Review of ***Being Called: Scientific, Secular, and Sacred Perspectives***

David Bryce Yaden, Theo D. McCall, and J Harold Ellens, Editors.

Praeger: Santa Barbara, CA., 2015.

© **Steven Herrmann, Ph.D., MFT**

(Contact Information: *Email Address:* sbherrmann@comcast.net

*Website*: stevenherrmann.com)

*Being Called* is one of the best books on the subject of vocation I have read and I do not say this lightly. Most attempts to address the subject of *being called* have been slanted in one direction or another, according to an author’s particular religious beliefs, research methodology, or theoretical orientation. Vocation, being called by a voice, is a subject that has preoccupied my interests for over 35 years now. I wrote my bachelors thesis, master’s thesis, and doctoral dissertation on this important subject. I read everything I could get my hands on relating to callings while I wrote these three works and yet, I was always perplexed by why there was insufficient empirical research to validate the phenomenon of the calling. Here, for the first time (at least to my knowledge) we have a comprehensive volume that addresses this fascinating topic of what it means to be called, from a number of different angles. The book arrives at a brilliant overview that enables any reader to achieve objective cognition and make phenomenological inferences; the book reflects back to the reader an impartial perception. The authors have indeed succeeded to my mind in making the matter of the calling accessible from a scientific, secular, and sacred perspective in modernity. The authors can be congratulated for this.

In the “Preface” to this volume, one of the books three central editors, J. Harold Ellens, makes it overwhelmingly clear at the start that the calling as a category of *felt* psychological experience falls within the scope of “prospective psychology,” which, although it might be conceived in a number of different ways in this book “refers to experiences that make us feel called into the future” (xiiv). What does it mean to be called into the future? When one has a felt sense of being called it is termed *prospective* explains Ellens, and he asks further: “are we called by the future into our future?” (xiiv) The question is left open ended for the reader to ponder. The new and exciting way the authors engage readers in a quest for the unique and ultimate meaning of the calling in one’s life, has the potential, I believe, to provide what the book promises: “a new vision of reality” (xiv). After reading the book, I can attest that the authors have given me a *new vision*, as I hope they will also for the interested reader. The book is ideally suited for either the layperson seeking guidance or as a textbook taught by a University professor.

In the Introduction, “How Are We called Into the Future?” Martin Seligman does not, moreover, ask whether we are called in to the future, he asks how: *How are we called into the future?* The accent of the book is experiential and scholarly written. Thus, if we read it as a self-help book, we may be able to answer this question. If we read it as a graduate student, it makes for good academic reading. The stories are taken from real life. The book’s aim is to *draw the reader into the experience of what it really feels like to be called*. In other words, it has already been determined by the authors that being called is something we all know about, at least potentially. They ask us to look within for the data, or incubate some new data through dreams. Positive psychology―the field Seligman works in―is “undergirded by the idea that human beings are drawn into the future” (xvi). This is what he refers to as the “phenomenon of *prospection*” (xix). Seligman makes it clear that the book is about “an unconventional” and even “outlandish, approach to prospection”: *Being called is to be expected*. “*Feeling* or *believing* that one has been called by the future is not an uncommon human experience” (xxi) he says. In other words, it is something we all experience during the outworking of our destiny-patterns, if we pay attention. Seligman goes further by proposing that the book “*hypothesizes* that some of the [calling] experiences are *true and they are not benign illusions but they are not divine*. According to this new view some human beings are actually visited and guided by the future, but that the *ground of these experiences is natural”* (xxii). This is Seligman’s view. Other authors in the book suggest that the calling into the future may come from a supernatural source. Most of the papers falling under this category appear in Part II of the book under the heading “Sacred Perspectives.” Whereas Part I is a collection of writings that fall under the heading “Scientific and Secular Perspectives.”

Chapter 1, “Callings and the Meaning of Work” by Amy Wrzesniewski provides the reader with a general introduction to the field from both an historical and a contemporary perspective. Chapter 2, “The Dark Side of a Calling” examines the potential shadow side of a calling and falls under the class of feeling a calling, but “not living it” (15). By making a clear critical distinction between having a calling and *living a calling*, the authors enable the reader to reflect on those moments in *our* lives, past or present, when we sensed that we somehow failed to live out the best within us. This is not at all an uncommon experience for most humans during the passage through mid-life.

In chapter 3, “Road to Damascus Moments: Calling Experiences as Prospective Epiphanies” David Bryce Yaden and Andrew B. Newberg define calling experiences as “*profoundly meaningful, temporary mental states that contain a revelation or directive that seems to come from beyond the self*” (28). By beyond they mean, following the biblical story of St. Paul’s famous religious conversion experience on the road to Damascus, the “*transcendent sense of callings*” (30). But they do not limit their view to theology. Their approach is psychospiritual and therefore scientific. The authors believe “that a positive perspective is possible within any metaphysical interpretation―including a natural/internal view of callings” (37) that includes psychological and neurological explanations. In this sense, the calling comes as a prospective, automatic, intuitive process that places *epiphany* *experiences and numinous experiences* “in a more positive light” than what most books on vocation tend to do, when their focus is primarily experimental-research-oriented. Such a positive view sees calling epiphanies as structured by “profound emotional states” even though just prior to an experience of the call the state of emotion may sometimes “be very negative” (41).

Chapter 4 “Neurophysiological and Personogical Aspects of Spirituality” discusses data obtained from neuroscience studies about the complex issue of religiousness/spirituality (57), which of course includes callings. What the authors conclude is that forms of meditation practice can lead people to rely more directly on “their feelings or beliefs about being called to a particular path or vocation in life” (58). Throughout the book the accent placed by most of the authors is on *feeling*, a criterion that was first coined in the philosophical and psychological tradition of pragmatism developed by William James, one which is still widely celebrated today in his popular book: *The* *Varieties of Religious Experience*. This *feeling* criterion as the chief function or capacity for confirming the call seems to be transcendent of all nationalities, cultures, and spiritual orientations, and is therefore universally valid.

In the next chapter “Called to Nonduality,” Zoran Josipovic and Judith Blackstone discuss how callings are understood in the Asian non-dual traditions; they present stories from their own lives that offer experiential data to help us understand how they were called to non-duality and the work that emerged from their spontaneous entrances into states of oneness and well-being. The exciting examples they provide consist chiefly of *vocational dreams*,[[1]](#footnote-1) or what Jung called prospective dreams. The authors provide us with a theoretical background in Hindu Advaita (non-dual) Yoga and Vedanta tradition and Zen Buddhism.

In chapter 6, “Folk Theories of Calling in Chinese Cultural Contexts” Kaiping Peng and Yukon Zhao provide us with some missing lines of cultural-psychological research approaches to comprehend the meaning of being called through an investigation of folk theories in Chinese culture. Amongst the categories they mention as significant to the feeling of being called are loyalty to *family*, responsibility to the *social* order, and calling to *transcendent objects* outside individual goals (91).

Chapter 7, “Calling Counselors: A Novel Calling Intervention for Career Development and Well-Being” by Susanna Wu-Pong gives us a concise overview of the field of career counseling. What the author suggests in her concluding remarks is that “Emerging research on callings can productively complement traditional career counseling approaches” and she ends by encouraging career counselors to expand their roles as “calling counselors” to benefit society “as a whole” (109).

Chapter 8, “On Call: Physician Perspectives on Callings in Medicine and Medical Education” focuses on the metaphor of the call and answer: the hospital intercom as the literal announcement foci that a physician’s life revolves around and that amplifies the phenomenon of being “on call” (113). What are really interesting to me in this chapter are *four* personal stories that are reported by physicians that give us some up close qualitative information to consider regarding how the call comes to doctors; whether in early childhood, through caring interactions, or, through the simple act of writing down the word “medicine” on a piece of paper during a Tibetan Buddhist meditation retreat at Stanford University (122).

In chapter 9 “Discerning Calling: Bridging the Natural and Supernatural” Bryan J. Dik and Michael F. Steger present us with an interesting case history that leads them to hypothesize that “prior to *being* the one living the calling, they [those called] *empathize* with the person they imagine to be living the calling. Thus, one of the most fundamental aspects of human social life (i.e., empathy) may play a role in experiencing of a calling” (129). They suggest, furthermore, that the “eureka” sensation that one has truly “found one’s calling may arise from an infrastructure that allows us to cognitively and affectively merge with another’s experience. The most intriguing possibility is that while contemplating future occupations, people get a sense that one of them ‘just feels right’” (132). Again, the accent placed in the book on feeling as the primary agent for confirming the call stands out in this chapter as tantamount to arriving at an experience of knowing what one’s true destination is. *Empathy, feeling into a calling, becomes Key*. This book may not change your life, yet I am confident it will change the way you think about what it means to be called through deeply empathic (feeling) understanding.

This leads us to Chapter 10, which opens Part II of the book under the heading “Sacred Perspectives,” a thought-provoking and fluidly written essay “The Normalcy of the Paranormal: Numinous Experiences Throughout the Life Span” by J. Harold Ellens. This chapter is really a *tour de force,* one I cannot recommend highly enough. The basic premise of his chapter is that paranormal, mystical, or numinous experiences are not uncommon and that if we pay attention to them and weave them into a tapestry of meaning in our lives as an integrated whole, they may give us what Ellen’s calls “our master story” (143). Our master story is where our meaning is, our purpose is, our *destiny* is: “When they occur, these numinous events infuse our psyches, lives, affects, and bodies. They give us a sense of our destiny” (144). After telling us his own remarkable calling experiences Ellen’s calls for a new science of the paranormal. He asks us to consider: “How can we create a science of the paranormal?” (149). However, Ellens adds that “We may discover that not all truth is empirical data” (150). If not empirical, what then? A science of paranormal phenomena: “If such a science were developed,” Ellen’s asserts “as William James called for a century ago, undoubtedly we would be surprised how much hard data we would have with which to work and what precise categories of evidence we might be able to develop” (152). The tremendous importance Ellen’s assigns to psychospiritual events in his own life, from the age of seven, illuminates for us the pivotal significance of this time of *transitus* (transition from the mother to the father) in the life of children. The life-changing effects of paranormal information perceived at this young age, or later in a numinous dream, transformative relationship, or suprapersonal event might at first glance appear to be completely out of the range of science; since the source of such experiences may indeed be, as Ellen’s suggests, *supernatural*. Yet as we’ve seen, prospection subsumes the natural and supernatural viewpoints into a new non-dual theory.

This complementary of viewpoints is modeled for us in the following chapter 11 “Calling of a Wounded Healer: Psychosis, Spirituality, and Shamanism” by David Lukoff, a bridger of the two worlds. This highly personal chapter takes us into the very heart of the experience of being called from a trans-historical and trans-cultural perspective; it bases its grounding in empirical reality on ethnographic studies of shamans the world over, as wounded healers for the tribes. By tapping into the *archetype of the shaman*,[[2]](#footnote-2) Lukoff describes how through his own shamanistic experiences of illness, reconstitution, and return, he was able to successfully answer his calling to psychology by co-creating a new category for the American psychiatric Association’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* (*DSM-5*) under the heading of religious and spiritual problems (163).

In chapter 12 “The Circus Snake: A Numinous Initiatory Calling from Below” psychiatrist and Jungian analyst, Thomas Singer, M.D., explores “the relationships between three deeply interconnected phenomena: initiation, the numinous, and a calling” (180). Singer makes it clear that there are different types of callings, initiations, and experiences of the numinous and he does not hesitate to quote a passage from a Turkish ISIS recruit in Syria (179) before moving on with his own personal story. What this does for the reader is to provide a context for comprehending the phenomenon of the call as seen in light of contemporary cultural currents as a call from the dark side of the self. Singer’s chapter addresses the phenomenon of the cultural shadow and problem of absolute evil in relationship to psychically infected religious groups, fundamentalist regimes, or creeds. Another important distinction made by Singer is that the calling can come from either “below” or from “above,” that is “from the instinctual layer of the human psyche rather than the overtly transcendent or spiritual” (183). In order to illustrate this Singer provides a personal example of a numinous dream of a “circus snake” that came to him when he was a third-year medical student at Yale Medical School (184) and that became an unexpected guide in his initiatory journey into the future. This dream and its message were not necessarily made immediately clear or transparent to Singer. As he says: “One needs to work at its meaning to get a ‘feel’ for it” (187). Getting a feel for the meaning of such a numinous vocational dream is a way to confirm what its destination might look like the future, as a calling from the future, or, from the eternal archetype of the healer in the collective psyche. As an amplification to his dream, Singer presents us with a striking picture of “Aesculapius in Human and Snake Form Healing a Young Man” and in the background of this relief we can see a young man lying on a bed who is being bitten on the right shoulder by a serpent (189)! I will have more to say about this image momentarily.

In chapter 13, “Hope and Eternity: God as Transcendent Presence in the Ordinary” Theo D. McCall begins his chapter by saying “Sometimes in the middle of a moment of total ordinariness, something extraordinary and transcendent can be glimpsed, if we have the eyes to see it. If we are alert to such things, these moments can draw us into the future, in spirit if not literally in time, and inspire us to embrace a process of self-transcendence” (194). McCall explains how the sense of vocation to the priesthood “occurred almost by accident: a chance word said on the soccer field” (194).

In chapter 14 “Called to Shape the Future” Stephen Lewis explores the idea that Christians are called to *shape* the future (204) and to *care* for the future (207). “Caring for the future” he says “is an active responsibility” (212).

In chapter 15 “Sacrifice: The Shadow and the Calling” Gregory Levoy considers the shadow work involved in *sacrifice* as a central aspect of the calling. By sacrificing ourselves to a transcendent other, we may fulfill our fate and destiny.

Chapter 16 “I Have Been Anointed and I Have Fleeced the Lord”: “The Contemporary Serpent Handlers of Appalachia and their Experience of Being Called by God” by Ralph W. Hood Jr. provides us with a cultural example of a creed that bases its beliefs on a specific section in the Gospel of Mark 16:17-18 that says: “They shall take up serpents.” These words from the Lord are viewed literally as the basis for their callings as serpent handlers. The Appalachian Mountain Churches that practice this creed take the Biblical lines literally as a call they must fulfill. The snakes are gathered together specifically for initiation rituals that have their own peculiar numinosity when these reptiles are handled and danced with. I want to remind the reader of the picture of Aesculapius and the serpent bite in the chapter by Singer here. However, in the temple of Epidaurus, the bite on the shoulder had a *healing* function, whereas here, pastors of the Church of God and its members sometimes report being bitten, sometimes numerous times by poisonous rattle snakes and cotton mouths. This is a chilling chapter, but one the reader will not want to miss.

In chapter 17: “Already but Not Yet: Calling and Called in Religious Time” Gordon Burmant continues a conversation he carried on for decades with his first Buddhist teacher, Kenryu T. Tsuji (1914-2004). What this chapter does for the reader is to provide from the Buddhist cosmic cycle perspective a sense of cosmological time, defined as a *kalpa*, which is “incalculably long” (245). This chapter helps us understand that the future that calls us may be billions of years in front of us.

In chapter 18 “Be Thou my Vision”: “Mystical Experience and Religious Calling” J. Hough Kempster begins his essay with an impressive New Zealand Maori saying “ka mura, ka muri,” which Kempster interprets as “walking backwards into the future” (261). This interesting metaphor helps us reflect upon the probability that prospection is a transcendent function that arises out of the unconscious and that leads us *teleologically* without our choosing it. This is elucidated by a quote from Marty Seligman: “I did not choose positive psychology. It called me” (262). To choose a vocation to positive psychology suggests that his ego was not in the driver’s seat, but really it was the Self that called to him from the transcendent future. It suggests, moreover, that positive psychology―the psychology that deals with the phenomenon of *prospection*―arises from an inborn archetype in the human psyche that is as natural as human instinct.[[3]](#footnote-3)

In the “Conclusion” section, “Answering the Call,” David Bryce Yaden explains for the reader that “Being Called into the Future” was “a meeting held in the fall of 2013 on the grounds of Canterbury Cathedral, England” (275) and that it was out of this *conclave* that the calling to write the book came about. “Like a compass,” Yaden concludes “finding true north, calling experiences can align us with what is most authentic in our own lives and point us toward what the world needs most.”

Finally, in “Appendix”: “Mystics Anonymous: An introduction” Kempster is interviewed by Yaden about the origination story of how Mystics Anonymous came into being and what an MA session might be like when one feels called in such a group to give voice to one’s numinous or mystical experiences of the call.

Overall, I found *Being Called* to be a highly readable book and one that I think any interested reader will enjoy. By engaging with the authors in each chapter the reader may be led to an experience of their inner compass finding true north.

**References**

Herrmann, S. (1994). *Vocational Development in Childhood.* Doctoral Dissertation.

Dissertation Abstracts International.

Herrmann, S. (2009). *William Everson: The Shaman’s Call.* Eloquent Books: New York.

Herrmann, S. (2014). *Spiritual Democracy: The Wisdom of Early American Visionaries for*

*the Journey Forward.* North Atlantic Press (Sacred Activism Series): Berkeley, CA.

1. What are *vocational dreams*?  Where did my research as a Jungian begin?  My vocational journey began with a study of the meaning of vocational dreams at John F. Kennedy University, where I wrote my Master’s thesis in 1985, “Vocational Dreams and the Nuclear Self.”  Dreams and their meanings with vocational significance is central to my work as a Jungian psychotherapist.  Although I had experienced the power of the vocational dream on a number of occasions in my early adulthood, I did not know what it was I had experienced on a feeling level until I met William Everson (formerly Brother Antoninus of the Dominican Order), at the University of California at Santa Cruz during the fall quarter of 1978.  Everson’s theory on vocation at UCSC provided the conceptual model for framing the problem I had taken up after high school, namely: the problem of which vocation to pursue as a life’s work. From the fall of 1980 to the winter of 1981, I worked for Everson as a teaching assistant in his course “Birth of a Poet,” introducing students to the art and science of dream interpretation from a Jungian analytic point of view.  I was also in charge of leading the dream groups every week, where the task was to teach Jung’s psychology in relationship to the subject Everson meditated on twice a week, corresponding to consecutive chapters the students were reading from Joseph Campbell’s book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces.*The requirements of the course were to keep a dream journal and write a final paper at the end of the quarter on the subject of “vocational clarification through dream.”  As I learned from Everson, every vocation is controlled by a designated group of archetypal *symbols*.  These calling symbols, or *vocational archetypes*, according to Everson, orient us toward our proper forms of work in the world. (For reference or further reading see Bibliography under *William Everson: The Shaman’s Call*.) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In our book *William Everson: The Shaman’s Call* I advanced Everson’s hypothesis of what it means to be called by saying that the *shamanic archetype* underlying the vocation is a psychic gateway to the highest forms of consciousness available to humankind, and that the archetype of the shaman, when it is fully integrated is further evolved than ego-consciousness, which is what makes it seem to be super-conscious. Consciousness cannot evolve, in other words, unless one attains access to this deepest stratum of the human mind. Post-modern people need what poet-shamans have: *direct access to the collective psyche without mediation from any external religious symbols.* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. William Everson defined vocation as a “disposition,” a “calling,” which holds the key to a person’s identity. The calling comes from the *vocational archetype*, which he defined as the “underlying constituency of the psyche” (Herrmann, S. "The Vocational Archetype: An Interview with William Everson, 1985, p. 3). This archetypal potentiality is released through our encounter with our familial and cultural environments. Everson said in 1985 that “it’s almost as if there is a caul over the soul, the psyche, almost like a membrane” (“The Vocational Archetype,” p. 3). Using the analogy of psychological virginity, he said that this caul, or “hymen,” has to be pierced or broken. In Everson’s view, the “rupture” in identity occurs primarily through the release of a *vocational symbol.* He said that we stand between the “collective conscious” and the “collective unconscious,” which comes from the instincts: “now the symbol of the archetype has to come in and relieve these two X factors.” In this sense, the vocational summons may come from a “book,” an outer situation, or “relationship,” such as the “laying on of hands by a master figure.” For me, at the age of 24 to 25, at U.C.S.C., Everson was precisely such a master figure! “The vocational symbol comes from the race,” he continued, but he viewed the dream as the “primary means to manifest” the vocational archetype in consciousness (ibid., pp. 2-4). For this reason, dreams were the primary data through which he attempted to confirm his hypothesis of the vocational archetype as the underlying pattern for all creative activities in the cultural world. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)