Faculty Speech
Multi-Faith Baccalaureate Service
Friday May 13, 2011

Thanks to the Center for Faith and Vocation, Judy Cebula, the committee that puts together this event and to the senior class officers and their support this year. I am honored.

First I think I need to tell you I’m a marketing professor here at Butler. I most often teach advertising and the capstone marketing course to seniors right before they graduate and head out into the world. I’m also actively involved with the CFV, most recently as the coordinator for a yearlong workshop for faculty/staff to explore issues of faith and vocation. But I’m also a mom (to two young adults) and a wife.

Writing this speech turned out to be a lot harder than I thought it would be. See I’m used to creating lectures/discussions. But I’m used to talking with students about marketing. Give me a marketing concept and I could come up with a ten minute lecture on the spot. I love marketing. I could read about it, talk about it, live it 24/7 if there weren’t other things I need to do. But my topic today is supposed to be vocation, specifically my vocation and I don’t consider marketing to be my vocation. I’m passionate about marketing but that only makes it the right application for this bigger, deeper, more purposeful thing I consider to be my vocation.

Vocation isn’t an easy word to define or to understand. There isn’t one clear meaning – you only have to Google it to find that out.
There are many people that write about it. Many that consider it to be faith related and in their context faith is associated with religion or spiritual foundation. But for others, vocation is more of a journey, a path towards something, a choice or choices that shape the impact one has on his/her world. I’m one of those that leans more toward the later, though I must confess that I do feel called, and that’s a calling from God, to be who I am. But I like Frederick Buechner’s image of vocation best. He says vocation is “the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.” I know what you’re thinking, just what we need another marketer (my passion for marketing) to convince us that world just needs to buy more stuff (that’s the world’s deep hunger you were thinking about?). No marketing isn’t my vocation.

My vocation or calling is to help others, turns out it’s mostly students, find their vocation.

I haven’t always know that was my vocation and I can’t tell you the date or time it became clear to me that was the journey I was on but I can tell you as I look back over my life that there were key moments – earth shattering, thunder roaring, firework exploding moments that shaped this journey, that helped to present the path, which today has me at this pulpit (whoops I mean podium) to share a brief reflection on my vocation.

These moments I referenced are only significant in retrospect. I didn’t realize as I was living those moment first hand that they would be so all meaningful to me later. I think that’s something important about vocation – it doesn’t happen all the sudden. It’s a dynamic process that emerges and veers and verges over time and place. To the students in the audience, I bet you’ve already had
some of those “moments” while you were here at Butler and someday, maybe in the not so distance future, in the quiet when you actually have time to reflect and think back (without worrying about tests, or chapter meetings or group projects) you’ll realize there were signs and directions for you.

I could probably go on for hours, recalling my moments, the signs and directions I received over the last, (cough, cough) 50 something years but we’d be here through the evening and perhaps into the morning tomorrow, but you all have somewhere else important to be tomorrow. Here’s just a couple that stand out like red flag, sore thumbs or again in retrospect flashing neon signs “THIS MEANS YOU!”

First, I loved college – I mean I LOVED college. I worked all four years though the residence hall program at Ohio State where I was exposed to the theories of Arthur Chickering, a student development expert. I was fascinated, intrigued and in love with idea of living and working in a community of people that grew up (developed) together. But I also loved college because when I reflect back it was when Deb Skinner became Deb Skinner. It was the time when I wasn’t someone’s daughter or wife or mother or professor or employee. I was just finding my way as Deb Skinner, friend, confidant, significant other... but truly growing to be the foundation of what is today, Deb Skinner. And that reflection hit me ten years after I graduated from college. A group of us, about ten that had worked in one of the residence hall groups got together for a weekend, no spouses, no kids, just us. And immediately we all went right back to being the person we were when we were at Ohio State. Just me, the true, the real Deb Skinner.
So offering that space and place for students to be able to grow to become the true Ann Govert or John Piko or Jess Beckman is part of my vocation. It comes from those amazing moments I had at Ohio State.

I got to do some training in the job I had after college. I loved it. I wanted to stay in that position, but it was only a temporary slot to teach (and my students will get a kick out of this – I trained people on how to use the new computer system!) Me, who rarely uses a cellphone these days. I wanted to be in training or teaching as a profession. It just so happened I had an inside track on how to do that – my dad was a marketing professor.

So I headed back to school (remember I LOVED College) and got my PH.D. so I could teach and stay in college. That temporary experience training people on how to use computers was another important moment.

And as I’m thinking of those amazing past experiences I’m realizing that it wasn’t just the time or space or place. Many of those experiences were so very rich with direction and signs because of the people that were such an integral part of those experiences. Mary Morgan at Ohio State an pillar of patience and understanding, a strong woman, Renee Garrett, my minister when I taught at the University of Maine and true soul mate, Hamilton Beazley and Bob Clark, fellow teachers but lifelong mentors, Judy Cebula, Marv Recht, Bob Mackoy, Kathy Paulson Gjerde. The list could go on. Listening and truly being with these people also help direct my vocation.

There’s a great song by Michael Franks, a jazz musician called “How I Remember You” and the first line is “If it’s true from the start, that those we love are written, on our heart and we’ll search till we find.”
I don’t believe in destiny or a predetermined life plan but I do believe that God had a hand in helping me to find this path, to meet these amazing people that have helped me on this continued journey of vocation. These people’s names were already written on my heart, there are more there I just have to keep listening.

Finally, besides the earth shattering moments and the wondrous people, my reflection back as I wrote this speech helped me to realize that my vocation is evolving, even as I speak. In the last few years I’ve begun to hear a call to be a more active and vocal participant in issues of fairness and justice. The issues are still issues related to helping others find their vocation but I can see application beyond students to colleagues and community members. Part of it is the realization that I need to get out and live the soap box lectures I preach to my seniors – working toward failure, taking risks, having the courage to call out others when you see injustice. And so my quest to help others find THEIR vocation is reshaping and tweaking MY vocation, my calling to be here in this room, at this university, serving these students and listening to the God that continues to call me – Deb Skinner – you’ve got more to do.