

"Welcome to My Life's Work"

Over the last several months, I've begun my presentations and workshops by saying, "Welcome to my life's work." Each time I'm about to say it, I experience a range of sensations and emotions: trepidation ("Isn't this a little bold of me?" says my inner voice), excitement, uncertainty, anticipation, and eagerness. And each time I utter those five words of introduction, it really gets people's attention. Once I've said it, though, I feel a little naked, exposed; I know I've pushed myself onto center stage, and now I feel like I've got to perform: to sing, dance, orate, or do whatever I've claimed as my life's work.

I never have a prepared text for what I'm going to say after that. I'm all alone out there: alone with myself and my resources, alone with the group arrayed in front of me, and alone with the naked truth of what I've just said.

I generally go on to explain that when I was introduced to appreciative inquiry (AI) in 1997, I knew I'd found, if not my life's work, than a *way* of working, and of living. And I mention that I'd written a note to myself, at the end of the training I attended that November in Taos, N.M., "*If I don't do this work, I won't be true to myself.*" And that it took me three or four years to begin to find ways to incorporate AI into my work, and longer than that to make appreciation and open inquiry the centerpiece of my work and my life. I explain further that I'm about to introduce them to a variety of information and experiences regarding the riches that could be theirs if they were to operate from their "best selves" more of the time in their work and life. Unlike the Tom Cruise character in *Jerry Maguire* I don't "have them from Hello." But I do have their attention from "Welcome to my life's work", and we're en route to becoming a rollicking learning community.

I know I function at my best when I'm operating from appreciation and possibility, with an openness to (a) seeing the very best in each person, in each situation, in the wider world, in myself, and (b) building on that sense of possibility, to co-create the best experiences, learning environment, and tangible outcomes we can.

Of course, I'm not always at my best; I don't always operate from possibility and appreciation. Sometimes I even get the sense that I'm just phoning it

in. Maybe you can identify with that, in your own experience of operating on auto-pilot. It helps me if simply say to myself, "Ed, are you just phoning it in now?" or "Are you operating at your best here?" or even "Hello!! Earth to Ed!" it serves as a Bell of Awakening for me. I'm then able to pay closer attention to my body, my feelings, the room and, perhaps most importantly, to whomever I am with. I'm getting pretty good at forgiving myself for these lapses, and I'm even approaching the point where forgiveness is not an issue: where I deeply know that such lapses are simply part of how the equipment operates.

So, my life's work -- at this point in my life -- is about bringing appreciation, wonder, and possibility to each individual and group I'm with, and about exploring with them how that perspective might operate, what it would look like, and the riches it would bring them, in *their* work and life.

Well, enough about me. (I must confess that whenever I say those words, a twinge of sadness comes over me ...) I've dwelled on this topic here as a way of bringing the following loving question to you: How much of the time are you able to say, about the work you do, "*Welcome to My Life's Work?*" Give credence to your very first, immediate response to that question; it contains more than a kernel of your truth. Did you, for example, hear yourself saying, "Oh, about ten percent of the time?" Or perhaps "Gosh, it's probably ninety percent." Or "Well, every time I'm with a client, I *know* I'm welcoming them to my life's work." Or "I really wish you wouldn't ask me such questions!" Any response is fine; it's all good, and it's all revealing.

Can you reflect on your first response, and look a little more deeply? What do you come up with? Do you find a different percentage occurring to you? An entirely different answer? (As in, for example, "It isn't relevant, because I'm currently in transition in my work.") You might give yourself a little time to "have yourself a think about it," and see where it takes you.

Here's a great way to go further: Ask yourself, "Can I recall a time when I felt, 'Yes, this is the work I was meant to do in the world?" When you ask yourself that question, what story arises in your mind? And if that question just doesn't work for you, here are a couple of alternatives:

- "Can you remember a time when you felt totally immersed and engrossed in, and excited by your work?"
- "Can you recall a time when you used your gifts to make a difference -- a difference that really mattered to you or to someone else?"

Here are some details, for any of those three questions: What was the situation? What was the challenge you faced? What gifts did you use? Who else participated, and what did they do? How did you feel in that situation? (Don't gloss over that one; it's centrally important.) How did the situation turn out? What important lessons did you learn? And the most important question to ask yourself: "What would it take to make this my life's work?"

If, after reading this column and living with these questions, (a) you feel confirmed in the choices you've made regarding your work life, or (b) you're getting insights about how you could create more experiences of that type for yourself, that's wonderful. Alternatively, if (c) you've become uncomfortable about the answers your mind has generated, then you've really been paying attention, and you are equally to be congratulated. Because self-awareness is always the first step on our journey to becoming what we might become. So, "live the question" of what has produced that discomfort, of what it may be telling you, and of what your life is asking of you; the answers can guide you to your life's work. And you shouldn't rush yourself to produce the "right" answers, or to evaporate the discomfort or distress you might be feeling; those difficult emotions may be signs that your life's work is calling to you. You owe it to yourself to listen. And to follow.

I hope that these musings have been of some value, and that these writings provide you with stimulation, insight, and a respite from your daily labors. I now realize that when I began these columns in the spring of 2006, I could have introduced them the same way I now begin my presentations and workshops: by welcoming you to my life's work.

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