

From the Kitchen

1 September 2010



Last week I started with a number of questions and I realise I only addressed the first of these. The one that is worth exploring further is: How many people do work that is demoralising?

There are many ways of examining this question. One is to ask another question: How many people are ennobled, energised and turned on through the work they do? Does it give them a sense of achievement and does it allow them to grow as individuals? Couching the question in this way brings it down to the personal – the effect of the work on the individual. Here the nature of the work itself is not the issue, nor its wider effects. What is at issue is whether the job is a good fit for the person doing it.

There are people who feel stuck in work they consider beneath them and others who feel inadequate for the work expected of them. It is the way the person doing the work relates to it that is important. There are university graduates who are perfectly content with doing a menial task; some permanently, others temporarily. There are also graduates, unhappily ‘stuck’ in graduate careers. There are lawyers who would rather be musicians and engineers who would be happier cooking.

Changes in work done can be deliberate or serendipitous. I have made at least four major changes in bread-winning activity, mostly through choosing to take up opportunities that came my way. I’ve also, occasionally felt stuck. I have never been attracted to a life-long career – that word has always been associated for me with an image of careering out of control.

There are many answers to the question of what makes particular work fulfilling for an individual. Much has to do with the person’s personality, their upbringing and their expectations, all of which are intertwined. Discovering that a wrong choice has been made may not be easily remedied. It depends again on the person’s nature, added to financial and economic circumstances. The financial circumstances are also bound to issues of health, family, geography and will; the economic ones have more to do with the wider world.

For many people, their satisfaction with or dislike of the work they do is related to whether or not it is for the greater good. Are they producing something worthwhile? Do they make the world a better place? The answer for them may be ‘yes’, even though others may disagree. The majority of fashion designers would see themselves as producing something worthwhile and the majority of politicians would say that they are making the world a better place and I would beg to differ with most of them. However, my opinion is irrelevant to the question of their work satisfaction.

The paid work someone chooses to do may or may not be satisfying in itself but is being done in order to allow them the opportunity to pursue another, more satisfying activity. This is the case with many artists, writers and musicians, adventurers and surfers, and people bringing up young children. Ideally, they can design the paid work to be satisfying in itself. I have done just that to allow me to write and photograph.

I was able to finance my way through university with fun: working at Luna Park and as a projectionist at the student theatre. This had a lot to do with hearing opportunity knocking and being there to open the door. Many students find themselves in numbing part-time jobs, which must adversely affect their ability to study.

That there are so many people who feel demoralised by their work could well be the result of our 'education' system, which in many cases defines education as training young people for work, instead of training them for life. While important, work is only one aspect of life. If young people were taught more life skills, then changing jobs would be possible for many more people – it is usually the sense of being stuck that stops people moving on, not that they are actually stuck. It is like the story of the little frog that fell into a large bowl of cream; it could give up and drown but, instead, it kept on paddling until the cream turned to butter and it could hop out.

It is a curious manifestation of the way people see education, that has them tell me that I have wasted all that education because I no longer practise as a lawyer. None of it has been wasted on me, because it still informs what I do and how I do it. Yes, it trained me to work in a particular, very specialised field, but it prepared me for so much more and has not been a waste. Everything we do, including all learning, can play a part in preparing us for the rest of our lives, no matter what age we are. Keep asking the important questions and be prepared and willing to act on the answers.