

Vincent Harding

I HEAR THEM . . . CALLING

Vincent Harding (1931–2014) was both a scholar-teacher and a leader of domestic and international movements for peace and justice. In this article, written fairly early in his career, Harding traces his own story, telling how he listened, across the years, to an ever-expanding chorus of voices that eventually summoned him into his work as a leader in the civil rights movement, a peace activist, a husband and father, and a historian. How does Harding's sense of the scope and needs of the community that is "calling" to him change over time?

This selection points ahead to some of the questions explored later in this book. For example, Harding's sense of the multiplicity of voices calling to him begins to make us wonder, "Is a balanced life possible and preferable to a life focused primarily on work?" (chap. 4) and "To whom and to what should I listen as I decide what to do for a living?" (chap. 2). Because of Harding's strong emphasis on the importance of communities in his discernment about the shape of his life, this selection could also be a centerpiece in chapter 3, "With whom and for whom shall I live?" We should also notice that here Harding is beginning to make sense of the many pieces of his life by creating from them a narrative, as several authors will recommend in chapter 6, "How shall I tell the story of my life?"

In his strong, repeated emphasis on the "callings" he heard and responded to during the first forty years of his life, Harding makes vivid use of the vocabulary of vocation. This essay was written for a book coedited by Will D. Campbell, whose own chapter in the same book ("Vocation as Grace") is included in the "Vocation" section of *Leading Lives That Matter* (see pp. 182–83 below).

Vincent Harding, "I Hear Them . . . Calling," in *Callings!*, ed. James Y. Holloway and Will D. Campbell (New York: Paulist, 1974), 57–69.

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Callings are strange things. I think I've heard a fair number in my time, perhaps fewer than I was supposed to — or maybe it was more; I'm not certain now. Sometimes they proved to be nothing more than echoes bouncing off from other lives (lives I sometimes thought were mine) and passed on their way. Others puzzled me, and led me into ways I do not yet understand. Some I understand and fear. A few — perhaps more than I know — I have followed as far as they led; and some are still moving. Still moving, preparing to join themselves to the sounds of the new summons, and I suspect there are yet borders to cross.

Callings are strange things. The first I remember (or want to remember?) came through the Black believers who were my extended family in a Harlem congregation. I felt their loving, often demanding grip on my life at an early time — maybe 6 or 7 — and heard the call through all their voices and fiercely possessive hopes.

Up there on platforms and stages, at all the church programs, reciting the poems and Bible verses, I heard them set me apart: "He's going to be a preacher," that call said (really meaning, he is going to be *our* preacher, ours, to assure the continuance of our hopes beyond the borders of our lives), and it was a while before I understood that it was supposed to be *my* calling, that I should hear it and respond.

It took a while for that to happen, for I was hearing other calls as well — or thought I was, though I'm sure I didn't name them that — and was trying to move with them. Like the calling to be an athlete. (This was before Jackie Robinson, so I'm not sure where I thought that road would lead. Perhaps I simply thought that a man should be able to spend his life doing what he really liked, and I liked everything that had to do with balls and bats and running and jumping and falling and feeling the strength of bodies against each other. I liked them far more than the violin and then the piano lessons that my mother hoped in vain I'd like.) That lasted for a while, but I wasn't growing as tall as I thought an athlete ought to be — especially one who thought he was called to play first base, among other things — and I began to hear other calls.

Somehow I got involved with building model airplanes, partly, I suppose, because no one had bothered to mass produce television sets yet (and we probably wouldn't have been able to afford one) and partly because there were no brothers and sisters to share the sometimes lonely days with. That's when the call came to be an aeronautical engineer (whatever that is), and I hadn't found out that Black folks weren't supposed to be aeronautical engineers. What I did find out was that my mathematical skills weren't

good enough to pass the test for the high school where all the really bright, aeronautical engineer–types were supposed to attend; so that call too was pressed aside. I think the model airplanes were pretty good, though.

Meanwhile, the loving, tightly gripping community was pressing me forward – not entirely against the sometimes showmanship of my will – into minor church offices, and other responsibilities. And I continued to be up in front at the programs (we, education-oriented folks that we were, mostly of West Indian heritage on the way from Africa, we called them *Lyceum* programs, following traditions of self-improvement deeply instilled in the African people of this country and elsewhere), reciting, only now it was a kind of quasi-acting we used to call Dramatic Reading. That was how I met James Weldon Johnson and Paul Lawrence Dunbar (not really knowing who I was meeting, not really hearing many things they were calling to me), and Walt Whitman and Alfred Lord Tennyson and a lot of even stranger people. Then on youth days I would periodically be the preacher, and that was enough to assure my extended family – and I think my mother too – that the call they heard was authentic, needing only the seasoning of time and the deepening of commitment, much seasoning and deepening – because I had some ways about me that they weren't quite sure were supposed to go with preaching in a Biblically-immersed community of saints.

But I hadn't stopped hearing the callings from other sources. In high school the teachers were the media, and I heard the call to high school teaching. Then one odd teacher told me I'd never pass the oral examination with such a wide space between my two front teeth. And high school teaching was put aside for a time.

Now, this thing with writing is part of the strangeness of the callings. I have not yet moved deeply enough into the chambers of the past to be certain about where and how it came. Perhaps the church community was the voice here too, encouraging my terrible poetry and acting as if my quarterly reports or my summaries and homilies on the Bible lessons were great documents (arousing, of course, certain contrary feelings among the younger members of my family-tribe at Victory Tabernacle Seventh Day Christian Church). That original voice is at least temporarily lost to me, but I know it existed, and if it was the community of believers, they likely did not know then that they had helped open me to one of the major tensions of my world of callings, a sometimes fierce stretching between writing and speaking, between writing and preaching, between scholarship and ministry in the midst of the people.

And by the time I got to college – somehow I think I always knew I had

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to go to college; and since there was absolutely no money for such a thing, I had to go to the only college I knew where you could at once attend without tuition and also have all the teachers and the loving tribe beam and say, "how wonderful, City College, that's a *hard* school to get into" — the loudest calling was towards writing, pressing me deeply into short story courses, journalism courses (finally majoring in History because there weren't enough writing courses), still experimenting with poetry, mostly devoted to working with the weekly campus newspaper, eventually becoming the inevitable FIRST NEGRO editor of that ancient institution of wisdom and scandal.

At City College, the calling towards writing meant another tension, pressed me towards a period of largely white friends and co-workers who vied with the ancestral community for my loyalties and my attention, led me into certain strange pathways which shut out voices I should have heard, led to great pain. But callings are strange things.

Some of the Tribe was likely worried when, after college, I went off to something else that wasn't really preaching, to graduate work in Journalism. (With all due respect to *their* worries, I was more worried about the Army then. That was a call I hoped to avoid for as long as possible.) Again the tensions of college were there, perhaps multiplied, as I was clearly being groomed for another FIRST NEGRO position. The serious and painful double voices were there, raising questions about the callings of the believers down the hill, through the park, in Harlem, and the callings which sometimes seemed so right and noble and GOOD FOR THE RACE up at City College and over at Morningside Heights — and the worlds were deeply in tension. Callings will sometimes do that.

When I finally had to answer the call of the draft board, it was 1953. Knowing of no movement, lacking courage and desire to go the path of a C.O., which I did know a bit about — but didn't really hear that call, perhaps didn't want to — I went in. I wanted desperately to be sent to Germany or Japan or even Korea, any place outside of this country — for "education," not from alienation, yet. By then I thought I had filtered out the central call among the callings, and prepared for the next FIRST NEGRO experience, at some liberal newspaper, my preference, of course, being the *New York Times*. So, my post-Army movement seemed fairly well established as I went in, hearing all the raucous sounds of death and animality which substitute for life in the Army, but determining to be a good soldier, perhaps even an officer, getting overseas somewhere.

But in the strangeness that has surrounded so much of my life (coming, I know now, from deep sounding sources in the surrounding ancestral com-

pany of saints), I also decided, perhaps for the first time, to try to listen consciously, with anticipation, for the callings. I think I wanted to see if I would hear confirmations of the voices which had come through the believers or the teachers, seeking some release from the tension, suspecting perhaps that I might be pressed across new borders, following, listening. And in a place I never expected, under circumstances I would not have chosen, a brother spoke and asked me if I had ever thought of teaching; and for reasons far too complex and too far away to speak of now, I knew that I had heard the voice, the calling for that time.

(Strange about the Army. It never sent me anywhere, except Fort Dix, N.J. and Fort Benjamin Harrison, Indiana — partly because I knew how to type and play handball. Strange, too, that time of listening. I ended up rejecting all my inclinations towards the good soldier, became a C.O. in my heart. Strange, too: I had decided to engage in a very serious and sustained study of the Bible, partly for the listening, partly to prove to my girlfriend that she ought to be a Seventh Day Adventist like me. I did not know that in those long wrestlings with text and spirit I would be engaging in a major step on my journey beyond the borders of the loving family-tribe of believers at Victory Tabernacle [but like all tribal partings, of course, *never* being able to leave them].)

It was strange about the call. I still had the words of the odd high school teacher in my mind, and decided that if I were going to teach it might be better to try college, where I assumed that spaces between teeth didn't count. But I knew nothing about graduate schools, and finally, when pressed to choose among the ones where I had been accepted, opened myself with fear and trembling to the voice of the tribe/community/church, and went to Chicago — two weeks after discharge from the Army — where I could be of assistance as interim, part-time pastor of a little mission congregation that Victory Tabernacle sponsored there. That made the graduate school acceptable, worldly as they knew it was. Now, I would be anchored in an extension of the tribe; so they thought the calls and prayers had finally drawn me out of the strange and various paths I had explored.

How do you explain it? Callings are strange things. In Chicago, for the first time — after having grown up in Harlem and the Bronx — strangely it was in Chicago that I finally heard and saw the Black urban condition in America. On the Southside, I heard its singing and its screams, saw its determination and its terror, sensed its freedom and its captivity. And while there was much I did not then understand about such calls, I knew this was calling me.

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One day I shall try to understand and speak more fully of the painful calling which took me away from the little mission congregation — and ultimately away from my immediate (but not my ultimate) relationship to the tribe of my childhood and my youth. That calling is not fully clear to me yet, and even if it were, it is not yet time to speak of it. This much can be said: the move to an interracial congregation as a lay pastor of a team ministry seemed to allow me to hold the tension of Blackness and whiteness (it was, of course, a time when such things seemed most urgent), the tension of teaching and preaching, of study and ministry. But those are only superficial statements, and should be received as such for now.

Nor is it yet time to speak fully of the ultimately transforming call that led to marriage, a call far different than any I had known, a call I was in too many ways unprepared to understand in all the richness of its meanings and its summons. But I know it is a calling, mine.

Then, before graduate work had ended, the call of the Southern Freedom Movement became overwhelming, pressing aside almost every other voice. There was no escaping it. It possessed me during my first, exploring journey into the South (grasped me there sitting on Martin King's bed in Montgomery where he rested recovering from his stabbing). It came to Chicago in the body of the students and found me. While sit-ins and freedom-rides were still sweeping across the South, we left Chicago and went South, hearing, following a call.

We shall understand it better by and by, and also speak more clearly of it, that calling. Now let it suffice to say that it was then that all the fiercely gripping, special callings of the South began, calls of the Movement, of Southwest Georgia (home of my wife's parents, repository of so many memories of hope and fear), of all the stretching land upon which my people walked, and worked, and ran, and stood, and died. Then it began, all the callings of Birmingham and Tuskegee, of Montgomery and Mobile, of Jackson and Meridian, of Gulfport and Greenwood, of New Orleans and Charleston, of Hickory and Atlanta, of Ella Baker and Amzie Moore, of Ralph Abernathy and Bill Shields, of Bob Moses Parris and Annelle Ponder, of Jim and Diane, of Septima Clark and Slater King, of Clarence Jordan and Staughton Lynd — this was the beginning of new callings.

And when, after four years that encompassed a generation of struggle, when the Movement had passed its height, it was possible to hear strange callings through personal tragedy, and there were endings and beginnings again. Then finally the finishing of graduate work and the beginning of teaching — still with a space between the front two teeth.

There the latest callings began. From somewhere — had Buddha visited? — there was an urgent aching to understand the meaning of Vietnam, and on the 20th anniversary of Hiroshima, that need plunged me past the superficial surfaces of my knowing, brought me in touch with the meaning of that brutal tale, that heroic defense of life, and provided new impetus for my continuing movement away from this America, towards a radically transformed society.

Teaching, spaces and all. There the latest callings began. Teaching history I was called to understand how little I knew of history. Teaching Black students, I learned how little this Black student, this FIRST NEGRO, had been taught, especially about the truth of his own long pilgrimage, about his people's struggles against the powers of death, about their determined movement towards new life. And when I knew that, I began — as in the Army, only a different army now — to listen again, hearing some things that I had let slip by in the days of the Tribe, understanding things I had only seen in the Movement. I began to hear voices more loudly than ever before, and they will not be silent, for they are me.

I hear all the varied sounds of my homeland, all its human sounds, all its animals, its spirit-filled rivers and lakes, its waterfalls, its mountains, its grass and trees playing with the wind. I hear them all.

I hear all the screaming of my homeland, all the mournful pacing down to the slave baracoons, all the piercing, dying shouts, all the parting wailing sounds. I hear children, crying children, I hear men, I hear women, calling, now desiring only to be remembered, and vindicated. I hear them between the decks of the ships called *Jesus* and *St. John*, and *Liberty*, and *Justice*. I hear their whispers and then their bursting yells as they come on decks prepared to die, and, if necessary, to kill for their freedom. I hear them calling, falling on the decks, thrown, often leaping to their ending — but not ending — in the waters. I hear them singing as they go under the waves — free.

I hear my people. I hear them calling from Virginia to San Francisco, I hear their songs and their cries and their defiant shouts and their long silences through all the horrors called slavery. I hear them lost in the wilderness, I hear them moving, seeking the North Star, determined to make their way to freedom.

I hear them in preaching and praying, holding one another through hunger and parting, through torture and sickness, through childbirth and dying, I hear them calling.

I hear my people, lurching, flooding towards freedom during the Civil War, seizing their own liberty. I hear them fighting and falling, rising and

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hoping again. I hear them in all the halcyon hopeful first days of Reconstruction, in all the bloody years that followed, when hope was crushed by the force of white arms and the power of white betrayals.

I hear them, mourning, weeping, wailing, prostrate around the thousands of trees where brothers and sisters were hung and burned and mutilated beyond recognition by a savage people. I hear them vowing never to give in, never to turn back, to endure, to resist, to live, to go on. I hear their calling.

I hear them coming North, I hear them in the armies, I hear them in the mills, I hear them in the railroads, I hear them in the fires, I hear them in the waters, I hear Nat Turner and David Walker, I hear Douglass and Delaney, I hear Harriet and Sojourner, I hear Ida B. Wells and Bishop Turner, I hear Garvey and DuBois, I hear Bessie Smith. I hear them calling.

I hear them in depression, picking their way through garbage piles, sharing even that with one another. I hear them calling for Robeson, for Father, for Daddy, for Adam, for Solidarity, for help.

I hear them in war, dying for a land that will not protect them. I hear them coming beyond war to struggle for truth. I hear them in court. I hear them in the streets. I hear ladies walking in Montgomery. I hear Martin preaching in the churches, hear his footsteps on the road. I hear old folks singing in churches, standing before dogs. I hear students risking their lives, freezing in jail, singing while hungry, laughing when afraid, not being overcome. I hear them calling.

I hear my people marching, refusing to stop, refusing to be quiet, refusing to be satisfied, refusing to die.

I hear Malcolm, I hear Stokely, I hear Rap and Feather, I hear Ruby and Jim. I hear Jonathan. I hear Angela. I hear Attica. I hear dying Panthers and preachers. I hear living men and women. I hear them. I hear voices, and I know what it means.

Callings are a strange thing. I know what it means: I am a witness, in spite of myself, beyond myself, and their voices must be heard.

I am a witness (teacher, preacher, ranter, raver, dissident, resistant, radical, revolutionary, silent carrier), witness to their truth and power, pressed forward by the force of their being, by the integrity of their struggle, by the silent roaring of their voices. No turning back.

I know what it means: I am historian — now recognizing all the long ago callings — summoned to tell their story, for them, for myself, for our children. They shall not be forgotten.

It means I am now of them, deep calling unto deep. Their voice has en-

tered so profoundly into me that I am flesh of their flesh, bone of their bone, song of their song, pain of their pain, hope of their hope. Forever lost to scholarly "objectivity," forever seared by the passion of their fiery movement, unwilling and unable to be detached from their struggle. Bound by cords of life and death and love — and intimations of the morning. Privileged, permitted, summoned to join them, their struggle is mine, and I am called forward into tomorrow, searching for the way to carry the struggle, to break the bonds, to build the new land of their hopes.

(Callings are strange things. They find you in the midst of your own family.)

I hear my mother, sighing, scrubbing all the floors in all the white homes, bearing with love and pain and anxious prayer the burden that I was/am. (I would like to hear my father, and one day I suspect I shall.) I know it means I am still son, hope, strength, promise for tomorrow, beyond all the pain and death.

I hear voices — of my children, Rachel Sojourner and Jonathan DuBois. I believe that ancient rivers of our people flow in them. I hear their voices, and I know what it means. It means I am called to be father, rock and strength, encourager for the struggles of tomorrow, baptizer in the rivers of their past.

I hear a voice, of my wife, Rosemarie. I know what it means. I am to be husband and man, strength and solace, lover and companion in the way, resting place and summons to joy in the morning.

Callings are strange things. I think I have heard many voices in many times and places, but it may be that I have heard only One.