

Single Life



An Inside Look

Donna Kamann

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*For my mother, Marietta,
who always encouraged me to tell my story.
Special thanks to Mary, Jerry, and Shirley
for their support of many of my single endeavors,
including the writing of this book.
Thanks also to Beth, Anthony, and Charlie,
and to the many people who have shared their life with me,
making it possible for these stories to come alive on paper.*

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Series Foreword

An old Hasidic legend about the mysterious nature of life says that God whispers into your newly created soul all the secrets of your existence, all the divine love for you, and your unique purpose in life. Then, just as God infuses your soul into your body, an assisting angel presses your mouth shut and instructs your soul to forget its preternatural life.

You are now spending your time on earth seeking to know once again the God who created you, loves you, and assigns you a singular purpose. Raise your forefinger to feel the crease mark the angel left above your lips, and ask yourself in wonder: *Who am I? How am I uniquely called to live in the world?*

The authors of the five titles in this Vocations series tell how they approached these same questions as they searched for meaning and purpose in their Christian vocation, whether as a brother, a married couple, a priest, a single person, or a sister.

Christians believe that God creates a dream for each person. What is your dream in life? This is how Pope John Paul II, echoing Jeremiah 1:5, speaks of the Creator's dream and the divine origin of your vocation:

All human beings, from their mothers' womb, belong to God who searches them and knows them, who forms them and knits them together with his own hands, who gazes on them when they are tiny shapeless embryos

and already sees in them the adults of tomorrow whose days are numbered and whose vocation is even now written in the “book of life.” (*Evangelium Vitae*, no. 61)

In spite of believing that God does have your specific vocation in mind, you probably share the common human experience—the tension and the mystery—of finding out who you are and how God is personally calling you to live in this world. Although you can quickly recognize the uniqueness of your thumbprint, you will spend a lifetime deciphering the full meaning of your originality.

There is no shortage of psychological questionnaires for identifying your personality type, career path, learning style, and even a compatible mate. Although these methods can be helpful in your journey to self-discovery, they do little to illuminate the mystery in your quest. What is the best approach to knowing your vocation in life? Follow the pathway as it unfolds before you and live with the questions that arise along the way.

The stories in this Vocations series tell about life on the path of discernment and choice; they remind you that you are not alone. God is your most present and patient companion. In the “travelogues” of these authors, you will find reassurance that even when you relegate the Divine Guide to keeping ten paces behind you, or when you abandon the path entirely for a time, you cannot undo God’s faithfulness to you. Each vocation story uniquely testifies to the truth that God is always at work revealing your life’s purpose to you.

In these stories you will also find that other traveling companions—family, friends, and classmates—contribute to your discovery of a place in the world and call forth the person you are becoming. Their companionship along the way not only manifests God’s abiding presence but reminds you to respect others for their gifts, which highlight and mirror your own.

Although each path in the Vocations series is as unique as the person who tells his or her story, these accounts remind you to be patient with the mystery of your own life, to have confidence in God’s direction, and to listen to the people and events you encounter as you journey to discover your unique role in God’s plan. By following your path, you too will come to see the person of tomorrow who lives in you today.

Clare vanBrandwijk



Introduction

Anthony and I are walking, taking advantage of the warm autumn day, when out of the blue he says to me, “Donna, why aren’t you married?” It seems odd that after all this time, my eleven-year-old nephew has thought to question my singleness. He and his seven-year-old sister, Charlie, moved to Winona, Minnesota, with their mother when their parents divorced five years ago. We all jokingly refer to me as “the Dad” because I have been such a big part of their life. Although we are not a traditional family unit, we love and support one another, and I know I will forever be part of their memories of childhood.

I also realize that I influence the way they think. It is important that I answer Anthony’s question honestly, but I also know he cannot understand my own complex thoughts about this same question: Why am I not married?

“I guess God wants me to be single right now. Just think; if I were married, I would not have as much time to be with you and Charlie.” Anthony ponders a moment and adds, “Don’t you want to be married?” I answer slowly, “I have always thought I want to be married, but I like being single too.” With the pure confidence of childhood, Anthony replies, “I want to have a wife and some kids.”

I hope to protect him from his own determination about a future he cannot possibly control. “Honey, sometimes we don’t always get what we want.” Anthony turns his strong, young face toward me and says, “Yeah, well, I’m going to get married when I grow up.”

My name is Donna, and I am a thirty-six-year-old single woman. Writing a book about being single was not on my list of things I would do when I grew up. Even *being single* was not on my list. Listening to my nephew discuss marriage with such conviction brought back memories of my own ideas of what adult life would be like “when I grow up.”

Does God call you to pick a vocation?

When do you decide how you will live? What goes into the thoughts that shape your dreams? Do you know, at eleven, what you want for the rest of your life? Do you ever know for sure? Who are the role models that affect your ideas about vocations? Does God call you to pick a vocation, or does fate decide whether you will marry, remain single, or enter religious life? Or do you just wake up one day and say, “I have decided to remain single”?

When children are young, adults quiz them, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” Before they complete high school, teenagers are expected to have some idea of the career path they are interested in as they make choices about college, vocational school, and work. Can you reasonably believe that young people at eighteen know what they want to do for the rest of their life?

Deciding on a lifestyle choice—marriage, remaining single, the religious life, or the priesthood—is daunting. I suspect that few people know with any certainty what they want from life until they have experienced different possibilities. The role models you see can lead you to believe in the option that you would prefer, but sometimes the alternatives are not

what they appear to be. What may work well for one person may not fit another. The more people I listen to and the greater insight I gain, the less I think the choice is quite as simple as it looks at first glance.

When I observe married couples, I often think that they look happy and that their lives seem complete. But after meeting many married people, I can safely say that they all have their struggles. The same conclusion holds true for singles, priests, and vowed religious. All lifestyle choices involve challenges, complications, and satisfactions that may not be apparent from a distance.

I pray that you will learn what God intends you to learn.

I hope to share with you some of the joys and challenges of being a single Catholic adult. I can honestly say that when I was eleven, fifteen, and even twenty, I did not know that I would now be single or how my life would play out. When I reflect on all the factors that have influenced my choices, I am aware of a vast and complex cascade of events that shaped my life. Many situations, including my childhood experiences, have led me to the single life.

When I pray for vocations, I pray that you will be open to whatever God offers you, be it pleasant or painful. I pray that you will learn what God intends you to learn, that you will grow in ways greater than you can imagine, and that you will remain open to the unknown. You might discover your vocation in ways you never anticipated, yet you must trust that good will come from every experience you approach with love and that grace will bless your future.



A Look Back

The summer I turned eleven, my mom was pregnant, and I was so excited. The second oldest of four children, I loved babies. Toward the end of her pregnancy, my mom set up the bassinet and filled it with the clothing she had received as shower gifts. I remember picking out my favorite, a mint-green sleeper, and holding it up, pretending that the baby was already inside.

Early one June morning, Crista was born. We children were all delighted, except Michael, who desperately wanted a little brother. He ran out of the house, crying, and slammed the door. His reaction did not dampen our spirits as my sisters and I hurried to eat breakfast and get dressed to go to the hospital with our father.

The three days my mom and the new baby spent in the hospital were wonderful days for all of us as we anticipated their return home. My father, who loved to hunt and eat wild game, had stocked the freezer with all kinds of crazy critters that my mother refused to cook or eat. While she was recovering in the hospital, he took advantage of the time to prepare his special meals for us. We all thought our father was cool, and we enjoyed these odd festive meals and his unusual presence in the kitchen.

Crista became a most coveted baby; we all wanted to hold, burp, and rock her. Hearing her crying in the middle of the night, I would wake up and

go to her room. I loved holding her in the quiet of the night. She was just beautiful!

We grew up in the woods of northern Minnesota. Summers were seasons of pure freedom: running barefoot through the woods, swimming in the lake, and lying in the grass while reading. Someone had given my mother a baby carrier that we could strap on our back, so my older sister or I would put Crista in the pack and bring her with us on our adventures. We picked dandelions and rubbed them on her cheeks until she looked like a piece of sunshine, and then we brought her, sound asleep and slumped over in the baby carrier, back to my mom.

Dreams and Realities of Growing Up

Having a new baby in our family clearly confirmed what I had always known: I wanted to have children when I grew up. I would be a wonderful mom, just like my own mother. At fifteen, I outlined my goals. I planned to go to college and graduate by the age of twenty-two. I would already be dating the man I was to marry, but I would spend two years working in a wonderful job. Then we would marry, wait a year, and begin our family. I even had selected names for the children. I based this idyllic plan on my perceptions of real life, the influence of television, and my observation of others. Once I became an adult, all the pieces would fall into place, and life would be perfect.

I did go to college and receive a degree in fine arts. Before graduating, I landed the job of my dreams: working as a graphic artist in a large publishing company. Before long, I began to hate my new job, which was stressful and did not seem to be a good fit for me. I was not dating the man of my dreams either. In fact, I was not doing well in the dating department. The realization dawned on me that everything did not necessarily fall into place just because I had reached adulthood.

I decided to leave the job and start over somewhere else. The move happened quickly: I quit my work, packed up my belongings, and headed to southern Wisconsin for a fresh start and a second chance. Another two years of working in jobs I did not like and of dating men who did not

begin to live up to my image of Mr. Right brought me no closer to the happiness I had expected.

How do you reconcile your hopes with reality when they do not match?

I soon became completely disillusioned with graphic arts as a career. Advertising was dehumanizing; deadlines and demands made me crazy; sitting all day made me restless. The realization of my unhappiness hit me on my twenty-fourth birthday, the year I was supposed to get married (according to my big plan) and begin my wondrous life with a beautiful husband who loved the name Lucy for our first daughter. Instead, I was riding with a coworker in her fancy red sports car on our way to Madison for a business meeting. There I was, wearing a sleazy pink suit, pantyhose that made me squirm, and high heels I could not walk straight in. I was too many miles from home and even farther from all my hopes and dreams. I was struggling with my disappointment, anything *but* open to the unknown. My twenty-fourth year was the longest and hardest of my life.

How do you reconcile your hopes with reality when they do not match? When you are young, you envision your future; you prepare a plan and move forward with a sense of purpose. Although visions are essential, they do not guarantee your future.

I once had a vision of life that included marriage and motherhood. The fact that my life did not turn out this way was a terrible disappointment. The feeling hit me hardest when I turned twenty-four because that year had been such a key moment in my vision.

As you grow from your late teens into your early twenties, you begin to discover who you are, what brings you joy, and what does not work. During these years you start to sort through the realistic options that life is offering. You may be able to discern a sense of vocation as you gradually know yourself better. You may need to set aside your previous plans or to discern why life is not working out the way you had hoped. Sometimes you must go back before you can go forward.

How can I make sense of what is happening in my life?

I had to go through the same process when I faced these difficult questions: How can I make sense of what is happening in my life? Why am I so unhappy? What can I do to change?

Learning and Healing from My Wounds

In the Gospel Jesus says, "Whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me" (Matthew 10:38). I realize now that he is talking to me. When I was twenty-four, I needed to identify my cross in life, embrace it, and make it part of my life's journey. I needed to continue to walk with God, who loves me in spite of the cross I carry. In fact, I believe God loves me *because* of this cross.

When I was seventeen, my father left the family. My parents, who had always seemed happy to me, were getting a divorce. My mother, raised in a family where her father had controlled the decision making, learned from an early age to tend to household duties, which also was her role in our family. She did all the cooking, cleaning, and child rearing. My father took care of the finances, car, yard, and major decisions. My mother never worked outside the home and was never responsible for putting gas in the car or paying the bills.

This division of labor worked well while my parents were married. I discovered in no time at all the utter hopelessness of our family situation with my father gone. We had little money, and my mother did not have the tools she needed to function on her own.

My father drove a freight truck—a big, beastly thing with a manual shift and no power steering. The day after he left the house, I decided to drive his truck, haul freight, and earn an income.

By afternoon I was driving down a forty-mile stretch of dangerous, winding rural road after struggling to load many impossibly heavy boxes of freight. I was exhausted, trying to keep the truck on the road, when I started to cry. I was so angry at my father. How could he do this to us? Why had he not taught me how to drive this truck? Why did none of us know about the family's finances? How could he leave my mother so high and dry? I wiped my tears on my sleeve, afraid to take my hands off the steering wheel. I firmly resolved, then and there, that no one would ever do the same to me.

I thought I could set this experience aside as I continued my life. Not until I hit the wall at twenty-four did I realize that instead of identifying and carrying this cross, I had tried to bury it in the past. I honestly did not know what to do with this painful part of my history that was interfering with my life.

At the time I did not realize the wound that needed tending. Until I took care of myself, I would not be healthy enough to have a wholesome relationship. Perhaps God either was offering me time to heal or realized I was not ready for marriage, but I was still assuming that marriage would solve all my problems. The opportunity to apply this theory never arose; I am certain the result would have been disastrous.

Many married people refer to their spouse as “my better half.” Can you expect your partner to make up half of your life? Certainly, you are correct in believing that the people you love will help heal your wounds, but ultimately you must take your own steps to become whole. Finding the balance between trusting others, requesting help, and taking personal responsibility for growth is everyone's lifelong challenge, whether married, single, ordained, or in religious life.

My experience with my father left me deeply suspicious of depending on others. I wanted to marry, yet I did not want a man to take care of me. I had to do that for *myself*, along with everything else, including earning the income and caring for my home and my car. My issues with trust were not only about men. This cross—the pain from my parents' ugly breakup—was subtly controlling the decisions I made in my life.

Taking on the world by myself became quite exhausting. In my twenty-fifth year, I began to weaken, and in this frailty I was able to start reaching out to others.

*You must take your own steps
to become whole.*