

***Everyone has been made for some particular work,  
and the desire for that work has been put in our heart***

*Rumi, a thirteenth century Sufi*

A few years ago there was an advertisement on SBS television portraying people who have drifted into some form of work without having given the nature of that work or their desire for it much thought, or who took on a job for just a few months but ended up staying in it much longer than they ever intended, as the years drifted by. It was aimed at encouraging people to think about what they really want to do and then to take action, realizing that it is never too late to study or train for that work. The catch line was: *I want to do the work I really want to do!* Particularly at this time of the year as people return to work after the summer holiday, the question of work and career and just how happy or content we may be can loom large in our thinking. Our work, our career, may span up to 40 or 50 years and we are directly engaged in that for a large portion of each week and each day. It is something that deserves much thought and discernment, and indeed, soul-searching.

When the great Indian leader and deeply spiritual, Mahatma Gandhi, was asked if he had a message to give the people, he replied, 'My life is my message'. Gandhi's life of simplicity and service was his message. This is what he valued, and therefore it was how he lived. Each of our lives is also a message which says something of the philosophy and the beliefs we hold. This includes beliefs about the nature of life and of ourselves, what is beautiful and good and true, the spiritual dimension of life, and most significantly, what is worth devoting our life to. Much of this lies deep within us and may often be unconscious and unrecognised. We need to bring it into our awareness. In order to make our life our message, as Gandhi did, we need to discover and acknowledge those deepest principles and beliefs about life and ourselves and seek to embody them and express them in our work.

To what is your heart drawn? What is really important in your life? What really matters? What would you be better off doing more of, less of? These are the essential questions we must reflect upon. Deep within every life there is something eternal happening. St Ignatius of Loyola exclaimed that we are 'from God, of God and for God'. If we truly believe that, then we will recognise that what lies deep within us is indeed sacred, holy. It is of God. It is, in fact, God come to visible expression in each of us! When we look at ourselves in this way we see the immense significance of what we do, our career, our work. This is what we mean when we speak of a vocation. The word 'vocation' comes from the Latin *vocare*, to call, and that is truly what it is, a calling. The work, the career we choose, when understood to be a vocation, is a calling forth of who we most deeply are. And we then need to make the necessary choices in order to pursue the path that will allow us to express and fulfil that.

Rather than see the work we do as just 'a job', we are invited to see it as an expression of what lies deep within us. The human person deeply desires expression. We desire to be known by others, we desire the opportunity of expressing what matters to us, speaking what is in our

heart, creating that around us which expresses who we are. As I write this I am very conscious, however, that many, many people in our world don't have the opportunity or the privilege of looking upon work in this way. It is a question of survival and any work is welcomed. For those of us, then, who have the privilege of being able to choose what we will do, it becomes really significant that we take that seriously, and that we recognise that we are indeed blessed to be able to see our work as a spiritual path in itself.

Joseph Campbell, the twentieth-century mythologist, gives us some wonderful wisdom which we can apply to the sometimes confusing array of responses to those questions we need to ask ourselves: questions about what will bring us happiness, what will be worth devoting our life to, what we would like to do more of. He said, 'Follow your bliss'. There is great wisdom in allowing this to be at the heart of our career choice. To follow your bliss does not mean doing whatever happens to feel good at the moment. It does not mean pursuing fleeting pleasures and sensations, and it certainly does not mean retreating into a self-obsessed state where we disregard others and our impact on those around us and the world we live in. Bliss is other than this. It is a taste of our spiritual nature. To follow our bliss is to do what best expresses and opens us to our true nature and its source. To do this we must face the challenge of finding out what gives us the most profound satisfaction and then make this the basis of the choice of our work.

When we are in touch with our bliss, we are in touch with our true nature, and therefore we are in touch with the Sacred within us. We all know the expression, 'to do God's will', and we may ask ourselves what God 'desires' for me, what God 'wants' me to do. I think "God's will" is exactly what following our bliss is! God's 'will' for each person is to be fully alive, to know and revel in the particular gifts we have, our unique talents and strengths and the goodness of who we are. It is to give expression to all this in a way that is good and that develops all that is positive and life-enhancing, and above all, it is to use it all in the service of others. We are all only too well aware that there are, and always have been, people who use their strengths to destroy, to ultimately be self-serving, to violate life and goodness. Every strength and gift we have is accompanied by a choice as to how we will use it.

To do God's will is to allow God to come to expression in us. It is up to us then to work out the details! And we do that by listening to ourselves, getting to know what brings us contentment and peace, getting to know our abilities and gifts, our strengths, our limitations. And of course, then, having the courage to make the right choices emerging from that discovery. While our primary understanding of our calling to a particular kind of work comes from our own self-knowledge, there is also something of value in taking note of what others notice in us. Often people say to each other things like, 'You're good at that' or, 'You have a real gift in that area'. It can happen that what is obvious to others, who notice what we may bring to a situation, is overlooked by ourselves. It is interesting that originally a vocation to the priesthood, for example, was something that was discerned by the community to which that person belonged, and who noticed their particular gift or charisma, and invited them into it and 'called it forth' from them.

St Paul says, 'Do everything for the glory of God'. And Mary Ward too spoke of doing everything for 'the greater glory of God'. There is a wonderful story from the life of Mary Ward which is known as the Glory Vision. Mary was at a stage in her life when she was not sure exactly how she was to pursue her certainty of a vocation to give herself completely to God as a nun, and she had already tasted some 'failure', as it first appeared to be, in joining the Order of the Poor Clares in St Omer, and then finding that that particular style of contemplative life was not for her. One morning, in this in-between time, as she sat in front of her mirror brushing her hair, she became aware of the words, 'Glory, glory, glory'! And in that moment of profound insight she understood that whatever she was to do, it was to be for the glory of God. Her life was to be her message. And that message that she lived so explicitly and fully was her profound trust in God, her utter love of God and her desire to give herself completely to God. She said, 'I listened to God's deep dream for me and I felt a longing to respond to God's invitation'. God's 'dream' and God's invitation are deep within us, structured into the very heart of who we are, speaking within and out of our particular gifts, strengths, loves, deeply felt desires and passion. Mary had to slowly discern these gifts within herself and discover where and how her passion could best be expressed and used. When we come to this inner knowledge and act on it, the work we choose becomes a spiritual path in itself. Everything we do becomes a sacred act.

This year, 2019, we celebrate the Loreto value, Sincerity. At the heart of Sincerity is self-knowledge and self-acceptance. It is about consistency, a radical consistency, between our inner self and our actions, what we say and what we do. It is, in Mary Ward's words, to 'be such as we appear and appear such as we are'. And this speaks right into the heart of our career and work choices.

Close your eyes and imagine yourself as you would like to be at some future time, perhaps a few years from now. Let this image arise spontaneously, without struggling or forcing it. Imagine yourself having done the things you most want to do. See yourself having achieved what you want to achieve, having learned what you want to learn, having made significant contributions to others, having established satisfying relationships. As you visualize your future self, look to see where you are and what type of environment you are in. Does your future self look different in any way? How do you feel? What emotions are predominant? What strengths are obvious? What new capacities are evident? As you imagine being your future self, ask yourself this question: of all the things I have done, what makes me most happy, most content? When you have this answer, then ask yourself: in order to achieve this, what strengths and capacities do I need to recognize in myself? What do I need to do? This is the way of Sincerity.

So as we reflect upon our work, may we always have the courage to let go of expectations and external status or success markers and listen to the deepest longings within ourselves, to recognize what it is that makes us passionate and alive, what it is that enables us to be who we really are and not how others decide we should be. And as we listen and allow these deep desires and longings to emerge, may we remember that it is here, in the depths of our being,

that God 'calls' to us and inspires us and leads us into the fullness of our own unique being. In order to feel real, and indeed to be real, we need to bring that inner world to expression.

Perhaps the best way to capture the heart of all that we have explored here is in these words of Rabbi Nachman, a Jewish sage of the eighteenth century: "Consider what you are doing and ponder whether it is worthy that you devote your life to it".

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