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It's Not Just a Job, It's a Calling: The Redemption of Soldiering as Religious Vocation in *Saving Private Ryan*

Abstract

Filmic depictions of the warrior have decayed over the last few decades, driven by a focus on Vietnam – the bad war in which soldiering was hell. When Spielberg decided to revisit WWII in *Saving Private Ryan*, he recaptured the idea of the good soldier whose mission was a Calling. This essay examines how western culture came to its fallacious, bifurcated understanding of Calling, then explores the definition of Calling, identifies Calling's key features, and then uses these theories to examine the character of Private Jackson, the Christian sniper from the film *Saving Private Ryan*.

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Over the last few decades, the way film depicts the warrior has decayed. Films about World War I and WWII portrayed the warrior as hero. Recently, the warrior is depicted either as a testosterone-fueled cartoon, such as Rambo, or a disillusioned veteran, like the one Tom Cruise portrayed in *Born on the Fourth of July*, or a psychopath so damaged by the war he is no longer of use to anyone, as depicted in *Full Metal Jacket*, or *The Deer Hunter*. The shift occurred once we began to portray "the bad war" – Vietnam.

Writing about the returning Vietnam veterans, Edward Linenthal argues:

Unlike veterans of other wars, warriors often returned alone to a society profoundly ambivalent about their presence. Warriors returned as outcasts and scapegoats, victims of the fractured symbol of the American Warrior. They returned to a nation divided by perceptions of the war and the worthiness of the American mission in the world. The controversy about the significance of the war raged about the veteran, who stepped from a hot war in Vietnam into an ideological war, a civil war, in America.¹

1998 brought us two films about the last "Good War:" *The Thin Red Line*, and *Saving Private Ryan*. These films represent Eastern philosophy and Western/Christian philosophy respectively. In this analysis of *Saving Private Ryan* I hope to demonstrate that part of its appeal stems from its development of a rhetoric of Calling.

The literature is sparse on the rhetoric of Calling. Most of the modern work on the concept of Calling appears, as one might expect, in religious periodicals and business journals. The religious periodicals deal nearly exclusively with Calling as

a professional religious decision, usually to become a priest or a nun in the Catholic faith. In business journals, Calling is used as a euphemism for work.

Regarding rhetorical criticism, arguing for Calling is a tough sell, because it presupposes a foundational, transcendent ought. Rhetorical theorists such as Walter Fisher argue that, under the narrative paradigm, nothing is foundational.² While Thomas Frentz argues for purpose, via his use of telos or "optimal moral end," he fails to clearly situate purpose, vaguely attributed to Hegelian Spirit.³

In this essay I do not presume to create a notion of Calling; this already exists. Perhaps it is fair to say that I intend to help resurrect an idea of Calling which is already making a quiet resurgence in some religious circles, and demonstrate how it appeals to a culture that is desperate to find a sense of meaning in an increasingly purposeless world. Harry Blamires challenges:

In this sense, if our contemporaries cry aloud that life is meaningless and that they see no evidence of a purposeful God in control of the universe, this cry is an indictment of our civilization. It may indeed spring from a deep religious sense – a deeply offended religious sense. Faced with this complaint, it is not our duty to try to prove that meaningful which is in fact meaningless. Our duty is to show how life can and ought to be rendered meaningful.⁴

I do not intend this analysis to be just one more in a parade of socially-constructed placebos designed by academics to winkingly understand how the masses are manipulated by mythic discourse. It seems a requirement that if we walk down this road, we must be willing to follow the direction that Calling may lead. For if we

accept the idea of Calling, then the existence of a Caller is implied – the question being one of fact, not of value or policy.

I will begin by examining how western culture came to its fallacious, bifurcated understanding of Calling, then explore the definition of Calling, identify Calling's key features, and then use these theories to examine the character of Private Jackson, the Christian sniper from the film *Saving Private Ryan*.

A Brief History of Calling

According to Marshall, Meister Eckhart and Johann Tauler argued for an elevated view of work that was distinct from the bifurcated views of others in the early church, and the Greeks and Romans, who viewed work (*vita activa*) as inferior to contemplation (*vita contemplativa*).⁵ Eckhart believed that work was our reason for being, and that it led us to God. Tauler believed that work and contemplation were both parts of the same body, and therefore it was wrong to elevate one over the other.

Lee Hardy explains that both Augustine and Aquinas believed that work was necessary, but that the contemplative life was to be more desired.⁶ The purpose of spiritual disciplines was to gain merit in the eyes of God, leading to salvation, rather than sanctification.⁷

Marshall argues that Luther extended the idea of Calling to all secular work by his choice of translating Ecclesiasticus 11:20-21 and I Cor. 7:20 with the word *Beruf* instead of *Werk* or *Arbeit*:

By introducing this novel translation, Luther took a word previously used only for a priestly or monastic Calling and applied it to all worldly duties. Hence he implicitly maintained that the role of husband, wife, peasant, or magistrate was a particular duty given by God.”⁸

Luther did not believe that Calling extended to those outside the Church. The key to Calling was not the work itself, but its faithful execution as a duty to God.⁹

Calling, according to Luther, connects vocation to station. Hardy explains:

Our vocation, according to Luther, comes to us through our station. What God would have us do with our time and talents is discerned from the duties which pertain to our stations in life together with the concrete opportunities he has placed before us ... Through the human pursuit of vocations across the array of earthly stations the hungry are fed, the naked are clothed, the sick are healed, the ignorant are enlightened, and the weak are protected. That is, by working we actually participate in God's ongoing providence for the human race.¹⁰

Calvin's position on Calling is similar to Luther's, except that Calvin argues that the work itself is the obedience to God. Calvin also allowed for more social mobility than did Luther; he permitted people to change their Calling. Calvin also required Callings to serve some purpose, to bear some fruit. Marshall explains: "Certainly he was not concerned with these fruits in terms of worldly success, but he stressed that things of importance are always for something.”¹¹ For Calvin, then, Calling served *telos*.

But in the 17th century, at the insistence of the Levellers, Calling is separated from the idea of position or estate, and becomes a duty born of necessity.¹² This shift distanced the idea of Calling from the idea of a Caller. Marshall notes, "The grounds of obligation had become natural, and the duties of a Calling had now become natural law and natural right. It became possible to speak of Callings without speaking of God, or indeed of any caller whatsoever. The Calling was now abstract right and duty."¹³ This view was furthered by John Locke. Locke believed in a particular and a general Calling. The particular Calling was the individual work each person was to do. The general Calling encompassed spiritual duties common to all people.¹⁴ The general Calling was religious, but the particular Calling was not necessarily so. This led to the separation of life into secular and spiritual realms. Locke confined the Church's mission to the saving of souls, and argued that there was no place within the state for the Church.¹⁵

By the end of the 17th century, the concept of Calling meant little more than employment. Hardy laments that:

This is an unfortunate development. But it leads directly to our present-day notion that a vocation is nothing more than a job. "Vocational training" meant "job training." If we are asked what our vocation is, we are expected to say what we do for a living. It follows that finding one's "Calling in life" is a matter of finding an occupation; that a person without a job is also without a vocation; and that the aspects of a person's life outside work do not have the dignity of being vocations – they are merely the insignificant details of personal life.¹⁶

Harvey Goldman explains how critics such as Max Weber advanced the idea of a secular Calling:

In "Science as a Vocation" Weber realized how it was possible to go back to Puritan roots, strip the Calling and the personality of their specifically religious coloration, combat the degeneration in their meaning, and make them available for the creation of "newer men." These men would be rooted in secular life, a life not only free of magical religion but also seemingly free of all faith and of any other spiritual disciplines capable of shaping the self for the difficult tasks ahead.¹⁷

Goldman's analysis is reminiscent of C.S. Lewis' admonition in *The Abolition of Man* that "We remove the organ, and demand the function."¹⁸ Or more specifically for my purposes here, "We laugh at honor and are shocked to find traitors in our midst."¹⁹

Os Guinness sums up the problem of Calling in what he refers to as the Catholic and Protestant Distortions of Calling. Guinness argues that these two distortions have plagued the notion of Calling throughout history. Both distortions commit the error of dividing Calling into sacred and secular dimensions, rather than perceiving Calling holistically - God Calling the whole person. The Catholic distortion engages in "a form of dualism that elevates the spiritual at the expense of the secular."²⁰ This is readily seen in even a casual perusal of Catholic periodicals where "vocation" is identified with entering the priesthood.

The Protestant Distortion, Guinness writes, is worse - "It severs the secular from the spiritual altogether and reduces vocation to an alternative word for work.

In so doing, it completely betrays the purpose of Calling and, ironically, activates a counterreaction that swings back to the Catholic distortion again.”²¹

Calling Defined

When people use the word "Calling" they generally use the word to mean a religious vocation, such as a priest or nun, or what they do for work. Occasionally it is used to describe what people define for themselves as their life's purpose. I will argue here that the first definition is too narrow, the second too broad, and the third lacking in content.

Os Guinness defines Calling as a summons: "the truth that God calls us to himself so decisively that everything we are, everything we do, and everything we have is invested with a special devotion, dynamism, and direction lived out as a response to his summons and service.”²² He also argues that "Responding to the call means rising to the challenge, but in conversation and in partnership -- and in an intimate relationship between the called and the Caller.”²³

Paul Marshall notes that Calling extends beyond the religious professional: "...the idea that people are called by God to a specific mundane work or duty as a sphere and means of religious obedience...”²⁴ The concept embraces at least four factors: 1) That Calling implies a Caller who can be recognized, 2) That humans

need to respond to, and partner with, that call, 3) that there is a dependence on the Caller, and 4) that Calling requires obedient perseverance until the end.

Analysis of Saving Private Ryan²⁵

Private Jackson (portrayed by Ron Pepper), a sniper, is one of the ensemble that make up the squad led by Captain Miller (portrayed by Tom Hanks) in *Saving Private Ryan*. He has few scenes in which he speaks more than one line; still his character stands out in a way others in the squad do not. Jackson most clearly senses, and responds, to his Call.

Recognition of the Call and Willing Response

We are introduced to Jackson as the squad is marching off to find, and recover if they can, the titular Private Ryan. Members of the squad are complaining about the mission. Jackson's complaint is not that the mission is bad, but that it is a misallocation of vital military resources. The military resource he has in mind, we find out shortly, is himself. He argues that "Well, it seems to me, sir, that God gave me a special gift, made me a fine instrument of warfare... Well, what I mean by that, sir, is you put me and this here sniper rifle anywhere up to and including one mile of Adolph Hitler, with a clean line of sight, sir, pack your bags fellas, war's over, Amen." Jackson argues that it is a waste to send him along on what Miller has referred to as a "public relations" mission. What at first strikes the viewer as nothing

more than youthful boasting, later is demonstrated to be a sincere understanding of what it means both to be Called, and to respond appropriately to that Calling.

Jackson fulfills the first two aspects of Calling: recognition and willing response. Such recognition looks, as Guinness notes, both backwards and forwards: "'Who am I' is not simply a matter of 'reading back' early recollections that are intimate and announce our later destiny. God leads forward as we respond to his call. Following his call, we become what we are constituted to be by his creation. We also become what we are not yet, and can only become by re-creation as a called people."²⁶ Guinness seems to echo Frenz's argument for the bidirectional reading of teleological time,²⁷ but situates the time around the foundational truth in the Calling of God.

Reliance on the Caller

The incident that underscores Jackson's sincerity comes just a few scenes later. While looking for Ryan, the squad comes across a besieged French town. On the second story of a bombed-out building a family is crying out for rescue. Specifically, they want the squad to take their little girl. The horror of total war is brought to the fore as the viewer realizes that there were many innocent casualties in WWII. One of the men steps forward, against the orders of Captain Miller,

because the little girl reminds him of his niece. He takes the girl in his arms, and is immediately cut down by sniper fire from the bell tower in the center of town.

No one else sees the shot, but Jackson intuitively knows where it came from. He remarks, "That's where I'd be. 450 yards, Captain, maybe a shade under." Then he yells to his comrades, "I wouldn't venture out there fellas, this sniper's got talent."

It is intriguing that Jackson appreciates the German sniper's skills, but he does not fear them. Clearly Jackson is "talented" as well, but Jackson does not rely on his talent alone. As he fixes his scope he prays from Psalm 25:2 "Oh my God, I trust in thee, let me not be ashamed, let not my enemies triumph over me." He then takes aim into the darkened bell tower window, and does not merely kill the sniper, he shoots his bullet through the rival sniper's scope, into his eye. He does not triumph over the kill, he is merely a man executing his Calling, who relied, not on his skill alone, but on his relationship with the Caller to make his aim true.

Perseverance in the Call Until the End

Those who are called are no longer their own. Dietrich Bonhoeffer once observed, "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die."²⁸ The death need not be physical (although that can be required), it is a death of the self to the will of the Caller. Those Called must possess a willingness to persevere until the end in the labor to which they have been Called.

On their trek, the squad comes across a German machine gun nest. The men would prefer to go around it, insisting that taking it out is not part of their mission. Captain Miller reminds them that winning the war is their mission, and that it would be wrong to let the Germans ambush another group of men when it was in their power to take it out. Even after making his argument, and pointing out the men he knows will go right and up the middle, he asks for a volunteer to go left. Though there is hesitation, Jackson volunteers. He does not want to die, but he does want to obey. He survives the firefight, but one of his comrades does not. The spectre of death is always before them – two engagements, two dead.

Ryan is ultimately found, but he is unwilling to leave his already depleted squad because their mission is critical to the success of the war campaign. The sense of Calling seems to extend to the rest of Jackson's squad. Captain Miller and his sergeant discuss the merits of staying, and the sergeant notes:

What if we stay and actually make it out of here. Someday we might look back on this and decide that Saving Private Ryan was the one decent thing we were able to pull out of this whole God-awful shitty mess. That is what I was thinking, sir. Like you said, Captain, we do that, we all earn the right to go home.

And while they do not get to go to their physical home, that they die honorably in battle indicates that a place has been made for them -- a home in the heart of Private Ryan, and perhaps an eternal home in heaven as well.

In the climactic battle, Jackson is perched in a tower, awaiting the coming of the German tanks and infantry. When his partner runs out of ammunition for his machine gun, Jackson takes over with only his sniper rifle, asking God to grant him strength. Jackson systematically picks off the enemy, all the while praying from Psalm 144:1-2: "Blessed is the Lord my strength, which teacheth my hands to war, and my fingers to fight: My goodness, and my fortress, my high tower, and my deliverer, my shield and he in whom I trust..." He is unable to finish the verse, which, interestingly reads "who subdueth people under me" because at that moment the German tank has spotted his position. He yells to his partner to run, but he remains as the shell blows apart the tower. Jackson has answered the Call, and now has finished his race.

Nearly every man in the squad dies, Private Ryan fights bravely, and in the end, as he stands over the dying Captain, Miller whispers to him, "Earn it." By this he means that Ryan should live his life in such a way as to honor the Call to which the men in the squad responded to save him.

Jackson as a Christian

It needs to be noted that Jackson does not come off as a "holier-than-thou" Christian. He is flawed. His anger flares and he is ready to execute a prisoner of war that the squad captures in retribution for the death of his friend. His comrades

respect his skill, and never once make fun of his faith. Even though his character is quirky, it is clearly one of the most positive portrayals of a Christian in cinema in recent memory.

Conclusion and Implications

The purpose of this excursion into the transcendent world of Calling was to isolate the key elements of Calling and see how they work, rhetorically, in a film like *Saving Private Ryan*. This admittedly brief analysis leads to a number of conclusions and implications, both for our understanding of warriors and Calling, as well as for rhetorical criticism.

First, while it may seem odd to choose a warrior as an example of Calling (one must analyze what one is dealt) perhaps this example is best because it takes what is generally thought to be bad, warfare, and redeems it through the agency of Calling. Perhaps the time is ripe to reenergize the warrior myth through Calling. The alternative, as Patrick Arnold notes, is disastrous:

There is no other psychic choice for a man moved to oppose injustice and evil than to find access to his internal warrior...In the face of evil, the psychic alternative to the Warrior is not the Peacemaker (who himself is a kind of warrior, though without violence) but the passive Victim, an increasingly common and unhealthy archetype in our culture.²⁹

The only change I would make in Arnold's analysis would be to more explicitly identify the Mover.

Discussing the corruption of the martial image, Edward Linenthal writes:

"We live in a time when traditional martial imagery has been radically altered by nuclear warfare and the effects of the war in Vietnam. Traditional martial images will now function only murderously, yet our nostalgia for comforting national symbols of righteousness exercises a powerful pull."³⁰

Perhaps we can redeem the traditional martial image, and the image of all work, if the work can be reinfused with meaning and vitality. Not the false meaning of social constructionists, but the real meaning of work as something that serves a higher Calling.

Second, it is important as critics that we allow an idea to speak for itself. To do criticism as if God does not exist is dangerous indeed, for it forecloses on an idea that criticism admittedly lacks the tools to adequately dismiss. If we can posit that we are finite creatures in the midst of a transtemporal world, we should be open to ideas that engage us even if we do not comprehensively understand them.

The called are not greater than the Caller, we sometimes need to step in and, in Lewis' words, look along rather than at.³¹ Gaining perspective from the inside has its merits. Once again we can sense the mystery in the world, and the possibilities for criticism take on new playfulness while simultaneously taking on new weight.

¹ Edward Tabor Linenthal. Changing Images of the Warrior Hero in America: A History of Popular Symbolism. *Studies in American Religion*, Vol. 6. New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1982. 164.

² Walter Fisher. *Human Communication as Narration: Toward a Philosophy of Reason, Value, and Action*. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1987. 1.

³ Thomas S. Frenz. "Mass Media as Rhetorical Narration." The Van Zelst Lecture in *Communication*. Northwestern University School of Speech. Evanston, Illinois. 17 May 1984. 4-5.

⁴ Harry Blamires. *The God Who Acts: Recognizing the Hand of God in Suffering and Failure*. Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Books, 1957. 73.

⁵ Paul Marshall. *A Kind of Life Imposed on Man: Vocation and Social Order from Tyndale to Locke*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996. 21-22.

⁶ Lee Hardy. *The Fabric of This World: Inquiries Into Calling, Career Choice, and the Design of Human Work*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990. 18.

⁷ Hardy 20.

⁸ Marshall 23.

⁹ Marshall 24.

¹⁰ Hardy 47.

¹¹ Marshall 25.

¹² Marshall 77.

¹³ Marshall 84.

¹⁴ Marshall 87.

¹⁵ Marshall 88.

¹⁶ Hardy 113.

¹⁷ Harvey Goldman. *Max Weber and Thomas Mann: Calling and the Shaping of the Self*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988. 211-212.

¹⁸ C.S. Lewis. *The Abolition of Man*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1947. 35.

¹⁹ Lewis. *The Abolition of Man*. 35.

²⁰ Os Guinness. *The Call: Finding and Fulfilling the Central Purpose of Your Life*. Nashville, TN: Word Publishing, 1998. 32.

²¹ Guinness 39-40.

²² Guinness 29.

²³ Guinness 24.

²⁴ Marshall 3.

²⁵ All film quotations from *Saving Private Ryan*. Dir. Steven Spielberg. Perf. Tom Hanks, Matt Damon. Dreamworks, 1998.

²⁶ Guinness 24.

²⁷ Frenz 13.

²⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer. *The Cost of Discipleship*. Trans. R. H. Fuller. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1963. 99.

²⁹ Patrick M. Arnold. *Wildmen, Warriors, and Kings: Masculine Spirituality and the Bible*. New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1992. 102.

³⁰ Linenthal xvii.

³¹ C.S. Lewis. *God In the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*. Ed. Walter Hooper. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1970. 212.