Reading

Vincent Harding, “I Hear Them . . . Calling”

From *Callings!*, ed. James Y. Holloway and Will D. Campbell (New York: Paulist, 1974), 57–69. Included, with permission, in Mark R. Schwehn and Dorothy C. Bass (eds.), *Leading Lives That Matter: What We Should Do and Who We Should Be,* second edition (Eerdmans, 2020), 31-39.

**About the author**

Vincent Harding (1931–2014) grew up in Harlem, the son of a single mother who was a domestic worker. The two belonged to a vibrant Adventist congregation that affirmed Harding’s gifts and called him into ministry. Teachers in New York City public schools, the City University of New York, and Columbia University introduced him to other vocational possibilities. After being drafted into the Army, he developed a lifelong commitment to nonviolence; he eventually became a Mennonite. He also decided to go to graduate school in history. All along the way, he wrestled with what it meant to move beyond the borders of the loving family-tribe of believers at Victory Tabernacle, his home congregation, which he left but would always appreciate.

In 1958, Harding traveled to Alabama with an interracial group to learn about the Southern Freedom Movement. He discovered there a calling that was “overwhelming, pressing aside almost every other voice.” He and his wife soon moved to Atlanta, where he became an important colleague of Dr. King and an influential leader in the nonviolent struggle for justice.

From 1981 to 2004, Harding taught Religion and Social Transformation at Iliff School of Theology in Denver. During these years, he wrote three influential books (*There Is a River: The Black Struggle for Freedom in America; Hope and History: Why We Must Share the Story of the Movement;* and *Martin Luther King: The Inconvenient Hero),* as well as teaching, speaking, and participating in movements for social justice. He also created the Veterans of Hope Project, which still operates under the direction of his daughter, Dr. Rachel Sojourner Harding. This project gathers and shares wisdom from elder activists about the role of spirituality and creativity in their work for racial, gender, economic and environmental justice, and it makes sure that these and other vocational stories are shared with young people.

**Commentary**

In this short essay, Harding traces his own vocational journey into his early forties, telling about the 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, a writer, and an educator.

Harding’s story emerged from his context in the Black church, the civil rights movement, and Black history. Encountering his story, readers of various backgrounds learn more about the depth and resilience of the specific communities from which Harding came.

At the same time, delving into the specific journey of one person also prompts other readers to recall their own journeys and the communities, teachers, and social movements that have called to them.

**Discussion questions**

1. Notice the various voices Harding heard calling to him at different points in his life. For example: his mother, the Harlem congregation, reading, high school teachers, college, Army, Chicago congregation, Martin Luther King Jr., his wife and kids, working as a historian, and the voices of his people.

How did the communities from which Harding came and which he encountered along the way help him to imagine what he should be and do?

Dig into the significance of one or two voices that seem most powerful or interesting to you; for example: the congregation in which he grew up; the Southern Freedom Movement; the sense of connection to the larger story of his people.

1. Write down a chronological list of the voices or communities you have heard calling over the course of your life. After a couple of minutes, circle the voices that stand out to you.

Have there been times when you stepped beyond the family-tribe in which you grew up? Have there been voices that have been overwhelming to you, pressing aside almost every other voice?

Share these lists in pairs.

1. Ponder the last sentence in this essay: “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.”

What One do you think Harding means?

As you see it, were the many different callings Harding heard actually from one source?

What in your own experience informs how you respond to this question in your own life?

1. Harding wrote this essay at mid-life. Three years before his death, he offered another summary of his vocational journey in an interview with Krista Tippett ([*https://onbeing.org/programs/vincent-harding-is-america-possible/*](https://onbeing.org/programs/vincent-harding-is-america-possible/)). Do you find the following statement true? Does it resonate with your own story?

The older I get, the more I am convinced that that magnificent madman, Jesus, was really talking about something very truthful and powerful when he said if you allow yourself to really hunger and thirst after the right way, then if you will not back off from that hunger and that thirst, if you will just keep after it, then you will find the way. You will be filled. The way will find you.