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Prayer, meditation and contemplation in career decision making

Liane Hambly

Introduction

In a rapidly shifting economy, the ability to face uncertainty and remain open-minded is often regarded as an asset to career management. Such an approach requires a particular mind-set, an acceptance that one cannot control all events and the courage to face and enter the unknown. This state can be defined as one of faith, a state which may be found in the religious and secular alike and which is increasingly linked to well-being. This paper reflects on the findings of a small-scale study into how people who define as having faith navigate career decisions, in particular the role of imaginative contemplation used in prayer and meditation. It considers whether such a discipline may be translated into a secular context and describes an allied approach that may be used by both individuals and career practitioners

Faith and well-being

Defining faith is the starting point for any discussion about its role in career decision making. We often talk about faith in terms of the religious beliefs that people may hold, referring for example to the Christian or Hindu faith. However, according to the existentialist theologian Paul Tillich (1952:172-173) 'faith is not an opinion but a state'; a way of being that enables people to have the courage to face rather than avoid uncertainty and anxiety. In psychological frames of reference this state is regarded as a positive or optimistic mind-set which fosters health and well-being. According to the Building Block theory of mental health (Fredrickson, 2002), it is not the practice of religion per se that leads to well-being, but rather the attitude of faith that may be engendered by certain religious practices. Positive emotions enable individuals to be more resilient, more creative and socially integrated, and it is those religious practices which encourage believers to find positive meaning in life's challenges that build positive emotions, augment personal and social resources and thereby contribute to health and well being. Religious pessimists are therefore no more likely to have better mental health than secular pessimists!

In a rapidly changing education and economic landscape an attitude of faith in the sense of optimism and a willingness to accept uncertainty, is increasingly regarded as essential for career management and employability (Neault, 2002). This is reflected in the competences of the Canadian Blueprint for Life/Work design, the Australian Blueprint for Career Development (MCEECDYA, 2010) as well as UK frameworks such as the 'CEIAG in Scotland' (Scottish Government, 2011), the Northern Ireland Strategy 'Preparing for Success' (DENI, 2009), 'Careers and the World of Work' (Welsh Assembly Government, 2008). The emphasis of these frameworks reflects a change in focus from mapping out one's future to the development of career management skills such as confidence, flexibility, self awareness, resilience and the ability to network and seize opportunities as they arise. Whilst careers education may be regarded as the obvious arena for developing such competences, work with individuals can also incorporate a shift from an emphasis on the client's plan to their ability to successfully navigate change and uncertainty. Secular approaches currently used by career practitioners include Motivational Interviewing (Miller and Rollnick, 1992), Neuro-Linguistic Programming (Bandler and Grinder, 1975a; 1975b) and Planned Happenstance (Mitchell et al, 1999). If religious practices likewise lead to such career management competencies then it seems important that this area be studied and brought into the sphere of career guidance and coaching; not only for any lessons that may be learnt, but also to ensure that career practitioners can work with those whose decision making lies outside their own experience, thereby making cross-cultural work both possible and effective.

The study

The study took place in 2008 and the detailed findings published in 2009 (Hambly, 2009). Questionnaires were distributed to a variety of faith groups and 45 questionnaires were returned. These questionnaires explored the impact of faith on career decision making and how it informed the process. Semi-structured interviews were subsequently held with 6 of the respondents who were identified to represent a range of beliefs: 2 adult Christians, 1 Muslim, 1 Buddhist, 1 spiritual and 1 agnostic. These interviews explored in more depth the practices identified through the questionnaires.

Personal agency and determinism

The findings indicated that faith was more likely than not to have a significant impact on career decision making (using a scale of 1 to 10, 71% scored the importance of faith as 5 or higher, with 18% regarding their career decisions as being 'totally' affected by their faith). Within a faith influenced approach there appears to be a high level of personal agency with only 2% of respondent agreeing with the statement 'I leave it totally in the hands of God. There is nothing that I can do'. Many respondents appeared to balance trust with having to take action and responsibility for the decision making process. It is this decision making process that became the focus for the six interviews.

Practices used in career decision making

The study revealed that people used a variety of methods including talking to people (84%), researching opportunities (58%), being open to unexpected opportunities that may arise (60%), prayer (62%), meditation (22%), listening to inner voice or feelings (47%) and noticing patterns or coincidences (13%). The subsequent interviews provided rich qualitative data for deeper insights into some of these methods although it has to be stressed that the small scale study may not reflect the diversity of how people approach prayer and meditation.

Prayer, meditation and discernment

Excerpts from three of the stories, of a Christian, a Buddhist and a Moslem are presented below. When read together common themes emerge as the interviewees describe how they used prayer and meditation in career decision making:

A Christian Interviewee:

Throughout the day I was praying to God for Guidance. The only way I can describe it is as a feeling of peace when I thought about leaving the course and a feeling of oppression when I thought about staying. Suddenly, my future plans with computers didn't seem important and I decided it wasn't what I wanted to do.

A Buddhist interviewee:

I would talk it over with people first and then I'd sit down to meditate. This would take place over a period of time as well. It wouldn't just be the once. I would try and really get in touch with my body, my feelings and what I'm feeling in my body when I think about certain options. I suppose that's listening to the inner voice. I'd sit there and ponder it but I'd have to be quite quiet and still, to rest with the feelings and the effect those feelings were having. It might be that I'd be slightly anxious or nervous but that wouldn't in itself make me not do something because there's a certain sort of anxiety that's just about change.

A Moslem Interviewee:

So if I was applying for a job I would do the Istikhara (the prayer of guidance) beforehand and then I would listen to my feelings. If there was a positive feeling then I would go for the job and if I got the job I would see it as part of God's will for me to do that.

The process of prayer and meditation for these individuals was not a matter of sending out a request and passively waiting for a response, but rather a discipline requiring attention and effort. At the heart of this discipline is the ability to create space for and to listen to one's inner voice and feelings, a process of contemplation. This contemplative approach to prayer and meditation has been used for many centuries and is a recognised practice across many religions. Within the Christian tradition it is often called the 'prayer of discernment', based on the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius. According to Hughes (2008) this form of prayer can be used for every day decisions such as what career to pursue or how to manage unemployment or retirement. The practice consists of engaging the imagination to enter and experience each option available and to notice any feelings aroused during and after the exercise. Hughes suggests making a provisional decision and then noting whether this leads to an increase in feelings of peace or feelings of agitation, boredom and sadness. One of the Christian respondents described such an approach: 'I make the decision with prayer and time. I decide one way in my mind and see if it feels right. Then I decide another way and see how that feels'. Likewise the Istikhara, the Islamic Prayer of Guidance is meant to be used for any decision. The supplicant would say the prayer:

God you have knowledge, we have not, you have knowledge of the future and the past. If you know that this (whatever the option is) is good for me then make it easy for me. And if you know that this is not good for me then keep it away from me and take me away from it and choose what is good for me wherever it is and please me with it.

Having said this prayer, the person then has to follow the discipline of paying attention to any feelings, dreams, hunches that may follow.

Being open to the unknown – the case for challenge

The ability to listen to one's feelings and to discern which ones to listen to and which ones to ignore is not always an easy task. Sometimes there may be contradictory feelings and a resulting state of confusion; other times the feeling may appear clear but have its roots in misinformation, prejudice and an attachment to a comfort zone that may prevent growth. Therefore built into the practice is a recognised need to incorporate challenge, whether through one's own questioning or from seeking the opinion of others. The aim is to suspend one's own egoistic inclinations, to incorporate other perspectives and to welcome the challenge that they may bring to your own intentions. To achieve this aim a specific attitude is required, that of an open mind or willingness not to predetermine the outcome of the exercise. In Buddhism, this attitude is referred to as Prajna 'a state of basic intelligence that is open, questioning, and unbiased' (Chödrön, 2003:145). In Hinduism it is referred to as Nishkama, the ability to be fully involved in life but without selfish passion. Similarly the Istikhara, the Islamic Prayer of Guidance, recognises the importance of suspending one's personal desires and being open to whatever comes one's way. Therefore listening to feelings is balanced with an attitude of detachment and of openness to being challenged by others in the community.

Cultural preparedness

To ensure that careers work is truly inclusive one could argue that an open and unbiased mind is as desirable for the career worker as it is for the client. According to Arulmani (2011), what is customary in one context may be contrary in another and so the background and training of the careers worker may only prepare them to work with people who share that culture. In the UK careers work is still dominated by the Trait and Factor matching approach, despite there being no evidence that it is any more effective than any other decision making method (Bimrose et al, 2008:2), and with some evidence that such an individualistic approach may not be culturally relevant for many people (Arulmani, 2007). This dominance may lead career professionals to use this approach automatically with clients regardless of its cultural suitability. Furthermore, its over-use may lead to an impression that any other methods are less desirable. The issue of trust is revealed in one of the narratives, a Christian reflecting on the decision she made as a teenager. At that time she did not trust that careers advisers and tutors would understand how she made decisions and so chose instead to talk it through with other Christians, such as a friend and her parents. She even chose to hide how she made the decision from her tutor, pretending that she had weighed up the pros and cons instead.

If the careers profession aims to be truly inclusive then we need to challenge our attachments to the methods we use, not to be subsumed by other people's methods but to enter a creative discourse with the possibility of transformation. The adviser's own paradigms can be broadened and enriched by listening to and understanding the perspectives of others.

Ritual as a decision-making medium

The contemplative approach to prayer can provide a conscious and formal methodology for approaching career decisions, a ritual which facilitates a process of listening to one's feelings whilst incorporating self-reflection and challenge. If we look to secular professional practice the Trait and Factor method is likewise a

formal methodology which offers a step-by-step approach to decision making, systematically analysing one's interests and ability and then matching to the opportunities available. It may be the comfort of having a clear process to follow that, despite the limitations discussed earlier, ensures the popularity of this method amongst practitioners and policy makers alike (Bimrose 2006). It would therefore be useful to have viable alternatives that also offer a step-by-step approach, but which take into account the client's constructs and subjective reality. The following is a real life case-study which illustrates a secular adaptation of the contemplative tradition by drawing on the narrative approach (Cochran, 1997; Savikas 1997, 2005). The method may be used independently or facilitated by a career practitioner. It has even been used with groups of young people with peers acting as facilitators. The method uses the imagination to engage with each option, to listen to the inner voice and explore potential consequences, thereby introducing the element of challenge. Names have been changed to respect confidentiality:

Martin's narrative

Martin's dilemma is whether to train to become a primary school teacher or a counsellor with young children. He has researched both options and is aware of what they involve but is still unsure which path to follow. He explains this to the careers adviser who asks him if he is open to trying a decision making method which uses the imagination. Martin agrees. The adviser writes the two options on separate pieces of paper and folds these up so that the job titles can't be seen. She then asks Martin to hold the folded pieces of paper in his hand, to pick one and, on opening it, to ask himself how he would feel if he *had to* choose that option. Martin opens the first piece of paper, sees the words 'primary school teacher' and notices his own response. At the same time the adviser carefully observes any body language cues that indicate the psychological response taking place within Martin. The adviser asks Martin to describe his immediate reaction to which Martin says 'yeah, it feels ok', smiling and nodding his head. The adviser asks Martin if he can visualise a day in the life of a primary school teacher and to describe what he sees. Martin describes how he would enjoy the interactions with the young people, even when the behaviour was challenging. As he does so his smile broadens. Prompted by the adviser, Martin describes other challenging aspects of the job, pulling a face at the paperwork but saying it's not too bad as 'that's something you just have to do'.

The exercise is repeated with the second piece of paper. Upon opening it Martin looks more anxious. This is reflected back by the adviser and Martin wonders whether it's because that option feels new and less familiar. When asked to imagine a day in the life of a counsellor with children, his face lights up and his tone is passionate when talking about the issues young people may bring. The adviser prompts Martin to imagine the more challenging aspects of the job which for Martin would be dealing with child protection cases, but again he sounds passionate about the need for this. The next stage involves Martin imagining further down the line to a future scenario where he is qualified in either option. At this point there is an interesting shift. Martin looks surprised and says he no longer feels anxiety about the counselling job as he would be trained and confident in his ability. When he imagines having chosen teaching he felt disappointed in himself for having taken what he now realises is the more comfortable option. At that point Martin says 'you know, I think I want to train as a counsellor'. The adviser reflects this back and offers the option of staying with the feelings for a couple of days, to talk to people he trusts and to see how it feels when he does so.¹

Although the described method may be used independently by the client, an adviser can provide a safe environment and relationship for deeper exploration and challenge to take place via facilitation and reflecting

¹ Martin eventually trained as a therapist and has since worked in a school counselling service and with the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service.

back observations. As with any method, sometimes there may be an immediate shift whilst at other times the process may not result in a decision, but provide food for thought by unearthing issues which impact on the decision. The method adopts many features of contemplative prayer and meditation; the imagination is used to enter the unknown and navigate uncertainty, time is taken to listen to the inner voice and other people are used to offer challenge. Whilst a facilitator plays their part, the decision is still one's own, building self-efficacy and the personal resources required to face change.

Conclusion

Imaginative contemplation may be used by those who pray, by those who meditate and by those who have no religious affiliation but for whom it works as a decision making strategy. It offers a step-by-step approach to decision making which can enable the client to explore options from their own perspective rather than from the adviser's, to develop the confidence to listen to themselves as well as to take on board internal challenge and discomfort. Furthermore, it enables people to discern what they feel in the moment, to respond to events as they arise and to enter areas which may feel less familiar. As such it may offer a viable alternative to the traditional matching approach and may suit a world which is more complex and changing. However, it may not work for everyone and, as with any decision making strategy, should be offered and not imposed.

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