

Do Your Best

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*To live content with small means;
To seek elegance rather than luxury, and refinement rather than fashion;
To be worthy, not respectable, and wealthy, not rich;
To study hard, think quietly, talk gently, act frankly;
To listen to stars and birds, to babes and sages, with open heart;
To bear all cheerfully, do all bravely, await occasions, hurry never.
To let the spiritual, unbidden and unconscious, grow up through the common.
This is to be my symphony.
—William Henry Channing*

Ancient Witness: John 4:31-34

There's a story of a man who died and found himself in a beautiful place, surrounded by every conceivable comfort. A white-jacketed man came to him and said, "You may have anything you choose—any food, any pleasure, any kind of entertainment."

The man was delighted, and for days he sampled all the delicacies and experiences of which he had dreamed on earth. But one day he grew bored with all of it, and calling the attendant to him, he said, "I'm tired of all this. I need something to do. What kind of work can you give me?"

The attendant sadly shook his head and replied, "I'm sorry sir. That's the one thing we can't do for you. There is no work here for you."

To which the man answered, "That's a fine thing. I might as well be in hell."

The attendant said softly, "Where do you think you are?"

We need work. We need work not just for survival, but we need work to participate in something meaningful and purposeful. Without meaning and purpose, we live in hell. In the *Tao Te Ching*, it says, "In work do what you enjoy." There's a difference between a job and work. A job is something we often do to pay our bills. Our work touches our heart.

Matthew Fox, in his book, *The Reinvention of Work*, says, "If there's one question I would ask to awaken us to spiritual work, it would be 'How does your work touch the joy in you and what does your work bring out in others?'"

William Sloane Coffin talked about the difference between a career and a calling:

Without a doubt the two can be, and often are, combined. But they can also be distinguished. A career seeks to be successful, a calling to be valuable. A career tries to make money, a calling tries to make a difference.

And so there is a difference between work that serves the Spirit of Life and other work. Doing God's work gives us a spiritual wholeness and peace that other labor cannot provide. In our Ancient Witness this morning, John portrays Jesus as saying, "My food is to do the will of God—my food is to do God's work."

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled." (Matthew 5) That is, as Dixon Junkin, a Presbyterian peace activist, pointed out, "If we hunger and thirst for righteousness, we will never see the complete realization of that for which we are working; 'success' may well elude us. Nevertheless, *we will be filled.*"

So this is what I want to talk about today: there is a certain kind of work that fills us and makes us whole.

But society does not often honor this spiritual work. It can be lonely. Even the church has trouble recognizing spiritual work and wants to mimic the world's idea of success. Sometimes we must choose if we will work to please people or if we will follow our deepest calling. Paul wrote about this tension: "We speak, not to please mortals but to please God... We did not seek praise from mortals [but to do the work of God.]" (1 Thessalonians 2)

When it comes to fulfilling our spiritual purpose, sometimes we go at it with the same assumptions we have for everything else. But spiritual work is about *shedding* the ego, not building it.

Early on in my work in the church I was amazed by all the work that I did that nobody would see: all the little administrative details, all the reading and studying, all the visiting and holding hands. Sometimes, I'd look back and have absolutely nothing to show for it. No increase in church membership. No increase in the yearly budget. No new impressive program. And I remember how it would frustrate me. *Even spiritual work can become a curse when there's no sense of being able to rest and find satisfaction in it.*

Sometime ago, I read a little book that had become quite popular: *The Four Agreements*. It's based on the ancient indigenous Toltec Mexican wisdom tradition. One of the "agreements" that the author suggests we have with ourselves for a more whole life is: "Just do your best, for your best is enough."

Humans punish themselves endlessly for not being what they believe they should be. They become very self-abusive, and they use other people to abuse themselves as well.

*Just do your best — in any circumstance in your life. It doesn't matter if you are sick or tired, if you always do your best there is no way you can judge yourself. And if you don't judge yourself there is no way you are going to suffer from guilt, blame, and self-punishment. By always doing your best, you will break a big spell that you have been under. (Miguel Ruiz, *The Four Agreements: A Practical Guide to Personal Freedom*)*

When we do less than our best, we are subject to frustration, self-judgment and regret. If we try to do more than our best, we spend more energy than is needed, and in the end, our best will never be enough.

Of course, our best will change over time, and it will be different in each circumstance of our lives. But being satisfied with our best *liberates us from suffering guilt, blame and self-punishment!* And it frees us to a more whole and integrated life.

I want you to notice how subversive this message is. Maybe you had parents for whom your best wasn't quite good enough. Maybe you've adopted Total Quality Management into your life of constant, continual improvement and dissatisfaction. There are those for whom your best isn't good enough, and an important spiritual task is to make sure you're not one of them!

Here's a story from *The Four Agreements*:

There was a man who wanted to transcend his suffering so he went to a Buddhist temple to find a Master to help him. He went to the Master and asked, "Master, if I meditate four hours a day, how long will it take me to transcend?"

The Master looked at him and said, "If you meditate four hours a day, perhaps you will transcend in ten years."

Thinking he could do better the man then said, "Oh, Master, what if I meditate eight hours a day, how long will it take me to transcend?"

The Master looked at him and said, "If you meditate eight hours a day, perhaps you will transcend in twenty years." "But why will it take me longer if I meditate more?" the man asked.

The Master replied, "You are not here to sacrifice your joy or your life. You are here to live, to be happy, and to love. If you can do your best in two hours of meditation, but you spend eight yours instead, you will only grow tired, miss the point, and you won't enjoy your life. Do your best, and perhaps you will learn that no matter how long you meditate, you can live, love and be happy."

And so, in our work for justice, peace and social transformation, this is an important spiritual center from which we can operate. In our world it's easy to get overwhelmed and feel helpless. Do your best, no more, no less. And it will be enough!

In the Talmud, it's written, "Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief... You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it."

Simply doing one's best is a spiritual struggle that is reflected in the lives of the great spiritual leaders, such as Martin Luther King, Jr. In the last sermon before he was killed, he talked about how he would want to be remembered at his funeral. He preached,

Tell him not to mention that I have a Nobel Peace Prize--that isn't important. Tell not to mention that have 300 or 400 other awards--that's not important. Tell him not to mention where I went to school.

I'd like somebody to mention that day that Martin Luther King Jr. tried to give his life serving others. I'd like for somebody to say that day that Martin Luther King Jr. tried to love somebody.

I want you to say that day that I tried to be right and to walk with them. I want you to be able to say that day that I did try to feed the hungry. I want you to be able to say that day that I did try in my life to clothe the naked. I want you to say on that day that I did try in my life to visit those who were in prison. And I want you to say that I tried to love and serve humanity.

He simply wanted people to know that *he tried*. He did his best. And for him, that was enough. That's what counted. That's what he wanted to be remembered for.

Part of growing spiritually is to become increasingly aware that our labors matter even if no one else can see them. It is being able to happily labor in obscurity. There's a wonderful quote from John Updike, one of my favorite novelist and poet, from one of the interviews he did:

I will try not to panic, to keep my standard of living modest and to work steadily, even shyly in the spirit of those medieval carvers who so fondly sculpted the undersides of choir seats.

We are challenged to work diligently without expectation of reward or recognition. Our spiritual work requires us to do the best we can, and, like the medieval carvers, to realize that our work matters even if no one else can see it. This soulful view of work leads to serenity and peace, the exact opposite of panic.

Henri Nouwen shocked the academic and the church worlds when he quit his post as professor at Harvard Divinity School to work in the L'Arche community, a community designed around serving severely handicapped people. He moved out of the limelight and into a home where he helped to feed, wash, love and take care of the basic needs of people like Adam. Nouwen wrote:

Most of my past life has been built around the idea that my value depends on what I do. I made it through grade school, high school, and the university. I earned my degrees and awards and I made my career. Yes, with many others I fought my way up to the lonely top of a little success, a little popularity, and a little power. But as I sit beside the slow and heavily breathing Adam, I start seeing how violent and lonely that journey was. So filled with desires to be better than others, so marked by rivalry and competition, so pervaded with compulsions and obsessions, and so spotted with moments of suspicion, jealousy, resentment and revenge. Oh, sure, most of what I did was called ministry, the ministry of justice and peace, the ministry of forgiveness and reconciliation, the ministry of healing and wholeness. But when those who want peace are as interested in success, popularity and power as those who want war, what then is the real difference between war and peace?

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As I cover him with his sheets and blankets and turnout the lights, I pray with Adam. He is always very quiet as if he knows that my praying voice sounds a little different from my speaking voice. I whisper in his ear: “May all the angels protect you,” and often he looks up at me from his pillow and seems to know what I am talking about. Since I began to pray with Adam I have come to know better than before that praying is being with Jesus and simply wasting time with Him. Adam keeps teaching me that.

People like Nouwen have discovered the liberation from self-judgment, self-abuse and regret—a liberation that comes simply by doing one’s best, and to see that it’s enough. It’s enough. It is enough!

(NOTE: The spoken sermon, also available online, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)