

Following Your Bliss: A Practical Guide

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Each month we set a theme for our services. We try to look at the big issues that people have to grapple with. This year in October the theme is “Vocation;” which is a theological term, a Latin term, or more commonly understood as calling. What is your calling? And there is a three-word answer, “Follow Your Bliss.” That’s really all this sermon is about. It comes from the great student of the mythologies of human beings, Joseph Campbell, who was completing a series of interviews with Bill Moyers for PBS just before he died in 1987. In those interviews he said, “My general formula for my students is . . . follow your bliss. Find where it is and don’t be afraid to follow it.” It is miraculous. I even have a suspicion that has grown on me as a result of invisible hands, coming all the time. Namely, that if you *do* follow your bliss you put yourself on a kind of track that has been there all the while waiting for you and the life that you ought to be living is the life you are living. When you can see that you begin to meet people who are in your field of bliss and they open doors to you. I say follow your bliss, don’t be afraid, and doors will open where you didn’t even know where they were going to be.

Much earlier than that, the great African-American liberal theologian, Howard Thurman wrote, “Don’t ask so much what the world needs, go out and do what makes you come alive. Because what the world needs most are people, who have come alive.”

So that’s it. Follow your bliss. It’s become a cliché. It’s been used in marketing. It’s been understood as only our culture can do, in the most shallow ways possible. Why should we pay attention to these three words? We’ve got to think about where they came from. Joseph Campbell spent decades studying the deepest spiritual wisdom of humanity, over time and across the globe. And he distilled his learnings into this essence. So I think we should pay attention. Follow your bliss.

After a lifetime of accompanying people on their spiritual journeys as a Minister, I’d like to offer what I can, and by way of a practical guide for following your bliss. The first thing I’d like to say is that you cannot find your bliss by copying other people. You can’t just buy your bliss map wholesale. It’s an adventure. You have to find your way yourself. There are going to be all kinds of adventures along the way. You can’t take the map that you were given through family tradition or that was somebody else’s idea about what your bliss ought to be, or what a less mature self might have thought your bliss was; or somebody you admire. You have to find it. The reason is because there has never been someone like you on this planet before. You have specific gifts and talents that the world needs and there is never going to be anyone like you on this planet before or after. And so if you don’t give those gifts to the world, the world is going to have to do without them. The world is going to be that much poorer. So you have to find what it

is that your vocation is, that your calling is. So you can't find your bliss by copying other people. And it's important that you don't confuse your bliss with a whim. Because you know in our consumer culture, we are educated to follow all of our whims. If your bliss changes every few months, well, I don't think you have found it yet. It's your whim. Your bliss is something deep. One of the reasons so many people watch American Idol is that kind of cringing, can't take your eyes off it, like a car crash, thing where the vast majority of contestants who think that their bliss is to be a rich and famous singing star, get up against the reality Simon and his colleagues on that judging panel. They thought they were following their bliss. But there should be some innate drive, yes, but also talent and discipline. If you are following your bliss, then you need to have the discipline to master that area of activity, and it is going to be a joy to do that, most of the time, despite the challenges that you will meet along the way. It takes character, actually, to follow through on following your bliss. It is not about instant gratification. And this is a big one, your bliss may or may not be what you do to make money and put food on the table. There is a Buddhist concept of right livelihood, it's actually very important, it's part of the Noble Eightfold Path to Enlightenment. Right livelihood traditionally is to make your living in such a way that you do the least harm, so you try to avoid occupations that are dishonest or that involve killing or stealing. Traditionally those involve selling weapons, drugs, alcohol, hunting, trapping, fishing, and those kinds of activities that cause harm to living beings. But any honest livelihood that doesn't harm human beings is right livelihood. We have taken this traditional Asian concept of right livelihood and run it through American Puritanism and changed it all around because we have this idea that our jobs are really where it's at. Work is the way we save ourselves. Some years ago a woman named Marsha Sinetar wrote a book, the title of which has become yet another cliché, "Do What You Love, The Money Will Follow." What she did was expanded the concept of right livelihood to include looking at work as a spiritual path. Okay . . . It means doing your work with great love, great passion and great awareness. I think that is a really good idea. It means using the hard discipline of being successful at any work and use it to change you to help turn you into your best self. I think that is a good idea. All of life is a spiritual path. So far, so good, I really don't have an argument with those presets. It is the title that is the problem. A lot of people read the title, some without reading the book, and decided to do what they loved and thought that a lavish lifestyle would follow. It is this kind of magical thinking that we are so prone to and they were disappointed. The problem is that it makes people feel guilty if their job is as useful and honest as they are, aren't fulfilling them somehow, in every way possible, aren't employing their total self. As a Unitarian Universalist adult curriculum was titled some years ago. Very few people do. And you don't have to, to have right livelihood. Sinetar and other advocates of salvation through work confuse your job with your vocation. Your job is what you do to pay the rent and put money on the table. Your vocation is the way you use the gift or gifts you were put on earth to share and your job doesn't have to hinder that. Some people are lucky enough to combine them. There was a study done recently, a fairly large study, that showed that about one-third of the employed people in our country see their actual jobs as their vocation, and they feel privileged to be able to go to work and do that job. It takes a whole lot of who they are.

They feel that they are contributing uniquely to the world. And it brings them great satisfaction and joy. That's about a third. I'm lucky enough, I think, to be one of that third. There is another third of the work force that sees work as a career, which has specific rungs. And every time you go up a rung, you get more money, more status, more perks, more power, and that is fine, as long as you keep going up the ladder. Sometime though, that stops, and then what? And another third see their jobs as jobs. You do the work or you try to get out of doing the work and then you get your paycheck, and that's all it means. Even Sinetar has modified her views after a lot of people misunderstood her first book. And she allows that sometimes your vocation does not support you, sometimes you have to support your vocation.

Let me give you a huge and obvious example here, if a little one or even a teen-ager is under your care, your vocation, part of it, is parenting. It is part of your vocation. Now I don't know how many of you, that are parents, have been able to work out a deal where you actually get paid for parenting. Mostly you are paying . . . big, to raise a child in this world. And parenting is part of your vocation in those moments of bliss that do come; as part of being parents and those moments of utter frustration it is still part of your vocation and you are working to support it. And of course we know about the great actors that have had to wait tables until they were discovered, and could support not only themselves, but their whole entourage. And of course we know about the great writers who needed to write, but had a job and maybe a family and had to find spare moments here and there, before they wrote the great American novel. It's freeing actually to know that you can follow your bliss without finding a job that lets you follow your bliss. You can support your vocation until or unless your vocation supports you. It is useful to know as well that even if you do find a way to make a livelihood from your bliss, it probably isn't going to be a lavish livelihood. Following your bliss and following a materialistic life-style are probably not compatible.

I think it is useful for all of us to think about a few questions, so here they are. You might want to think them over. What is my vocation? What have I been put on this earth to contribute? Do I have more than one vocation? Has my vocation changed at different times in my life? For those of you who are past your active working career, know that you, too, have a vocation, a bliss to follow. For this stage of your life, what is your bliss, your vocation? To what extent are my job and my vocation combined? In what ways does my job hinder my vocation? Would I have more energy for my true vocation if I changed jobs? Or if I changed the way I did my job? Does my job involve harming other beings or dishonesty at any level? Could I change the way I do my job so that I could do it with a clear conscious? Can I change the way I look at my job so that it becomes my bliss? Turning work into salvation is a peculiarly western, peculiarly American idea. Work has taken over or lives to the point that it crowds out other essential values like family, friendship, citizenship, service. I don't think we need a spirituality of the workplace, as much as we need models of living whole lives, balanced lives; lives of integrity and compassion and awareness. Because, for all of us human beings, the ultimate goal is transformation. Our goal

is the gradual transformation of selfishness to selflessness; of inner-conflict to inner-peace; of lives that are exploitive and unsustainable to lives that are sustainable and justice centered. Our work can certainly help us in this quest. The way we do it can be a part of our path. But often times, if done the way it is done in our society, our work can actually harm and hinder our quest for transformation; our ability to follow our bliss. It is hard to be a person of integrity in the evenings and the weekends when you have to lie and steal for most of your work day. Of course spiritual practice won't be able to heal the wounds to your soul of these self-betrayals. The greatest treasure of this precious life is to find your bliss and all the challenges and triumphs along that path. Find your bliss, and then live it. You may have to struggle to find it. You will undoubtedly have to sacrifice to follow it. But there is no greater joy than doing what it is that you were put on this earth to do. Amen.