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## Introduction

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“BOBBY HURLEY NEARLY RAN OVER ME LAST WEEK!” a female classmate chirped as we stepped out of class into a bright September afternoon. Rather than expressing relief that she had avoided being struck by a vehicle, she actually seemed a little sorry she hadn’t ended up on the hood. The reason was obvious enough: he might have noticed her then—and back in the fall of 1991, few things meant more to students at Duke University than a mere glance from Bobby Hurley.

As the school’s sensational point guard, Hurley had led Duke’s basketball team to its first national championship just five months before. By April of the following year, he would be a full-fledged hero—featured on the cover of *Sports Illustrated*, Most Valuable Player of the Final Four, the spark behind the Blue Devils’ second straight NCAA title. I didn’t even know the guy and had never seen him driving. But during my freshman year at Duke, there was no one I envied more than Bobby Hurley.

My jealousy wasn’t new either. In fact, it was in full flower before I’d even set foot on campus, back when I was a third-string distance runner on my high school track team. Hurley, fresh off a legendary career at St. Anthony High in Jersey City, was already a star in the making at Duke. Here was a guy who had everything I didn’t have—athletic prowess, fame, and, judging by the rumor mill, all the women he could handle. He also apparently had the one thing I did have—book smarts. A basketball magazine

I'd leafed through once mentioned something about his stellar grade point average.

When my uncle, a Capuchin priest from Pittsburgh, stopped by the house one night for dinner, I greeted him with a plateful of teenage aggrievement. Why, I demanded, still smarting from the humiliation of the previous year's biweekly acne treatments, did God give one guy so much? Why couldn't I be like Hurley?

My uncle, calm and thoughtful, nodded slowly. "Hmm," he said. "The distribution of talent. That's a difficult one."

"The distribution of what?" I nearly shouted in the midst of my outrage. "Must the Catholic Church have a theological construct for everything?"

My uncle gently explained that God endows us all with gifts; it's our lifelong challenge to ascertain what they are and how to use them. We waste our time—and stray farther away from our own purpose—by envying other talents God never even intended us to have. From the distance of twenty years and some additional maturity on my part, his answer makes much more sense now than it did then. Snared as I was, however, in the clutches of bleak novels about the meaninglessness of life by Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Camus, and other chronically unhappy philosophers and writers, not to mention self-pity and tremendous yearning for several girls I was too shy to ask out, I nodded, dismissed his advice out of hand, and continued on my bitter way. Many years and some developed talent later, I do take solace in this: there was a good reason to be jealous of Bobby Hurley. He did have something I didn't have. But it wasn't any of the things I thought it was.

It's taken most of my adult life to figure that out—and, fittingly, it was my Capuchin uncle who put me on the

scent. Chatting at a family reunion several years ago, we touched on the shortage of priests. Vocations were still out there, my uncle told me. But our culture had gotten noisy and distracting, and it was getting harder and harder to hear the call. Making matters worse, most of us had also forgotten how to slow down long enough to listen. And it wasn't just potential priests who were missing out. Increasingly, people in general couldn't get a grip on who they were supposed to be. Even the simple notion of a calling, emanating from deep within and filling our day-to-day lives with meaning, seemed foreign to many of us. Instead, from our earliest days in school, we often pursue what others expect of us, or what we think is practical or prestigious, or whatever we fall into by accident or circumstance. Sometimes, we stumble into the right fit for our lives. Most of the time we don't—and the toll ranges from broken relationships, addictions, and physical or mental illness to burnout, creeping frustration, and the relentlessly nagging question: "Is this all there is?"

It's only recently I've understood that when you strip away the highlight reels and the championship trophies and the chants from adoring students, this was Hurley's greatest blessing: he had a calling. When he stepped on the court, he knew exactly who he was supposed to be, and he didn't want to be anyone else. He was an artist, the author of stunning no-look passes and daring drives down jam-packed lanes, uncannily threading the ball through a thicket of flailing arms and legs. More important than that, though, it was obvious how much he loved to play and how hard he worked to get better—not merely so he could make another highlight reel move, but because he owed it to himself to give every possible ounce of effort to what he

was born to do. Watching him, you got the feeling he'd play precisely the same way against you in a driveway game of one-on-one, and take the same deep satisfaction in it too. A calling that pure, coupled with that kind of self-knowledge, is actually worthy of envy—now more than ever.

I believe today that regardless of the pain that sometimes comes from the lack of prestige or success in the world, such a calling is within reach for all of us. Finding and fulfilling a vocation does not require genius. It does not depend on extraordinary talent or knowing important people. It certainly has nothing to do with fame, despite our society's ever-growing fixation with it. Rather, starting with faith—in both God and the trueness of one's calling—we can stand out in our own right, instead of fixating with jealousy, regret, and bitterness on the kind of people we aren't and were never intended to be. We probably won't play out our calling in the headlines or on national television, but that doesn't matter. We're all called to live with passion and purpose in a broken world that is desperate for the very best each of us can bring. God will know when we're succeeding. So will we and the people close to us—and that is a profoundly Christian, if countercultural, way of measuring success.

Where to begin, however? How does one find one's "calling"? The Catholic Church offers numerous guides, both living and dead, who show us how to discern a call or build on the progress we've already made. They remind us, first of all, of this enduring fact: the journey toward a calling can transform our lives in ways we never imagined. In fact, embarking on it is perhaps the only way to experience life to its fullest. The pursuit of an authentic vocation can bring out the best in us and those around us, making

us more self-aware, creating opportunities to serve others with our talents, enriching our days with meaning that might have eluded us before.

These guides testify, too, with even more challenge, to a second lesson: discovering one's vocation can be an extremely demanding trek. The first (and perhaps most difficult) demand is we must live with a degree of uncertainty. We don't know where the journey will lead or how long it's going to take, though we can be sure it will test our strength and demand sacrifice. How many of us have told a friend, "I just want to know what I'm supposed to do with my life"? We expect such an answer to cause everything to make sense and all anxiety disappear from that point forward. In truth, receiving the "answer," even if we receive it in a powerful, unambiguous way, is just the start. We might not—and probably won't ever—be entirely at ease with all our calling requires of us. Might it mean turning down lucrative job offers? What if it brings us skepticism or even misunderstanding and contempt from loved ones? Are we willing to end close relationships with people who think we're misguided? What if we make a mistake and need to start over?

We are social animals, wired to conform. Convention frequently drives us to pursue wealth, status, and security, not because we are vain (although we can be), but because the alternative can be deeply frightening. Unfortunately, the work that brings us the reward of security is often not the work that makes the best use of our gifts (although sometimes it can). Even if we don't necessarily crave the rewards that come with following the path of security (although sometimes we do), we oftentimes conform merely because it's what our culture expects us to do, and to

challenge that is frightening. Discovering a vocation is difficult because we need to both construct and *trust* an inner compass instead of the outer one by which we've oriented much of our lives. In America, living out a calling, whether it leads us to riches or rags, is a countercultural act. If we are ever to get to a true calling, we need to be intentional—the more, the better.

In this book, I explore five steps, grounded in the Catholic tradition, that provide a practical road map for moving ahead. They involve naming our desires, developing focus, learning humility, cultivating community, and exploring the margins of our inner and outer lives.

Why these five, and what is the basis for them? They emerged in part through much reflection over the past decade on my own experiences—lessons shared by friends and mentors, interviews and observations I continue to compile as a journalist, and particularly through the ordeal of a serious illness in my mid twenties. Just as significantly, these practices are strongly informed by the Christian mystical tradition, specifically the wisdom and routines of Trappist monks. Since my first visit to a monastery in college, the Trappist way of life—so completely counter to our prevailing culture in virtually every way—has proved an endless source of fascination. Over the years, I've made many retreats to monasteries, interviewed monks, read their books, and closely studied their way of life. Every page of this book is, in some way, rooted in the Trappist spirit and example.

Examining exactly how we build a vocation and what examples of success look like are the central business of the book. Going in search of a call, as you will see, is an adventure of the highest order, and it exacts a real price. In

fact, it must—because for many of us a call is created in the very act of paying for it. Even Bobby Hurley wasn't exempt from this reality.

After Duke, Hurley was drafted by the NBA's Sacramento Kings. Heading home from a game one December night during his rookie season, he turned at a dark intersection. Another car—charging down the road at sixty miles an hour with its headlights off—broad-sided him. Not wearing a seatbelt, Hurley flew one hundred feet into a ditch. He'd likely have died if a teammate hadn't happened upon the scene just minutes later and called for help. Even so, Hurley's injuries were staggering: two collapsed lungs, a fractured shoulder blade, a damaged knee, and, most seriously, a torn windpipe. The accident shattered his body and very nearly killed him. His grueling recovery and return to pro basketball a year later made great headlines. But Hurley's body and his game were never quite the same. He did not become an NBA superstar and was out of the league within five years.

Back in those pre-Internet days, it wasn't easy to keep up with his whereabouts. Besides, freshly out of college and struggling mightily with my own purpose, I was too busy to think about anyone but myself. Sometimes Hurley's name would pop up in a box score on the sports page, or a sportscaster might bring his name up when a Duke game was on television. As the years went on, an article about him would appear now and then. It seemed he lamented his lost career. His focus had drifted. He'd found some peace training and breeding racehorses. But he still felt awkward outside the gym. Increasingly, though, I relegated him to my cluttered mental bin of college memories, my substantial capacity for schoolboy jealousy

ultimately crowded out by kids, mortgage payments, and work deadlines.

Then one Saturday afternoon, not long ago, Hurley popped right back into my life. Glancing up at the television, I saw a clip for March Madness. There was Hurley, skinny and jubilant, celebrating Duke's shocking upset of previously undefeated UNLV in the 1991 Final Four. The clip faded, and suddenly there, in the center of the screen, stood the present-day, middle-aged Bobby Hurley, his dark hair thinner and his body thicker. "No way!" I thought. "That's Bobby Hurley? How did he get so old?" And then moments later: "How did I?" Poking around later for hints of what he was up to now, I came across a story from a Duke sports magazine, one of those "whatever happened to that guy?" stories about ex-jocks, the kind that often don't end well. But this was different.

Hurley, the story said, is Catholic. He didn't like to think too much about the accident that put him at death's door and stole his career. It was, he said, "a tough deal." For years afterward, he missed basketball. If he needed to settle his mind, the former all-American would shoot baskets by himself in the driveway. But at the same time, being around the game pained him, reminding him of what he'd lost. He tried working as a scout for a professional team, but that didn't last. He talked about getting into coaching but didn't. He went into the horse-breeding business instead. Still, a few years ago he told a reporter, "I can't complain. I believe God brought me back for a reason."

The reason, he said, was his wife and three young children. They became a fresh source of passion and inspiration, the new vocation of family man gradually blossoming in place of the old dream. In the time since that commercial



showed up in my den, Hurley's life has taken a few more major twists. The horse-breeding business he ran in Florida fell apart. Then his younger brother Danny Hurley was hired as the head basketball coach at Wagner University in New York. One of his first moves was offering Bobby a job as an assistant coach, which he accepted. This time the timing felt right. "I need to get back in a gym," the thirty-eight-year-old Hurley told a Staten Island newspaper. He'd had his original vocation torn away from him but still managed to stumble back toward it, and it fitfully grew into a second, richly rewarding one along the way. His story is more dramatic than most of ours. But how different is it really?

We all struggle to get on the right path; it's an equally challenging fight to stay on course once we've found a calling. That's where the five core practices laid out in this book come to our aid. I know the practices explored in this book to be true because following them changed, and in some respects even saved, my life. More broadly, they have transformed the lives of Trappist monks for far longer—a thousand years, to be exact. I wrote this book to make their knowledge accessible and actionable for more of us. I wrote it, too, to make sense of my own experience and make it useful for others. I hope you find it an engaging, hands-on, and, above all, practical guide to the most important work we can do in our lives—finding and fulfilling our callings.

Part 1 recounts my own struggles to grasp a purpose, from my awkward high school and college years through the present day in which I've emerged, now in my late thirties, far more comfortable in my own skin. In part 2, the bulk of the book, we will look in detail at the five practices I've learned—and how they can help you journey toward your calling right now and well into the future.

You will see it is crucial, first of all, to follow our desires. What attracts us? What leaves us cold? This shouldn't be hard to observe, but we manage to make it hard. Since we are continually distracted by the Internet, television, and the latest hand-held devices, it's challenging to slow down long enough to identify what moves us. We're eager to get things done, check the next item off the list. But to what are we truly drawn?

Once we know our desires, we need a second trait: the focus to follow through on them, to make room in our lives for what matters most. Monks passionately desire total union with God. Unlike most of us, they don't passively await blinding moments of insight or let how they're feeling on a given day decide the outcome of their journey. Instead, they devote themselves to highly structured lives of prayer, work, and study. Might getting a little more focused in our own lives give us the momentum we need to enter more fully into our own callings?

At the same time, winding our way toward our own uniquely personal vocation means letting go of many things—preconceptions of ourselves, the opinions of others, the temptation to settle for easy answers. Letting go calls for the humility to accept where our desires lead us instead of where we want to steer ourselves. Humility is perhaps the most fundamental key to salvation in the gospels, and certainly one of the keys to finding and embracing our calling.

With humility comes the realization we're not likely to find or to fulfill our vocations solely by ourselves. Even Jesus needed his disciples. The rest of us need help as well—and we can find it in community. In fact, the pursuit of a calling can—and in my case, did—devolve into an

exercise in self-absorption. So it's crucial that we involve others on our quest. They have plenty to teach us about our strengths and weaknesses. They can offer inspiration that helps us move through challenging times—and also afford us the privilege of assisting in the pursuit of their own callings. The vocational journey, after all, is not just about us. We are all, as St. Paul reminds us, part of the Body of Christ. The Church's collective progress toward salvation and the development of our unique callings as individual Christians are closely intertwined. We have critical roles to play in helping each other along.

Finally, the pursuit of our own vocations sometimes calls for journeying into the unexplored regions of our communities and, even more significantly, our own hearts, minds, and souls. Many of us lose sight of our vocations because we're too quick to follow society's conventions, which often dictate the jobs we have, the friends we make, and the views we hold. It's worth remembering that Christianity emerged entirely from the margins. Living our faith requires keeping one foot over there. That's what Mary did two thousand years ago when she said yes to God, and it's what some of our most visionary spiritual leaders do today as well. As the examples we will explore in this book remind us, when we listen less to the opinions of the world and more to God and to our own hearts, we're likely to see our vocations arise and evolve in ways we never imagined.

Let me be clear: this is not one of those volumes on "how to find a meaningful job" that a career counselor might hand you. Certainly, there's nothing wrong with those books. But there's already plenty of them out there. Instead of industry overviews, educational prerequisites, personality tests, and skill inventories, this book is grounded in a

different tradition altogether—that of Christian mysticism. This book might actually help you find a specific career that is more compelling, but it's more concerned with helping you find answers to life's most fundamental questions: What was I put here to do? And how do I do it? In these pages, we'll meet ourselves where we are and see what we can learn from some of history's greatest teachers. We will ready ourselves for the next steps on our own unrepeatable journeys—not the journeys we think we should take or wish we could, but the ones to which we're called.