

Along the track

Not Smiling

As I write this piece, I am sitting in a large, very, very busy IT store. It is noisy – people are waiting, some patiently, some becoming increasingly frustrated and angry, others are bargaining, a few being tutored...and no-one is smiling. I wonder why? Outside the IT store in this large and very busy retail complex, people are rushing from one shop to the next, intent on getting the tasks done. After all, it is Friday. But no-one seems to be smiling. No-one seems to be enjoying this experience. I wonder why?

Sometimes we can become so highly focused on what has to be done, so focused on the destination, we miss out on the delights and wonders of the journey. They become distractions. And so we miss out on what life is really all about, we stop enjoying life. Our homes can be filled with so much activity there is little family time. Workplaces can become so highly organised, so efficient and focused, they become stressful places to work. Such an atmosphere doesn't bring out the best in people. That's not productive. I worked in a factory once where each of us had goals, daily and weekly targets. These were totalled up, and comparisons made with last week and with others working there. And we were packaging cream! The management had a stifling regime of assessment and monitoring. Production fell week by week. Morale was dreadful.

Jock was past retirement age but he came every day to work alongside us on the factory floor. He lent money to just about every co-worker in times of need, he was a story-teller, a great listener, an encourager. One day he didn't appear at work. At lunchtime, as Jock lived alone, someone went to investigate and discovered that he had died in his sleep. We were not allowed to go his funeral, not even a representative group. At the time of his funeral, quite spontaneously, the workforce downed tools for an hour. Production might have suffered but morale went up a hundred percent, even if just for that short time.

Sometimes we can become so focused on efficiency that we become inefficient, so bent on winning or being the best, focused on outcomes and results that we miss out on what we really want to achieve. Surely life is about discovering what we enjoy, what we love doing, what brings us satisfaction and happiness, and in the process finding enjoyment and a sense of fulfillment.

There is an ad on TV at the moment about sport being one of humankind's best achievements. Why? Because it teaches us about winning and losing, about competing, nothing about enjoyment, fun, making friends, learning about co-operation.

So in what ways do our homes and workplaces and places of recreation enable people to show themselves 'in their best light', how are they places of growth, of discovery, of enjoyment? These are all the building blocks of life, no matter what age we may be.

People are complex but one important thing that unites us is our pursuit of what makes us happy. That search finds its way into our homes, into where we learn, work and play. Making homes, workplaces and where we relax into places which 'bring out the best in us' is not just the responsibility of the parents or 'the bosses'. We all have a part to play in that. Jock wasn't a manager but he added a special dimension to our workplace. We loved working with him. That's why so many of us wanted to go his funeral. We all work together to bring about what psychologists call 'authentic happiness'. That means working to create an environment, or as these psychologists say: '*the stable experience of joy that comes from pursuing a life that is meaningful, intimate and virtuous*'. Joy doesn't mean unmitigated, unending happiness. It is rather, an environment that enables us to feel that we are using our gifts and talents to benefit others, creating an environment which encourages healthy, fulfilling and loving relationships, and an environment which encourages growth and development, despite life's inevitable challenges, difficulties and setbacks.

Pope Benedict XVI, summed it up in these words: '*God wants us to be happy always. God knows us and loves us. If we allow the love of Christ to change our heart, then we can change the world. This is the secret of authentic happiness.*'

This prayer was painted on the wall in the foyer of one place where I worked for some years:

May God's word find a home within these walls.
May those who work here be protected by God's loving presence.

May all who come here find a place of respect and kindness.

May prayer, joy and laughter never be strangers here.

May the spirit of pardon and forgiveness reside within us; and

May your name be always holy within this place of work.

Regards
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