

BACK TO MY OWN MODEL TRAIN

All theory and theology aside, I have never known a happy person who did not feel in some way “useful.” That may sound like a grand theory, but I can reduce it down to a single day. If, by the end of the day, we feel like we have accomplished something (though there still may be residue of many other issues and still may be things to be done and people we care about, and things are far from perfect), then it was a good day, and we are okay with ourselves and, to some degree, we feel in tune with God.

On the other hand, it’s no fun to be with somebody who feels like they haven’t accomplished anything during the day. If they feel like they haven’t accomplished much *ever*, in their whole lives, run for cover. They carry an enormous spirit of negativity, blame, complaint, anger – destruction just waiting for a chance to happen. But I was only talking about people we love and live with – people who are normally wonderful. If at the end of the day they feel like they have accomplished nothing, then they are what we call “not themselves.” They are just waiting to pick a fight, blame us for their misery, or blame something or someone for it being a rotten world. And no matter how much we listen, try to comfort, or give love and support, they will not be happy with us or themselves until the next time they feel like they are contributing and accomplishing again.

Now, a few of you may spend the rest of this sermon arguing inside yourselves about whether or not this premise is really true, especially if you haven’t been accomplishing much lately. But most of you know it is true. You have seen and felt the principle operating in and around you for years. So to you I say: If this is our reality, why doesn’t it show up more strongly and clearly in our theology – in our Christian belief systems? Why doesn’t the Christian Faith help us to expect and deal with this principle, if it is so strong and prevalent?

Life is always more complex than simple theories. I am not trying to explain – only to acknowledge. Sometimes the world is willing to pay us to accomplish things that really are not worth much. It can get worse: it’s a terrible thing to succeed at something that never should have been accomplished in the first place. On the other hand, if we are depressed, absolutely nothing seems worth accomplishing. That’s why depression

is such a devastating disease; it destroys its own solution ahead of time: “I have not accomplished; I will not accomplish; I’m never going to accomplish. But nothing is worth accomplishing anyway, so everything is totally hopeless.” HOPE, you remember, is a huge theological concept, not just the picayune little wishful thinking that goes under that title today. Is it possible to be depressed and filled with hope at the same time? I mean, if the hope is genuine, and rooted in God?

Back to our question: Why isn’t there a clearer connection between Christianity and accomplishment? Work and survival are such huge parts of life for most people on the face of the earth, why do we imagine that they have little or nothing to do with our Faith? This has not always been so, but the twentieth century has mostly mocked or minimized the connections. Countless times I have sat in church-sponsored gatherings where caring about our work and what we are trying to accomplish is minimized, if not scorned. “We are not human doings – we are human beings,” it is said. “Grace and love are deeper than our achievements,” it is said. While that is most certainly true, there is seldom a hint that there might be connections between (1) feeling grace and finding gratitude and (2) wanting to strive and accomplish under God, and for God. Frequently, the implication is that it doesn’t matter what we do – that unconditional love cancels the need for accomplishment; that the solution to all the frenetic, workaholic patterns of our time is to stop striving or caring. I’m sorry, but it’s not that simple. The only solution to workaholic and burnout is to find your true vocation, and to have so much passion for what you are here to accomplish that you no longer have time for all the things God never asked you to do in the first place.

The vast majority of Christians do not think of their Christianity as having very much to do with their workplace. To them, Christianity is about weekends or side efforts to be kind or helpful. Though there are notable exceptions, for the most part the church has not identified unemployment with sin, sorrow, or the source of great evil. The church has not taught its children that choosing a vocation under God is as important and holy and spiritual as choosing a mate. This church celebrates ninety-six weddings every year. How often does it celebrate when somebody finds their true vocation? The church has been far more eager to give *things* to people who are poor than it has been to help them find jobs. If it is true that people who are not accomplishing anything are miserable and unhappy, what does that say about our love and compassion? Or for that matter, our IQ? It’s Labor Day weekend, and I ask you: Who thinks that Labor Day is or ought to be a great celebration

for Christians? Who, outside of this church, remembers that “vocation” means “the calling of God” – or that conversion and vocation are two sides of the same coin?

All snide comments aside (from me *or* you), I do not have any desire to run or control your lives. I want you to be people of prayer, so that the Holy Spirit can run and control your lives. I do not want to run or control this church, though I *do* sometimes interfere with others who want to. I want you to be a congregation of prayer, so that the Holy Spirit can run and control this church, handing it its true assignments and guiding it into its faithful destiny and calling. But I cannot keep from having opinions and notions of my own. I can only keep from trying to force them onto you. I assume, perhaps too easily, that most of you see the reticence and patience I use in trying to encourage you and allow you to grow and come into your true destiny. If I hurry it, I will ruin it. If I try to design or force it, instead of letting it grow from within the heart and soul of this church, I will corrupt and ruin it.

But is it any secret to you that my own vision and hope for this congregation is that it will eventually take VOCATION as its special mission under Christ? I dream that someday you will be in a congregational meeting together and somebody will put that mission into words, and you will all look at each other and say, “Of course! We have known it for a long time. It’s what we can do better than almost anybody. It’s what Jesus wants of us. Time we got to it!” And from that time on, I imagine you spending huge amounts of time, planning strategies, and giving energy and money to encourage and move people from what they are doing into what they know God wants them to be doing. That changes lives! The repercussions of that are beyond measure.

I’m aware that this might not be the right vision for this church. If we do not keep growing, praying, teaching our children, and learning to love each other, no vision or mission we talk about or try to take on will matter for very long anyway. But we *have* been growing and praying and teaching and learning. So I suspect the time is drawing near when it will be right for us to acknowledge and respond to the Holy Spirit’s call – to accept a special identity and purpose of our own. It happens to faithful individuals, and it happens to faithful congregations. You know how it works: you cannot keep fooling around in the foothills of the Holy Mountain without seeing a burning bush.

I didn't know it at the time, but the closest I have ever come to associating with famous people was the time Eddie Nixon invited me to come spend the night so we could play with his model train. (Eddie had a brother named Don, and another brother named Richard. His father, Frank, ran the corner grocery store. We all went to the same church.) Eddie was in the seventh grade, in my sister's class. I was in the fifth grade. To a fifth-grader, all seventh-graders seem pretty aloof and superior, so I was duly awed by the invitation. Looking back, of course, it was our mothers who cooked it up. Hannah Nixon and my mother were best friends.

Childhood memories tend to become exaggerated, I know, but I remember Eddie's train set taking up a huge room in their basement. It was vast, and it was all permanently mounted on plywood. I had never imagined such a thing. I had a train set, but you had to get the box down from the shelf and set up all the tracks. If it even worked after you got it all set up, it ran around and around in this tiny little circle, or went too fast and fell over. Pretty boring. And then you had to put it all away before you went to bed so it wouldn't be in the way in the morning.

But Eddie didn't have to put anything away – he just kept adding. He had mountains and tunnels and crossings, and all kinds of different trains running all at the same time. There were even little towns with cars and trucks on the streets, and little derricks to load things onto the boxcars so you could haul them to another town and unload them. I hated having to stop for supper, and hated when we had to go to bed. It was one of the fastest nights of my life. I was dumbfounded, and enthralled. And Eddie was wonderful to me. He treated me like it was really fun to be together. He moved from distant hero to hero/friend (until he went off to high school and I never saw him again).

After that, I had this burning desire for a terrific model train of my own. It somehow seemed like the appropriate response to what I had seen, and to what Eddie had done for me. So I dug out my old model train and started planning where to set it up and how to build mountains and tunnels, etc. I got permission to use one end of our screened porch on a more permanent basis. But my train didn't work too well anymore, and I didn't have much track or much money to spend on more track or any other pieces. Yet I dutifully began to build some things, and even found a way to buy a little more track. I remember my train going up a little grade, across a bridge I had built, and down the other side. Pretty neat, but a very far cry from Eddie's.

I tried to stay dedicated for a while, but I had animals to take care of, a horse to ride, collies to train. I really didn't have sufficient time or money or love to put into model trains. Model trains were not my "thing" – horses and dogs were. Trains were okay but they couldn't lick your face or nuzzle your shoulder. So eventually, reluctantly, I put my train back in the box and put the few projects I had started to make back on their shelf. I don't remember ever getting them out again, or ever wanting to. I still love seeing other people's model trains; there are some great ones down in San Diego. But I do not want one for myself anymore.

Nevertheless, this experience made me realize that horses and dogs were my "model trains" – my "love," my specialty. And the expression "your own model train" still carries that meaning for me. Ever since then, I have believed that everybody has their own "model train." Some people don't know it. Sometimes life moves on and we exchange one for another one. Sometimes, for a while, we have lots of interests and cannot decide which one is our top love. It is nevertheless where the word "amateur" comes from. *Amore* = to love; *amator* = lover – one who loves a subject. An amateur does it for love. One who stays "in love" and becomes trained, seasoned, and skilled enough may become a professional as well. It is nevertheless the secret hope and meaning of "work," or at least of vocation. And *vocatio* = the call of God.

The point is that everybody has their own "model train" – a subject or area of special attraction, interest, fascination. The "model train" can change, of course – or, more likely, evolve. And there is nearly always a connection between what you most want to be doing and what God most wants you to do. That is the first principle. The second principle is: The world will nearly always make it seem impossible, unlikely, unreasonable, or irrational for you to go on playing with your model train – that is, for you to find some way to turn your top love (your best skills and interests) into your vocation.

Paul speaks of the many, diverse gifts that each individual has to contribute to the community. Indeed, he implores each individual Christian in Rome to humbly reassess his or her own gifts so that the body of Christ may be effective and faithful, and so that each person, and in turn the whole community together, may become a living sacrifice unto God. In fact, the full imagery of the passage is more than we can handle at one sitting. It's not that the truth is too much for us, but our unfamiliarity with active altars and temples is a barrier to full understanding.

But the fact is that most people, even most Christians, are spending their working lives doing things they do not love or contributing off of secondary abilities, and therefore are cheating themselves – and God, and the rest of us – out of what they are really here to accomplish and contribute. It is one of the saddest things about “The Fall” – one of the saddest things about life in a broken world. Christians and Christianity do not expect to heal the broken world – that is, they do not expect to fix it once and for all. But we are here to heal, to redeem, to be redeemed; to recover and help others recover from “the curses”; to come back into the presence and love of God; to allow the Holy Spirit to put our lives back in tune – back in alignment with God and God’s purposes. That is not possible until we have also dedicated our work to God. Please, if you have not done so already, get back to your own model train.

What we can understand, if we are willing, is the imperative need to get our model trains back into the center of our devotion and worship. Our model trains reveal the area – the category – of our best gifts. Our model trains reveal to us what we really love to do, and therefore what we can do best. If all goes well, our model trains develop into the awareness of our vocations (our calling), and thenceforth into our occupations and professional lives. Since our working time takes up *at least* half of our normal waking days, this also is where the “living sacrifice” is most concentrated and most important. Yet seldom does the world allow this to happen easily.

“If all goes well,” you heard me say. If all goes well, we progress naturally from the love of our model trains into an appropriate vocation that expresses our unique and rightful purpose under God – “God’s plan for us,” we sometimes call it. Yet when does everything go well?! There are so many other possibilities, shading from mild discontent to total disaster. Most humans do not find “work” that comes very close to their spiritual vocations. Our world is not that close or in tune with its Creator. It’s an *old* truism, but that doesn’t make it untrue: The meaning and the satisfaction in life come from what we contribute, not from what we accumulate. It follows then that if we know our purpose – our vocation – we have some chance at a good life. It also follows that the most serious waste of natural resources on our planet is the waste of human life and potential. The greatest social problems come straight from “no work” or “the wrong work.” We could find utopia almost overnight IF we could make it possible for even seventy percent of the people on earth to do what they would love to be doing most – and get paid and valued for doing it.

We cannot imagine it. Our world is not that much in tune with its Maker. Neither are we with ours. We even have whole segments of the population gifted in areas we have no vocations for yet. The Creator knows we need them, but our society has not identified them as valuable yet. The waste is enormous! And unlike most other natural resources, unused human resources cause mayhem. Human energy either builds community or destroys it. When Jesus says, "*He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me, scatters,*" THAT is what He is talking about. (Not about being narrow-minded or sectarian.)

Unfortunately, there is not much I can do to change this on a global scale. I *can*, however, get back to my own model train. I can get it onto the altar, or at least back onto the altar. So can you. Maybe we can help a few other people do the same. But to make such changes in our kind of world is tougher than it seems. I suspect we cannot do it very much or very well unless we live in a covenant community that understands such things. What do you think? Do we understand such things?

Almost always there are some traces of our model trains left lying around in our lives somewhere. We may not pay them much mind, but we keep bits and pieces around somewhere, just in case there really is a God. Then one day, down in the basement perhaps, I find one of my old trains that doesn't work right anymore. In the old days, I could have fixed it easily, but I don't have time anymore. Why don't they build them right in the first place! It's the 57th frustration of the day, and I hurl the engine across the room and into the brick wall. The sound startles me. The action itself startles me. Seeing the broken engine in pieces on the floor startles me. "I used to love these damn model trains," I mutter to myself. And then the real shock hits. I still DO! It is what I was born for. How could anything make me smash one of them?!

And as I gather up the broken pieces, it occurs to me that I haven't enjoyed playing with model trains for years. I try to remember back to the last time I added to or fixed or even played with my own model train. Yet I still spend time telling other people how much fun it is? And then wonder why more of them don't get inspired? The best way to enthuse people about model trains (or the Faith) is to have one of my own that I work on all the time because I really love it. It may not be the fastest way, but it is the only authentic way.

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What is the subject today? Getting back to your own model train! Do you know what your “model train” is? Mine is not horses and dogs anymore, but I know what that evolved into. And I am very good at it. At least I am when I get back to working on my own model train just because I love it, and not because of whom I can impress, how much money I can make, or how much somebody else approves of it. So I say to myself, and it has become a prayer, and the prayer is necessary most every day: “Go back to your own model train.” How you and God play is your best work in the outer world. If you work in other ways, for other reasons, it will be of no real help to model train lovers.

And I’ll bet you are really good at whatever your model train is. How long has it been since you worked on your own model train just because you love it? How long since you connected it to how God made you, and what God wants to spend the most time doing with you? I implore you: Get back to your own model train!