

Finding Meaning in Work

Manila, Philippines

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This reflection by Audrey, fcJ, first appeared in her blog [Surprising Grace](#)

I spent the last 8 days making a “silent retreat” at a beautiful Jesuit retreat centre just outside of Manila. Such a retreat – Ignatian-style – involves quieting oneself and giving time for a certain amount of prayer and reflection each day with the aim of reconnecting with God, oneself, and nature, usually with the help of a guide to whom you talk each day about your inner process.

Going on retreat, it occurred to me this year, is a bit like going up a mountain. In the whirlwind of work, play and activity that fills our days, we sometimes lose track of where we have come from and where we are going – or why we are going anywhere at all! It is only when we are on the mountain, gazing down at the road we have travelled in our daily experience, that we regain a sense of the bigger picture: yes, I have travelled that road, and look how far I have come! Looking down at the paths by which we have come gives a deeper sense of meaning and direction to the daily grind; the flurry of busy-ness, the mixture of eager anticipation or sometimes yearning emptiness that seems to fill our days.

This year I went into retreat after a period of feeling overwhelmed by work and its anxious demands, stretched to the limits of my capacity and yet feeling a strange sense of emptiness in the midst of it. Taking the time to reflect on all this reminded me of the deeper meaning behind it. Pre-occupied with the struggle to achieve, to perform competently and effectively, I had lost sight of the reason why I do this work at all – and, more importantly, who I do it with and for.

In the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius there is an intriguing imaginative exercise sometimes known as “The Call of the King”. (Bear with the medieval terminology!) In more modern restatements, you are first asked to imagine a charismatic figure that you like and whose life and work you admire very much – maybe Mother Teresa, or Nelson Mandela, or someone from your own life, for example. Imagine them calling to you and saying, “Come follow me. Come share in my life and work – live with me as I do, and work with me in my mission.” How appealing is that to you? Of course you would want to follow this person. And then, now imagine that it is Jesus who calls to you – the Lord of all the universe whose mission is larger and deeper than any one human person’s life work; whose love envelopes all of creation. And this Jesus calls to you in the same way: “Will you come follow me? Come be with me; come share in my life and my work...” How much more would you desire to say yes?

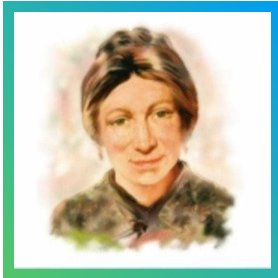
“ This image of being called by Jesus to be his companion was very significant for me in this retreat. I remembered that I had started out on this work as a response to the love of this One who is so dear to me, whose love is the reason why I live and move and have my being.

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In the light of this love I know that in the end the results of my work are not why I do it. My life and work could from my meagre point of view seem a complete failure – as Jesus' own life did when he died on the cross – but the only thing that matters is that I have walked with God. More and more tools have developed nowadays in the social sector as a means by which to evaluate our work, and these are important. But there is nothing yet that can measure the forces of love and grace that go far deeper than we can see – and that will save us in the end. In the light of faith, all that matters is that in my work, I have walked with God as a response to God's generous love.

And how wonderful it is to be called – in spite of the weaknesses and imperfections I am so aware of – to be God's companion!

Food for thought: What is the reason why you work?



“ La Société n'est pas mon œuvre, c'est l'œuvre de Dieu qui saura la soutenir si telle est sa volonté. ”

Marie Madeleine d'Houët

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