

PAST PERFECT
Making Life Matter

CHRIS JOHNSON

“The Readjustment of Vocations”

William T. Harris

Only by means of social combination is man able to lift himself above the brute. Through and by means of society, man is able to add to his life as an individual—that is, as an animal—another and higher life—the life of his species—a spiritual life. The life of the individual is one of selfishness and immediate gratification; but social life is everywhere a devotion of the individual to the service of others and, at the same time, a participation in the common fund of service thereby created

[T]he social organism works a miracle of transformation here. It directs the energies of each and every individual away from himself, and causes him to labor for others Instead of laboring directly for his own gratification, the individual man shall work at a special vocation and produce, not what he needs for his direct consumption, but what his fellow-men need in society. This is the filter which eliminates brute selfishness

Participation in a common life—the life of the social whole—is the essential characteristic of spiritual life as contradistinguished from animal life; the realization of the social life in firm, enduring institutions, and the elevation of all individuals into a conscious participation in this life, is the object of man as an ethical being

In subduing his appetites and caprices for the sake of combination with his fellow-men, the individual comes to realize the moral image which is in him as a possibility. In giving to his crude fancies and opinions such forms as make them intelligible to other people, he comes to be a thinking being, and to know truth.

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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—swept into popular consciousness, eliciting 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? □

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