

Death of a Dream, Birth of a Vision

This article reflects on the questions that are raised as we enter mid-life transition. The author, Robert Kuhn, grapples with questions of hope, purpose and vision.

Time to Question

I'm 39.

For the most part, the dreams of my youth have come true. Or in some cases I have realised they are unlikely to.

But it's time to ask myself some serious questions. Perhaps they are the same questions asked by others who have apparently reached the age of mid-life confusion (I prefer 'confusion' over 'crisis'. 'Crisis' leaves the impression of an event rather than a state of mind.) Like Chris, the successful young lawyer who had just been made a partner in his law firm, who, as we went up in the lift together, said, 'I wonder if I'm doomed to ride in this lift to the same job for the next 30 years?' It seemed like a strange question to ask when the road ahead looked so full of promise.

Perhaps it is the same question asked by Michael W. Smith in his song, Place in This World.

'Looking for a reason
Roaming through the night to find
My place in this world...
Is there a vision
That I can call my own?'

Or from the halcyon days of the seventies, the question posed by Diana Ross when she said, 'Do you know where you're goin' to? Do you like the things that life is showin' you?'

Or the same question posed by Billy Crystal in the movie City Slickers when sitting around the campfire with his mid-life cronies he says, 'Is this the best that it gets?'

Or perhaps it is the same searching which Arthur Miller wrote about in Death of A Salesman where Willy Loman's sons concluded after their father's suicide that, 'He had the wrong dreams.' I fear that Willy's dreams may be the same as mine.

LOOKING FOR ANSWERS

Whatever the question is, it seems time to answer it. It seems that now, more than ever, it is time to choose, to make a decision as to what I will live for. What is my aim in this life? What do I want to accomplish in order to know my days have been worthwhile? What am I really living for? What is my life purpose? What is my definition of success and a life well spent? There seem to be many ways to ask the question, but the answer must define, in some way, my future. I want an answer that will give context and meaning, overcome my current sense of aimlessness, and liberate the passion I want to experience in a positive, constructive way.

This all sounds like the complaints of a man who has lived too long as a rudderless ship, but I really have nothing to complain about. As the Psalmist said, 'The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; surely I have a delightful inheritance.' I have a wonderfully supportive and understanding wife; three miraculous children (nine,





overwhelming demands within my own limited personal environment. I see how much needs to be done to turn things around, make things right. I am confronted with the compelling need to make a difference in my world, even just in my own small sphere of influence. But I feel helpless, small and insignificant. An angry, but very controlled, rebel without a cause.

The cry is for leadership, for people with vision, a sense of mission. But I fear these are my childhood fantasies of superhero deeds of courage and conviction speaking, not the reasoned considerations of a man slipping into his forties. After all, what can I do? I am no Gandhi, no John F. Kennedy, no Albert Einstein. They all knew their calling. They had a passion for what they felt compelled to do with their lives. They were special. They knew or at least had a passionate conviction about what I am struggling to find: What unique pursuit will give my life worthwhileness?

So if the dreams of my youth are dying, and I need to re-establish direction, how do I do that? I am far too sceptical to believe I can re-invent my anarchistic adolescence. I have seen the personal and relational havoc wreaked by those who want to start over in their lives. I have concluded I cannot really start over; I can only move on. But how; where is my purpose? Where does my vision come from? What is the source to which I must go to find that passion and my personal vision for the second half of life?

What the Gurus Say

The gurus of humanism would have me reach down deep inside and 'create a vision of greatness.' As highly respected management writer Peter Block says:

'A vision exists within each of us, even if we have not made it explicit or put it into words. Our reluctance to articulate our vision is a measure of our despair and a reluctance to take responsibility for our own lives, our own unit, and our own organization. A vision statement is an expression of hope, and if we have no hope, it is hard to create a vision.'

He goes on to define the qualities of 'great vision':

- **It comes from the heart.** A vision is in some ways unreasonable. The heart knows no reason. When our vision asks too much of us, we should begin to trust it.
- **We, alone, can make this statement.** The statement needs to be recognisable as ours. It needs to be personal, and those who know us should be able to recognize who it came from.
- **It is radical and compelling.** A vision dramatises our wishes. This makes it radical and demanding. Radical in the best sense of service rather than rejection. Our willingness to take a unique stand is what empowers us.

But this all sounds like the philosophy of a reckless

six and three, and all adopted, healthy and gifted in unique ways); a career in law which has been rewarding, challenging and more successful by most definitions than I would have dreamed possible. I have had roles to play in church, non-profit, and community opportunities which have enriched my life. I have a group of friends with whom I can relate deeply and from whom I gain precious wisdom, accountability and love.

I am healthy and reasonably fit, even being able to compete as a middle-of-the-pack triathlete for the past two years. Truly, I have been blessed far beyond deserving or expectation. But lately, as I reach the middle of my life where the future and the past seem to hang in a delicate and frightening balance, I have felt a deep longing for something more. As if a part of me was dying, a part I hate to lose, something that reminds me of the carefreeness (my parents might say irresponsibility) of my youth and its limitless dreams. I feel the need for a new beginning.

Perhaps it was my parents who instilled in me this search for meaning, this vision quest, as some native Indians call it. I was their hope, the carrier of their dreams. My father completed grade eight, and my mother grade nine, in a world in which university education opened the door to opportunity. As long as I can remember I was told that my education would give me everything I would want; everything they did not have. It was the ticket to success.

So now I am 'successful'. Why is it I still have the vision quest? Why is it I sometimes feel angry that life is skipping by like a flat stone thrown across the surface of time, touching every so often but slowing, inevitably slowing, to sink and skip no more.

I seem no longer to be able to recite my teenage motto, 'I can do anything if I just put my mind to it. I can have it all if I really want.' Cocooning has become a comfortable way to merely survive without my dreams.

CRIES FROM AFAR

Lately, I seem to be constantly reminded of the great needs in our world, our country, our city; even the

explorer steering to some destination using a compass with the true north defined not by the pole but by the visceral instinct (or indigestion) he experiences. Where does God fit in to all this? Is it possible to have a vision defined by each of us without it being somehow grounded in truth or absolutes? Vision without such a foundation seems like nothing more than guesswork, the artistry of a blind man, a nightmarish life of grab bag uncertainty, humanistic wishful thinking.

God's Vision or Mine?

I choose to believe that God loves me. That he sent Christ his son to die on a cross for me so that I might not only live in eternity with him when I die, but also so that I might live today with purpose and meaning. He is deserving of my worship, service and love, for without his love for me I would truly be destitute, left to rely on my own puny efforts and ideals to make sense out of the few years of my life. Without him there would be no truly significant answer to the question, 'Why?' I know of no one else who can establish true north for the compass I must steer my life by.

And believing as I do, I have no difficulty agreeing with Stacy and Paula Rinehart in their book, *Living in Light of Eternity*, when they say: 'God offers us a purpose-filled, integrated life. He is more than willing to help us discern what shape that life should take for each of us individually.'

But a conundrum emerges. If the vision is mine, how can it be God's? But if the vision comes from God, where is it and how is it mine? Is it hidden like some needle in the cosmic haystack? Or is it reserved for only an anointed few?

Surely the God of the Bible is interested in each of us uniquely, including the details of our lives. He is interested in our visions.

While I will never rank with the great Bible heroes, I found it instructive to examine people such as Moses and Paul and their visions. I discovered some helpful things from my study which gave me some guideposts in my search for a vision.

1. Both Moses and Paul had or were provided with the basic character, qualities and training to carry out their missions, despite Moses' protestations and Paul's thorn in the flesh.
2. Both were men who had their own misguided sense of calling which they were acting on. In the case of Moses, he saw himself as the hero of his people long before he was confronted with the burning bush. Paul was obviously driven by his religious passion in his mission to exterminate the 'heretical' early Christians.
3. Both had experiences that indelibly marked them and validated God's role in their ministry: Moses with the

burning bush and Paul on the road to Damascus.

4. Both experienced lengthy periods of 'wandering in the desert' without a precise understanding of their calling. Moses watched his father-in-law's sheep in the Midian plains, and Paul spent some time in the Transjordan desert cooling his heels. John Haggai, in his book, *Lead On*, says our visions often remain unformed or half developed because we spend so little time alone with God.

A WAY FORWARD?

It appeared from my reading in the secular wisdom, measured by the truth contained in biblical accounts of God's involvement in the processing of a person's vision, that certain tentative conclusions could be drawn:

1. Having a vision means choosing for some good things and against other good things. I cannot do it all. I must forego some of my dreams in order to lighten my load for the climb to the summit.
2. I need not look in some distant place for my vision. God has given me unique experiences, qualities, circumstances and a character which provide a setting in which my vision can be defined and played out.
3. While I may need to step beyond my current frame of reference in order to act upon my vision, it is likely a change of focus I need. In other words, before I run off and change what I am looking at I should consider a change in glasses.
4. My vision must be defined in partnership with God and therefore requires time of contemplation and meditation with him. It is neither imposed upon me nor framed in his absence if it is to have personal and ultimate significance. I like the term 'Imagineering' as



an expression of the merger of two apparently inconsistent concepts. It is like many other elements of God's plan. It involves the apparent paradox of a sovereign God and a man with complete freedom of choice.

5. Vision is often formulated in the context and with the help of others. There is accountability for my vision, which could otherwise so easily become a fetish for personal gratification. This process of accountability has been especially helpful in refining my sense of calling and giving it concrete direction.
6. While vision gives living direction, it is not necessarily measurable in the temporal context. Success must be defined by the journey, not by the destination or one's distance from it.
7. The greatest enemy of vision is the fear of failure. But I may see things in a way few others do, and therefore I should expect that my steps toward that unseen horizon may be criticized. The direction I must walk should be defined by faith, not my eyes and my ears. Vision in this sense isn't vision at all; it's faith.
8. The vision quest involved the following questions:
 - How has God equipped me? Talents, personality, experiences, circumstances.
 - What ideals stir and motivate me? When I get beyond my scepticism, what do I feel strongly about?
 - What do my time expenditures tell me about my current priorities?
 - Having spent time seeking God's direction, what do I believe he would have me commit myself to?
 - Am I really prepared to commit myself to the vision? It may require more dedication than I have given to anything.

Considering the alternatives, who wouldn't want a life with meaning and purpose moulded in partnership with our Creator and the Creator of this world we inhabit? But I recognize the mere desire for a focused and meaningful vision is not enough. It requires effort both to define my vision and then to carry it out. It requires time with God, not just to discover what he would have me do, but also how in dependence on him I am to carry out the vision.

From the vision come plans and goals which, as one lecturer said, are dreams, or using the preferred term, visions, with deadlines. I have found in my own search that both the vision and the plans and goals which flow from that vision are best refined and understood when written. There seems to be something about seeing my thoughts and prayers in black and white that gives them reality. I understand and can see them as true or false.

I wish it were an easier process, this vision quest. No wonder so many avoid asking those hard questions like, 'What's life all about, anyway?' But the alternative of living life in the shadow of unmet expectations or glare of empty dreams achieved is too frightening.



As the Rineharts said:

'If some day we sit in the rocking chair of our old age and look back on life with regret, with a sense of having wandered aimlessly over a faceless terrain, it will be because we never stopped long enough to assess our direction or because we chose to give ourselves to empty dreams.'

I'm 39. But even as I feel these last days of summer slip into autumn, I have begun to sense a new beginning; a new sense of vision for the uncertainty ahead; a new confidence and excitement in the direction of my path.

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