

# Along the track

## Life to the Full Takes Time

Initially van Gogh harboured thoughts of becoming a preacher but decided instead to learn to draw. He wasn't much good but he persevered for years before things began to improve. He transformed himself into one of our greatest artists. Haunted by a sense that time was running out and that he might not live past forty (he died at 37), he painted 860 paintings in ten years. His best-known works were all painted in the last two years of his life during what could be called a chance move to the south of France.

The story of the man going on a journey and entrusting his property to his servants (Matt 25:14-30) is very familiar. To one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability, we are told. I wonder what each according to his ability means? Then he went away. That's an important detail. He left to give them space and time. Amazingly, during the master's absence, the one who had received the five talents and two talents traded with them and doubled their value. So what is the message? Those with more will get more? That the talented are successful, others are not? That doesn't seem to be right!

The one who had received the one talent buried his master's money. I have always felt a bit sorry for this one. Why only one talent? For some, it is not easy to find what we are good at, especially when those around us appear to have found their talents, sometimes so easily. Most of us have to work hard at it, to suffer the setbacks and the disappointments. What pleasure van Gogh must have felt as his efforts began to emerge into something to give such wonder and pleasure. Success didn't come easily but time, perseverance, dedication and an understanding that setbacks and disappointments did not mean failure made the difference.

When I was learning to ride a bike many, many years ago conventional wisdom said that you had to fall off six times before you could ride. I fell off a lot more times than that but eventually success was achieved. Failure isn't the end but in a society that places such high importance on personal achievement, success and power, it can seem that way. The one-talent man must have felt something like that. After all, look at how his companions were succeeding. Did he feel it was safer to 'bury' his talent than risk failure?

Mark's Gospel pays particular attention to the failure of the apostles, often emphasising their mistakes. All twelve disciples fail Jesus at some point. Mark stresses how amazingly unperceptive they are and in some ways, are almost opposed to Jesus in their thinking. After witnessing healings and receiving private instruction, the disciples still become afraid when Jesus calms the storm. Jesus walks on water and the disciples' response of amazement, but they still don't understand. They ask, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey Him?" Mark even says the disciples' hearts were hardened, a condition previously used to describe the Pharisees.

They just don't get it, at times. The disciples bicker about which of them is the greatest. They still hold onto the view that the messiah will bring a kingdom of power and glory. They can't even stay awake with Jesus in his hour of great distress.

But despite all that, Mark does not portray them in a negative light. They didn't pack it in. They are, like the rest of us, people who struggle at times with understanding, with commitment and staying power, and at other times, we succeed. Talents aren't just about being an artist or a craftsperson, but some have skills to listen, others are wordsmiths, others have great understanding of others, others have skill in caring for others, or combinations of some or all of them. We are all gifted and talented but these emerge over time. Not many of us discover them early on. It sometimes takes almost a lifetime to unearth them, to develop them, as was the case for van Gogh. Living life to the full is a lifetime journey – it does not happen overnight.

Discovering who we are, what we are good at, what we really think often comes when we find ourselves in different places, different circumstances, and different times. Or we try new things or look at life from a different perspective. Sometimes we unearth skills we didn't know we had. We won't if we don't keep trying. How much would we have lost if van Gogh had given up!

Regards  
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