

DSPY *Vocation*



A treasure hunter walks softly over the new grass listening intently for what may lie beneath the surface.



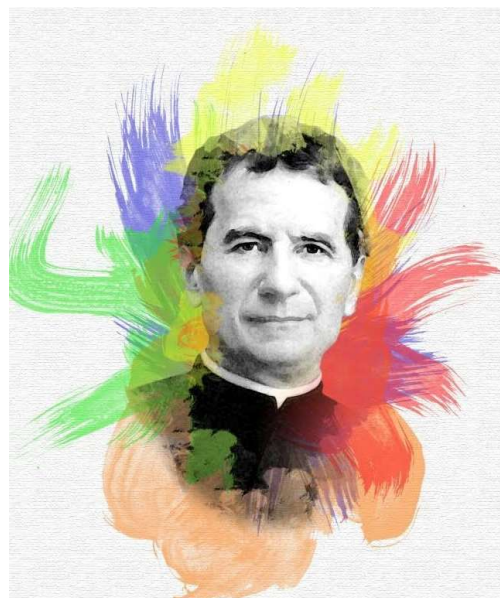
And I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year:
“Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown.”
And he replied:

“Go out into the darkness
and put your hand into the Hand of God.
That shall be to you better than light
and safer than a known way.”
So I went forth,
and finding the Hand of God,
trod gladly into the night.
And He led me towards the hills
and the breaking of day in the lone East

M L Haskins

TALKING VOCATION WITH YOUNG ADULTS

Don Bosco described the heart of a young person as a fortress which can only be opened up by loving kindness. That fortress is the sacred inner space within which major life choices are forged and lived out in the external world of the young. It is only when that heart is opened up from within that vocational accompaniment can take place with the reverence and respect needed by young people. Inappropriate proposals of vocation, premature pushing in a specific direction and a lack of sensitivity to a young person's inner life will only serve to stifle the sense of being called in the heart of a young person.



Therefore, patience and gentleness are key to the informal accompaniment proposed in this booklet. It requires the dual skills of observation and prayerful reflection on the way that young people present themselves in public. These skills and attitudes can be exercised in the setting of events and projects that throw young people together with their peer group so that their gifts, passions and stories emerge in healthy youth work. The informal listener needs to share in the settings where young people can be themselves and be at home with them. In those settings in schools, clubs, on trips and in local projects, conversations can develop that can become vocational.

For short periods the fortress heart of the young can be accessed, the drawbridge comes down and there are graced moments when heart speaks to heart in truth, in love and in safety. The listener needs to be ready for such moments of grace, recognising them when they appear and knowing how to make the conversational invitations that will affirm and strengthen the young person's inner life.



This booklet is an attempt to prepare the listener to recognise those graced moments and also to use skilled and respectful conversation to engage with a young adult's sense of meaning and purpose. It is intended to be used for young adults of any faith and none. Religious language is something that has to be used sensitively by a listener, depending on the world-view of the young adult. Of course, if the listener is invited to speak about their own sense of meaning and purpose, they have been given permission to use such religious experience and language. It should be used by invitation and not as a way to colonise the young person's experience. The listening envisaged here is that of normal conversation and not formal accompaniment. The material here is designed to raise awareness of the vocational dimension beneath the surface of ordinary talk. The hope is that the raised awareness in the listener of an emerging sense of vocation and the use of skilful questions will help the young adult to discover their unique path in life.



WHAT IS A VOCATION?

Vocation is a word that has broken out of a narrow definition to something that embraces every human person. The experience of being called is not confined to religious language or experience. Everyone moved to self-sacrifice by a passion to make a difference knows what it is to be called even if they do not recognise the source of that calling. For Christians that sense of calling originates in God as a way to trace out the Gospel in their own lives. But for many young people that explanation is not where they see themselves. As Christians we are called to be incarnational: to start where young people actually are, entering their world and walking with them, waiting for the right moment, the right level of trust that opens one heart to another.

Therefore, the definition of vocation adopted in this guide is very broad and can be applied to any vocational conversation. Here it is:

Vocation is the place where your deep gladness meets the world's deep hunger.

This definition by Fredrick Buechener, a writer and Presbyterian minister, opens up vocation for all. It encourages the individual to search for meaning by looking within; at stories and memories that hold a passion that can be turned outwards to meet the world's deep hunger. This gives the listener a kind of map within which they can explore and reflect upon the experience of walking with young people. Identifying deep gladness and perhaps the absence of a that gladness in young lives is a starting point for accompaniment. The accompaniment comes to a conclusion when such energy and passion finds a long-term focus on the hunger of the world. That hunger could be large and dramatic or small and hidden in family life and friendships. In both cases there will be a flow of energy and a purposefulness about activity as young people find themselves in that zone where they are being who they are and doing what they are called to do even if it is hard and unrecognised by others.

*“Speak,
for your
servant is
listening!”*

1. Samuel 3.

REFLECTION POINT



KNOW YOURSELF AS CALLED

Looking at your own life experience, can you see the links between your story and memories, your deep gladness and passion and the way that experience focuses your energy on the needs around you?

How do your passions and actions find their roots in the positives and deficits of your own life?

How have you been gifted in life, what talents have you been given to build a better world?

What does it feel like when you are doing what you are called to do?

CHRISTIAN REFLECTION

Lord help me to recognise your call, your touch and inspiration in my daily life. May the experience of being called to fulness of life help me to recognise that calling more clearly in the lives of young adults. Help me not to get in the way of your call but, like Eli the priest*, draw attention to that call at the appropriate time. AMEN *See 1 Samuel 3.10

THE SIGNPOSTS OF A PERSONAL CALLING

A personal vocation emerges from the combination of many factors. These factors “call” the person towards action on behalf of others. For those who are religious, that call comes as a personal invitation through five different areas of experience:

1. Giftedness
2. Memory
3. Relationships
4. Passions
5. Spirituality



What follows are some reflections on each of these areas of experience. The aim is firstly to help raise awareness of the presence of vocational expression within ordinary conversation with young adults. Secondly, some suggestions are given about how to respond to that awareness with appropriate questions. Within the Salesian tradition this might be called evangelisation through conversation. The outcome for the young adult of these one-off conversations might be anything from:

- growth in self-esteem
- clearer sense of direction
- appreciation of others in their life
- a sense of mystery or meaning
- an encounter with God
- a sense of discipleship.

Like Jesus on the road to Emmaus, listening is the starting point but it is also important to keep to the pace of the young adult and not rush ahead. Sustained patterns of informal conversation over a long period build slowly into a relationship of trust. That growing trust builds the confidence of the young adult to open the fortress of the heart and share their experience of gifts, memories, passions, relationships and spirituality. Those are the seedbeds of every personal vocation.

GIFTS

As a listener it is useful to see giftedness in young adults as a kind of tool kit for life. The gifts point to possibilities that can be important in focusing the range of choices that a young adult may face. Some gifts seem attractive, some remunerative, some gifts may be favoured by parents. Some may be natural and automatic and others may need time and discipline to develop. Ideally a person's gifts should resonate with the rest of their lives. Just because a person has a particular gift does not mean that they need to build their life around it. The listener needs to help the young adult think about what values lie beneath the development of a gift: is it based on popularity, money or status? Or is it based on a conviction that this is the best way that they can make a difference in their world?



The listener needs to be aware that a strong or popular gift in the life of a person may be masking other gifts that run deeper into the life story and memory of a young adult. The gifts that resonate in a person's life are more likely to lead them to engage with the needs of the world and lead them to the fullness of life.

SOME THINGS TO DO AND TO SAY

OBSERVE

What they do well with ease and with grace

How they manage relationships

What qualities they demonstrate

SAY

Compliment them on their gifts: they may not realise they have that gift.

Ask them where the gift comes from: their family life or just experience or...

Where did you learn to do that?

Do you enjoy using that gift?

These gifts can be anything from sport, music, humour, organising, creativity, intelligence, empathy, practicality, teamwork, listening, courage etc. At a spiritual level the gifts are deeper, more personal and emerge from memory, hope and vision:

But the gifts of the Spirit are love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Galatians 5.22

STORY TELLING AND MEMORY

Scripture reminds us that creation has a purpose and a direction moving towards a point of reconciliation in Christ. That is true for the big picture and also through our personal stories. God speaks in history and in the stories of our lives too. So, the listener needs to pay particular attention to the stories that young adults tell about themselves. The listener should pay careful attention to the energy and intensity behind the words used because it is often in that energy that the influence of a call may be at work. The stories can be of success, tragedy, humour, confusion or mystery. Look for what some writers call relational consciousness.¹

An unusual level of consciousness or perceptiveness relative to other conversation especially about how a young adult related to life, people, including themselves, and God.

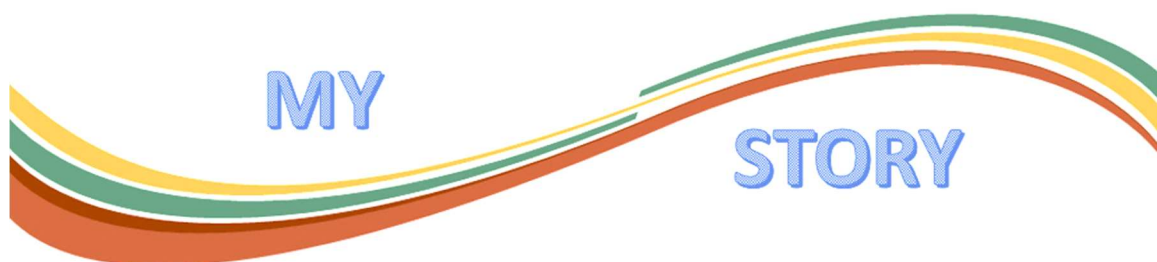
SOME THINGS TO LISTEN FOR AND EXPLORE GENTLY

Ask questions that take young adults back to their memories:

- The funniest memory, earliest memory, scariest memory, school memory, best holiday, best Christmas memory etc.
- How did you learn to do that? Who taught you?
- What is your most peaceful moment so far?
- When did you feel most alive, most yourself?

Young adults are conditioned in our culture to think forwards, to plan, anticipate and perhaps worry about what will happen. Remembering can heal the fragmented nature of their lives and set them on the search for patterns of meaning in the good and bad experiences of their lives. As Christians we may see those patterns in their lives as the Easter mystery but they may not wish to see it that way.

Listen for energy, intensity, compassion, wisdom, cheerfulness and perseverance and reflect those qualities back to them when they talk about themselves. Praise the qualities you see emerging from their past and ask them if they have a part in their future.



RELATIONSHIPS

A vocational call comes through a community, through a network of relationships. Each young adult has already been formed for over a quarter of their lives with values and experiences that will have shaped their sense of call. Each person they have met will be like a mirror within which young adults learn to see themselves. Some of those mirrors will be true and clear, others might be distorted and manipulative. So, the young adults may have friends and family who both confuse and clarify their sense of self and the direction of their lives. The listener needs to notice a young adult's experience of relationships, looking for issues such as low self-esteem, over-confidence, isolation or undue dependence on another's approval. All of these can dull the sense of being called to fullness of life.

Conversations around this area need to be affirming and enquiring about significant people in the lives of young adults. Are their own plans being overwhelmed by parental or peer pressure? Is there a lack of confidence and courage due to the absence of supportive and freeing friendships? Do they have an inflated view of their own qualities?

SOME THINGS TO LISTEN FOR AND EXPLORE GENTLY WITH QUESTIONS

- Do you still have friends from primary school?
- Who is your model human being your hero or heroine?
- Who do you ask for advice? Who is your wisdom figure?
- Are there people who can pressurise you? How do you manage them?
- Who among your friends will always tell you the truth?

Questions like these put into your own natural conversational pattern can offer a young adult a pathway to reflect deeper on their own life. Don't make the questions artificial but raise them in a natural way in the way that Jesus did on the road to Emmaus with the two discouraged disciples.



PASSION

The yeast in flour provides an energy that transforms the flour into dough for bread. In Greek the word used for that energy is “zeal”. As Christians, if we are to become bread for the world, we need that zeal at work inside us. As listeners we need to listen for that energy, that zeal, in the lives of young adults. We say we have a passion for things like music, sport, dance, study and so on. In that passion as human beings we get into a focus and a flow that puts us into the present moment where we can encounter God.

When that focus and flow, that passion, is linked with an issue or a challenge, we are on the verge of a vocation.

Mother Teresa discovered that call on a train watching the poor and starving at every station along her route. She started by saying “something should be done” but at the end of the journey she said “I must do something.” The passion within her had found a focus in the world around her, she found her identity and call. As a listener, we need to hear the passion in young adult lives and explore with them how it might be focused into action so that the vocational journey can continue. In young adults this passion can appear extreme. They may want to make a difference to the world even at the risk of their own lives. That is part of the optimism and energy that seems to be easily exploited by radicalism. The listener, however, eases the desire to make dramatic gestures and points to longer term commitments to transform the world through a lifetime of service.

SOME THINGS TO LISTEN FOR AND EXPLORE GENTLY WITH QUESTIONS

- If you had a gap year right now, what would you do with it?
- What makes you feel really sad or angry about our world? Can you do anything about it?
- What gifts do you have that the world might need right now?
- Who is a modern-day hero or heroine that is making a difference?
- What experience of injustice or sadness have you had that you would want to erase from other people’s lives?



SPIRITUALITY

Spirituality is a vague term but it is everywhere. One basic definition is that it is what gets us out of bed in the morning. It is what gives us purpose and meaning on a daily basis. That is inadequate as a definition but it may be a good place to start when listening to young adults. What drives them, enthuses them and attracts them into life? What is harder to recognise beneath that pattern of living and enthusiasm is the transcendent element in the attraction into life. By being drawn into enthusiasm and action a young adult is also responding to a deeper pattern of meaning and purpose in all of creation. Without that deeper connection to the spirit a young adult may not persevere in their sense of call or, more likely, switch from one direction to another and never engage with the commitment needed to make a difference to their world.

It is very difficult to raise awareness in this area without using religious language because religious language opens up the possibility of a personal relationship with the eternal. Many young adults will have had a broadly religious experience, perhaps listening to music, watching a sunset, sitting in silence or being in church. But they may not have recognised that experience as religious or even spiritual. As a listener it is important to believe that God is in a strong personal relationship with each young adult and ask questions when appropriate, to open up awareness of that dimension of their lives.



YOU COULD ASK

- Can you remember a peaceful moment when you were really chilled and relaxed? Where was it, what happened?
- Have you ever felt a presence alongside you when you were alone?
- Can you remember getting lost in a daydream when time stood still? Where did your mind go? Was it good to do that?
- Have you ever sensed that there is a pattern to your life that is just out of your reach?

MOVING INTO RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE WITH DON BOSCO

So far, we have looked at five areas of experience that may reveal a vocation without using direct religious language.

- Giftedness
- Memory
- Relationships
- Passions
- Spirituality

These areas reflect our common humanity within which a call emerges. As Christians we believe that our humanity is shaped into the image of God, we are deeply connected to God with a family likeness. That means that all the natural gifts, memories, relationships, passions and spirituality we carry are expressions of a deep relationship with a God who calls us personally though we may not realise it.

Many young people may not be ready for that interpretation of their experience, and trying to impose religious approaches too quickly may close down the listening role in ordinary conversation. It is only when the listening relationship is developed, trusted and free from pressure that heart can speak to heart. Of course, there are many young people for whom God is already a friend and a lived experience and in those situations much more can be shared and more clarity gained.

In Don Bosco, we Salesians have a wonderful model of vocation that can be used to explore the experience of vocation in religious language. Each of the five areas above are clearly worked out in Don Bosco's vocation story and can be used to deepen the sense of call that can be awakened through informal accompaniment conversations. What follows are some simple thoughts about how Don Bosco experienced his vocation through the five areas of experience noted above.

“A young person's heart is a fortress”



DON BOSCO'S GIFTS

Don Bosco grew up with quick wits, a sense of humour, an ability to remember and re-tell stories. He was strong and quick at games, athletic and determined. He was creative in designing tricks, making bird cages and was a quick learner at school. He was also sensitive and emotional at times. He could be quick to get angry and was easily frustrated.

In his adult life these gifts became focused around the needs of youth ministry in Turin. His gifts were well suited to make cold contact with difficult youth. He was able to grow healthy relationships with them and be with them in their world in a youthful way. The tricks, athletics, stories and understanding he brought to young people were the very gifts he needed to respond to a deep sense of call to serve the young.

In Don Bosco we see a good fit between his life's work and his giftedness. It was not a complete fit, Don Bosco lacked many gifts that would be needed to sustain his work and he learnt to rely on others with different gifts that shared his concern for young people. People like Mamma Margaret and Don Rua. In talking with the young, use examples from Don Bosco's life to point out how gifts hide a call to action, how gifts need to be shaped to a deeper purpose and how gifts call us into interdependence as part of God's human family. Use your examples as an invitation for young adults to reflect on how their gifts are also a personal call from God to build a better world, to live the Gospel and God's kingdom.



MEMORY AND DON BOSCO

Memories can be seen as a signpost to meaning and purpose in life. Some of Don Bosco's memories almost certainly focused the whole of his life work. The sense of abandonment on losing his father, the memory of hunger and poverty during floods and famine, the tension in his family home, being forced to leave home at a very early age. Those were the negative memories of deficits in his life. He also had positive memories: growing up in a rural setting, playing with friends, designing tricks and acrobatics, looking after animals in the fields for hours with friends and above all, a loving mother who created a safe place within which he could grow up.

The positive and negative memories Don Bosco carried had within them an energy that inspired his vocation. His memories of play, fun, and the care of his mother gave him an inner strength and an experience he wanted to share. In Turin he met many young people who lacked those things and he knew how to provide them. The negative memories he carried also had energy because when looking at the street youth of Turin, he recognised his own memories: their abandonment, poverty, desperation and sadness. The energy of those memories was the inspiration that drove Don Bosco to serve the young and the poor. His memories shaped his vocation.



Listening to young people's stories, the listener can hear both positive and negative memories that can become signposts to a vocation. Sometimes it would be good to ask open ended questions: "I wonder what that memory means for your future?" or similar. Young adults may appreciate some open-ended questions that help them to re-tell their story and grow in awareness. It gives the listener the opportunity to ask where God might be found among those memories.

"Strive to make yourself loved"

DON BOSCO AND RELATIONSHIPS

The vocation story of most people emerges from a varied pattern of relationships that support and shape the sense of vocation. The listener may find that they become one of those significant people in a young adult's vocation story. Don Bosco's network of relationships began with his family. His mother, Margaret, was a strong shaping influence on his life pointing him towards balance and away from excess in enthusiasms and anger. His brother Anthony was a brooding and angry presence that threatened John Bosco and his other brother, Joseph, was a good supportive friend. He also had a grandmother (also called Margaret) who lived with them. Later on, John had other friends at school and at seminary but long-term relationships fell into place when he began his work and found other priests (Don Cafasso, Don Borel and others) who worked alongside him and guided his sense of vocation for the young.

Listeners also need to do this thinking from their own lives. Who has been with them on their own vocational story? Why do some people stand out? Which relationships have fallen away and why? Who has been a guide? Who has been honest? Who shared the same concerns? Knowing one's own inner pathway to vocation and the people who populate that vocational pathway can increase the sensitivity of the listener to what might be happening in the life of the young adult.



So, asking a young adult about their network of friends can be an interesting way to gain an understanding of the shape of a young adult's call. Who do they feel comfortable with? Who shares their enthusiasms? Who are their wisdom figures? Which people are already doing the kind of work to which they feel called? These questions can raise awareness within the listener about the shape and the direction of a vocational sense that emerges, not out of the blue but from the context of the young adult's own community and friends.

“Salesians for the third millennium, be enthusiastic teachers and guides, saints and formers of saints, as was Don Bosco” Pope John Paul II

DON BOSCO AND PASSION

Don Bosco was certainly full of passion for his mission to young people going ahead to the point of recklessness at times to meet their needs. At one point he was believed to be unbalanced because of his passion and because he regularly worked to a standstill and then had to take extended time off to recover. This tight focus on the needs of the young was a hallmark of his vocation and it can be traced back to a close identification Don Bosco had with young people. His own experience of loss and poverty and abandonment left him with an almost desperate need to ease those problems in the abandoned young people of Turin. He did not want that cycle of damage and neglect to destroy young lives. Therefore, his gifts and his deficits came together in a single focus to serve the young. Their needs resonated deep in Don Bosco's heart and roused within him a passion to change their world.



The passion experienced by founders is often disarming and also alarming. It is at times wild and creative and likely to disturb the status quo. In religious language it is an expression of the Spirit that transforms life. The passion expressed by young people to change the world is the outward sign of that Spirit at work in their lives. It may be wild, prone to highs and lows, but it may be a vital key to the young adult's long-term vocation. The listener needs to follow the energy and support the young adult as they learn to manage this spiritual energy into balanced vocational action.

The majority of young adults probably find it difficult to identify their passion, their deepest most compelling values in life. There is so much over-stimulation in young lives that they may have been disconnected from their inner life, their own imagination and their spirit. Don Bosco identified his vocation as responding to wounded childhood at the invitation of Jesus. What might Jesus be inviting them to do with their life through their own passions?

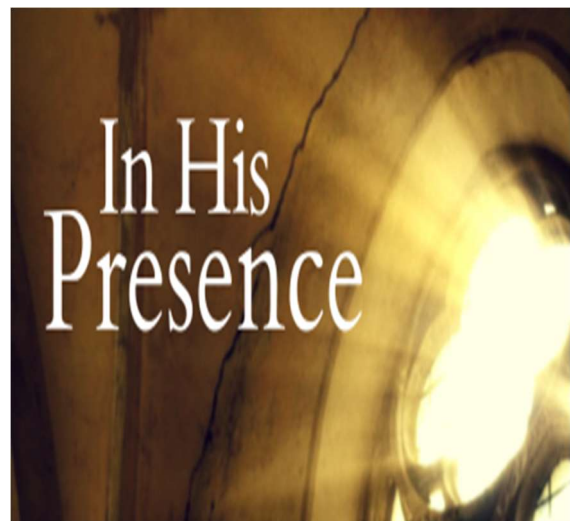
"For you young people I study, for you I work, for you I live, for you I am ready even to give my life".-St. John Bosco

SPIRITUALITY AND DON BOSCO

Spirituality is the way a person experiences the transcendent and the meaning of their lives. For religious people this means the experience of God as it shapes their lives and their world-view. For Don Bosco that spiritual and religious view was developed in his relationship with his mother Margaret and through the events of his early life. The regular patterns of family prayer and his early parish experiences were important in forming that religious world-view. Far more influential was the way his mother modelled that spiritual life in her actions: in her fairness, tenderness, consistency, love for neighbours and understanding, she revealed the face of God to John Bosco and showed him how to integrate faith and life.

Don Bosco's personal spirituality was nurtured in that cradle of family life. His loving kindness, his compassion and justice, his sense of fun and celebration were all intimately linked with an abiding sense of God's presence as a loving Father. So, Don Bosco's vocation and his relationship with God took on a shape that reflected his own experience of faith, hope and charity in his early years.

The listener, in engaging with the young adult needs to notice their early history of belief: did they always believe in God? Go to church? Say prayers? Did they have people in their lives that somehow made belief easier? What kind of world-view do they have now? How does their life fit together and into a bigger picture? Is there anything, or anyone for which they would give their life?



Helping a young adult to identify what is the deepest driving force in their life beyond ego, beyond popularity or success, is a sacred task for the listener. Once they have found that theme, that key in which their life is being played, they have discovered something more of who they are in relation to their God. So, the listener needs to be reflecting prayerfully on the way that God seems to be at work in the young adult's life and encouraging them to engage in that unique relationship to God for which they were made.

SOME KEY PHRASES TO LISTEN FOR:

“It just felt weird.”

Here the young adult’s world view has just been challenged by something that doesn’t fit. Ask what they mean, draw them out and see if they can articulate what weird might mean for them.

“It makes me so angry.”

Some deep value has been offended in the life of the young adult. There is energy there to defend a person or a situation. Ask why that makes them angry, what has gone wrong and if they can do something about it. Ask them what their anger says about them as a person.

“My heart just went out to them.”

This phrase or similar represents a sense of identification with someone at risk and a feeling of compassion. It points to a deeper sense of connectedness that Christians call the communion of saints. Ask them why it bothers them that others are hurting and what that compassion says about how they want to live their lives.

“I was just so peaceful. Time stood still”

Phrases like these point to a possible religious experience, a connection with the transcendent and, depending on the person, religious language could be used. The inner life of the young person and their interconnectedness with the world around and with all people may have overwhelmed them. Listeners need to affirm these experiences because they are so easily dismissed and ask them to say what they think it might mean. Do they need to slow down? Take up some meditation? Re-think some choices? Ask them to let you know if they have other experiences like that.

“I’m just so restless”

I’m so unsure, something is niggling away inside me.”

Sentences like this may indicate that there is something more that needs to happen on the young adult’s life path. It is an intuition that something might need to change but it is not at all clear what it is. Such a phrase can give the listener an opportunity to suggest some ways of thinking about this uncertainty. How are you going to put your finger on what is niggling? Who can you talk to, who knows you well, who might help? What has changed in your life that might be connected?

“I had a dream.”

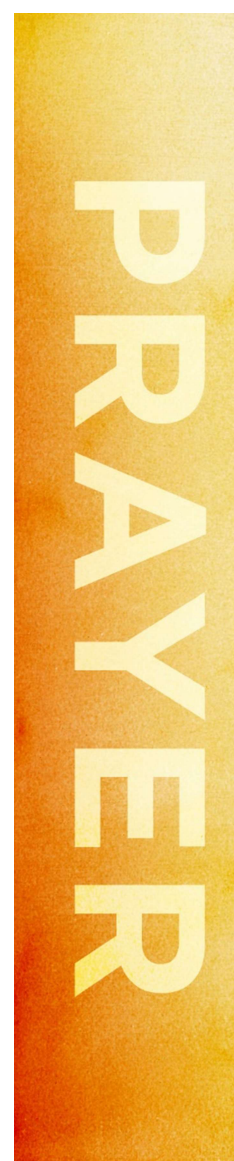
Young adults often mention dreams and the listener can encourage them to talk about them. Not because dreams predict the future but rather, they reveal some inner concerns of the young adult. The dreams that are most significant are the ones that wake a person up and have some positive energy about them. Ask them what the mood and theme of the dream was. Ask them how it might connect with their waking life and whether it raises any choices. Don't take the dreams too seriously or at face value. But take the conversation about and the opportunity it creates for the young adult to speak about their interior life.

A PRAYER FOR VOCATIONAL LISTENING

Lord open my ears
Open my heart
To hear the way that your abiding presence
Is emerging in the lives of young adults.

Help me to recognise the way that you call young adults
And the way that you are calling me to listen to them.
Save me from giving unwelcome advice
Help me to avoid explanations
That the young adult needs to work out themselves.

Help me to listen, as you did on the road to Emmaus
To enter the world of the young adult
As holy ground and with reverent questions
So that together we can walk the path of your Gospel
In friendly conversation. AMEN



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ⁱ See Hay and Nye The Spirit of The Child 1998 page 237