

An Honest Day's Work

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September 5, 2010

Changeability

Friday night, the night of Hurricane Earl, I woke several times to look out of the window and see the rain; I opened the door to feel the wind. The storm wasn't a hurricane after all—nevertheless, the rain and gusting wind was impressive. Yet when I woke on Saturday morning, I woke to the most beautiful day I could imagine.

It is this quality of *weather* that is one of the most endearing aspects of life on an island. There is always weather here on Nantucket. I love the way it changes, from calm to wind; from sun to storm; from clear to fog; and back again. Sandy Gingras, in her little book *How to Live on an Island*, reminds us that life on an island is not grounded and predictable, but reflects the unexpectedness and changeability of life itself.

Like an island, human beings also sometimes seem to stand “only by some whim of fate, given a chancy foothold among the chaos,” life changing in a moment, sometimes so swiftly that it seems as if the ground has moved underneath our feet.

Given the way my life has been lately, the dawn of a beautiful day after the storm was a hopeful metaphor, and came as a great relief.

The recent and very open discussion about how well I do my job comes just as I've been planning this Labor Day sermon on honest work. I've lived long enough, and been in ministry long enough, that synchronicity comes as no surprise. Each week, no matter what the topic, inevitably someone comes to me, or something happens, that makes a poignant contribution to what I have to say.

On Being “Zusya”

The philosopher and theologian Martin Buber wrote a little book called *Tales of the Hasidism*, a collection of stories told in the tradition of Jewish mysticism. One is based on a true story told about 18th-century Rabbi Zusya, a simple and devout man. His students found him deep in thought one day. He seemed sad, and they asked why. He said he was concerned about making his accounting to God about how he had lived his life. The students tried to reassure him, saying that he was a great man, that he might even be compared to Moses. But Zusya shook his head. “God won't ask me why I haven't been Moses. God will ask, ‘Why weren't you Zusya?’”

Each of us has a vocation, work that allows the true and best self live in what we do. A vocation is not work that serves a need to be Moses, or Gandhi, or Martin Luther King; Margaret Mead or Dorothy

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Day or Mother Theresa. A vocation is the place where the gladness of the true self meets the world's deep need.²

Both my children are adopted; Jamie, the oldest, came from Korea when she was four months old. Within a very short time, just a few months, it was possible to see her evident and self-determining personality. I had the thought, the marvelous insight, that my job as parent wasn't to create her; my job was to keep her safe so that she could grow up and be fully herself.

Vocation is like that. Whatever the circumstances of our birth or upbringing, each of us has talents and limits, gifts and flaws, that make us who we are. Vocation is the work that allows our best "true self" to become visible in our lives.

Fifteen years ago my minister preached a sermon series about finding work that expressed the heart's deepest longings, that was attuned to the soul's most cherished values. Not everyone has that luxury. Not everyone can, like the artist Paul Gauguin, quit their job and go to South America to make beautiful art. But each of us can ask life's deepest vocational question.³

That question is not "What ought I **do** with my life?" It is the more elemental and demanding "Who am I? What is my **nature**?"⁴

Honesty

Regardless of personal circumstances, each of us does have the freedom to ask that question and ask it honestly. For me, 15 years ago, the question came to me this way: "If I could do anything, what would I do?" The answer was immediate: become a Unitarian minister. It was an answer that surprised me, astonished me. It was entirely unexpected. I wonder if Paul Gauguin, *stockbroker*, felt the same surprise when he realized he would become an artist.

I also wonder if he, as I, found that once the thought came, it gripped my soul with a ferocity and power that would not permit me to do anything else. It still holds me, fiercely, uncompromising, unrelenting, so that I cannot *imagine* doing anything else. And this work, challenging as it is, has its wellspring in the gladness of the true self.

But I have to add that *finding* a vocation is not the same as *doing it perfectly*. When the true self has been papered over with other work, with "shoulds" and "oughts" and expectations that have restrained and silenced it for years, there is much that must be unlearned. There are mistakes that must be acknowledged and understood.

² Paraphrased from Frederick Buechner, who defined vocation as "the place where your deep gladness meets the world's deep need."

³ Gauguin titled his last painting, "What are we? Where did we come from? Where are we going?" More on Rabbi Zusya and Paul Gauguin in an essay by Harry R. Moody, <http://www.asaging.org/at/at-231/Zusya.html>.

⁴ Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak*, page 15.

And that's why it's good to live on an island. "Each day starts washed, swept, utterly different than the day before. ... Where else do we get the chance to step out into so much renewal?"⁵

A vocation, once found, requires diligent and honest work. Not just the day-to-day task of the work itself (which to the true self often seems not like work at all), but diligent and honest and soul-searching *openness*. This is the work of the spirit, learning and growing from mistakes and stumbles.

For the true self to emerge in work that is its vocation, complete self-honesty is required, soul-searing honesty, a refiner's fire that after its pain brings the joy of awakening.

This is our true work, the work of the spirit, and life offers it to us daily. We keep getting second chances at being our best selves. Like life on an island, when the storm washes the air clear, it's possible to awake into a beautiful new day.

Work That is Real

This work, the work of the spirit, is for everyone. Whether what we do is full-time or part-time, paying or volunteer, a true vocation or only a way to put food on the table, the work of the spirit is real work. Whether it leads to a new career or not, whether it brings fame and fortune or just a new attitude, the work of honestly facing one's own limitations and mistakes, and emerging with fresh insight, may be life's most significant accomplishment.

When my daughter Jamie was seven years old, we went with a group of friends to New Hampshire's White Mountains. We brought along Jamie's English friend Alice. One day featured what was to be an "easy" climb up a nearby mountain, so Jamie and Alice and I went along. Even at that age, Jamie was used to outdoor activities. But for Alice the mountain hike was entirely unexpected, and (as it turned out) wasn't "easy."

About half-way up Alice began to grumble. Good little soul that she was, she didn't actually complain or criticize us. Instead, she began asking life's deepest vocational question: "Why am I here?"

It became quite a litany: "Why did I agree to come? Why would I choose to go up this trail? Who am I? What was I *thinking*?" Alice continued to ask these questions unremittingly for the next hour and a half.

As we neared the summit, the trail twisted back on itself through the brush. I reached the top before the girls, stepping out onto a shelf of rock. I took a few steps forward, seeing only more brush ahead, then turned—and saw the vista. We were at the top at last, and we would be able to rest and have lunch and (perhaps) have an end to Alice's soul-searching.

Jamie came up next and, like me, turned to see the view. Alice, still talking, toiled at last into the clearing. Seeing us, she asked plaintively, "Why am I here?"

As one, Jamie and I said, "Turn around." Alice turned around. "Oh!" she said, and then, "Now I understand why I'm here."

⁵ Sandy Gingras, *How to Live on an Island*, page 4.

“Give Yourself to It”

The Buddha once said, “Your work is to discover your work and then with all your heart to give yourself to it.”

I believe each of us has a vocation, that there is ever and always a best use of our talents. But whether we are in the job that is our vocation or not, our first work is facing the true self with honesty and love. Shedding the layers that separate us from the true self can be painful and difficult. Like Alice on the mountain trail, we must never stop asking “Who am I? Why am I here?” even as we move forward.

Once Alice reached the mountain top, she gave herself to it with all her heart. Going *down* the mountain she talked non-stop as relentlessly as she did going up, but this time her litany was:

“I know why I’m here! I know why I’m doing this!”

Alice’s revelation was not the work of the intellect. It was the sudden sky-opening recognition of the heart. She gave herself to it fully, completely, with abandon. It was all she could talk about. Because of the view from the mountain-top, she embraced the entire mountain, and she *celebrated* the rough uphill trail—because that’s what had led her to a beauty she had never before imagined.

I do not know whether the challenge of vocation always requires difficulty. I suspect that, for most people, it does. I know that, for me, it has. The prize is worth the toil.

My difficult path has led me to discover the gladness of my true self. I embrace it with all my heart. I wish the same joy for each of you.

Hallelujah.