

Ian's Monthly Newsletter

August 2008

"Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which does not satisfy?"

Just in case we were to think that our concerns about meaning in our work were new (which we kind of did in the May and June Newsletters), the quotation above is something Biblical¹ to remind us that there ain't nothing new under the sun.

We might find the first question easier to answer than the second if we assume that Isaiah meant just food. But, despite the fact that he continues to use that word, he clearly doesn't. He tells his listener, "Listen carefully to me and eat what is good and delight yourselves in rich food." Or, as those of us seeking value in our work might say these days, "Pay attention to how you actually live your life, particularly at work. Benefit from your work in ways that give value to you." We might call this Personal Job Alignment.

And then as if an antidote to the very idea of fulfilled or happy lives, the following headline appeared in the book review section of the Weekend *Financial Times* on 9 August.

"But what would happen if we all suddenly found happiness?"

The article (The Up Side of Down by Stephen Cave) goes on to suggest that should we all suddenly find happiness then we would immediately not want any new consumer goods. The industries that provided these goods would thus collapse and, "Before long we'd be in a full blown recession. Give it a decade and we'd be

back in the Dark Ages."

Now, let's leave aside the hyperbole and the fact that we seem quite capable of recessions while still craving those same consumer goods. Cave goes on to consider what we know to be an age-old conundrum.

"Is our inability to attain nirvana actually adding to our woes? ...research shows [according to the book under review] that after the age of 25, neither winning the lottery or losing both legs is likely to have much long-term effect on our happiness. We are stuck with ourselves as we are." (We could say that that's good news about the legs! (Sorry))

So, here we are again. Back to our regular consideration that it is not the trappings (good or bad) or indeed (the legs again) the experiences themselves. It is who we are and how we are in relation to the world as we experience it. Now, Cave seems to admit to a certain fatalism about who we are as ourselves – i.e. we're stuck with it. He quotes Freud as suggesting a similar fatalism about life as we now experience it, "The price we pay for our advance in civilisation is a loss of happiness."

The prophet and I take a different view. I am not suggesting that we can change who we are – far from it. I believe that our life's work is to become who we are and be that person in the world. But, what we no doubt can change is how we relate to the world as we are. We can make choices, choices that can align

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ourselves with the world so that we do not 'spend our labour for that which does not satisfy'. By which I mean, what has often been said, that we do not pursue happiness or contentment as such.

I tried to make a reasoned distinction between happiness and contentment until I came across these dictionary definitions:

Happy: enjoying or expressing pleasure and *contentment*

Contentment: state of *happiness* and satisfaction

I quoted, in the February 2007 Newsletter, Oliver James (author of *Affluenza*) as saying, "Research proves [there it goes again proving things!] that, overall, people with intrinsic motives and goals (doing things for the pleasure of doing them) tend to be emotionally better off.." Does this really say no more than the tautology that those who do things that give them pleasure – or are happy according to the dictionary definition – are, you guessed it, content?

Not quite. The important phrase is 'intrinsic motives and goals'. In finding out who we are, at least in relation to our work, Personal Job Alignment takes us through the process of looking at what energises us as a way into considering what we value. And we've seen that what we value, or rather, doing what we value as who we are, may well not give us happiness in the sense that perhaps Freud and Cave and much of the consumerist world had in mind – a state of heightened pleasure.

One manager I may have referred to before gets satisfaction from (i.e. contentment) from working to develop her team and service in an otherwise onerous role. Similar feelings must be true for many people who work in, for example, NGOs in terrible conditions. Think also of journalists under fire in war zones. We all know, don't we, that it's not the material goods that we get that give satisfaction of any lasting kind? (However difficult we find it to live our lives as if we do believe that!!)

So, what do we make of all this? Two essential points:

First, it's the intrinsic benefit we get from what we do that counts. And to get that contentment from what we do, that happiness, we must know ourselves well enough to understand what it is we value about what we can do. Vocation isn't a word used much these days, the notion seems very counter-cultural. Yet in a sense we need to feel as if called to our work in order to get that intrinsic connection that we seek.

And second, as if that bit were easy, we have to have the courage to make the choices that allow us to live that value, that vocation, and not be too sidetracked by all the other demands on and attached to the other desirables in our lives.

Or, to end with another Biblical quotation that fits the bill:

"Better is a dinner of vegetables where love is than a fatted ox and hatred with it."²

1. Isaiah, Ch.55 V2

2. Proverbs 15, 17

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