

Please know that the coughing you might hear after a statement I am about to make would be from Patricia, who takes issue with my identifying myself as an *introvert*. But objectively, I am; that is how I test, and perhaps paradoxically, it is probably one reason that I like *teaching*, as in, leading Bible Study.

That I am also comfortable being out-going does not negate my basic preference for reading and studying over partying, which is why *introvert* is accurate. One is an observed *behavior*, the other is part of, heck, I don't know, an internal preference, the preferred behavior. But my being an introvert, though only mildly so, shows up in the appropriate *test*, at any rate.

*Tests*. When I was in business, I placed some importance on having several tests done by a psychologist on people I was considering hiring or promoting to top positions. The fellow I used to do this humored me, since I was paying him, but he also believed he could tell as much from interviewing and observing as he could from the tests.

Maybe he could, but I was lousy at that, which is why I consider that among my major weaknesses in business was judging people's suitability for a job, their "fit," if you will. I would make decisions based on how much I liked a person and felt he or she was conscientious, but being conscientious is not the same as being a good fit for a particular job.

Add to that that I am in my third or fourth career, and you can see why I would not be a good *vocational* counselor, would not be able to foresee as did Zechariah the proper *calling*, or career, for a person— and I have an example to prove that.

And while it was not in connection with anyone working for me, one of my mistakes where my influence may have been felt was with the sibling closest to me in age, my brother Russ, two years younger than I. Looking at pictures of us before we were two years-old, I could never tell who was who, but though we shared the same father, as I have shared with you, my mother died from complications of my birth, and my step-mother was the mother who gave birth to my three siblings. As we grew, well, I doubt that people see resemblance in us now.

And Russ is far more a real extrovert; he is highly sociable as well as out-going, and so I -- and I think our dad figured in -- I thought he would be great at sales when he got out of college. His first job was selling paper diapers, I think for Johnson & Johnson, and no, we weren't *that* Johnson & Johnson, but anyway, for a company that was in competition with the disposable diaper pioneer, Pampers, and then he went to work as a stock broker, working in Milwaukee for a national firm.

Russ, I thought, was a good fit for such a *calling*. I was dead wrong. Being a stock broker is really a *sales* job, but Russ grew tired and unhappy, because though he felt his obligation was to his clients, his customers, to do what was best for them, he felt that he was under pressure to have them trade -- it is commissions on trades that provide the

pay for brokers and the profits for their employing firms — he felt under pressure to have them trade, whether it really benefited them or not. He didn't like it.

As I recall, this occurred as he was also going through a really painful divorce that was not of his choosing, and for whatever reason, this gave me the opportunity to help some not-yet-born "exceptional children," though I did not know it at the time: Russ asked me to loan him money so he could go back to school and get whatever courses he needed to become a *school teacher*. I somewhat resented his assumption that I was his bank, but I was able to help him -- it ended up being a gift -- the two years or so it took, and he became, as I recall, a second grade teacher in a school district in a far northwestern suburb of Chicago.

And he loved it. This is actually relevant. In 1992, probably embarrassed by my political failures, my parents decided to move south from near Valparaiso, Indiana, where I lived and to where they had moved about twelve years before when my dad came to work for me, to move south to Asheville, North Carolina. Not too long afterward, liking that area, Russ moved there too, no, not moving in with them.

It was not trivial, I don't believe, for him to get North Carolina credentials, but he did, and became a teacher in the Hendersonville school district, teaching exceptional -- meaning with substantial learning disabilities — teaching exceptional elementary school children, and he did so until he retired a few years ago.

And he loved it, or perhaps more importantly, he loved the kids, and I am willing to bet *they all knew it*. That teaching was the right *vocation* for him.

Now, that kind of vocation, that kind of *calling*, leads me to want to comment for a moment on something that, at least to the late German sociologist, Max Weber, arose from Luther and Calvin: *The Protestant Ethic*. It is frequently misunderstood that the Protestant Ethic means that we must always be working (working or suffering, which is why I mix playing at golf and watching Illinois lose at football with my working), but what Weber concluded from Luther and Calvin is that all work, any occupation we undertake -- any occupation within the law, I should probably add --any occupation we undertake can be regarded as doing God's work. Being a teacher, being a nurse, being a caretaker, being a sales person, and yes, being an engineer, though I am not sure about being a lawyer, can be regarded as doing God's work.

Which is good as far as it goes, but I think for us Christians there is, if not a condition, an embellishment in the form of an opportunity: as we do God's work in the world outside the Church, we can do so, should do so, *always displaying the Christ that is within us*, not necessarily by saying, "Jesus made me do it," but rather, by showing Christ-like love to everyone we encounter.

Our wonderful story of John the Baptist's birth and of his father's conviction of what John's *vocation* would be does *not* mean that what you and I are to do in our secular lives is determined at birth, even though our God-given talents may tend more in one

direction than another — I think I was born to be an opera singer, — but it does say how we are to live not only our secular, but our entire lives:

*<sup>75</sup> to serve him in holiness and uprightness in his presence, all our days.*

Seeking *to serve him in holiness and uprightness in his presence, all our days* is a challenge, yet it is also rather succinctly stated. In what is the theme of these messages, *I am seeking* to assert we are all called to *prepare the way of the Lord*. And I suspect that the principle way that you and I can *prepare the way* is to soften the hearts — and heads, there are many hard-headed opponents of religion out there — to soften the hearts and open the minds of others to receive the message of the Good News, to receive Jesus Christ.

It is not our task to convince them with words — words won't do it, — but to make them perhaps feel puzzled, and to wonder, "Why was she so nice to me when I was so difficult to her?" or "Why would they give me a turkey, even though I admit I asked for it?"

And equally importantly, it is our task to show understanding and forgiveness toward those who might think that they are unworthy of understanding and forgiveness, much as Zechariah exclaimed about his newborn son: "*to give his people knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins,*" and while I believe Zechariah then switched to talking about Jesus, "*to give light to those who live in darkness and the shadow dark as death.*"

As I was writing this, I was indeed pondering when Zechariah was speaking of his son and when he might have been speaking of what John was to proclaim, and I was going to say, "not that we can give light," but that our actions and our words could point people toward, could thus *prepare the way of, the Lord*. But then I realized that to say "we could not give light" would counter the words I said earlier and with which I so often close: *We can help prepare others to receive Him, can prepare his way, by letting others see the presence of Jesus Christ within us*. And pondering those words, I realized that since *Jesus is the Light of the World*, we can seek to do that third thing Zechariah said, "*to give light*" — to give hope — "*to those who live in darkness and the shadow dark as death.*"

I don't know how religious my brother Russ is, though all my siblings are very respectful of what I do, but my point is, showing love to those "exceptional children" was showing what was inside of him. I would settle for being able to show what I believe is inside me, Jesus Christ, but to assure that I might succeed, I must first prepare the way through showing kindness and unexpected generosity and understanding and forgiveness.

I am not sure an aptitude for that can be shown on any test, but it was that for which I was born — for which we all were born — and to which we are called. So, like John the Baptist, we were born for a purpose.

Amen