and bendy story, that is how Emerging Leaders was born. So, what is the world asking from you? What is it calling to you? What is your vocation?

### ***Challenge #3 Run at a pace you can continue***

Once you have been hooked, engaged in doing something rather than nothing, in responding to the unique call that you heard, the challenge is to then keep the rhythm - to run, but at a pace that you can continue. One of the most common diseases of the humanitarian sector is burning out. Need-fatigue. It's the flip side of challenge 1 where we do nothing because the need is too big; in challenge 3 you have engaged in the need and its killing you. Exhausting you. Drying you out of all your physical, emotional, mental and spiritual reserves. Paying careful attention to the drains of our vocation means we need to put equal amounts of restoration juice back in to our tanks. If certain things deplete our energy, what is it that we can do to replenish ourselves? To run at a pace we can continue means that we continue to do the refueling all of the time. The moment we are too busy to do any of our refueling activities then we are out of balance; we are no longer running at a pace that we can continue.

### ***Challenge #4 Be wise***

The challenge of vocation is to be wise. When we start doing something that feels like our vocation we want to give it our all because we have found something that matters deeply to us and makes a real difference to others. Our enthusiasm can make us blind to what is the most effective way of doing this vocation. We need to be wise in our efficiency - is this really the best way of doing this? Wise in our prudence - could I do more with less, or would doing less actually achieve more? Wise in the size of your eyes - volume and scale can look good and impressive to donors, friends and ourselves, but it can be just inefficient noise. One of the easiest traps to fall into is "*it must be me who does this thing*", but maybe wisdom says that it's a better use of your energy and resource to find someone local, on the ground, where the need is, and you support them. It might

not feel or look so amazing to watching friends, but it may well be more impactful.

***Challenge #5 You are everything and you are nothing.***

The hardest of challenges in our lives is managing the mother of all existential tensions. We are everything, in that we can change the life of another human being and that is simply amazing, *yet* we are nothing, we are tiny and small and the difference we make is often like a speck of sand on a vast beach. We have a divine core to our beings *and* we are a speck of dust in the wind. This tension gives us a sense of awe and wonder and at the very same moment it gives us a deep humility. Both are true. You know when this challenge is getting out of balance when you find yourself saying “*only I can do this; they need me; it wont survive or they wont survive without me*”.

So, what do we practically do to keep this Vocation on the Beach?

***The 5 scans***

A scan is like a personal x-ray machine, a checking in on ourselves, a consciousness of what we are doing and why we are doing it. There are five scan questions we can keep asking ourselves on a regular basis to check in with ourselves

***#1 Doing the vocation scan***

Keep checking in with myself “*what is the world asking of me?*” and is it still asking this of me, or is it asking something else of me now? There are seasons and chapters for everything in life and so sometimes we find ourselves driving ourselves harder, when really it's the end of a season and something new is calling to us.

***#2 Doing the ego scan.***

The ego wants to make this thing look good. It wants to make me look good. More numbers, more scale, more lives saved, more clean water given, more beaches cleaned..... The problem is that all of these are amazingly good things

and who wouldn't want to do lots and lots of them? But watch out! The Vocation, the call, can quickly and subtly turn into a feeding frenzy of the Ego. The ego *always* wants to look good, to be right, to be amazing, to draw the adulation of the crowd – “*wow, what you do is so amazing; we all thing you guys are so awesome*”. When Vocation slips into Ego then the world no longer looks in balance and wisdom no longer guides the way.

I love the Jewish idea of the Mitzvot to keep things in ego-balance. Many of us have heard of Bar-Mitvah. The celebratory rite of passage for a young Jewish boy. But it was only recently that I heard about the Mitzvot. These are not great, grandstanding acts of changing the world. They are the little every day actions we take to make the world a better place. Checking up on the elderly neighbor, thanking everyone who serves you, picking up the friends laundry, paying for their coffee. The list is endless of small actions that we can take every day that demonstrate what life can look like if it's put back the right way up. If I'm not prepared to do the Mitzvot then something is out of balance.

### ***#3 Doing the efficiency scan***

Is my strategy as lean and simple as it could be? Am I running at a pace that I can continue? Do we need all these people – really? Are we spending our resources the best way possible? Does it need to be me doing this? Driving hard on the questions of efficiency makes us dig deeper into the core of what we are trying to do and whether we are still actually achieving what we set out to do, or whether we have made it a whole lot more burdensome than it really needs to be. I have found it more realistic to talk about my *contribution* to life's needs, rather than getting caught up in thinking that I am the answer to life's needs. A contribution allows me to see myself as another brick in the wall, rather than the whole wall.

### ***#4 Doing the being scan***

Being comes before doing. We breath in before we breath out. I am before I do. Am I living out of a place of being? Do I meditate, practice mindfulness, stay connected to the heartbeat of what called me to my Vocation in the first place? Am I deepening my connection with my deeper self or am I lost in a frenetic

shallowness of “doing good”? When we start getting frustrated and angry at the people we started out wanting to love and help, then **being** has been lost somewhere along the road and needs us to turn back and recover it.

### **#5 Doing the breathing scan**

*“Am I running at a pace at which I can continue?”*

*“You are running too fast. Slow down. Keep running, but slower”*

When I find myself forcing my Vocation, forcing my energy and forcing my commitments I notice that my life is getting out of breath. When I see it I want to stop, sometimes stop for good; give up on Vocation, Redeeming, Resurrection and Eucharist. That is the danger of the overreaction of someone in burnout.

Am I breathing slowly, or am I panting? Runners are told that the right speed to run is one in which you can still hold a conversation. Vocation at the Beach is running at a pace where you are still having a daily, meaningful conversation with yourself, your friends and the people you seek to help. A conversation with yourself and your co-workers about the five words. What I am seeing is that noticing my breathing in life is giving me the opportunity not to ignore or to give up but to wrestle. Wrestle gently with the creative tension of Vocation, Redeeming, Resurrection, Eucharist and the Beach. What the wrestle is showing me how to live from a different place. How to run and breathe properly. How to fuel my Vocation out of a deeper sense of Being, rather than Doing. More mindful, less performance. More soulful, less driven. More out of love and less trying to fill up my own ego need for love.

Vocation at the Beach answers the question *“Can I indeed do something to help change the world at a pace that is sustainable?”*