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What Do You Do?

Last week my mum rang me with a question that had been bugging her. ‘I was talking to one of the ladies at the Mothers’ Union, and she asked me what you do. What should I have told her?’ I knew straight away that when she said, ‘What do you do?’ she wasn’t looking for me to say, ‘I walk the dog most nights and I’m handy with a screwdriver.’ She was talking about work ... and specifically what pays the rent. And I honestly didn’t really know what to say. I do a bit of broadcasting and a bit of journalism; I teach a bit; I’m doing some study. I think of myself as an Everyday Activist – but what does that actually mean?

What I mean by that is that in all the things I do and all the people I meet, I see it as my job to try to find where goodness is at work – and if I can, to point it out to other people. I do all sorts of different jobs to pay the rent. But you won’t be surprised to know that no one actually employs me to be an Everyday Activist. I guess that’s what I’d call my vocation.

Except ... I’m a bit wary of the idea of vocation. It’s a word religious people tend to use a lot. Often, the suggestion is that there’s a job out there that you’re called to do, and you have to find it if you want to be happy. It’s a bit like the idea that there’s one person out there somewhere among the seven billion of us who is Mr or Ms Right for you, and you have to find them if you want a happy life. I don’t buy that at all. Sure, there are quite a lot of people who could make you distinctly unhappy. But there are quite a few who would make you reasonably happy too ... certainly more than one. It’s not just who you

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marry, but who you are with your partner – that’s what makes the difference. Same with work. If you can make a job out of doing the thing you love, that’s great, but lots of people don’t have that luxury. Lots of us just have to find whatever work we can and try to make something of it. What’s more, lots of us have to spend huge proportions of our time doing things that don’t really count as work at all because they are not paid, but they just need to be done. I’m up for changing the world, really I am. I’m more than willing to be Greta Thunberg or Nelson Mandela or Malala Yousafzai. But first I have to cook the dinner/pick up the kids from school/find a way to stop the water coming through the bathroom ceiling. Plus, I need to sleep. Because somehow, before I’ve even started on my saving the planet agenda, I find myself exhausted by the mundane stuff of life. If I’m going to be an activist, I will need to be an Everyday Activist. I will need to work out my deepest values, and get the shopping in at the same time.

So, what about vocation? I think of it like a Venn diagram. In one circle is the person you most truly are: your skills and your interests, and most importantly the things you really care about; the things that stir your passion. In the other circle is the world, with all its opportunities and all its many many needs. You will find your vocation in the place where the person you are deep down overlaps with what the world most needs. If you can hit that sweet spot, you’ll find a rhythm where your self dissolves easily into the tasks you have to do.

Vocation is not just about paid work. That’s really important to know, because getting a job is not as simple as deciding what you’re called to and walking into it. We don’t have all those choices available to us. But we can choose what sort of person we are, and to some extent how we spend our time and who we spend it with. I have a feeling that if I am ever called to account for my life by God, God won’t ask me, ‘Why were you not Prime Minister or President or Archbishop?’ God will ask me, ‘Why were you not Andrew?’

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I knew we would end up talking about God. We always do, but as soon as we do, we run into difficulty. The only thing we can use to talk about God is words, and words are human creations, so they are always going to be inadequate. Worse than that, every word you use is far smaller than the God you are trying to describe. In the novel *A Passage to India* by E. M. Forster, one of the characters refers to ‘poor little talkative Christianity’. Ouch! That stings. I’ve spent countless hours of my life in churches, and most of what we did there was talk. I’ve contributed more than enough of those words myself. I wonder if the sum total of my words has actually shrunk people’s image of God. Sometimes I think that the most effective thing the Church could do to evangelize the nation is to shut up.

The whole business of listening to God is not as easy as it sounds. Not everybody ‘hears’ God’s voice in a way that’s clear enough to put God down as a reference on an application form. But everybody has a place that’s right for them. If you want to find what God is calling you to, my suggestion is that you listen really honestly to your self, and your heart’s deep longing; then listen hard to the world, and its deep need. And what you hear there – that will be God speaking to you. The place where those two things meet, whether it’s being the prime minister or pressing flowers, that place is where you are called to be.

The Russian playwright Anton Chekhov is reputed to have said, ‘Don’t tell me the moon is shining; show me the glint of light on broken glass.’ It gave rise to one of the first rules for writers and film directors: ‘show, don’t tell’. And yet here I am, contributing another pile of words to the world. My excuse is that I want to tell you some stories. My stories are nothing special. They are certainly no more valuable than yours. I am a middle-aged, middle-class, white Christian man who was brought up not to make a fuss. I admire the people who do great things that change the whole world. I’m in awe of Malala, and Greta and Mandela, but if I’m honest, great people sometimes make me aware of my own smallness. The

fact that I recycle my jam jars and switch off the car engine at traffic lights is simply not going to save the planet, and the knowledge of that sometimes makes me feel hopeless. As a result, I have tried to cultivate an attitude of seriousness in life – but also of nonsense.

George Orwell said, ‘Every joke is a tiny revolution’. At the very least, a joke disrupts the settled order of our everyday lives. The joke starts, and for a moment we’re carried into a world of possibilities, before being dropped from a height into familiarity. Laughter brings down the towers of pomp and power – sometimes our own. That’s why no one likes being the butt of a joke. Where Christians are persecuted it is because they declare that Jesus, not Caesar, is Lord. And Caesar can’t bear being laughed at.

That’s why laughter is one of the sharpest tools in the Everyday Activist’s toolkit. It has so many uses. If it is used carefully, laughter can deflate the pompous and cut them down to size. It can empower people who have been squashed or abused. Sometimes it can do both at the same time. And if all else fails, laughter has power to heal deep wounds. I have been privileged to lead a few funerals in my time, and I always think they have done their job if there is laughter somewhere along the way.

Of course, laughter has to be used carefully, or it can hit the wrong target. Sometimes comedians talk about the vital difference between ‘punching up’ – laughing at people who are more powerful than you – and ‘punching down’ – laughing at people who are vulnerable.

I try to sense the gravity of each moment, and the extraordinary privilege of what the poet Mary Oliver called my ‘one wild and precious life’. Life is a solemn business – but then you get your foot stuck in the drawer of a drinks vending machine. Looking back over my life from the vantage point of my late 50s, I can see that most of the really significant things that have happened in my life have happened by accident.

This book is one of them.