

The True Livelihood Series



Reflections from...

Denise Bissonnette



Denise Bissonnette is an internationally renowned writer, trainer and keynote speaker. For over two decades, she has inspired people and organizations throughout North America to look beyond traditional concepts of career development and to craft livelihoods rooted in the individual "genius" of each person. Her work is a rich tapestry of her talents as a poet, writer, storyteller, teacher and career developer.

The Call to Purpose: Living a Life Laced with Meaning

As I write, I am looking out on a beautiful scene of squirrels and birds scampering for seed under a bird feeder in my brother's Wisconsin yard. To my delight, a pair of cardinals has landed on the bird feeder, dazzling me with their bright red wings. How apropos, as I ready myself to write about the "call to purpose" - that dimension of life wherein we invite, inspire and invoke our hearts to take wing.

Albert Einstein once wrote, "Strange is our situation here on earth. Each of us comes for a short visit, not knowing why, yet sometimes seeming to divine a purpose." Aristotle asserted that one's purpose is merely a matter of knowing where one's talents and the needs of the world intersect. We know of what they speak. When we think about people we've known who were the most content, who exude the most joy, and who model the most wholesome and healthy lives, we see a common thread among them - their time and talent was spent for something beyond their own personal welfare. Look more closely and we will find that their time was not "spent" at all - it was "invested", whether in a profession, for a cause, or in the well-being of the people closest to their hearts.

People who have found a path of authentic service in the world emanate a sense of deep satisfaction and contentment that goes deeper than what we think of as ordinary "happiness". I believe that is a quality of joy that every human being seeks - the joy of making a difference and leaving a legacy for others to follow. The resounding message from the great spiritual traditions as well as from contemporary psychology is the same: Humans are not happy simply consuming and pursuing creature comforts, although Lord knows we give it a good try! Only by discovering and then creatively utilizing our unique combination of gifts in a way that serves something bigger than ourselves can we ever feel the deep satisfaction of a life well lived. As an ardent and impassioned believer in the idea of "true livelihood" - I use the term to mean that we are true to, among other things, our deepest, highest and most cherished purposes.

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We all know stories of people who had a clear sense of purpose – individuals who heard a call, pursued a dream, focused on a goal, and rose above their circumstances to lead extraordinary lives. We can easily point to the likes of Mother Theresa, Nelson Mandela, Mahatma Gandhi, Cesar Chavez, Rosa Parks or Joan of Arc as examples of individuals whose lives were aflame with purpose. This discussion, however, is not about those lucky few whose grand purposes and unifying vision were clear cut and straightforward. I want to write, instead, about the rest of us more ordinary people whose purposes are fuzzier and less certain – for those of us who know we have wings of purpose, but who are unsure of the piece of sky in which we are meant to take flight.

As a young Catholic girl fascinated with the stories of saints, I anxiously awaited “the call” – perhaps a burning bush, the voice of angels breaking through the heavens, if not a short personal visit from the Blessed Mother. I remember well the hopeful anticipation of a sign that would relieve the ache in my young heart to know that I, too, had a part to play that could make a difference in some small corner of the world. I can see now that my childhood ambition to become a nun was my ace in the hole – in the event that “the call” never came, I would simply choose a path that seemed purposeful and holy enough. Little did I know as a fledgling bird that there would be not just one sky, but many skies into which I would try my wings and know the joy of feeling useful. Yet, in some ways I am still like that child, wondering with sweet anticipation what future skies I will know in the second half of my life. As I wait and wonder now, however, I have the solace of knowing a few things I did not know then. Among them are the following:

1. Working in a “purposeful profession” does not always mean that we are fulfilling our unique purpose.

I meet people all the time who work for schools, agencies or organizations involved in the noble and challenging work of assisting individuals to enter (or reenter) the world of work. Unfortunately, many of the people I meet express (or reflect) that they feel burned out, discouraged and disheartened. They look tired, not just around the eyes, but in their spirits - as if nursing a broken wing.

There is a theory that suggests that burnout results from trying to give what we do not ourselves possess. From this perspective, while burnout is a state of emptiness to be sure, it may not result from giving all we have: it may merely reveal the nothingness from which we were trying to give in the first place! In other words, just because we are in a role of service does not mean that we are connected in the way in which we are meant to serve. For example, the person who is meant to be a teacher but is working as a social worker or the social worker who finds herself in the role of bureaucrat- it’s like asking an apple tree to produce lemons. Trust me – we, like the tree, will exhaust ourselves quickly trying to produce what is not in our nature to produce.

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Throughout our livelihoods we need to return to the essential question, “Am I using my time and talents in accordance with my deepest and highest purposes?” If not, we need to consider what we can be doing to bring them into stronger alignment. This imbalance may signal the need for a job change or it could simply point to the need to give to the world outside the confines of the job. For example, the person who is not able to fulfill the desire to work towards social justice through employment may consider contributing to a cause through a community project, a voluntary agency, or a political action group. One way or another, I think our deepest purposes will persist in their pleading to be played out in one arena or another – not unlike the flower pleading to blossom on the tree on its way to becoming fruit.

2. Rather than wait for the one, grandiose, high-flying call of purpose, we need to be responsive to the simpler, ongoing calls that spring from a purpose-filled life.

Living a life of great purpose is not reserved for a lucky few - for the divinely inspired, the extremely powerful, or the uniquely talented. Playing a part that we deem meaningful is the birthright of every human being, whether we use our gifts changing public policy, delivering a warm meal to elders in the community, or teaching our children to love themselves and the world. If you look back on your life I think you will see that you have been moved to fulfill some purpose not once, but over and over again, if only in small but meaningful ways. It would behoove us to change our thinking from the expectation of that there will be one grand “call to purpose” to the idea that we will live a lifetime of ongoing, simultaneous callings!

We play multiple roles in our lives including that of child, parent, sibling, aunt or uncle, neighbor, citizen, voter, employee, co-worker, supervisor, colleague, advocate, etc. Is it possible that we are called daily in different ways in each of these roles? Rather than wait to know what grandiose purpose we are to serve in our lives, what if we simply asked now and then, “In what new ways am I being called in all areas of my life?” Surely as the mother of a seventeen year old, I am being called to act and respond in different ways than when my daughter was five or ten or fourteen years of age. As a daughter, the ante is being upped in relationship to my mother as she ages and her needs intensity and change. I realize now that I need not await any heavenly signs to know my purpose; I need only to look in the eyes of the people in whose lives I already play a part to know how I am being called to fresh purposes. We need to look around at all times in the world in which we live, work and play, realizing that it is all holy ground – every corner of it inviting us to bring our best.

3. Rather than impose our purposes on our lives, we need to be responsive to the purposes that choose us!

J.R.R. Tolkien gifted us with a supreme example of responding to a call of purpose in his “The Lord of the Rings” trilogy. Here Frodo, with no credentials whatsoever - the never-been-out-of-the-Shire regular guy kind of hobbit from the outskirts of

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Middle Earth, decides to bear the ring he has innocently inherited on the jaunting journey to its destruction. Surrounded by other creatures with more skill, intelligence and knowledge of the world, (and many of them very scary, indeed), he sees the task fall to him and he claims it. Sometimes we are like the hobbit Frodo, called to work and to situations we didn't really choose. At other times we are like the faithful Sam Wise, the loyal counterpart playing a supporting role to others who actually carry the ring, but without whom the task would never be accomplished. Regardless of the role we are called to, sometimes we know that we are part of a plan not of our own making.

Think back on the times in your life when you felt called to serve, give or make a difference in someone else's life. Those calls probably didn't come in the form of a burning bush, but a burning desire in your own heart to respond to someone in need, to speak up in a situation, or to simply play a role that you knew you had to play – whether or not you asked to play it! Learning to listen to the promptings within our own hearts is essential in living a purpose-filled life as we are the only ones who hold the key to unlock that particular treasure. In the words of Rainier Marie Rilke from his book, *Letters to a Young Poet*, "Think of the world you carry within you... Be attentive to that which rises up in you and set it above everything that you observe about you. What goes on in your innermost being is worthy of your whole love and attention. You must somehow keep listening and responding to the inner call."

4. We have to believe that we are all being called to purpose!

I have shared in other articles that my favorite place to begin in job targeting is with the question, "What do you love?" Well, my second favorite question is, "What do you care about?" Rather than asking what the world has to offer, what if we changed our question to "What do we have to give and where do we plan to give it?" What issue, cause or arena of work stirs your imagination or sets your heart on fire? Knowing that life is temporary and tomorrow is not promised, what kind of work would you find worthy of your precious time and talent?

My heart has been broken time and again by working with people for whom those questions have never arisen – people who have never entertained the notion that they have something valuable and useful to offer. (Many individuals who grew up with disabilities know this all too well.) What if we were to assume that we are called in every situation, in every role in life – especially in the ways in which we work? Surely believing that we have a purpose is the first step in discovering what it is!

I think of purpose as a current in the river of our lives, much like blood in our veins. We don't need to create it, we need to let it find us. How do we hear it knocking on the door above the cacophony of pagers, telephones, and traffic? We need to hear the voice of purpose calling above the insistent voice in our own heads that chides us into believing that with so much yet undone, we can't afford the luxury of paying attention to purpose or to passion. We know the truth - once we hear a "call to

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purpose", words that yesterday seemed just words, today become a song, a poem, a political message, a rallying cry or a simple but heartfelt prayer. If you are working with individuals who question whether or not they have a purpose, or if you are questioning your own, I invite you to use the prompts in this issue's "Putting It Into Practice" in order to tune in and listen to what Rilke called "the inner call".

Observe any part of nature long enough and it will speak to you. Today as I watch the birds I am reminded that we are part nester, loving the comfort of woods as we sing in the trees. We also work our way to the feeder for our daily fill of seed, and to some extent, know our place in the pecking order. We take cover in the branches from life's winter wind. But there is also a part of us that belongs to the open spaces, and must fly - not for the sake of heights, but for the joy of having wings. May our highest purposes call to us such a way that we never settle long under the wooden roof, but continue stretching our wings in the piece of sky that we know is ours.

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POETIC REFLECTION



To Be of Use

By Marge Piercy

The people I love the best
jump into work head first
without dallying in the shallows
and swim off with sure strokes almost out of sight.
They seem to become natives of that element,
like the black sleeked heads of seals
bouncing like half-submerged balls.

I love people who harness themselves, like an ox to a heavy cart,
who pull like water buffalo, with massive patience,
who strain in the mud and the muck to move things forward,
who do what has to be done, again and again.

I want to be with people who submerge
in the task, who go into the fields to harvest
and work in a row and pass the bags long.
Who stand in the line and haul in their places.
Who are not parlor generals and field deserters
but move in a common rhythm
when the food must come in or the fire be put out.

The work of the world is common as mud.
Botched, it smears the hands and crumbles to dust.
But the thing worth doing well
has a shape that satisfies, clean and evident.

Greek amphoras made for wine or oil and
Hopi vases that once held corn, are put in museums,
but you know they were made to be used.
The pitcher cries for water to carry
And a person for work that is real.

Marge Piercy is a contemporary poet and novelist who has published fourteen books of poetry, including a book with the title poem, "To Be of Use".

THOUGHTS TO CONSIDER



“Here’s a test to find whether your mission on earth is finished:
If you’re alive, it isn’t.”

- Richard Bach

“Everybody can be great because anybody can serve. You don’t have to have a college degree to serve. You don’t have to make your subject and verb agree to serve. You don’t have to know about Plato and Aristotle...(or) Einstein’s Theory of Relativity...(or) the Second Theory of Thermodynamics to serve. You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love.”

- Martin Luther King, Jr.

“If you want to be happy for an hour, take a nap.
If you want to be happy for a day, go fishing.
If you want to be happy for a week, take a vacation.
If you want to be happy for a month, get married.
If you want to be happy for a year, inherit a fortune.
If you want to be happy for a lifetime, find your purpose!”

- Chinese saying

PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

1. Utilize the following prompts to help uncover or discover some of the purposes calling to you at this time in your life. If you are using these with other individuals, let them choose two or three of the prompts to respond to from the list as different words will appeal to different people.

A part of the world (my community) that I would like to affect in some positive way is ...

I have always felt that I wanted to be a part of the effort to change ...

A personal challenge that I have experienced and would like to help others cope with or avoid is ...

A cause or issue that captures my heart and imagination is ...

What I know in my bones I must be a part of is ...

My life would feel incomplete without my having given something to...

I have always known that I am called to a life of

A purpose that feels like an imperative in my blood is ...

Some of the people I have know who live a life of deep purpose and calling are... How would you like your life to reflect theirs?

Ways in which I have felt "called to purpose" in my life and work include...

2. St. Francis of Assisi taught that our purposes should seek roots as well as branches. He said that if our purposes are only about us, they have no branches, but if they are only about the rest of the world, they have no roots. Think about your own life. Do you pay attention to your individual purposes to the extent that you pay attention to your purposes for others? Which is out of whack? How could you bring more balance to the two?
3. Make a list of the major roles you play in your life and consider what you are being called to in each of those roles. Identify the "depth-level purpose" of each of these relationships or parts that you play.