

WHAT'S YOUR HEART'S DESIRE?

Ps 20:4 “May God grant you your heart's desire, And fulfill all your plans.”

Ian Sowton's translation: “May the Eternal grant you your heart's desire,
bringing all your plans to their fulfilment!”

What would you do if I said I could wave a magic wand and grant you your heart's desire? Would you be able to tell me what your heart's desire was?

I was speaking at a public event out of town recently and a young man gave me a ride back home. He is in his early 20s, just graduated with a business degree and working for one of the banks. He has a good job and a promising career but he is not happy. He is unsettled and restless and not sure what he should do next. I said to him “If there were no financial pressures and no family concerns, what would be your heart's desire?” After a long silence, his reply was: “I really have no idea. I've never asked that question before.”

The world is full of desire and if the advertisements are to be believed, the world is full of unfulfilled desire. But is that really what we mean by the heart's desire? Mostly our world seems to focus on the desires of the stomach. We call them appetites. We are hungry for stuff. Everything we see we want to consume. The more we consume, the larger our stomach grows and so our hunger grows as well. We are also hungry with genital desire. We sometimes treat our sexuality as a consumable good, we constantly want more, better, newer - food, stuff, sex.

One of the challenges of desire is that it can sometimes be displaced. We desire love and we replace it with ice cream. We desire social approval and replace it with name brand luggage. We desire connectedness and we replace it with collections. Even the phrase “Heart's Desire” sounds more like the title of a Harlequin Romance than a biblical quotation!

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St. Augustine (354-430) lived over 1600 years ago in North Africa. One of his most famous quotations is this: "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you."

What do we do when we desire the Divine? What do we replace God with?

Today I am simply stating the obvious when I say we are living through the biggest economic crisis of our generation. Even though things are a lot worse in countries other than Canada, still, if you have not been affected personally, you know someone who has; someone whose job was in the wrong place at the wrong time, or someone who had the misfortune to lose their job just as the crisis hit – someone like me.

When you fall off the employment ladder, you start asking important questions, or you start asking them one more time. Firstly there is the question of income. I need a job so I can pay my bills. Secondly, it is a question of community. Most of our waking day is spent not with our lifemates but with our workmates. If I am not employed, who is my community? Thirdly, it is a question of direction and purpose. Which job shall I apply for, which role do I imagine for myself? Each option represents a different trajectory for my life and might even represent a different location, city or country. The longer this detachment from the workforce lasts, the deeper the impact. At its root, it represents a deeply spiritual question – by that I mean it forces you to ask: what is my heart's desire?

Fredrick Buechner is an American Presbyterian Minister who has written a lot about work and meaning and spirituality. He says "The kind of work God usually calls you to is the kind of work (a) that you need to do and (b) that the world needs to have done. If you find your work rewarding, you have presumably met requirement (a), but if your work does not benefit others, the chances are you have missed requirement (b). On the other hand, if your work does benefit others, you have probably met requirement (b), but if most of the time you are unhappy with it, the chances are you have not only bypassed (a) but probably aren't helping your customers much either." Most of us spend our whole lives trying to figure out the relationship between (a) and (b).

I have had many jobs in my life, and a few careers.

My first real job, a summer job, was painting a fence. My first career was in the restaurant business. It sustained me for 7 years. However, when I finished my B.A. at York University in a college where Michael Creal was the Master, I had a hard time figuring out what I was called to do. My father kept calling me into the business world – banking or the stock market was his vision for me. My choice then was defensive – what choice could I make that would defend me from this parental pressure. Law was my chosen defense! I joined the ranks of bright, young students dangerously confused about the difference between justice and law. When the University of Windsor asked me why I wanted to go to law school, I told them what I thought they wanted to hear. But the innocence of the question slipped through my psychological fortifications and destabilized my confidence in my decision as I rode the night bus down Yonge St. from my job waiting tables at an up town steak house to my shared flat above a grocery store at Dundas and Sherbourne. When I went to bed and when I awoke, long after I had submitted the application, the first question on my lips was “why do you want to go to law school”? Eventually I was able to admit to myself that what I was looking for was security and I associated security with a house in the country and a white picket fence. I knew this cost a lot of money – lawyers earned a high income so voila! That’s why I wanted to become a lawyer.

Well, no sooner had I let the words pass my lips, I knew this was a false logic. I grew up in Oakville. I knew lots of wealthy people and the last word I would use to describe them was ‘secure’. Actually, I found them to be a remarkably insecure bunch. No, clearly the security I was seeking was of a spiritual rather than a material kind.

The juridical desire, like a veil, disintegrated before my eyes. If I didn’t want to be a lawyer, what then did I want to be? I was 22, single, no dependents. What did I want to do, I asked myself, so that even if it was a mistake, I was still young enough to recover. What could I do now that I couldn’t do when I was 40? I decided at that moment that

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ever since I was 13 I had questions about God I wanted to answer. Now was the time to seek answers. I signed up for seminary. I didn't want to get ordained, mind you. I didn't feel called to it. I just wanted to seek answers to my questions about God.

You see when I was 13 I was attending an Anglican boys school and we had a confirmation class led by the chaplain. The chaplain was someone who was physically awkward (a cardinal sin among teenaged boys) and he carried little personal authority among us. I was the kid sitting at the back of the room trying to make life as difficult for him as possible. I was asking all the toughest questions I could think of. After class one day he asked me to stay behind. I thought I was in big trouble. He said 'you seem to be having a lot of trouble with this class.' 'I am', I replied (we were studying the Nicene Creed). 'I don't know if I believe in the Virgin Birth!' He looked at me and he said 'Well, sometimes I don't know if I believe in it either'. I was stunned. Here was someone standing before me and wearing a black suit and a high white clerical collar – the uniform of the Church and he was expressing doubt in the core doctrine of the Church. I felt as if the Earth had moved. Though I wouldn't have used these words at the time, I realized he was saying to me that doubt was not opposed to faith, it was a part of faith. In that moment he helped plant in my heart a desire to figure out my relationship with the Divine.

So, 10 years later I was in Seminary. I earned my first theological degree, went to work for the Canadian Council of Churches. I then earned my PhD in Theology (in ethics and economics) and went west, to Saskatoon to teach in a seminary sponsored by the United Church. Eventually I became President of that College and I asked a lot of questions about how people came to make the decision about a vocation in ministry. How and when did people hear the call? It turns out most people heard that call as a teenager, in high school. At some point in those deeply formative years, some older person (a relative, a minister, a teacher, a camp counselor) said to them 'have you ever considered becoming a minister? I think you'd make a good one.' I now realize that all kinds of desires are formed at this age and sometimes, while we're not looking, our deepest commitments and values find their roots.

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Recently I was talking to a group of young women at Massey College about vocation. They were all in their 20s, all in graduate programs, all at the top of their class. I asked them if anyone had ever asked them what their heart's desire was. There was a long silence when finally one of them said – “you just did”.

I have sometimes described my life as a series of accidents on the bourgeois express. Oh, I had plans, lots of them. The only positive thing we seem to have taken from Stalin is the 5-year strategic plan! However, it is the accidents of my life that have been the most meaningful. It was an accident that led me to York University and a student population that was more diverse in class and religious make up than anything I had experienced before. It was an accident that took me to seminary and another one that took me to Saskatoon and gave my children a prairie identity. Now it's another accident that finds me looking for work during the global financial deep freeze. But actually, I'm not looking for work, exactly. It is this accident that has caused me to ask again “what is my heart's desire?”

St. Augustine cautioned us to distinguish between the true object of desire and the false object of desire. We are easily deceived about the objects of our desire. If we are possessed by thirst, we will be attracted to any water, even if it is poisoned. If we are hungry enough we will grab anything that looks like food, even if it is rotten. If we are lonely we will grasp at any relationship, even if it is abusive. If we are longing for the sacred, how will we satisfy this desire? I understand with Fredrick Buechner that vocation (the place God calls you to) “...is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet...” Your deep gladness is your heart's desire.

For me, my deep gladness, my heart's desire, is to be engaged in work with a purpose, to be healing the hurts of the world and to be engaged with a community of people committed to doing that with love. When I look at the world this way I see that I have lots of work – great work. Its paid work I'm short of.

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And for all of you I can offer the following prayer but especially I offer it for Alice & Ben, and for Andrew & Celia whose vocational discernment is leading them this summer away from here but towards new homes and old homes:

“May the Eternal grant you your heart’s desire,
bringing all your plans to their fulfilment!”

Amen.