

Truly, Madly, Deeply: *Why Do We Work?*

Rev. Robin Landerman Zucker

Beacon UU Congregation

May 3, 2020

The Presbyterian minister and writer Frederick Buechner recalls an encounter with a woman who, meaning no real harm, remarked: “I hear you are entering the ministry. Was it your own idea or were you poorly advised?”

Buechner states that the answer she could not have heard was that it was not an *idea* at all. Instead, he recalls, “It was a lump in the throat. It was an itching in the feet. It was a stirring in the blood at the sound of rain. It was a sickening of the heart at the sight of misery. It was a clamoring of ghosts. It was a name which, when I wrote out in a dream, I knew was a name worth dying for.”

Buechner is musing on his sense of vocation, his call into the ministry. On the sight of it, though, Buechner might also be describing the process of falling in love; *madly* and irrationally in love. That’s what it feels like to many of us as we awaken to the realization that we are called into the ministry – equal parts exhilaration, queasiness, and lump-in-the-throat gratitude.

Looking back to September 1995 (25 years ago!), I recall the electric passion coursing through me as I entered the hallowed halls of Harvard Divinity School. I was a 38-year-old married mother of two school-aged children who had enjoyed some previous success in my career as a journalist and television producer. Having burned out on that pursuit, I had come to burn instead with a passion for the pulpit and the bedside and the street corner, filled with unstoppable energy and zeal. I was “in love.”

Could my vocation have clay feet? No way! I was intoxicated by all that I thought ministry was and would be. My goodness, I espoused a lot of strong opinions! Back then, I resided in a somewhat pretentious (at times, cringe-worthy) world of concept, theory, and presumption - not unlike the supposed daredevil who jumps off the garage roof onto a moldy mattress and claims to understand the fine points of skydiving. I sure made a big noise like a minister, but I lacked context. I wasn’t ministering out of a relationship with a flesh and blood congregation as I am now. (And if I haven’t said it recently – I am so blessed to serve here at Beacon).

I’ve pursued this peculiar profession with tremendous vigor and commitment for years. Yet, in these peculiar lock down days, vocation, passion and hunger meet at an unfamiliar crossroad of real life deadlines, paperwork, a global pandemic, you tube worship, some kerfuffles, and some drudgery, too. I’ve come to understand over the decades that to love this work *truly* is to love it with a constancy that “doesn’t waver in the dull heat of noon, but remembers the ecstatic moonlight.” (just like a marriage, some would say)

Yet, even in the stone cold sober dull heat of noon, I am grateful that there is *any* buzz at all in my professional life. For many of the people, the mob, the masses in their workaday lives, there is no initial buzz, no intermediate buzz, no oh-my-the-buzz-just-came-back after a dry spell. Just no buzz. Zip. Only *labor*. Just a clock punched and a paycheck earned. These days, with unemployment skyrocketing, many would be happy with that alone. It's a desperate time and Americans want to get back to work. So, this would not be a great time for you or I to whine about an intact job with intact wages.

If your framework is one of "labor" or having a "job," then "Vocation" (a calling to which one is well suited or drawn) can sound like a foreign and elitist concept to be rejected. Work is work, pure and simple. An honest day's work for an honest day's pay and this is to be honored. My grandfather owned a scrap metal business in Plttsburgh. He got his hands dirty and I respect that as neither better nor worse than my experience with this "higher-falutin" Ivy-league fueled chosen profession or those of his son, the Doctor or his son, the Engineer.

As Sandra Beasley demonstrates so eloquently in her poem (read earlier by Char), vocation or calling covers a wide swath, and her litany may sound familiar to anyone who has strung together a series of jobs to make ends meet, or to one who questing to find the right calling to match their talents or sense of purpose.

"For six months, I dealt Baccarat in a casino," she writes,
"For six months, I played Brahms in a mall.
For six months, I arranged museum dioramas,
My hands were too small for the Paleolithic
And when they reassigned me to lichens, I quit."

Later she tell us:

"If it calls you, it's your calling, right?"

Once I asked a broker what he loved about his job, and he said, 'Making a killing.'

Once I asked a serial killer what made him get up in the morning and he said, 'The people.'"

What makes *you* get up in the morning? What calls you? Summons you? Do you hate your job? Relish your calling? Are you in between, are you retired? Are you on the road to find out? Are you laid off or furloughed and, if so, Is this a time to reflect on whether you are called elsewhere or can recommit to the work you will return to? Or, like Sandra Beasley, are you weary, and willing to do anything as long as you can do it on a veranda?

Apparently, fewer and fewer Americans are satisfied with their jobs; while, paradoxically, they leave hundreds of thousands of unused paid vacation days on the table each year. One study suggests that more than 75% have actively disengaged from their employment. Disturbing. Europeans cannot fathom this! In

Italy and Spain, for instance, work/life balance is embedded in their understanding of a sane and healthy life and these countries practically shut down for the month of August. So, what has poisoned the American water cooler?

One possibility is that it's just human nature to dislike work. This was the view of Adam Smith, the father of industrial capitalism, who felt that people were naturally lazy and would work only for pay. "It is the interest of every man," he wrote in 1776 in "The Wealth of Nations," "to live as much at his ease as he can." This idea has been enormously influential. About a century later, it helped shape the scientific management movement, which created systems of manufacture that minimized the need for skill and close attention — things that lazy, pay-driven workers could not be expected to have (or so they believed).

Today, in factories, offices and other workplaces, the details may be different, but the overall situation is the same: Work is structured on the assumption that we do it only because we have to. The call center employee is monitored to ensure that he ends each call quickly. The office worker's keystrokes are overseen to guarantee productivity. Amazon fulfillment warehouses are stressful and demanding.

Even in a marketplace where jobs have been scarcer and folks cannot afford to be too choosy, I think that this cynical and pessimistic approach to work only grinds us down further. It is making us dissatisfied with our jobs — and also making us worse at them. For our sakes, and for the sakes of those who employ us, after the COVID-19 lockdown eases, our workforce may be able to return to their jobs or to new ones with a more self-empowering mindset.

Of course, we care about our wages, and we wouldn't work without them. But we care about more than money. Studies have shown that migrant workers who make little money still care about the quality of their work beyond compensation, the condition of the grapes they cut and the efficiency with which they cut them. And have you observed the glowing pride of workers on the Post *Honey Bunches Of Oats* assembly line in a popular TV commercial, as they share their glee at finding a box on the grocery store shelf that they had personally packed?

Many Americans want work that is challenging and engaging, that enables us to exercise some discretion and control over what we do, and that provides us opportunities to learn and grow (whether we are an assembly line worker or a tenured professor). We want to work with colleagues and co-workers we respect and with supervisors who respect us. Most of all, many people still strive for work that is meaningful — that makes a difference to other people and thus ennoble us in at least some small way; that affirms our inherent worth and dignity.

Up until now, we've wanted these things so much that we may even be willing to take home a thinner pay envelope to get them. Lawyers leave white-shoe

firms to work with the underclass and underserved. Doctors abandon cushy practices to work in clinics that serve poorer areas. Wall Street analysts leave the grind to launch a micro-lending bank for 3rd World nations. And entrepreneurship (the “gig” economy) in America is at an all-time high.

We will see how this plays out in the near and far future – whether more of us will set out on a new road vocationally after this imposed quarantine time of reflection on who we are and what we value. Will the fellow who works road construction decide to learn computer coding? Will the software engineer for Google pivot to become the manager of a homeless shelter? It’s worth noting here that the Chinese character for Crisis is the same one used for Opportunity. So, we will see.

I know people like the ones I just described...the ones who have pivoted...and maybe you do, too. Maybe you are one of these people, who have learned through experience that compensation alone cannot fulfill you on its own when you’ve been summoned by a calling. Going further, anthropologists have argued that it defies our very human nature to perceive work as separate from our identity and only as a means to earn money. Work is *meant* to be understood as intrinsic to personhood and essential to the creating and sustaining wholeness, for both the individual and society.

Historically, in the simpler, more interdependent social groups of yore, families were responsible for accomplishing everything for their own existence: hunt, farm, build, sew, cook, clean, etc. Until one day, somebody noticed his family was better at farming than building and decided to barter with a neighboring family. “If we grow extra food and give it to you, will you build an extra house than we can live in?”

Our understanding of work was born. Both benefited from the arrangement: better food was grown and stronger homes were built. In the end, all of society benefited. And each individual was able to pursue contribution in their area of giftedness and passion.

But somewhere along the way, we lost this balance. We no longer worked primarily to benefit others, but ourselves. Work became self-focused. Work became a vehicle through which we make money so that we could consume and do the other things we really wanted to do. As a result, work became that thing that we *do*, rather than part of a holistic system of social order, imbued with what the Buddhist call “enlightened self-interest.”

Yes, work that is adequately compensated is an important social good, especially for underpaid or exploited laborers (and for ministers, who used to be paid in potatoes and haunches of meat!). But so is work that is worth doing, wholeheartedly. Half of our waking lives is a terrible thing to squander. My Boston colleague Elliot has encouraged me in those fallow periods that “Passion builds

Parthenons.” And poet Marge Piercy reminds us in our opening words that, “The pitcher cries for water to carry, and a person for work that is real.”

Work that is real. Yes. I’m thinking now of my ordination in May of 2000 (20 years ago now!), during which the Rev. Katie Lee Crane preached a wonderful sermon entitled, “Real Life is All I Know.” She quoted the writer Anna Quindlen who observed: “I am humbled by the task before me. I have no special expertise talking to you today. My work is human nature. Real life is all I know.”

Katie Lee went on to explain that part of her ministry and mine would be to help those we serve live out their mission, their callings; to see the possibilities of “real life;” and to see and appreciate the interplay of work with real life. And, as Katie Lee concluded, “Real life is qualification enough.” Enough to enable us to stand together at a crossroad where hunger and passion meet, where joy beckons us down a tree-shaded byway, sorrow propels us along what seems like an endless highway, conflict sends us careening into a ditch, and courage and commitment gets us back on the road again.

For me, in my own work, ministry needs to be about this real place in the real world, real questions asked by real people. It needs to be more than concepts and eloquent position papers, an impressive robe and stole, an honorific title or degree. It must embody the dreams we dream, the risks we take, the love we give, the sorrow we bear, the pain we expose, the grit we display in a pandemic, and the mission we strive to fulfill when we go deeply in to the work...yes, a bit madly and oh so truly.

We are witnesses to life. Real life. The Rev. Howard Thurman admonishes us: “Don’t ask the question, ‘What should I do?’ Ask instead: ‘What makes me come alive?’ because what the world needs is people who have come alive.” So I ask you: How might you come alive in your work, your vocation, whether you’re just starting out or you’ve found a calling in retirement? Will you take this journey of questing and risking and loving and growing? And will you remember and respect that rest is holy, too, as you toil? For Pete’s sake, if they are offered, take those vacation days!!

Abiding in the real life, real work, real clarity, and real intention is what my colleague Victoria Safford lifts up in her reminiscence entitled “The Small Work in the Great Work.”

Victoria remembers vacationing in Maine one summer, renting a classic lakeside camp from a seasoned-as-hardwood *Downeaster* named Clive Knowles. Clive lived next door and they got to gabbing one day, when Clive revealed that he had been a minister, a Unitarian minister in the 1930’s, in Gardner, Massachusetts.

Clive wanted to stand up for working people in the town, so he agreed to host a Union meeting at the church. But then the biggest contributor to the church visited him and said he forbade the meeting because he owned one of the factories

in the town and wanted to crush the unions. He threatened Clive, but the minister stood his ground. Real life was all he knew.

After the meeting, Clive was fired and he adopted the life of an itinerant clergyman in the South, donning the big black Baptist preacher's hat and cloth coat that would not betray his liberal leanings. He fought for Civil Rights and other causes before retiring.

All excited, "like an eager puppy," she recalls, Victoria chirped, "I'm a Unitarian minister, too." Clive just kept on chopping wood for his pile and asked: "What kind of work do you do?" Victoria thought he might be hard of hearing so she repeated her statement about being a minister. Clive looked up slowly, smiled at her, and said: "I heard you. You're a Unitarian minister. So, what kind of *work* do you do?"

Place this question your own context – You are a stockbroker. What kind of work do you do? You are a teacher. What kind of work do you do? You are a truck driver or a welder? What kind of work do you do? You are a nurse, a programmer, a baccarat dealer, a fundraiser, a soldier, an activist, a butcher, an artist. What kind of work do you do? As we ponder this question together, I will abide with you at that crossroad where passion and hunger, where need and calling collide. And whether we are standing tall on our feet or knocked to our knees, we'll keep listening faithfully for the answer.

Why do I work? Why do we work? Because we would be less human without it. That said, it's possible in my case that I'd be a bit saner without it, too. Who knows? Alas, the madness for me may never completely subside, I'm told. My witty colleague David Weissbard (a 50-year plus veteran) has quipped "When I get well, I might just leave the ministry."

Even so, I assure you, *I'm* not going anywhere. I was not poorly advised and I'm not quite ready for the veranda. And I'm just finally figuring out Zoom and iMovie! The spark, the fire of commitment still burns, even if it's a mere glowing coal at times. I'm still in love – soberly, a bit madly, oh so truly, and ever more deeply with the work.

And for that, I am grateful, and I say, "Amen."

© 2020 Rev. Robin Landerman Zucker. May be quoted with proper attribution to author and sources.