

# The Good Work

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There is an ancient Chinese proverb that says, "*If we don't change our direction we'll end up where we're headed.*" Where the human race is headed as we approach the 21st century and what that means for all of us is what I want to talk about tonight.

I believe there are only two things worth devoting a human life to: your own happiness and the happiness of others. Do you want to be happy? Of course, everyone does. But happiness, as sages throughout the centuries have noted, is very elusive. You can't buy it, you can't find it, can't grasp it. Note that the U.S. Declaration of Independence guarantees the *pursuit* of happiness-not happiness itself.

Those of you in this room today, will on the average, have about ten different jobs in five separate careers during your lifetime. This is a striking contrast from days past, when you were a farmer, or a potter, or a printer your whole life. While you wind your way through these many jobs, you need to find a guiding internal principle, a personal work, a true vocation or a "calling". This work will be greater than your job. Finding this life work, this right livelihood, will be a struggle, like all good things. You will know you have found it because it will benefit both you and others. My friend John Stephenson's work is to help serve the people and solve the problems of central Appalachia. His job is president of Berea College.

Regarding the pursuit of happiness, it is essential to realize that all of us have both an inner journey--the life of the mind and heart, and an outer journey--the life of the world. In order to find happiness, your inner life needs nourishment and development, and your outer life, in all its forms, needs to become infused with a spirit of service. These two together, inner and outer, are what I call the good work. Only this good work can produce happiness.

As we speak, a mother somewhere in our world is looking down at a child who is starving to death, with swollen belly and flies all over his face. Thirty children on this planet die every minute from hunger and poor health care. Forty thousand will die this year. These are not animals--they are human beings. One in four American preschoolers today are growing up in poverty. Today 3,000 teenage girls will become pregnant and nearly 4,000 teenagers will quit school. Homelessness is increasing at an alarming rate, and today 100,000 of those without homes are children. And did you know that the teen suicide rate has tripled in the last thirty years?

What does this picture of profound social injustice say to you about the world you, as young adults, are inheriting from the rest of us? To me it says two things: one, that we as a race, in spite of our many achievements, are still at a pretty low level of evolution, barely human really, and two, that we'd better do something! Why? First of all, it does not take a genius to realize that the outcome of such trends, besides tragic human suffering, will be dangerous social and political instability in the 21st century. Secondly, and most importantly, it is simply the right thing to do. It is the good work.

In 1981, after three years of concentrated research, an important document was issued that

received little attention-The Global 2000 Report to the President. U.S. President Carter asked the State Department and the Council on Environmental Quality to study *"the probable changes in the world's population, natural resources, and environment through the end of the century."*

*"Our conclusions . . . are disturbing. They indicate the potential for global problems of alarming proportions ... If present trends continue, the world in 2000 will be more crowded, more polluted, less stable ecologically, and more vulnerable to disruption than the world we live in now ... the earth's carrying capacity is eroding ... life for most people on earth will be more precarious in 2000 than it is now--unless the nations of the world act decisively to alter current trends. "*

Are we acting decisively to alter our present course? No! As the ozone thins, the oceans die, the globe warms, rain forests disappear and millions starve, we squabble among ourselves. Thank God a major thermonuclear war between super powers no longer seems imminent, but we cannot yet rule out the possibility of a so-called limited nuclear exchange, perhaps in the Middle East. And population in the year 2020 could be somewhere around 8 billion people. Ninety-five percent of that will be in less developed countries, where people are already struggling to survive.

In 1987 the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development produced a similar report entitled Our Common Future. They addressed their findings in particular to young people:

*"Most of today's decision makers will be dead before the planet feels the heavier effects of acid precipitation, global warming, ozone depletion, or widespread desertification and species loss. Most of the young voters of today will still be alive. "*

That means you! Like other documents, Our Common Future calls for massive changes and concludes,

*"We are unanimous in our conviction that the security, well-being, and very survival of the planet depend on such changes, now."*

In 1989 The Worldwatch Institute published its extensive-State of the World report. The forward says that,

*". . . the looming threats we now face ... have so much momentum that unless action begins now to reverse them, they will inevitably lead to paralyzing, costly **economic consequences and the** collapse of social and political institutions."*

Furthermore, Worldwatch concludes with the chilling opinion that the nineties must be *"the turnaround decade."* The authors allow that,

*"We would like to be able to write an upbeat State of the World, one in which we can report that the trends undermining the human prospect have been reversed. It now seems that if we cannot write such a report in the nineties, we may not be able to write it at all. "*

The United States of America, as you know, consumes a huge chunk of our world resources. The fossil fuels upon which our wealth is based are rapidly depleting. America should be leading all nations towards the establishment of a sustainable, just world. The books have been written, the scientists have spoken, and the people are alarmed, but here we sit, informed, fat, and powerful while the situation deteriorates not only outside but also inside

our borders. The U.S. ranks at the bottom of the industrialized nations-19th in the world-in its infant mortality rate. Children in the capitals of Zimbabwe and Mozambique have a better immunization rate than NYC. Mother Teresa said, "You can find Calcutta all over the world if you have eyes to see. "

The handwriting is on the wall for America. If we don't get moving soon, I fear history will record us as a villain who reformed only as a very last choice. The United States could again be a great world hero if we could set our priorities several notches higher and fight for the sane and peaceful evolution of the entire human race. The future, said former Harvard law professor Louis Sohn, "belongs not to those who have the largest number of weapons of mass destruction but to those who can best solve their own economic and social problems and can provide a beacon of hope for the rest of humanity." Where is our integrity as a nation within the world community? Don't we recognize the grave threats to our democracy? Where are real leaders with long-range vision? I know these are hard words, but these are hard times.

Ramakrishna, the great Hindu sage of the 19th century was once asked the question, why is there such evil in the world? . After going into meditation for a few moments he replied with a twinkle in his eye, 'To *thicken the plot*' The plot is thick! We are at a pivotal moment in the human experiment, a moment fraught with both grave danger and great opportunity, a "moment of truth".

Forgive me, please, for bringing you all this bad news. I hate to be the one who has to tell you this stuff, but you see but I care very deeply about our beautiful oasis in space. And it is people like us who must act upon these solemn messages. . Marshall McLuhan said over twenty years ago, 'There are no passengers on Spaceship Earth, we are all crew. "

If we can bring all hands on deck during these next critical decades, future generations will sing our praises and rejoice that early in the 21st century, in extremely perilous seas, humanity became a higher kind of species, made an evolutionary leap, a paradigm shift. We began to live a different ethic, an ethic that placed the common welfare of all beings and the Earth on par with private and national goals. The alternative is too terrible to contemplate.

I am, actually, hopeful. I don't believe that the future is predestined. But the inescapable changes that must occur will require a great deal of you, of us, and will depend, as Our Common Future states, on '*Vast campaigns of education, debate, and public participation.*' The buck must stop somewhere.

By now you have probably gathered that I think it ought to stop with you too. So, what is your personal response to this global analysis? One question that immediately comes to mind is how did all this come to be? Who is responsible? Although it is proper and necessary to determine causes and examine the past, I don't think that these are the critical questions. I am satisfied to blame mankind as a whole, rather than the communists, the capitalists, the Caucasians, the church, or the corporations. Everyone's hands are a little dirty. What amazes *me* most is our stunning short-sightedness. We are not at all like the band of American Indians who, when confronted with difficult decisions involving the life of the tribe, would solemnly determine the impact of their actions for seven generations into the future. The unborn sat at their council fire. These were the so-called primitives!

I believe that the only honorable response to our global dilemma is to ask two simple questions: *what can I do?* and *what can we do?* Perhaps most people will not ask these questions. Considering the immensity of the challenges, many of us will avoid the issue and

carry on as if nothing really urgent is in the wind; hoping for the best, hoping someone somewhere will find the answers. Those of us who do this will remain part of the problem. For the vast majority, especially those involved in a dramatic struggle for survival, maybe there really is no other choice.

But I am speaking today to people with exceptional potential. Such a medium choice would not be worthy for individuals of your caliber. You are after all, American college students. Robert Greenleaf, who wrote *The Servant-Leader*, once asked the question: who is the enemy? And he said it was not the tyrants and the terrorists, who, if you could somehow dispose of them, would all be back in a generation or two. Certainly not the masses of the poor and disadvantaged. People like us are the enemy; who are informed, and capable but do not choose the high road that redeems humankind. "*Leadership*," said Robert Burkhardt, "is *the inability to sit back and watch the world go to hell.*"

But the good work is not easy, it requires great strength and character. What can you do? One thing you can definitely do is work on yourself. The good work has an inner as well as an outer mandate, and its first office is to prepare yourself. This is something tangible you can do while also engaged in the necessary business of college, career, marriage, and family.

Why is this inner stuff important? Because good intentions are not enough. Much of our present mess is the product of well-meaning but poorly conceived, short sighted effort. Only great character engineers great change and petty people simply cannot make a peaceful world. It is really an incredible conceit that imagines it can change the course of history without first attending to self development. The Greeks called this "hubris"; overweening, righteous, arrogance. Gandhi said, "*we ourselves must be the change we want to see in the world.*"

What is this inner work? Learn the receptive skills of listening and sensitivity, and the active skills of willpower and perseverance. Do what you say you are going to do, period. Be well-informed but not all-knowing. Be principled but flexible. Be harder on yourself than you are on others. Read fine books. Cry a little. Earn respect. Learn to disagree without being disagreeable. Make friends with the poor, with little children, and the very old. Allow yourself to be influenced by men and women of wisdom. Discriminate without being judgmental. Remember that you too are here only for a short time. Find your deepest heart's desire and follow it relentlessly. Become a person of superior character, of sterling integrity. This will safeguard both you and those you serve. This is the first trial of a true hero. "*The best way to fight evil*," say the ancient Chinese, "is to *make energetic progress in the good.*"

It is only fair that I raise one other question with you: Why me? Why should I be devoted to the good work? 'I'm getting my degree and I'm going to grad school, I want to get a good job and raise a family-get out of my face!' Unfortunately, that family and that job exist in the 21 st century I have just told you about. I know that most of the newspapers and the economists are not telling you these things. I know all this is hard to swallow. It was hard for me to swallow. But, while you are following your personal dreams on this Earth-and I very much hope you will follow your personal dreams, here are the four reasons I believe people like us should choose to do the good work.

First, life is precious, sacred. A gratitude for this awesome universe in which we have mysteriously appeared is naturally expressed as service.

Second, life is fleeting and painful. We do not have aeons of time to play

around here. A sense of urgency and purposefulness should compel us to get busy and waste none of our precious existence.

Third, the good work brings you joy. We live in a cause and effect universe. People eventually understand that serving others is a cause of happiness for themselves.

Fourth, because other beings are suffering. The great motivator of great acts is the sharp recognition that unbelievable agony is going on everywhere. It simply is the noble thing to do.

We do the good work out of gratitude, with a sense of urgency, for joy, and with compassion.

Young people all over America are waking up, are thinking globally and acting locally, are tutoring kids and building houses and helping the elderly. Great changes always show up first in young people. Profound and necessary change is the next order of business for our world. The show must go on! Who knows if we will succeed? Perhaps we will fail. But fight we must. Have you heard about the joy of battle? You find purpose and meaning and joy when you are a warrior doing the good work.

When you come into your time of leadership, a little further down the line, the fate of the world will very literally be in your hands. The world always has need of its next generation of young leaders, but never before has it needed them like it needs you. We absolutely must have an abundance of real leaders in every arena if we are going to prevent untold human suffering and promote a truly just world. We need you in banking, business and industry; in agriculture, dance, and the arts. We need journalists and theologians and educators; biologists, physicists and politicians. You are needed in the non-profits and yes, even in the military. One of the wisest women I've ever spoken with works high up in the Pentagon. Prepare yourselves, because the world is going to draw heavily upon your wisdom or suffer your lack of it. And even though you are not hungry or homeless tonight, don't waste a moment being ashamed of your privilege--make it part of your power for change.

I hope I have convinced you that the times are upon us, much more so than we realize. The greater context of all our lives in the 21 st century is the very survival of our Milky Way world.

What can we do? What can I do? Will you ask these critical questions and then live your life in response to them? Will you advocate for a new world? Will you strive for sterling integrity within and without? Will you find the courage and happiness of a hero? Will you do this good work? The very Earth is praying that you will.

On my grandfather's gravestone are these words:

*"What we do for ourselves alone dies with us. What we do for others and the world lives on and is immortal."*