Calling: An opportunity and a choice for the university

Radboud University Dies Speech – 20-10-2022

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Could the university offer people the opportunity, in the midst of today's choice overload, to discover their calling? And could helping everyone, staff and students alike, to follow this calling also be an opportunity for the university? Amidst the many small choice moments inherent in every study and research programme, it is all too easy to forget why you chose for an academic environment in the first place. The word 'calling' transcends this dilemma by pointing to a guiding principle that can help you set a course in your studies, your career, or your life, even in turbulent times. It is a word that can lift the weight off your shoulders, because there is something bigger than you, some intrinsic motivation. Or it can have the opposite effect, adding to the heaviness you feel, because you have as yet no idea of what your calling might be. What are you being called to, and by whom?

I'm convinced that any university would benefit from integrating the concept of calling into its identity, and all the more a university with a faith-based identity such as Radboud University. As monastic Theologian Laureate, I was invited this past year to various events where I spoke with people, mostly professionals in positions of responsibility. This is a group that responds quite positively to the idea of a calling: it apparently doesn't frighten them, not even in its spiritual sense. "You're so lucky to have a calling!" was a response I often heard. Just because I'm a monk and wear a habit, people assume that I'm clear on something that 'normal' people may only have a vague notion of. But a calling is not reserved to specific, and in our society very small, groups. Everyone has a calling, and helping people find theirs is one of the core tasks of an academic institution. If you can nourish people's calling based on your own, in our case Catholic, identity, you can be a source of great inspiration.

Calling

But what is a calling, in the spiritual sense? Radboud University Professor Emeritus of Spirituality Kees Waaijman breaks the concept down into four elements. The first is a personal *task* that "cannot be reduced to general principles or professional usefulness." This automatically leads to the second element: *charisma*. "A person's concrete calling reveals their personal charisma and awakens their gifts." The third element is *discernment*: "systematically discerning one's calling and charisma." The final and fourth element is the *community* in which one's task and charisma "can be realised in intersubjectivity and charity." Our university consciously invites people to become aware of their responsibility, as expressed in one of our slogans: "You have a part to play!". One can almost see this as a call to embody all four of the above elements. When you feel you have a part to play, you also feel that it is your task to discern what you are good at, and give it shape in a context where you can assume your responsibility, in service to others and to fundamental values such as the Christian charity that Waaijman mentions. The translation of these kinds of concepts into concrete values for our times is a task for all disciplines – and theology can play a mediating role in this.

The space we need to hear our calling is hard to find. In this era of the flexible human, of flexible study programmes combined with a growing pressure to complete one's study

programme as efficiently as possible, it can be hard to find your calling. Do we give people enough time to discover their task? Enough freedom to test their talents, and enough time to discern what they feel moved towards? And aren't career prospects alone a rather narrow path towards finding a suitable context that cries out for your talents? I certainly don't want to come across as pessimistic, nor to sketch a romanticised image divorced from reality and propagate the illusion that an institution like ours, firmly planted as it is in a centuries-old religious tradition, can somehow allow us to escape what sociologist Richard Sennett referred to as "the corrosion of character". This is a danger that can manifest as missing one's calling. To combat this corrosion together, we must go in search of beacons and landmarks, which is where a fundamental framework can be useful.

Prophetic

In my year as Theologian Laureate, I had the opportunity, with the support of the Vermeulen Brauckman Foundation and Radboud University, to carry out a project in which Biblical sources were revealed in creative ways for our modern culture. What values emerge from the Scriptures that implicitly and explicitly permeate our tradition and culture? The project was called 'Prophet voices' and it involved collaboration with writers, artists, and musicians. My goal was to define core values arising from ancient Biblical figures to provide beacons for people today in search of their identity. The figure of the prophet turned out to be an interesting starting point. Were prophets inspiring figures, 'influencers' as we might refer to them in another one of our university's slogans? Or were they historical figures from ancient religious texts like the Bible? As the project progressed, the ancient sources began to resonate in the sound boxes of modern-day thinkers, including four of my colleagues. The result was among other things a book, entitled *Prophet Voices*, which is published today.

Based on the dialogues with these four colleagues featured in the book, I distilled four core values that relate to our university's Catholic identity. The first one emerged in dialogue with Han van Krieken, Rector and Professor of Pathology. He believes one of the key values to be *integration*: everyone should have a place at the university, and everyone should be free to make choices. The second value was *emancipation*, put forward by Jos Joosten, Professor of Dutch Literature. Our university has emerged from the Catholic emancipation movement, and to this day, we continue to attract the largest proportion of first-generation students. The third value, which I heard from José Sanders, Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Professor of Narrative Communication, is *connection*. We can use words and stories to make or break people. The goal of our studious work is to connect people. Finally, there is *solidarity*, a value Maria van den Muijsenbergh, Professor of Personalised Care, strongly adheres to. Don't assume that you know better what other people need, but instead, stand by those in need.

It goes without saying that you don't need to study or work at a Catholic institution to live by these values. And yet, in the *Prophet Voices* project, these values did emerge from sources that are important in the Catholic faith, as well as in other traditions. In this context, Professor Emeritus Hans van der Ven spoke of the 'character forming' that can unfold within a narrative: stories form our character when we share and embody them. Without claiming exclusivity, we can conclude that prophetic values from ancient sources can act as beacons for those in search of their calling, in every discipline. Guarding this process is the task of a Catholic university.

Working in an environment where there is room to talk about such things makes it easier for people to become aware of their task, be they students, researchers, or other staff members. And this in turn helps them to assume their responsibility within society.

Ritual

Following your calling requires not only meaning, but also structure and landmarks. Otherwise, it is too easy for the dialogue on value-focused identity to become detached from the real-life experiences you have in your studies or research project. This is why it's important for the university to provide this structure, by marking steps and phases, and making them more tangible. This brings me to my own specialisation, Ritual Studies. The first Professor of Ritual Studies at our university, Ronald Grimes, formulated the importance of our field as follows: "A transition is something that happens to us, but a ritual is something that we stage." When we fail to ritually mark study and work processes – our narratives of calling – these transitions and the accompanying transformation may go unnoticed, or fail to happen altogether. A helpful tool in this context is the classical rites of passage model developed in 1909 by anthropologist Arnold van Gennep. It begins with a need for a well-defined severance moment: letting go of what we considered self-evident up to this point. This is followed by a transformation phase: a value-free zone in which status and differences between people become irrelevant. Finally, there is an integration phase in which you share what the transformation has brought you with others.

What does this model, originally developed for addressing important transitions in a person's lifetime, mean for a university? I think it is important for a university to have a repertoire of required landmarks that provide the freedom as well as structure people need. Anyone coming to the university must first experience a conscious moment of *severance*. The 'otherness' of the academic space can be expressed through social activities, but also through meaningful moments. I'm always surprised at how students experience a visit to an abbey as a transformative experience that helps them realise that the training that they are about to receive is more than just functional. Secondly, we need to have phases of *transformation*. The British anthropologist Victor Turner calls these 'liminal moments': value-free shared experiences in a kind of in-between space free of tempo norms and pressure to perform. The ritual laboratories I organise with students are more than welcome distractions. They open a communicative space that would not be available otherwise. Thirdly, *integration* matters. Being handed your diploma doesn't just mean that you are ready for the job market, it also means that you are ready to consciously assume your responsibility. A Catholic institution such as our university is ideally positioned to treasure ritual traditions, while at the same time developing ritual creativity.

Engagement

Calling as an opportunity and a choice presupposes that everyone who studies and works at the university does so from a sense of personal engagement. Distance and objectivity may be important in many disciplines, but we still need engagement to underlie methodological and theoretical excellence. Young students long for teachers who embody what they teach, and lecturers are happiest with students who have chosen their study programme from personal passion. I remember the times during this past year when I had the opportunity to meet

people publicly in my role as monastic theologian. The fact that both my own search and the tradition I stand in were visible to all did not feel as an obstacle. On the contrary. People are not only fascinated by engagement; they also see it as a mirror of their own attitude to life. The fact that our university gives me the opportunity to do this as an intellectual only makes me feel more completely at home here. I hope sincerely that together, we can stand for engagement in science. That way, we can, while firmly rooted in our identity, contribute to the societal debate, and share our expertise in a responsible way. When we do, an ultimate horizon can open up, and science can become meaningful, in the understanding that all our knowing has an open end that theologians refer to as God. If this Dies celebration can make a small substantive and ritual contribution to this process, our time together will have been well spent.