

I'm lucky. I love my job!

I really love my job. Sometimes it is very challenging and can be stressful but I have never really regretted taking the career path that I have. That is not to say that my career has followed a detailed plan. It hasn't. I have often reached cross roads that I never expected or planned for but I have always found myself working with people who I have liked and who have challenged me in positive ways. On the other hand I have met many adults who, on hearing that I am a careers adviser have said 'I still don't know what I want to do when I grow up! Can you help me think of a job I really would like because I really don't like what I am doing at the moment!' This always makes me feel a little sad. It seems to me that we spend so much time in work that we owe it to ourselves to choose occupations which make us happy. There is not much point in wasting life being miserable.

I often reflect on how lucky we are in having a great deal of choice and that this is not the case for everyone. Our career decisions can often be driven by what opportunities are available to us or can be constrained by the expectations of our families or communities. However for many people their career decisions are made freely and we are able to enact our lives through the occupations which we choose. So why I wonder are many people so unhappy in their jobs?

When I was twelve years old, my parents took me on a trip to one of the UK's great churches, York Minster. The church was undergoing extensive renovation at the time. This was not exciting for a twelve year old. Whilst my parents were investigating the exposed foundations of the great church, I was in the shop looking at what I could spend my pocket money on! However I didn't leave the shop with a keyring or a bag of sweets. What had caught my attention was a small poster with the words of a poem written in 'monastic style text'.

Max Ehrmann wrote his famous prose poem 'Desiderata' (which means 'desired things') in 1927. The concept of vocational choice was very early in its development at the time: it was only nineteen years after the founding father of vocational guidance, Frank Parsons, wrote his seminal text 'Choosing a Vocation'. Ehrmann's writing reflects his concerns about the social problems of the times and his poem Desiderata sets out his ideas of what really leads to happiness in life. One particular phrase in the poem has direct relevance to career counsellors:

'Enjoy your achievements as well as your plans. Keep interested in your own career, however humble; it is a real possession in the changing fortunes of time.'

Max Ehrmann 1927

As a young person this really resonated with me and was the first time I really thought about the idea that I had a career. What interested me then and still does as a career practitioner is the idea that career and happiness are linked in this way. I think there are important messages for advisers as we develop our practice.

First of all what is happiness? It is hard to define happiness without using the word 'happy. One definition suggests happiness is a state of mental well-being. Let's stick with that! The United Nations recognises that happiness is a fundamental human goal and created the international annual Day of Happiness on March 20th to celebrate this. Different disciplines view happiness from their own perspectives however with their focus on personal choice, careers advisers and counsellors have an interest in the concept of happiness as an end goal of their work with clients. Some researchers have linked happiness to better health and living longer. A healthier population reduces the burden on health and welfare services.

Others have suggested that if all disciplines focus on happiness as an outcome of their work this will lead to a stable 'good' society. It seems to me that these are all very powerful reasons for careers advisers to focus on happiness as an outcome of their practice.

What does Ehrmann say about the nature of career? Ehrmann uses some important words in his lines about career. He notes the relevance of aspiration and achievement and his dynamic view of career requires planning and review. By emphasising the importance of enjoying our achievements as well as our plans he stresses that we should take pleasure in both. Planning our careers should be exciting and enjoyable. I was talking to a young person the other day who told me about her feelings about the future. This is what she told me:

'I get all tingly when I think about the future. It's a bit scary but really exciting. It's like waiting in a queue for one of those big rides at a theme park!'

Twelve year old girl

This is such a marvellous picture. One which captures a joy in anticipating the future. As careers counsellors we have a duty to help young people find this joy and to carry that forward into their lives. It made me think back to that little girl in York Minster all of those years ago on the brink of adult hood and thinking about the idea of a career. I think I have maintained a joy for learning but I am also very conscious of the role of personal values in my career decision making. My joy comes from the knowledge that I have made a positive contribution and not because my bank balance is healthy. Perhaps this is the secret to happiness in career?

Ehrmann notes that careers are not something to be left on a dusty shelf and taken out once a year when you meet for a careers interview or appraisal. He notes that we should 'keep interested in our careers'. This requires a very specific mind-set. One of personal reflection and review. I think that I have been fortunate with the adults, peers and colleagues who I have worked with. I have been encouraged through personal and professional processes to regularly reflect on my life and progress. Reflective practice is a pillar of our profession but we do need to help young people to do this too. I guess we need to preach what we practice as well as practice what we preach!

Ehrmann reminds us that all careers matter not just those of high achieving individuals. Careers counsellors have an important role in engaging their clients in 'owning their careers'. It can be very hard for some young people to follow the path which will make them happy particularly when there are high expectations from those around them and it might mean them challenging cultural or family norms. Building young people's confidence so that they can make decisions based on their own needs and aspirations is an important role that careers counsellor's play. We also need to ensure that we are equitable in the services we provide to individuals and ensure that those pursuing 'humble' careers receive the attention that they need to make their dreams come true.

The longer I work as a career development professional, the more I am convinced that helping our clients to identify what will make them happy in a job or occupation is fundamental to successful career decision making. This requires a real focus on values based career decisions. Of course it is important to think about many types of rewards for working. I am not suggesting that we should not help our clients think about career prospects or financial gain. But I do think that if we allow our clients to lose the joy that they have as children for the future then we do them a dis-service. After all having lots of money but being unhappy is no way to spend your life!