

# Spirituality for the working life

*Rachel Jones*

## *Introduction*

I CANNOT REMEMBER WHEN I FIRST LEARNED what a CV was. But I do remember hearing endlessly at school that I'd have to 'sell myself' to future employers and therefore ought to be accumulating an impressive list of accomplishments in order to distinguish mine from the hundreds of others it would be competing with. Never one for acting or public speaking, not playing a musical instrument and being worse than appalling at every team sport ever invented, I was always vaguely concerned that I wouldn't have much to write down. I hated the idea of being measured like that, but apparently that was what the World of Work was like: lean and mean, cut and thrust, each man for himself (*sic*). Looking back I think it was partly just a tactic to bully us into participation, CV points used as carrots to prompt reluctant teenagers into action. Nonetheless, the careers rhetoric of my teachers echoes the language of the job market: prove yourself, market your skills, if you don't get there fast someone else will. An advert I saw on the London Underground for the temping agency Brook Street a couple of months ago says it perfectly:

We're all temps now. No one can expect to stay in the same job from 16 to 60. But what this brave new world lacks in security it makes up for in flexibility. Forget the Euro. Attitude is the new currency . . . Worrying about job security is a thing of the past. If you're good you'll have career security. If you don't care, well – the meter's running out.

What does it mean to be a person of faith in this environment? How do those of us starting out on the career path connect spirituality with professional life? What do young working people need, and where are they finding nourishment? Over the last two months I have talked to seven young professionals about their work and their faith. My aim has not been to reach any general conclusions but to listen to how the people I know are negotiating issues in their own lives.

My brief was to find people who are not in the 'caring professions', where the Church has tended to concentrate its pastoral attention, but rather in areas such as business, industry and finance. All those I talked

sharing our prayer (or lack of it!) and learning to 'find God in all things'. CLC meetings became a sacred space, a time to reflect on all the events of our busy week, a place where we could 'talk from our hearts of the things that matter'. (Those words were spoken by an elder of the Yup'ik community in Alaska, and quoted to me while I was a Jesuit Volunteer there last year. He was not talking about CLC or anything related to it, but his words express my experience of CLC, and I think probably Sinead's too.)

In Sinead's home city of Belfast the parish is enormous, and the congregation at the noon mass on Sunday over a thousand. For the first six months after she moved back there she hesitated to join any of the groups in the parish: 'It takes a lot of energy to turn up at a new group, and I felt shy. But I was praying a lot and trying to work out whether I wanted a CLC group here.' In Northern Ireland CLC did not have any young adult members, and Sinead joined a group which had been going for twenty-five years. The next newest member joined twenty years ago, but she was not deterred: 'I really value the quiet time. Even though the other members are a lot older than I am, I do feel at home and I'm learning so much from them. We take turns hosting the meetings and last week it was my turn. It was lovely to pray together in my house.'

More recently Sinead has also started a CLC group for young adults. She and a Jesuit priest share the role of group guide, taking the group through a formation programme which was developed in Dublin, where young adult CLC is also growing. This makes CLC accessible to those who have no previous experience of spirituality, and allows some space for discussion as well as being a listening group. As part of her own formation, Sinead goes down regularly for meetings with the Jesuits in Dublin, and she also attended the last CLC National Assembly in Northern Ireland. It all adds up to a huge commitment for someone who works full-time as a civil engineer, but when I asked her about that, Sinead was clear that she is finding the experience tremendously life-giving, even though she is very busy.

What I need from the Church is to be nurtured and to be allowed to grow, to be given the opportunity to deepen my spirituality. Leading a CLC group has made me very aware of how much further there is to grow, and that is what I really want . . . I would usually be very quiet about my faith at work. Only in the last couple of months have I gained a bit of confidence to articulate

it. One or two people at work are aware of what CLC means for me and they respect it.

### ***Finding God as an engineer***

One of the recurring themes of our CLC meetings as undergraduates was a shared struggle to make sense of how prayer and study fitted together, and the guide of our group was constantly reminding us that we were serving God just by doing what we loved and were gifted to do. Listening to Sinead I could not help but be reminded of that:

I love what I'm doing and I feel alive when I'm doing it . . . I was really hung up when I graduated about doing something good for the world, like being a nurse. But now I recognize that God has gifted me to be a civil engineer and it's my way of living my life to its full potential. I'm constantly seeing God in the world around me and trying to build things that complement that.

Finding that match between the things which make us feel most alive and a way to make a living is not always easy, though. Joanne is also an engineer, but her experience is in complete contrast to Sinead's:

I can't seem to get God and my job to connect up with each other at all. I think it's partly because by nature I'm not really an engineer. It's doing things with people and that sense of teamwork that I get a real buzz out of, not really the technical things. And staring at a computer screen I find – not exactly ungodly, but divorced from God in many ways. I find it hard to make that part of my prayer. If I have a really bad day I can't see any reason for doing it, but if I'm working with people and I have a bad day, I think even if I'm not getting anything out of it, someone else is. The other day I had a really bad day and I was going home, and I thought, 'They could not pay me enough money to make me want to do this and to make me enjoy it. Money could not do it for me.' I definitely have a vision of doing something completely different. I feel like forty hours of my week are empty hours, and life is what I do outside work.

### ***Getting involved in a parish***

Sinead and Joanne's descriptions of *how it feels to be doing what they are doing* illustrate well the energy and consolation of being

'drawn' and the clanging sense of desolation in being 'driven'. For Joanne, getting involved in the community in the village where she lives has been a very important part of her 'outside work' life, and she too has brought her experience of CLC at university to her new parish:

I started my job in the January and to start with I felt quite lonely, sort of displaced. In our village the Catholic parish is spread over five parishes, whereas all the other churches are just focused in the village. They have quite a strong Churches Together and they run Lent groups. So I went along to the Lent Group that year and met quite a lot of people through that. We used a book written by five people of different denominations, all about ways to pray. From that I got a CLC group going, and that's how I got involved in the parish really. Our group is ecumenical and it's all sorts of ages, from late twenties to people in their seventies, and from all walks of life. It brings together all sorts of people who have different takes on life, and it's really good

Sometimes I think the Catholic Church is not very good at getting people out of the Sunday mode. There are no house groups, there's no encouragement to read the Bible. The Catholic faith in this country is very mass-centred, and that is important, but it shouldn't be the only thing. Because if all you do to express your faith is go to mass then that limits you. That's one of the great things about CLC, that finding God in all things. And also bringing your intellect to your faith as well.

### *Possibilities for vibrant community*

What is striking is that once students have been involved in CLC, where they have encountered an authentic and life-giving way of connecting faith with the rest of life, they carry the experience with them into new parishes. Once again, the drawn/driven image is pertinent: if people are able to find what they want and need, that generates energy and commitment. The focus shifts, from a burdensome 'How are we ever going to get more young people involved?' to a desire to share something vibrant and alive. If young adults have a chance to see that there are such possibilities and then choose not to explore them, that is fine. Most, however, are not aware that vibrant faith communities can and do exist. Joanne continues:

There's so much that can happen in parishes: days of reflection, one-day retreats, weeks of guided prayer. It doesn't need to be

the parish priest who initiates things, although he has to be open to it. You need the input either of someone in the parish who's prepared to put lots of work into it or people outside the parish who can cover a certain area. You just need help to get things going and people can do whatever they want. Look at what goes on at chaplaincies – children's visiting groups, theology groups, Bible study, SVP . . . There are all sorts of things you might get going for young adults in a parish. At the moment it is noticeable even in my parish that you don't get many people in their 20s and 30s who don't have kids coming to mass.

Joseph is part of a Bible study group in the parish where he has lived since he graduated.

We've got a Bible study for people under 35. Most are working full-time, so we can share our experiences, not necessarily in the Bible study but in the social events which come out of it. It's quite an international group, and good friendships have formed. You learn more about your faith, and it deepens your knowledge about the Church. We have interesting discussions, most strands of opinion in the Church are represented . . . I'm very lucky with the parish I've landed up in. It's a small Catholic community, and because it's a cathedral parish there are three or four priests, all with different talents, who minister in different ways. But it is still difficult to get to know people if you just go to mass.

### *Discernment and decision-making*

A graduate in modern languages and social sciences, Joseph is now working as an auditor for a county council and training with the Chartered Institute of Public Finance Accountancy. I asked him if he feels that there is an interface between his faith and his work:

I'm always asking myself the question, because it's important to me that there is. The qualities of an auditor are qualities a Christian should have, honesty and fair-mindedness. The comments you make affect other people's future, and you have to be courageous if it comes to something controversial. Sensitivity and the way you ask questions are also very important. But whether the County Council was the job that was intended for me, I'm not sure. Discernment is difficult when you're running out of time, you have a deadline and you have to get a job – you

get tied in basically. Once you get a job and you've got a mortgage and a car, then any decision that you make subsequent to that has got to reflect those commitments . . . so you can't just go out and do exactly what you think the Spirit is leading you to do.

***Pressures of work and the search for community***

For people who are 'tied in' to high-pressure jobs which they do not enjoy, the split between faith and work can be all the more stark, and finding a community all the more crucial. Lauren works for a large accounting firm in London:

In my work environment there's very little support and people are very guarded. Nobody can really know what anyone else is thinking because it's very competitive, guys don't let their guard down, they want to be seen as though they're in control. The company is only interested in results, and people are seen as commodities, to be swapped round all the time. No one would talk about religion or spirituality at work.

I live with Ruth who goes to church every week, and it was one of the reasons I felt comfortable here, that I could mention church without that usual, Oh, you're not religious are you? It's so important in your working life to find a community, but it is an active search. The transience of everything makes it difficult. Who knows, maybe next year I'll be in a completely different part of London. Ruth now, because of her church and her friends, is deciding that Finchley is where she's made a community and a home, and I think that's a very healthy thing to do. But not everyone can do it; sometimes you just have to go where it's practical to go, and then you have to start building up again. And I think that's very draining.

Having distanced herself from the Church and explored Sufism for a while, Lauren has recently started going back to mass, and I asked her what prompted that decision:

I think I was wanting to look at religion in an everyday context, not associating it with some sort of exotic mystical experience. I felt that to be rooted in something you need to accept all aspects of it and not just pick and choose . . . One of my favourite parts of the mass is the prayer before communion, 'Lord, I am not

worthy to receive you . . .’ At that moment you can just say, ‘Look, I’m sorry I’m making a complete hash of things’. People realize when they hit rock bottom that they need something else – and a lot do hit rock bottom because of the immense stress they are under.

### *Work and social responsibility*

Stress, competition and isolation are aspects of professional life that are unenviable, but there are also privileges, not least financial. I asked Dan, who is a copywriter, about the social and economic responsibility that comes with his job:

If there were no connection between me being successful and living in a successful country and someone else not being, then perhaps I’d see it as charity but not responsibility. But because everything we do has an impact, we are duty bound to get rid of Third World debt and to trade fairly with companies for the products that we benefit from. We don’t do it but we should . . . Everything that a business does in this country, somewhere along the line it’s going to be linked to another’s suffering. It’s unfortunate, but it’s absolutely true. I work for a small recruitment-advertising agency; we do lots of high quality design work, but we do it for companies that aren’t very pleasant. I wouldn’t refuse to do it for a company I didn’t think was worthy of it, because I have a high level of professionalism I have to keep up, but we do a lot of work for a large petroleum company, and I’m not particularly comfortable with that. Sooner or later as my seniority rises I will get to do that. There’s also an economic responsibility within the UK. It has started to dawn on me that there is an underclass in this country, that we have a third of kids growing up in poverty. That’s about 12 million people growing up in poverty.

James, a research engineer working for a major telecommunications company, confronts the question of responsibility in different terms, being at the forefront of technological developments:

I do think about this, especially as the project I’m working on at the moment has potential military applications [for training soldiers using ‘augmented reality’]. I am very aware that mobile phones have altered the way we communicate, and the tech-

nology we're building on top of or in addition to that will have an equal impact on people's lives in the future . . . I have been on a course where I was shown incendiary devices and mines and what disturbed me most about them was their diabolical ingenuity, that someone had sat down and designed something like that, so I am very aware that it is potentially a very destructive profession. Although I think progress in general is a good thing, we need to be extremely careful in assessing the significance of new technology.

### *The holiness of work*

Initiatives within parishes for discussion and reflection on issues relating faith to economics, business and technological change could be a valuable step towards bridging the gap between Sunday and the rest of the week. Although the Church speaks prophetically of social justice in its encyclicals and many parishes have justice and peace groups, there are not many opportunities for people to share their concerns about the decisions that they face in their professional lives. Many questions are raised here, about how we might better support people in the work they do, and affirm the holiness of work. In the Church of England there are non-stipendiary ministers in secular employment, ordained people who continue to do their jobs and whose ministry it is to witness to the presence of God in all the ordinariness of everyday work. If they bring an awareness of God into the workplace, what is equally necessary is for an awareness of the workplace – with all its unresolved questions and tensions – to be brought into churches, into faith communities, into prayer and into spirituality.

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**Y**OU DON'T HAVE TO SEARCH VERY FAR to find the source of our generation's emotional pain. Intimate relationships are the norm for our generation – people rushing into living together without establishing the trust and friendship required for the success of such relationships. It is not unusual for some of our generation to have experienced the emotional equivalent of a couple of divorces by the age of thirty. When we experience such rejection of love in adulthood, it often triggers those deeply rooted feelings of rejection that one experiences in early childhood. And yet I have still managed to find hope.

A spiritual healer once explained to me that

We are all born with divine qualities which are our soul/subconscious/heart (these are the innate positives we are all blessed with at birth such as self-love, trust of oneself and others). If a child is not made to feel 'safe and protected' by his parents (through no fault of their own, they are doing what they were taught by their parents), he/she will instinctively build barriers and cut himself/herself off from his/her innate divine qualities. At this point the child begins to develop attention-seeking behavioural patterns, all stemming from a lack of self-love.

When an adult experiences those same feelings of rejection in intimate relationships at a later stage of life, he or she will instinctively tap into that same defence mechanism established at birth. So we raise our barriers even higher and in doing so we experience those same feelings of self-hate which breed a plethora of negative character traits.

My sense is that we are all searching for the same thing, that 'peace of mind' which equates to God. Perhaps it is a question of vocabulary and presentation. This 'peace of mind' which our generation is now seeking through therapy, yoga and meditation is the same God as our parents found in traditional forms of religion. What gives me hope is that God is within us all. We are now seeking to find him through learning self-love, rather than relying on a religion which is based on the experiences of others. It will be a long journey, but the journey has now begun.

*Tom Bible*