Your Life Is Your Work

Dianne R. Costanzo, Ph.D.

This year’s Caritas Veritas Symposium focuses on some of the enduring questions the junior seminars raise, particularly the question that asks us to contemplate the difference and the connection between making a living and making a life. This question is more important than we can know, as it asks us to consider something profound and non-negotiable, our place in the world. It is all too easy not even to think about our place in the world since most people are worried that they find a place, any place, and make due. We hear this motif in our students’ voiced and often tacit fears about finding a job after graduation—and that is a legitimate concern. College is expensive; we know that. And many people seem to justify the expense of college with the perceived paycheck that will follow it. Some parents are not shy about telling their children that they need to go to school to get the degree to get the job. All of this is valid and needs its place in the conversation regarding what students need from college. Yet, for our brief time together today, I wish to offer another way, a way that is not fear driven but purpose driven, a way that considers first one’s life and then one’s livelihood.

It has been my privilege to teach in the LAS seminar program for eighteen years. It is not only one of the pillars of our curriculum, but a gem, often underappreciated and subject to the criticism that seminars are not useful, and because some feel they are not useful, not necessary. Such a premise is not only short sighted, but ultimately dangerous. If we do things that are only useful, then all art, all rigorous thought, all expressions of beauty, all
people who do not have an apparent and obvious function are held suspect and lose their value and place in the world.

The seventeen century poet, John Milton (1608-1674), contemplated the eternal tension between usefulness and purpose in his sonnet, “When I Consider How My Light Is Spent”:

When I consider how my light is spent
Ere half my days, in this dark world and wide,
And that one talent which is death to hide
Lodged with me useless, though my soul more bent
To serve therewith my Maker, and present
My true account, lest he returning chide;
“Doth God exact day-labor, light denied?”
I fondly ask; but Patience to prevent
That murmur, soon replies, “God doth not need
Either man’s work or his own gifts; who best
Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best. His state
Is kingly. Thousands at his bidding speed
And post o’er land and ocean without rest;
They also serve who only stand and wait.”
When this poem was written in 1652, Milton had become totally blind and his meditation on his place in the world shows his own struggle to rectify his contribution to the world given his physical limitation. Had he come to believe that he had nothing to offer, we would not be gifted with his insight despite his lack of sight. Perhaps Milton can become for us an example of questioning the tyranny of usefulness. He raises the issue of cost and value, which Oscar Wilde clarifies two hundred years later: “A cynic is a person who knows the cost of everything and the value of nothing.” Our work, then, is to know the value of things.

This, of course, is easier said than done. William Wordsworth, the British Romantic poet, voices this in his sonnet, “The World Is Too Much with Us.” To quote him briefly, “The world is too much with us; late and soon, / Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers.” Even back in the days of the early nineteenth century, poets and visionaries had their finger on the pulse of life speeding up and questioning the risk/reward ratio of the march of time. There is certainly something to be gained by moving more quickly—and there is something to be lost as well. Progress is not simply forward motion in speed, but movement in understanding and time. If we as students and teachers are serious about education, then we must be clear about what our goal actually is: are we training people for jobs or even careers or are we educating the minds and hearts of those before us so they may hear their calling and be a light to the world? Of course, the answer is not simply an either/or, but a both/and. We need to be mindful of the realities of the world and yet we are challenged not to give ourselves away so easily. We must develop a double vision, which acknowledges the necessity of the short term while remaining steadfast to the beauty of the long term. In other
words, we must develop the whole person. For this reason, a strong liberal arts education is the best gift we can offer because it provides students with a way into the future by providing a strong foundation. It helps us understand that our life is our work and understanding who we are will allow us to do what, to quote Rainer Maria Rilke, is our “must” (Letters to a Young Poet, letter four).

Some people may say that this sounds good, but what about now? While the fear of the near present is real and needs our attention, we cannot just be reactive to the near present. Trends change pretty quickly and usually the trend is already on its way out by the time we recognize it. This creates a frenetic sense of dread in students who major in disciplines because they think that is where the jobs are. But we also know that students who graduate today will probably change careers four or five times before retiring. That raises some important questions about what our responsibility is to our students. Do we simply get them ready for their entry into the working world and hope they find their way or do we provide them with the foundation of exposure to great minds who have pondered humanity’s place in the world?

Quite frankly, it is insufficient to have our students get on the career treadmill without contemplating the value of doing so. I must say that I am not against our students having careers. I want them to be successful. But I define success as something much more than having a career. Success, for me, is having a purpose and living from that interior place, willing to make the sacrifices to stand in one’s truth. Doing this requires the capacity and the desire to be formed in order to transform the world. This is how we attain our freedom and it is the most difficult and wonderful work we will ever do.
In his stunningly beautiful book, *The Road to Character*, New York Times writer, David Brooks examines a number of world figures like St. Augustine and labor activist Frances Perkins to give us a way into a meditation of lives well lived. He tells us, “By cultivating the habit of reverence—for ancient heroes, for the elderly, for leaders in one’s own life—teachers were not only offering knowledge of what greatness looks like, they were trying to nurture a talent for admiration. Proper behavior is not just knowing what is right; it is having the motivation to do what is right, an emotion that propels you to do good things” (108). Further, he goes on to say that “character, therefore, resists expediency; it defies hasty acquisition. This is undoubtedly why Soren Kierkegaard spoke of character as ‘engraved, deeply etched’” (108). It takes time to polish character, but this is much a part of building our life as is acquiring skills to give us a livelihood.

Polishing character is not in the domain of “doing” but of “being.” As human beings, we need time and place to contemplate our being, our sense of self. While it is important to “do good” in the world, it is crucial to “be good.” Perhaps we can spend time arguing which needs to come first, the doing or the being, but that is for another day. For now, I would ask that we consider moving from the inside out. This returns us to the point about creating a foundation, which is impossible to accomplish alone. All of us need help in developing our way of seeing so we can go into the world and be instruments of change and promise. We need to allow our disposition in life to be nourished. Such a task is not simply intellectual, but deeply spiritual. We need our minds and our spirits to be activated in order to act.

To help us, we can look to the gifts of the Holy Spirit as but one model of articulating how we might consider polishing our character.
Gifts of the Holy Spirit

Wisdom

Understanding

Counsel

Fortitude

Knowledge

Piety

Fear of the Lord (Awe)

If we notice, four of the seven gifts have something to do with our intellect while the other three help us lean toward God. Wisdom, understanding, counsel, and knowledge help us know not just facts, but how to use what we come to know in the service of others and to help us find our right place in the world. These gifts help us discern right from wrong, amusement from happiness, diversion from rest. Fortitude, piety, and fear of the Lord temper us. Much is being touted recently about the word “grit,” as a quality students need to succeed, but fortitude has been around much longer; it is the capacity to be courageous and to endure the vicissitudes of life. Piety is a reverence for the Holy, which is all creation. Piety creates in us humility, a real sense of our true selves. Not false modesty, piety allows us to be in right relationship with ourselves, with others, with creation, with God. This leads us to what was once referred to as “fear of the Lord” or awe. Aquinas sees such fear as filial rather than servile. In other words, we do not have fear that God is going to zap us when we do something wrong, but that we do not wish to disappoint God. Awe creates reverence.
If we were to bring the gifts of the Holy Spirit to our attention, perhaps we could see how using our intellect and our leaning toward the Holy could help us become the people we are called to be. As we attend to our character, we become better women and men. To quote David Brooks again, “Aquinas argued that in order to lead a good life, it is necessary to focus more on our exemplars than on ourselves, imitating their actions as much as possible. The philosopher Alfred North Whitehead argued, ‘Moral education is impossible without the habitual vision of greatness’” (107). To this end, we need to be exposed to great minds in every field. We need to become friends with a lot of dead people, who are dead only physically, as they live because they are part of the enduring conversations that we still get to have. They are begging us to speak with them and we are fools if we do not accept their invitation, to ask them what they think, to consider their perspective, to disagree with them while still honoring the wisdom they can give us. If we do not know them, we are the poorer for it. How could we be satisfied wading in the shallow pan of our own experience when we could be diving into the ocean of the universe of discourse? Our work, then, is to dive—to dive deeply and full heartedly into the More. Our work becomes not just what we do but who we are. We discover the treasures buried within us as we cultivate our character. This can occur only with great love; it asks us to dedicate ourselves to becoming our best selves.

D.H. Lawrence (1885-1930) writes, “Love is the great asker. It asks us to go from the lesser to the greater, from the rind to the core.” Perhaps another way of trying to articulate such movement is to contemplate the risk it requires because such work does not come cheaply or easily. Anything of true value is neither cheap or easy.
One of my favorite poems by William Butler Yeats (1865-1939), called “The Mermaid,” voices the risk of venturing from the rind to the core:

“The Mermaid”

A mermaid found a swimming lad,
Took him for her own;
Pressed her body to his body,
Laughed, and plunging down,
Forgot in cruel happiness
That even lovers drown.

Clearly, this is a poem that often creates a sense of discomfort in us because we usually associate the word “drown” with loss and death, and, to be sure, there is both loss and death in this poem. But if we can look at this poem a bit differently, then we may enter a different and deeper reality. When I used to teach poetry, I would often use this poem and ask my students, “For what are you willing to drown?” Some of the more typical responses would be “nothing—I don’t go near the water” or “my family.” Good enough answers, but what if we pushed the limits of that question? What if we dove into it? Might we begin to think that drowning is not always a bad thing? In truth, all of us are drowning and we do not even know it. As a culture, we are drowning in our materialism, our selfishness, our lust for power or prestige or privilege. We are drowning in the illusion that more is better, faster is better, comfort is better. But what if we allowed ourselves to drown in a different way? What if we drowned to our selfishness, our pettiness, our ignorance? What if we risked the comfort of our isolated and solipsistic world of life in our selfies and dared to cultivate a Self? What if we were audacious enough to do our work and wake up?
In the junior seminars of which I am a part, we are reading Pope John Paul II’s *Encyclical on Human Work*. While I can be pretty sure that no one would pick this up and read it on his or her own, I will argue that we are all better for having done so. Using the book of *Genesis* as his scriptural foundation, John Paul II asks us to work, not like Adam and Eve, who, once banished from the Garden, had to toil for their daily bread, but to work like God, who created from a sense of abundance and great love. If we could connect with that sense of work, then perhaps we, too, could bless our work at the end of the day and say, “It is good.”

I will be the first person to admit that such a vision of work is optimistic, and I will not apologize for that. Often I hear pessimists proclaim that they are merely realists, assuming that optimists have their heads in the clouds and are out of touch with “the real world.” For all the optimists in the room, I would ask that we challenge that premise and invite the pessimists over for coffee. To be honest, it is much more demanding to look for the light—to be the light—then it is to rearrange the deck chairs on the Titanic in the dark. If all of us could be light for the world, however small and apparently insignificant we think our light is, then we could make extraordinary changes in our own lives and in the lives of others. We could make the world more just, more kind, more whole, more holy, but it has to begin with how we take up our own work. Are we willing to become the best students, teachers, administrators, staff, parents, children, friends possible? Are we willing to wake up? Are we willing to do our work, that is, to make of our lives a blessing for those with whom we walk? To return to Oscar
Wilde’s definition of a cynic as someone who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing, are we willing to put down our cynicism, which is often clever but seldom wise, and learn the true value of things?

Each of us will have to choose how we will respond and then we shall act on our choices. To close, perhaps it might be helpful to leave us with some simple, though not easy, final thoughts:

Do not be afraid

Do not allow yourself to settle for less when you can be more

Be light for the world.

We have a lot of work to be; let us go and do our work.