Forgetting Ourselves on Purpose: Vocation and the Ethics of Ambition

One would be hard-pressed to find a subject more central to the spirituality of modern life than ambition.

Look at the newspaper: The front page reports that efforts to protect incumbents in redistricting will make less than 10 percent of U.S. House races competitive; the editorial page is awash with the Enron fiasco; the sports page monitors college coaches who lose and are fired, or who win and command million-dollar salaries while academic programs starve for funding; and the religion page—well, let’s not go there.

Brian J. Mahan, a Catholic layman and teacher at Candler School of Theology, examines the dynamics of ambition and calls us from the pursuit of culturally scripted success to “self-forgetfulness” in his new book, *Forgetting Ourselves on Purpose: Vocation and the Ethics of Ambition*.

Growing out of a course he taught at the University of Colorado for 10 years, Mahan intends for the book to be a participatory experience. Exercises at the end of each chapter help the reader reflect on his or her own life situation. Mahan wants more than an academic exploration of ambition; he wants a personal experience of moving from ambition towards compassion, which is at the heart of vocation.

“We long for a kind of self-forgetful yet fully engaged sense of immediacy, for a more graced and gracious way of being in this world ... than our infernal preoccupation with some soon-to-be success or failure,” Mahan writes.

To advance his argument, Mahan draws from a number of sources, including
William James, Thomas Merton, Anthony DeMello, Ignatius Loyola and Walker Percy. Figures such as Tolstoy’s Ivan Illych and Nixon aide John Dean are offered as case studies for how socially scripted ambition can be so strong as to lead to moral deafness.

While he uses a wide range of sources, perhaps the real strength of the book is in the personal stories Mahan shares: with college students at Colorado, high school students in summer youth institutes and memories of his Irish-Catholic upbringing. These stories—delightful, witty, sad—communicate Mahan’s point.

Of particular interest to church folk may be Mahan’s observation that faith itself can be co-opted by our own self-seeking. Faith may be used to rationalize our ambitions or deny our failures, he argues. It is essential for Christians and churches to ask, “What is it we are living for and what is it we think is keeping us from living fully for the things we want to live for.”

In rejecting socially scripted definitions of success in favor of vocation —what Frederick Buechner describes as the point where “one’s deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet”—there is an ever-present danger of spiritual pride.

Mahan asks, “Can you find within yourself the capacity to look down on all those less evolved among your friends and acquaintances, who are still caught up in the pathetically banal search for wealth, fame, and power and who have not a hint about profound spiritual wisdom?” Spiritual ambition, he says, can lead us just as far astray as social or financial ambition.

Instead, Mahan calls us to the practice of “spiritual indirection”—uncovering and gently resisting what is keeping us from living fully for the thing we want to live for. This is hard work.

When we turn from the morning paper to the denominational magazine, or the agenda for the church board meeting, or our own personal to-do list, we find that Mahan’s argument is every bit as applicable. We would do well to pay attention.
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