

A review of
Crossing the Unknown Sea
by David Whyte,
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Rating: 9

(The Official Ayers Rating Scale goes from 1-10. Anything lower than 6 is thrown out. This produces a net five point scale from 6-10.)

When David Whyte attended university, he studied biology and soon after his graduation worked in the Galapagos Islands as a researcher / guide. He now has his residence on an island in Puget Sound. He thus has a long and ongoing connection with the sea. He has also published several books of poetry while at the same time serving as a successful business consultant. Here he brings the poet's sensibilities to a common contemporary problem in business – finding personal fulfillment in work. He uses a sea voyage as a metaphor for life in general and worklife in particular.

Whyte offers something akin to a memoir, drawing from circumstances and stories of his own life. The book carries the subtitle of 'work as a pilgrimage of identity.' As a result, this book does not offer a grand unified theory of everything. Through the description of various incidents he draws lessons for himself and by implication for the rest of us. Along the way, he offers comments on finding good work, having dignity and purpose, and engaging in genuine human conversation.

What does 'good work' mean to Whyte? He suggests that, "At its simplest, good work is work that makes sense, and that grants sense and meaning to the one who is doing it and to those affected by it." In doing good work, you bring your entire self to bear. You fully commit your brains, and your courage, and your heart to the work. He recalls a situation where he had nearly exhausted himself in multitasking, conflicting priorities, and having simply too much to do. He talked to a trusted advisor and heard this reply:

"The antidote to exhaustion is *wholeheartedness*. ... You are so tired through and through because a good half of what you do here in this organization has nothing to do with your true powers, or the place you have reached in your life. You are only half here, and half here will kill you after a while. You need something to which you can give your full powers. You know what that is; I don't have to tell you."

The advisor does not offer specific advice on what work Whyte should undertake as a career counselor might. He simply points out that his current choices, whether deliberate or not, will kill him.

Finding *good work* permits you to have dignity and personal honor. With dignity comes the ability to stay true to your own spirit. To keep that dignity and honor involves taking full ownership of your own capabilities and limitations.

“With dignity comes honesty and an unwillingness to sell yourself short, to temporize or collude in cowardly ways that may preserve our jobs but not our honor. There are certain things we should not do, certain people we should not work for, lines we should not cross, conversations to which we should not descend, money we should not earn however easily it may come”

Making the conscious choice *not* to work for someone because of who that person is, making the choice to *not* to take the easy money – making those decisions can help you preserve your dignity and honor, but they almost will cause a major upheaval in your worklife.

Whyte recounts a story from his Galapagos days. The members formed a good crew, individually skilled and understanding their roles on the ship. They had inadvertently, however, become dependent on the mastery of the previous captain, Raphael. Early in his tenure, a new captain slept through a perilous overnight weather change, endangering the ship and its crew.

“We had allowed Raphael to lull us subtly into a lack of responsibility at the very core; we were alert as crew members, but Raphael had so filled his role of captain to capacity that we ourselves had become incapacitated in one crucial area: We had given up our own inner sense of captaincy. Somewhere inside us we had come to the decision that ultimate responsibility lay elsewhere.”

In abdicating to Raphael, the crew members had ceased to do *good work* – the unintentionally imperiled those affected by their work. So had Raphael, the previous captain. Were they really a good crew? A retired US Navy admiral offered this reaction to Whyte’s story: “A good crew doesn’t let a new captain fail.” That inner sense of captaincy requires that we hold tight to dignity and honor.

In order to remind ourselves just what we mean by dignity and honor, and what evidence we see of them in our worklife, we need to engage in conversation not only with others but with ourselves. Whyte writes, “Conversation is the heart of human life” Conversations with co-workers, industry experts, customers, family members all bring something important.

“But the depth and usefulness of *all* these outer conversations depend upon an internal conversation that is occurring within each individual. It is very difficult to make any of those outer, abstract conversations real if the people who come in through the door every day have no real conversation with their own individuality.”

Setting aside appropriate time for this reflective conversation requires a genuine act of will and discipline. People seem exhausted – how can we expect them to do yet another task? Whyte contends that the *inner* work must come first because it informs the *outer* work. Dignity and honor result from retaining that inner sense of captaincy, of making decisions that allow us to bring *wholeheartedness* to our work. Only then can we engage in *good work*.