Me, My Career and the Future of Our World

Discussing our professional lives

BY AMY UELMEN

"Isn't that kind of egotistical?" our little group mused as we tussled with titles for the weekend we were spending together that focused on career choices and challenges. We were a motley crew: college students and professionals, some at the beginning of their careers and others recently retired, but we were all convinced that the spirituality of unity had something important to bring to a discussion about professional life. Now if we could only find a title.

Those of us born before 1980 were concerned that “Me, My Career” emphasized a certain focus on “What’s in it for me?” from which we wanted to steer clear. But as we listened carefully to the questions and hopes of our college-age friends, we realized that there might be something else going on.

Personally, these discussions helped me to understand more deeply some recent interactions with my students. At Fordham Law School in New York, I have taught an ethics class that students are required to take in order to graduate. To dig into recent business disasters such as what went wrong with the legal advice to Enron, I set out this problem for the students: “You are a lawyer working for a law firm, only about six months on the job. Your supervisor, a partner in the firm, says there seems to be an ethics question surrounding a certain case the firm has been offered, but it would be very good for business if we could figure out a way around that. You do the research, and conclude that in your judgment there is indeed an insurmountable conflict of interest. What determines your approach to your research report to the partner—your own judgment or what the partner wants?” About 85% of the students in the class raised their hands in favor of “What the partner wants.”

I could see that for my students, the “me” part of the discussion was really uncomfortable. If I am 25 years old, who am I to tell someone who is 50 what to think or what to do? In fact, why would anyone in my job care what I think? And when everyone seems to be traveling along the same path, it is scary even to think about stepping off the track. Maybe they won’t promote me; maybe they will think that I cannot adapt to the demands of the job. I might even be fired. Especially when there could be a clash, I often want the “me” to just disappear. As I make decisions, what is my

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point of reference? How do I deal with the pressures that seem to be coming at me from all sides?

As students move from college and graduate school into their first jobs, the “me” part seems to get even more complicated. Heavy debt from college and graduate school loans can feel like a real limit to their choices and can keep them from thinking creatively about their career possibilities. Looking ahead to increasing family responsibilities, it seems that it becomes harder and harder to manage material needs, wants and expectations.

**Who Am I?**

As we listened to the questions of the youth in our planning group, we came to see that their deepest concerns were not so much, “What’s in it for me,” but “Who am I?” In light of these struggles, we decided to devote a considerable portion of the weekend to reflection on the “me” questions. So we set out quite an ambitious agenda for our weekend: Who am I? What should I be doing in the world? How can we move beyond the sense of powerlessness that overcomes us when we think about the problems that we face as a globe?

We were heartened to reflect on how in a certain sense the source of the spirituality of unity, the Focolare Movement, grew out of a similar set of questions. Chiara Lubich and her friends were in their 20s, a time when the world of choices and dreams for their lives and careers should have been opening before them. But as this was during World War II and their northern Italian city was a prime target for heavy bombings, all of their dreams for their futures and careers were crumbling before their eyes. In 1943, the future of their personal lives and of the world at large could not have seemed darker.

In the midst of this total destruction they asked themselves, is there something worth living for that no bomb can destroy? And they discovered a God who is love, who accompanied them step-by-step in their choices and difficulties, and most of all in their efforts to love one another.

**Insights**

The weekend presented a panorama of experiences and discussions about how the effort to build relationships of love and unity can transform the fields of health care, education, art, media, law, politics and business. Already in 1949 Chiara had intuited this potential. She wrote: “We need to bring God back to life in us and then to keep him alive, so that he may overflow onto others like bursts of life that revive the dead. We need to keep him alive by loving one another. Then everything will change: politics and art, education and religion, private life and recreation, everything.”

The insights shared during the weekend drew on years of experience in which two or more people who live the spirituality come together in a workplace, perhaps with very different kinds of jobs. United in love, they have been able to see together new ways to approach the problems in their work environment and discover new solutions.

As Chiara once reflected, in contrast to a life which is “dull and flat,” or “made up of bits juxtaposed and disconnected,” in living the spirituality of unity we discover how every aspect of life—even the most concrete and mundane—can be rooted in an expression of love. Based on their experience in seeing their lives as a unified whole, the youth could also explore their studies and career choices in this light as well.

Wasn’t it strange for college-age youth to want to spend the weekend with adults well into their 30s, 40s and even in retirement, when interests and backgrounds were so divergent? The spirituality of unity helped us to see each person as a treasure to discover, whatever their age, interest, career path, background or experience. Meals, doing dishes and even games together in the evening all helped to build an atmosphere of true family and equality in which each person could share their gifts.

**Professional Life’s Real Heart**

Among the most precious treasures shared were reflections on how living the spirituality of unity could transform the most difficult moments in professional life. Painful experiences that are often covered with a shroud of silence—daily disappointments in spite of efforts to build constructive and productive relationships, battles with stress to the point of illness, the loss of confidence and security that follows an experience of being fired—were offered and received as a gift.

Here, too, “Who am I” questions quickly rose to the surface. If “I am what I do,” then criticism or moments of failure touch me not only in the disappointment of that specific incident, but they go to the core of who I am. If “I am what I do,” then the failure to meet other’s expectations can become an enormous pressure that often translates into a sense of failure as a person.

And here, too, the spirituality of unity was a light to draw out a deeper sense of identity and to see how the love of God can shine even through experiences of failure. It was also a moment to reflect on the possibility that some expectations or reactions might be unrealistic, driven by the desire to make more money, or a reflection of other problems that have nothing to do with who we are.

“Love is a light,” Chiara says in *A New Way*, her recent collection of reflections on the origins and content of the spirituality of unity. That, perhaps, is the best phrase to capture the journey of *Me, My Career and the Future of Our World*. For each of us, love was a light to help us discover our true identity, and the real heart of professional life as a vehicle to love and serve humanity around us.

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