

## ***The Most Important Job***

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**“Our life is more than our work. Our work is more than our jobs.”  
–Charlie King**

This is a sermon about dreams and despair and surprise and knowing and risking and believing and learning and becoming and being amazed at the gift that is life in all its messy glory and magnificent disappointment.

This is a sermon about dashed hopes, and foiled plans, and dead-ends, and turnabouts, and possibilities, and recoveries.

This is a sermon about making meaning when it is easy and when it is not so easy.

This is a sermon about work, specifically the life of work and the work of life.

In talking and thinking together about work, I believe we are almost required to consider what we do (or have done) to earn a living, because such a large portion of how we see ourselves, and others, can be tied up in how we have made our money, or not. When we meet someone, often one of the first topics of conversation is “What do you do?”, meaning of course, what is the work for which you get paid. The more significant questions to be raised, the answers to which would reveal much more about who we are and what our lives mean, are often left unasked: *What fills your heart? What makes you smile? In what activities do you engage that help you to say “yes” to your life?* Sometimes the answers to these questions would include our wage-earning endeavors (past or present), but for many of us, they would not, at least not in a significant way.

I recently read a description of the Balinese, the people who live on and around the island of Bali off the coast of Indonesia, who have culturally placed a great emphasis on the celebrating of special occasions as the core of their character as a people. Much of their individual identities are rooted not in how they earn a living, but in their roles in these festivals, in the ways they contribute to the greater community’s customs and fun:

“If you ask a Balinese what he does, he will proudly answer, ‘I am

a Baris dancer' or 'I am a mask maker.' If you persist and ask again, 'No, I mean how do you get your rice?' he loses interest, his voice drops, he may turn away, deciding this is a pretty boring conversation. 'Oh that,' he will say."<sup>1</sup>

Can you imagine what it would be like for our culture to make that kind of switch in how we perceive our identities, from an emphasis on what we do to earn a living to an emphasis on how we contribute to our community's most important festivals, affirmations, and rituals? When asked *What do you do?* we might offer *I make really good pies, I set the table, I string the lights, I grab the extra chairs from downstairs, I do a mean "chicken dance", I entertain my grandchildren, I make the home brew, I play my guitar, I ooh and ahh at the fireworks.* Or taken a step further we might say *I vote, I participate in forums, I get to know my neighbors, I speak up for those without a voice, I appreciate the gift of freedom.* In this church community, it might be, *I read for services, I sing in the choir, I teach the children, I usher, I run the dishwasher, I maintain the memorial garden, I participate in Small Group Ministry or Wednesday night programming or a social action project, I decorate signs for the pride parade, I laugh at the speaker's jokes and sing with gusto during services, I show up and help even when I'm not sure I want to, I provide a warm welcome to all those who enter.*

How we answer the question "What do you do?" is all about how we choose to see ourselves as a people isn't it? Are we merely individualists battling life, trying to squeeze every last dollar out of our wage-earning years, regardless of how our spirits experience this squeezing? Or are we contributors to something much greater than how much money we can make? Contributors, we might say, to the greater good of our collective lives?

Making this kind of switch in how we view our working lives is difficult because the emphasis on career has been set for us before we even knew it was happening.

From the earliest time most of us can recall, we have been asked *Who do you want to be when you grow up?*, meaning, of course, through which line of work do you see yourself one day trading your time for the money that will enable you to support yourself, and your future family.

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<sup>1</sup> Quote of Corita Kent, from Robert Fulghum, *Words I Wish I Wrote* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1997), p.121.

This standard conversation starter for adults addressing children is so common that it's almost trite...except, of course, for the children with the desire and interest to take the query seriously.

I think I was one of those kids. Whenever I was asked, I'll bet I thought hard about my answer, no doubt wrinkling up my little boy face in earnest contemplation of my future. I do recall a childhood car ride with my father, when I was about 6 years old, when he posed the question. At that point in my brief understanding of the world of work, my best guess was either being a carpenter (I loved the smell of a woodshop and the magical creation of sawdust) or perhaps a fireman (I loved playing with the early-evening, still-hot coals of our family grill, and the magical creation of forbidden campfires with my neighborhood pals).

Of course, I had no idea what either carpentry or fire-fighting would really require, nor did I know, at that time, if I would have any desire or aptitude for them once I reached the age when I might get to decide.

Just a few years later, I realized that I had interests in lots of areas. I remember rising before the rest of my family on Saturday mornings, and turning our living room into an imagined combination tv studio, restaurant, performance space, where I would not only interview the guests, and cook and serve the food, but also speak of my latest sports achievement, acting or music project, or piece of artwork.

I was a true renaissance man-to-be, at least in my mind. But isn't that the case with many of us, at least those of us with the benefit of families and treasured teachers and mentors who instilled in our youthful expectations a sense of entitlement, a sense that anything is possible, a sense of privilege that leads us to believe and act as if we really can choose the specific directions of our working lives?

A simple look around us, though—sometimes even a look in the mirror—will tell us that the choices of this life, particularly the choices about our career paths (or lack thereof), are rarely as simple for most of us as we once may have imagined or hoped they could be.

Career aptitude or interest in youth (or at any stage in life) does not necessarily remain as we age, or even from week to week. Our career interests and abilities can be transitory, subject to our health, our genetic makeup, our economic and cultural backgrounds, and our life

circumstances—the circumstances which our American pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps mythology suggests we always choose, but which we know through life experience, sometimes choose us. The careers we previously thought we desired, once pursued, may be less than we imagined, or incompatible with our current realities, or perpetually out of reach.

And even if we have been gifted with a deeply felt career direction, and have had the resources and resilience to head toward it, we may, at one time or another, find ourselves thrown off course by the choppy waters of a shifting economy, or shrinking opportunities, or our advancing age.

When the unemployment numbers in our country are reportedly at their highest levels in over 25 years, we know there are lots of our sisters and brothers, and maybe lots of us, trying to navigate the churning reality of changing times.

While some of the forced changes in employment can be embraced for the new opportunities they may open up, the result of all this turmoil for many of us is to become under-employed or over-employed, if we are employed at all. The workplace for many of us becomes even more complicated—more pressures to produce, more personalities to placate, more reasons to wonder how we ever ended up where we are and to dream about what might have been, and maybe, what might still be.

Michael Gates Gill, a sixty-something Ivy-League graduate and former ad executive who took a job at Starbucks when his life was on the skids and then wrote a book about all he learned in the process, certainly had to re-imagine the narrative of his life in order to not only accept a job as a low-level employee at a coffee shop but to thrive in it. He had to let go of a great deal before he could even begin to see the possibilities before him. He had to let go of his pride, his accustomed lifestyle, even his expectations of his future, so that he could better embrace his present. He had to grow up, we might say, so that he could be somebody...somebody more like his true self.

We should not over-glamorize his decision to work at Starbucks. Mike, as people call him in the book, probably wouldn't have taken the job if he hadn't felt as though he had no other choice. After having been out of work for many months, running out of money, and knowing that his health concerns required expensive treatment, he was attracted to an off-the-cuff invitation to apply for the Starbucks job (and its health

insurance benefits) the way someone drowning in the ocean would be attracted to a life preserver. It was a matter of survival. And perhaps, this is the primary reason he embraced the responsibilities of this coffee shop work with such heartfelt passion. He confesses that fear drove his work ethic as much as anything else, especially when it came to the dirtiest tasks, like cleaning the bathrooms. He figured that if he got really good at a job no one else wanted, he couldn't be fired.

For Mike, work became less about his identity and more about his dignity. What he was doing became less important than how he did it. And much to his surprise, he found satisfaction, if not elation, in the experience of a job well done. He could see tangible evidence of how his seemingly insignificant role in a seemingly mundane place was impacting other people in positive ways, ways that he might not have even noticed before he began this surprising chapter of his life.

The growth he experienced was inspired in many ways by the Starbucks culture of hospitality as modeled by the store manager, a twenty-something woman named Crystal. It was Crystal who offered him the job. It was Crystal who hired him to a staff with an average age of 20. It was Crystal, a African-American woman with a complicated past, including a drug addicted father, who taught Mike the necessity of respect toward others, which he describes in the book, as the real source of his rebirth into a life of joy.

One afternoon, not long after he began at Starbucks, Crystal offered Mike one of the most important lessons of his transition from a life of self-described arrogance and privilege to a life of humble, joyful service. Mike had just spent a good deal of time cleaning the café bathroom when he saw an old man who was clearly homeless heading towards the door. Mike stopped the man and explained that the bathroom was closed for cleaning, which was a lie he made up in fear of the mess the visitor might make. Crystal overheard the conversation and invited Mike to her office for a one-on-one reprimand, in which she told him he must never refuse the bathroom to anyone. Not so easily persuaded, Mike argued that the guy wasn't even a customer. "He might not be a customer," Crystal answered, "but everyone who walks in that door is a *Guest*." When Mike argued back, "It's not Starbucks's job to provide toilets for the homeless," he opened the door for Crystal to teach the foundational Starbucks precept of respect and dignity for others: "Look," she said, in low, angry, measured words. "In my store, in *our* store we are...*welcoming*. Don't refuse that toilet to anyone, especially someone who really needs some

welcome and not another person putting them down.” Later she asked him to read the number one item on a posted list of the “uncompromising principles” of Starbucks, which is, “To create a great work environment and treat each other with respect and dignity.”<sup>2</sup>

Throughout the remainder of the book, Mike’s newfound happiness is revealed as a translation of this Starbucks maxim into the ultimate instruction for what we might call the most important job of all: To do all we can to create a great life environment and treat each other with respect and dignity.

At its core, this instruction, this uncompromising principle, this most important job is about hospitality, about allowing ourselves to humbly and openly relate to other people, to see our sisters and brothers—family, friends and strangers alike—as entryways to the divine, to God itself. This most important job has little to do with what we earn in money and everything to do with what we can offer in spirit. This most important job is less concerned with how dangerous a stranger is, and more concerned with how dangerous we will become if we don’t learn to be more open to and accepting of others.<sup>3</sup>

This most important job is not typically easy; in fact, it is often the most difficult work of our lives. Accepting other people, embracing their worth and dignity, tempering our own fear-based arrogance and sense of entitlement to leave room in our hearts for the challenges and joys of others may not offer immediate rewards, at least not in obvious ways. But in the depths of who we are and hope to be, any step we make towards the radical hospitality of meeting others where they are will be a step that will make us stronger, more capable of seeing our own stories in the stories of others, more capable of finding in the midst of our complicated lives, the true interdependence that can sustain us when we may most need it.

This most important job is not about striving to be everyone’s best friend. None of us can handle that kind of pressure. It’s not about eliminating conflict or having to always agree, as if that could even be possible. This most important job is about trying each day in whatever ways we can muster to quiet our judgment and open our hearts, to bridge the distance between ourselves and others, a distance that is

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Gates Gill, *How Starbucks Saved My Life* (New York: Gotham Books, 2007), pp. 78-80.

<sup>3</sup> For this turn of phrase, thanks to Father Daniel Homan and Lonni Collins Pratt, *Radical Hospitality: Benedict’s Way of Love* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2002), pp. 36-37.

created by our suspicion and our fear, a distance that leads us to be insensitive and timid. This most important job is about taking the risk to choose the loving action when we might be more likely to lash out or turn away. It is about searching for and embracing a reverence for life that can be ours if we will only reach for it. It is about turning down our cultural emphasis on external measures of success and expectations that are embedded in the desires of others and practicing measuring our lives by the ever-evolving desires of our hearts, of how we can live in such a way that our very existence is an affirmation of this life that we have the precious and always fleeting opportunity to live.

Today begins the enrollment for the next six-month round of our Small Group Ministry program. I can think of no better program at the church to teach us through practice and patience how to be present to others in the full awkwardness and grace of our humanity. Each group of six to 12 people will meet for two hours twice a month from October to March. Each session begins with an opening reading, followed by a check-in, during which each participant has a chance to speak about his or her life for a few uninterrupted minutes. Everyone then has a chance to ask questions and offer reflections. Then, an hour into the session, a topic for thoughtful conversation and storytelling is raised and facilitated by a trained member of the group. The ministry that arises for the participants is directly equivalent to the degree to which they embrace the process, choosing to be open to and accepting of others, curious about the stories they hear and willing to risk the sharing of their own stories. This church has nurtured our small group ministry program for more than seven years, and our growth as a congregation has a lot to do with that investment. Small group ministry has offered us a means to practice being present, curious and accounted for in the relationships of our lives. It has taught us how to accept that our most important job...the job of hospitality toward others, which in turn is about hospitality toward ourselves. I encourage you to sign up. We have nine groups from which to choose. They are listed in the insert in your order of service. Turn in your completed form today after the service in the gathering area...or by September 20<sup>th</sup>. I am confident you'll be glad that you did.

Our friend Mike was eventually transferred to a different Starbucks, much closer to his tiny apartment on the other side of town, but away from the friends he had learned from and with, and who he had come to treasure. On his last day working with Crystal and his partners at the 93<sup>rd</sup> and Broadway Starbucks, his coworkers presented him with a prayer, which seems a fitting way to close, as it could easily be my

prayer for all of us as well.

"Dear Lord," they wrote,

"please give...[Mike]

- A few friends who understand him & remain his friends
- A work to do which has real value, without which the world would be poorer
- A mind unafraid to travel, even though the trail be rough
- An understanding heart
- A sense of humor
- Time for quiet, silent meditation
- A feeling of the presence of God, the patience to wait for the coming of these things, with the wisdom to recognize them when they come.

May God continue to guide you, Mike. We love you.<sup>4</sup>

To which I add, may the spirit of the holy, however we perceive and experience it, be with each of us, in all the most important jobs of our lives.

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<sup>4</sup> Gill, p. 248.