

Three Prominent Careers Through the Lens of Parker Palmer's *Let Your Life Speak*

Parker Palmer's philosophy of career development is briefly submitted in a retelling of his personal journey into the depths of his own heart in *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*. In his work, he writes, "I must listen to my life and try to understand what it is truly about—quite apart from what I would like it to be about—or my life will never represent anything real in the world, no matter how earnest my intentions." Palmer attacks human tendency toward duality within our souls—the person each of us *is* and the person we each *present*. Palmer's analogies of vocation as a *seed* planted at birth, the cyclical changing of *seasons*, and a *journey* from darkness to light are illuminated in the stories of Captain Linda Greenlaw, Steve Jobs, and Dr. Danielle Ofri.

CAPTAIN LINDA GREENLAW

Greenlaw's vocation was "caught" at an early age. Her devotion to a life at sea as an adult finds its roots in seeds within her that were cultivated as a young child. She could resonate with Palmer's *seed* analogy for vocation as she returned to her "first love" after her formal schooling. She describes her experience as a fever that she can't quite shake. Even after 30 days of venturing at sea, she is eager for more work. In one regard, the fever she is "sick" with is outside her control and was imparted on her by her environment as a child. Palmer's seed of vocation he claims is present in a person at birth. Was Greenlaw *born* a fisherman? Her parents would likely claim the affirmative, but had they lived further inland, would she have become a lawyer instead? This gets at the nuanced differences in how people interpret and tell their own stories.

Palmer and Greenlaw describe a deep yearning for freedom from the expectations of others, both experiencing considerable doubts about their own abilities, but pursue the truest part of their being into a vocation they find joy in. However, the sequence and causal relationships of different influences can settle into a different philosophy of career (i.e. the

seed vs. the fever). Greenlaw manifests the humility Palmer praises in her relationship with her longtime mentor, Alden Leeman. Leeman's ability to just know stuff is inspiring to Greenlaw. She claims that she would trade in the state-of-the-art tech gear from the Hannah Boden if she could possess his "know-how" or, rather, "know-where" when it comes to fishing location. Greenlaw gives credit to those that have poured into her and helped her become the excellent Captain she is today. Some might say she is too humble as she is praised as the best swordboat captain in the world by Sebastian Junger in *The Perfect Storm*. Palmer tells an important humbling story where a group of trusted confidants were invited to ask him questions about a promoting career move. He ended up seeing the position for what it was—an ego boost – and declining it altogether. Both Greenlaw and Palmer would agree on the important influence of others guiding them in the development of their vocations.

Lastly, Greenlaw does not fall into the shadow of identity, that Palmer states can be difficult to bring into the light. She says, "The obstacles that challenge fishermen, such as weather and mechanical failures, are ignorant of gender..." Even though there is considerable evidence of gender impacting careers in other fields and, it is worth noting, that Greenlaw could quite possibly be the *only* female swordboat fisherman on the planet, Greenlaw is secure in her identity and the vocation she has chosen.

STEVE JOBS

Although Steve Jobs' adoptive parents would likely attribute his success to tendencies observable in him at a young age, his vocational pursuits align most closely with Palmer's final analogy of cyclical seasons. Palmer writes, "The notion that our lives are like the eternal cycle of the seasons does not deny the struggle or the joy, the loss or the gain, the darkness or the light, but encourages us to embrace it all—and to find in all of it opportunities for growth." Throughout Jobs' life he walked through harsh winters and abundant summers, from processing the reality of his adoption, to building a world class organization from the ground up. He was likely unable to see the seeds that were being planted when one winter in particular approached (as Palmer suggests), as tensions rose prior to his removal from Apple (Autumn). As striking and painful as it was to leave the company that he began (Winter), Jobs pressed on. The

seeds planted grew (Spring) into another world changing company, Pixar Animation Studios (Summer). Jobs continued to experience the up and down of career, but kept moving forward. Even if he doesn't explicitly say it, he "embrace[d] it all...find[ing] in all of it opportunities for growth." After his return, he built Apple into the largest corporation in the world—by all professional accounts, he was abundantly successful. Would he have been as successful had he not boundlessly sought control in every aspect of his work? Did Jobs' distrust and disdain for others' contributions and abilities prevent him from organizing and humbling himself before a Clarity Committee? Jobs appeared to have such a clear way forward that he did not have the time to ponder the "way" behind that closed.

We see from the documentary Jobs pursues enlightenment through the spiritual practice of Zen Buddhism. He never fully commits for unknown motivations. Did he begin to find one of the monsters that Palmer warns us of? Was Jobs unable to move deeper than his constant pursuit of egocentric perfection to find the peace he sought? Based on the many observers to Jobs' life, he never did the complete work of uncovering his true self. There were still levels of fragmentation undealt with, however, no one would argue that he was in the wrong line of work. His high level of professional success and the innovations he provided the world are undeniably boggling. Nonetheless, Jobs lived a life of duality. One interviewer stated, "Behind the scenes, Jobs could be ruthless, deceitful, and cruel. But he won our hearts by convincing us that Apple represented a higher ideal."

Jobs' leadership is also notable in comparison with Palmer's call for leaders to cast "less shadow and more light." Jobs saw the universe as a battleground. His ideas, company, and shareholders needed to be protected at all costs. Palmer suggests that the competition Jobs lived in and lead through could have been an atmosphere he, himself created. Maybe his infamous method of interacting with colleagues and competitors would have been diminished had he gone deeper "in and down." It is hard to say what the cost of this unfinished inner work was for Jobs. As Palmer explains, the further our outer self is from our true self, the more pain and stress we experience. Unfortunately, Jobs died at age 56 and did not have the chance to do some of the deep diving Palmer has been able to do during the latter parts of his life. It is interesting to imagine if Jobs had completed the journey to the bottom and rose back to the

top. Would he have been even more successful? Or did his disunity create a calloused determination that gave him an advantage in a Capitalist culture?

DR. DANIELLE OFRI

It wouldn't be surprising to find out Dr. Danielle Ofri is one of the many readers of Palmer's *Let Your Life Speak*. At one juncture, Ofri left Bellevue shortly after completing her rotations in internal medicine. She credits her time away from the business and resource of Bellevue as instrumental in her finding her written voice which has been a defining characteristic of her career. This time in her journey likens to Palmer's time at Pendle Hill where his year of sabbatical extended into 10 years away from the scholastic environment. Both Ofri and Palmer affirm the value of this time away from it all, so to speak. Ofri was able to ask, who must I become? Before her return to Bellevue, Ofri had discovered herself and her unique contributions to her profession. She had settled in to her true self as evidenced by the value and identity she gives to her patients, especially those on the margins of society.

Ofri's commitment to reflection and expression through writing serves as her way to continue the "inner work" that is required to stay engaged with the needs of each patient. She also puts a healthy confidence in the power of healing she possesses within herself and even her hands. She would agree that the most dynamic part of her profession is her heart (Palmer's soul) expressed through her hands and her writing. This is contrasting with the typical assumption of the medical profession being centered around a powerful intellect. Dr. Ofri is not in short supply on intellect, but she does not exude the air of mental superiority some physicians do.

Ofri might be considered by some as a somewhat odd physician as she does not fit the traditional mold; however, like Palmer, she has come to understand the freedom and reward of living an undivided life is well worth the inner work to get to that point. Palmer writes, "If we are to live our lives fully and well, we must learn to embrace the opposites, to live in a creative tension between our limits and our potentials. We must honor our limitation in ways that do not distort our nature, and we must trust and use our gifts in ways that fulfill the potentials God gave us." As Ofri listens to her inner self, she discusses her balance of tension between the demands and pace of a New York City hospital with the care and individualized attention she

must give her patients. She also markedly balances the ubiquitous use of technology with the personal instruments of her eyes and hands. The interviews and resources provided demonstrate Ofri's ability to fulfill her vocation with a spirit of purpose and joy while casting more light than shadow as she leads her students through their years learning along with her.

The three cases brought forward in this discussion help show the breadth of application the words of Parker Palmer have across different career fields. Greenlaw, Jobs, and Ofri, all successful externally in their respective careers; however, consideration to the inner world Palmer illuminates provides a more complete picture. Palmer would encourage us all to ask the question, "Who must I be?" Then, we must do the hard work of unearthing our own answers.