PAST PERFECT
Making Life Matter
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A while back, a private liberal arts college in Minnesota took as its tagline the phrase “Make Your Life Count”—to which a few students snarkily responded, “Well duh! Everyone’s life counts!” A few years later, “Black Lives Matter”—the phrase and the movement—swung into popular consciousness, elicitng from some a similarly argumentative response: “Excuse me? ALL lives matter!”

Well yes, of course. All lives do matter, every life does count. Still, entrenched structures of systemic injustice, and simple unreflective habit, regularly demonstrate that we really don’t seem to believe it. [Pet peeve alert: the “elite” boarding lane at the airport, a fiercely guarded 4x6-foot swath of gentrified real estate which, as the magic moment is pronounced by the officiant—er, the gate agent—transubstantiates into the grittily proletarian “general boarding lane” through which all the rest of us are summarily herded. As “caste” systems go, pretty Mickey-Mouse . . . but perhaps also a coal-mine canary, revealing how easily we separate and stratify—dis-count and dis-matter—one another.]

We even seem to doubt that our own lives matter in ways that go beyond instant gratification of superficial wants. We fritter away precious gifts of time and talent. We squander Earth and neglect relationships. We succumb to the delusion that we’re responsible only for ourselves and “our own,” and we fail to grasp that our choices and actions do make a difference for others, for our communities, for the fragile global commons. And yes, we keep forgetting—denying—that Black lives do matter.

In this light, the “readjustment of vocations”—tapping anew into the power of the idea—is a worthy task. The word simply means calling, invitation, or summons, and is related (via the Latin vox) to the word “voice.” Vocation is how you live out who you most truly are, on behalf of the greater good. It has to do with making a positive difference for others via the wide array of roles, relationships, decisions and actions of daily life, including family, neighborhood and community, spending and consumer choices, care for the earth, and daily work (paid or unpaid). It’s the shape that your entire life takes as an other-regarding answer to the Big Questions of identity, purpose, and meaning, questions such as, “Who am I, and why am I here? How can my life make a difference?”

To believe that life is a vocation is to see yourself as gifted, both in terms of discerning your gifts, talents, strengths, and passions, and in terms of knowing that you are a gift to be cherished and shared with others. It is to see yourself as free—that is, free from the instinct to conform to corrosive social norms and practices, and free to “raise your voice” on behalf of justice. It is to see yourself as nested within and responsible to realities and values that are greater than yourself. And it is to see yourself as a moral agent whose decisions and actions do in fact matter in the lives of others.

Vocation grows out of and expresses the conviction that your life does, in fact, “count”; a sense that your life—every life—really does matter in the larger working out of things. Really believing that your life and every life counts, that your life and Black lives and all lives matter, opens up a more expansive and empowering imagination about who we truly are, as agents of peace and justice in the world.

Who are you, really, and why are you here? Today, how will you live into your true calling to make a difference?