

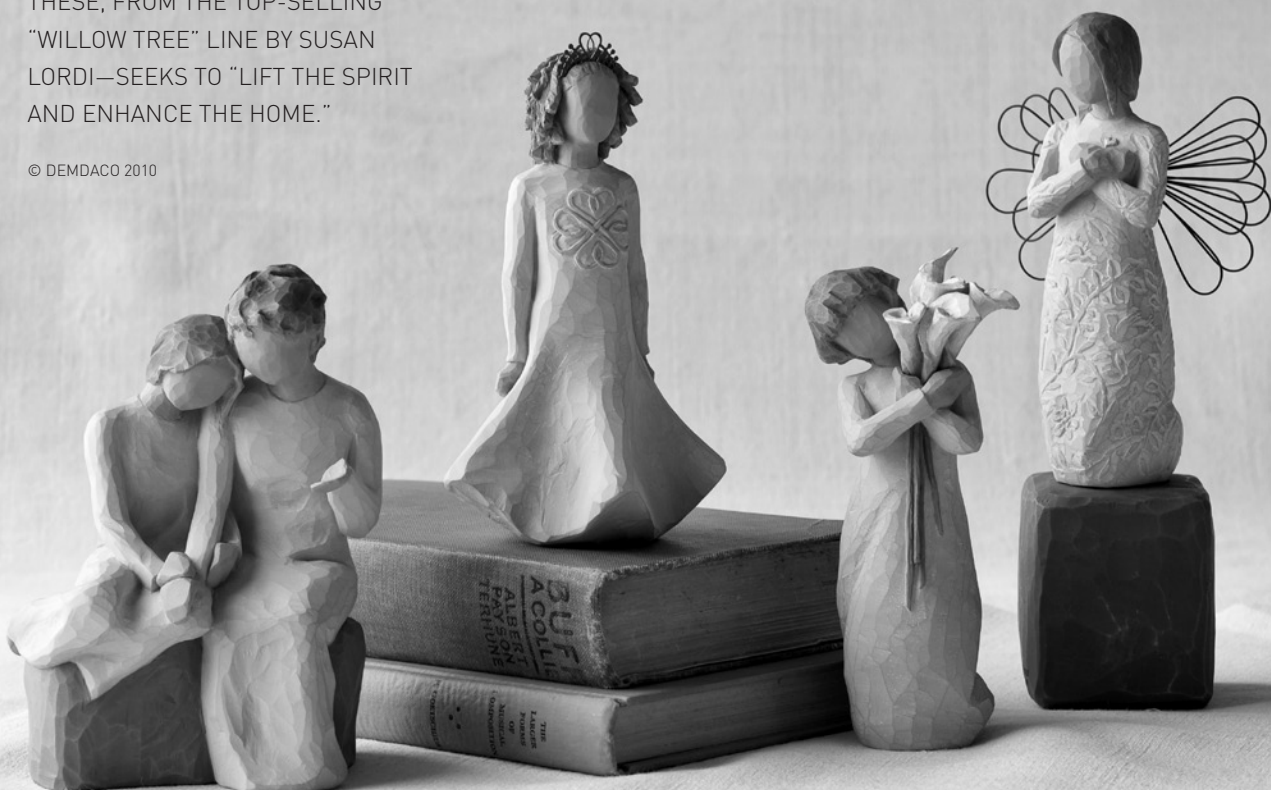
# VOCATION NEEDS NO JUSTIFICATION

THE STORY OF A STORY

BY STEVEN GARBER

THE KIERSZNOWSKIS' DÉCOR COMPANY—OFFERING GIFTS LIKE THESE, FROM THE TOP-SELLING "WILLOW TREE" LINE BY SUSAN LORDI—SEEKS TO "LIFT THE SPIRIT AND ENHANCE THE HOME."

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**C**ommon grace for the common good.

As I watch the world, often those words seem to best capture what I see—sometimes perhaps what is most important to be seen.

How do we make sense of the sweet smile of a baby, the tender embrace of a mother, the passion of a kiss . . . the smell of bread baking and meat grilling . . . the glories of the sea, the sky, the mountains and the valleys . . . the gift of good work that satisfies and serves . . . the ordered safety of street lights and speed limits . . . the wonders of good novels and good music . . . the miracles of X-rays and dental care . . . the bright yellows of daffodils and the pastels of foxgloves . . . the steady support of friends and the enduring affection of a spouse . . . the accountability of justice and the responsibility of citizenship, and on and on and on?

Each are common graces. They do not save us from our sin, but they are gifts from God, and we see them as that.

Unless the world is all simply “a bang and a whimper,” in the end only a final sigh, then we have to make sense of foxgloves and friendship. What are they? What do they mean? Why do they matter?

If they are gifts of God, true graces, then it changes everything. Seeing the world in this way makes vocations of all sorts equally important to the work of God in the world, as each one contributes to the common good, to what it is that makes our common welfare a place for *more* rather than *less* flourishing. It is a very wounded world, and we are not romantics about the brokenness. There are deep disappointments, far-reaching hurts,

tragic injustices—and sometimes all we can do is groan and grieve. But common grace offers a way to understand the meaning of ordinary life day by day, holding in the tension of our hearts the true sadness but also the true joy of life—in one of Bono’s best insights, seeing our vocations as “tearing corners off of the darkness.”

In the life of my friend, Dave Kiersznowski, I see the reality of common grace for the common good. It is a theology I believe, and yet I do need to see it in practice to understand its meaning. The words have to become flesh, and in his life I see not only his, but my own commitments, become a way of life.

With his wife Demi, he is the founder and owner of the DEMDACO Corporation, an international business offering beautiful gifts that “lift the spirit,” providing décor for the home. “Willow Tree” is probably their best-known product, and is known the world over. In the last year I have been in a little shop in Scotland, the closest village to Balmoral Castle and the River Dee—and found DEMDACO. A month later I was on the coast of Oregon in a large dairy store, seeing cheese be made by the truckload—and there was DEMDACO. And most surprising of all, not so long ago I was in the CIA headquarters and found DEMDACO in their gift shop. There are few places that we go, all over the world, where DEMDACO has not gone before us—a surprising reality.

Central to Dave’s vision is the theological motif of creation, fall, redemption, and consummation (or re-creation), but given that DEMDACO is not a parochial company—meaning that its employees are not necessarily Christians and the products are not sold to a particularly Christian audience—his work is translation,

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to see what he does and to describe it in ways that “translate” what he believes in language that the world around him, and within DEMDACO, can understand. It is an invitation to “come and see,” and it is common grace for the common good.

But Dave is not alone in this vision. Nothing he imagines, nothing he does, is done apart from a deep sense of camaraderie with his wife, Demi. Twenty years ago they were students together pursuing M.B.A.s at the Kellogg School at Northwestern University, several years later they married and moved to Hong Kong to work in business, and then a few years later they formed the DEMDACO Corporation—“Demi and Dave.” Yes, sort of cute, and they still are, in a wonderfully winsome way.

As their company and family have grown, Dave has taken on more of the daily responsibility for DEMDACO’s life, becoming its CEO. Dave offers this about his wife, a woman he obviously adores and prizes:

*Demi is such a wonderful bride and partner; she has clarity of vision that is simply unusual. She was CEO of a company much larger than DEMDACO, and she is able to speak with remarkable insight into complex issues. That said, she’s also very generous as a co-owner, and intentionally gives the managers of the company tremendous leeway in their decision-making.*

He continues, explaining more fully their shared sense of calling in all of life:

*We feel specifically called together to be involved in the area of faithful presence in*

*vocation. We both lament the fact that the church seems to have created great schisms between faith and vocation, deeming some*

*work “holier” than other work, and both hope for the day when the church will rejoice in its butchers and bakers and candlestick makers, along with its missionaries and youth workers. So we both feel fortunate to understand that we are called, together, to work toward a picture of vocation that is seamless with faith.*

It is a gift to partner together with someone you love in things that matter most, like the pursuit of a seamless faith.

But that idea of faith has not always been the way that Dave has understood his life and his work. The son of good people, a brother to a handful of brothers and sisters, an undergraduate at Boston University majoring in engineering, Dave experienced true faith growing over time. God mattered, the Church mattered, the work of God mattered—and Dave saw his growing ability in business as a way to support those doing God’s work. Any teaching about vocation he experienced argued that “some had vocations, and some had jobs” and those with the latter financially supported those with the former; some had callings from God, and some made those callings possible.

Along the way, Dave and Demi began to be less satisfied with the bifurcation of that view of life; the dualism that taught that some of God’s people had sacred work and some had secular work simply didn’t make sense, the more they understood about God and the meaning of his work in the world. Why were they working, after all? Was making money justified by generously

giving it away? Dave describes their pilgrimage in this way:

*I would say that we've changed significantly in this area over the past 13 years. When Demi and I first started our company (we were living in Hong Kong at the time), I think we wanted to be good people who ran a good business. But truth be told, we probably measured our "success" as Christians by what we were able to give at the end of the year. We saw our company as a means to an end; be successful, and that will allow you to support more "full time Christian workers."*

*Of course, there's nothing wrong, and much right, about supporting those whose calling is in missions or youth work. However, we were missing the point of our own vocations. We were missing the fact that our daily lives could be offered as a sweet aroma to God—that the ethos of our company could be a sweet offering to Him. We see that now. It doesn't mean we always create a sweet aroma; we still miss the mark as often as we hit it. But we're so grateful that now, on Monday morning, we feel that we're doing what he specifically, uniquely made us to do, and that our company and our vocations need no other justification. He has made us to work, for Demi and I specifically as entrepreneurs, and we can delight in that fact. And now, rather than waiting until December 31 (when we used to do our "year-end giving") to feel his pleasure, we can go about our work each and every day knowing we are doing what he perfectly made us, called us, and ordained us to do.*

The more that I listen to people all over the world, the more I hear this longing for their work to matter to God and to history. Like Dave

and Demi, they want what they do, Monday to Saturday, to somehow be part of what God is doing in the world—not only as a means of supporting God's work through others, but in the doing of God's work too. But if I hear this longing, also I also hear—all over the world—that the Church does not teach this. Rather what is offered is a bifurcated gospel that asks God's people to compartmentalize life in order to make theological sense of life; that is the message that churches, missionary organizations, and seminaries offer, *all over the world*.

When that does not happen, it is an exception. Knowing something of Dave and Demi's world, I know that their church, Christ Community in Leawood, Kansas, by great grace is a place where worship and work, liturgy and life, are seen more seamlessly—in large measure because of the pastoral vision of Tom Nelson, who for 20 years has been leading his people to understand that vocation is integral, not incidental, to the mission of God. I asked Dave what this has meant to them in the deepening and transforming of their understanding of vocation.

*Honestly, without sitting under the teaching of Tom Nelson at Christ Community, I don't imagine that Demi and I would understand vocation as we do. The concepts of tam (the Hebrew word for integrity), the integral life, and the meaning of vocation are written into the founding documents of our church, and so we've been studying this for 13 years or so. We had not really read much or heard much about this fuller picture of the Christian story before attending Christ Community, and I will forever be grateful for the fact that we were introduced to such a wonderful place of community, worship, and teaching. I'm not sure I ever understood the effect of a specific local church on one's life the way*

*I understand it now, as Christ Community has completely tilled the soil to allow Demi and I to see all of our lives through the lens of Scripture. We've also been able to journey with others who are very serious about their vocations, be they architects or mothers or educators or attorneys or legislators. It's been an amazing gift to be surrounded by people who see faith and vocation as seamless, and who are excellent in their vocations.*

The word *vocation* is a rich one, having to address the wholeness of life, the range of relationships and responsibilities. Work, yes, but also families, and neighbors, and citizenship, locally and globally—all of this and more is seen as vocation, that to which I am called as

a human being, living my life before the face of God. It is never the same word as occupation, just as *calling* is never the same word as *career*. Sometimes, by grace, the words and the realities they represent do overlap, even significantly; sometimes, in the incompleteness of life in a fallen world, there is not much overlap at all.

Watching the ways that Dave and Demi work out their vocation together is itself an education. They see a big world, with much beauty and wonder, as well as much longing and groaning—and they have chosen to step into history with their own gifts and passions. In a word, they see themselves as *implicated* in the way the world ought to be—and that has implications (good word that it is) for their



DAVE KIERSZNOWSKI

## **BUSINESS AND LIFE AS THEY OUGHT TO BE**

Headquartered in Kansas City, the DEMDACO corporate center is a beautifully-imagined building of stone and glass. But as architecturally stunning as it is, the lobby offers a surprisingly graceful invitation: “Come and see who we are and what it is that matters to us.”

Along the wall on the left are two large paintings by Makoto Fujimura of New York City, a friend and colleague of Dave’s who was commissioned to paint the story of all stories—but in his uniquely allusive way, drawing as he does on ancient Japanese techniques and materials, but with a very twenty-first century style.

This is the way Dave describes it:

*I asked Mako to create a painting for our lobby because I knew that our story was his story too. I had worked closely with him through International Arts Movement, and I knew he cared deeply about vocation, and trying to live and to see all of life through the lens of the Christian story. And I told him that we would be exploring the themes of business and life as they ought to be, the reality of the way they are, what we can do to help redeem them, and our hopes for how they will be in the future. I knew that Mako would find a place where people might see the story in his painting.*

Editors: watch more from Mako on the DEMDACO installation at [vimeo.com/2896456](https://vimeo.com/2896456)

work with DEMDACO, with their children and their schooling, but also with efforts small and large, known and unknown to the wider world.

For example, Dave loves music, more than most would ever imagine. But he also cares deeply about the way the world is, and ought to be. One expression of that is that he is one of the founders of the Wedgwood Circle: an effort to address the reality that the culture is “upstream from politics,” it brings together investors and artists to work on the way the world turns out, working to shape the cultural imagination through theatre, music, film, television, graphic novels, and more. He has also served on the boards of International Arts Movement and the Clapham Institute. On the other hand, because of her own loves, Demi is on the board of In Media Res, which stands behind the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture at the University of Virginia. And those relationships are only a small window into the range of commitments and cares that have become theirs. He puts it this way:

*Demi and I believe that we've been called to encourage some of the tremendous conversations about vocation that are happening around the world. I happen to be more involved in conversations around the arts, and Demi is more involved in areas of education and justice, but both of us believe that we can encourage others who are wonderful leaders and participants in these conversations. The common theme of the groups we are involved with is an integral understanding of vocation, and we see ourselves as advocates and encouragers of both the conversations and the people involved. I think one of our great hopes is that the church might make the issue of vocation more central to its teachings. And*

*of course, helping this conversation take shape in seminaries around the world would be a great hope of ours.*

*Finally, one organization that Demi and I have chosen to spend significant time with is our kids' school. It's an amazing organization, and we care for it deeply, and it has students and families of all faiths. And we hope to help its students achieve the school motto, which is freedom with responsibility. We seek the flourishing of all of the students at the school, and are so grateful that our kids go to a place that takes educational and personal development so seriously.*



FROM THE “EMBELLISH YOUR STORY” LINE  
BY CAROL ROEDA

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*Seek the flourishing?* It is an image that takes us back thousands of years, when Jeremiah wrote to the exiles in Babylon, “Seek the flourishing of the city . . . for in its flourishing you will flourish.” In his own day, in his own way, he set forth a vision of common grace for the common good. Daniel was one among many who heard this word, and gave himself to its vision of vocation, his as the chief political advisor to three different despots, rulers of their worlds as they were. His work? Weighing in on agriculture, the military, taxation, roads, water—all the stuff of public life for everyone everywhere. In and through it all he was seeking the flourishing of his city. To see what we do and why we do it in light of the deepest truths of the universe is a gift, but it is also crucial to sustaining our vocations.

One of the most intriguing decisions that Dave made about the DEMDACO headquarters is that he decided to name the meeting spaces throughout the building after “heroes of the common good” such as Mother Theresa, Martin Luther King, and William Wilberforce. And so each of the rooms, differently sized as they are, has a very high-tech communications system keeping track of its daily use, but also a small, beautiful sign explaining the person and their work, why in fact they too are a “hero of the common good.” These are simple reminders meant to help DEMDACO’s employees remember the meaning of their work, that in their labour they are doing

something that matters to history. These rooms are where the ordinary work takes place: the imagining, the counting, the planning—not heroic in any other sense than *important* for the common good of both the corporation and the world.

When someone chooses to see the world as God’s, to see all of life as a response to God, to see the purposes of God unfolded in the ordinary things of life—in our marriages and families, in our vocations and occupations, in our neighborliness to folk near and far—that is the story of the story of common grace for the common good.

In my world, I know more of what those words mean because I have watched them become flesh in the life of my friend Dave Kiersznowski. His company makes simple beauties that are reminders of ordinary graces—that is his work. But unique as it is, it is instructive for all of us, called as we are in many different ways to our own vocations, offering ordinary graces in and through the callings that are ours.



STEVEN GARBER has been listening to students for most of his life, learning to love them along the way. He directs The Washington Institute ([washingtoninst.org](http://washingtoninst.org)), whose focus is always on the intersection of faith to vocation to culture.