



# SENSE OF DESTINY

CHOOSING YOUR OWN LIFE STORY

## IDENTITY

It starts with an existential question: who am I and, by implication, who are you? If you were asked by a stranger in an elevator, 'Tell me who you are' with just 1 minute to answer and without explaining your name or what you do for a job, what would you say? What essentially defines you? What best expresses who you are?

It's a question that philosophers, theologians and others have been grappling with for centuries, trying to work out exactly who we are, what it means to be human, what it means to be part of this thing we call humanity. The pop group Supertramp expressed this feeling well in *Logical Song* – 'When all the world's asleep, the questions run so deep...I know it sounds absurd but please tell me who I am...'

We can define ourselves by many different things in the world today, e.g. where we live, what work we do, which brands we identify with. But there is still an existential question at heart of all this – who am I? Am I just a product of my circumstances or environment or am I something unique in my own right?

We have different ways of answering this question. If I can answer it with some degree of clarity, I may begin to answer the question 'who are you' and 'who are others' too, and thereby develop a theory of personhood, a theory of humanity – where I'm able to assert what I believe I am and we are and, maybe, what we are and could be together.

You might have heard people say, 'I'm not sure I'm being myself', 'I don't feel myself' or 'I want to be more true to myself'. These statements point to an intuitive sense that we are, deep down, something more than our circumstances or environment.

It's as if we can lose ourselves, feel pressured, driven or enticed by other things that leave us feeling confused or inauthentic, acting differently to who we believe we are.

Answering the question 'who am I' and, thereby, being grounded in a sense of who we are, gives us a basis for being authentic, knowing ourselves, developing ourselves and relating to others that is so critical to whatever lives and work we choose to engage in.

## PURPOSE

Another existential question: purpose. It's more than what career should I pursue or what training should I do. It's something deeper. Where do I fit in the world? What is this grand scheme of things that I seem to be caught up in? Is there a bigger picture? Is there a bigger plan and, if so, what's my part in it? Is my life more significant than the simple decisions I take on a day-to-day basis?

Pause and reflect for a minute. Why are you here? What's your purpose in life? What are you about? What do you see as your place in the world? Different people will answer this question differently – we're likely to be coming from different places with different ideas, experiences and beliefs and that's OK.

When I was a teenager I went into industry, not because I had any aspiration for the job but because I wanted to earn money to buy a motorbike and that was the only way I could get it. When I arrived, it was one of the most dehumanising environments I had ever encountered. People were viewed as objects to be used and I couldn't believe what I had stepped into.

While I was there though I did encounter some people who seemed to have a much greater sense of what was important in life and a real passion to make a difference for good.

One of those people gave me a book – Richard Bach's *Jonathan Livingstone Seagull* – which you might have read. I can hardly begin to describe the impact it had on me. It's a short story about a seagull who decides there's more to life than going out fishing for food each day. He decides he wants to excel at something and works hard to learn different techniques that enable him to fly with speed, grace and agility.

The other seagulls mock him for this because they think it's irrelevant. They think the day-to-day matters of life are much more important and so, over time, he becomes ostracised by his own family and community. This doesn't deter him. Instead, he perseveres and determines to make his life extraordinary. Over time, he also helps other seagulls move forward in their own journeys of discovery too.

This simple allegorical story had a profound impact on my psyche.

At the age of 21, I became a Christian and this was an even more dramatic experience. It was as if my mind and heart exploded with light. I cannot begin to describe it but I became absolutely convinced through that experience and in subsequent years that the answer to the questions 'who am I' and 'why am I here' are ultimately tied up with who God is and what his purposes are for the world.

At that point, I left industry and moved into community development work as a volunteer, earning just £12 per week, but having never felt so fulfilled in my life.

Other people have stories of similar impacts or events, moments when suddenly everything seems so clear, when even familiar things appear in a whole new light. Everything seems to make sense – even if just for a moment, and it spurs us into action.

It can be really hard to hold that perspective. There's so much to confuse or distract us. It's a bit like a flash of imagination or insight that illumines things for a moment, but then it's gone. Nevertheless, it's something that can stir, move or compel us to do something radically different with our lives, to set out on new adventures and to head off in new directions.

I think that's an important backdrop to conversations about things like personal and professional development. There's so much more to our lives, work and talent potential than everyday mediocrity.

## VISION

I will use the word 'vision' here very loosely to include passion, aspiration and imagination. Try pausing for a moment before reading further and jot something down on paper; perhaps a simple picture, symbol or word that encapsulates something of your own vision or passion in life. 'This is the thing I really aspire to'. 'This is the thing that gives me energy'. 'This is what makes me feel alive.'

In the industrial environment I spoke of earlier, I developed a profound sense of conviction I could make a difference for good, and so I joined the trade union and tried very hard to reform some of the things that were happening in the union and in the organisation itself. I spoke up at a trade union event, got shot down for my views and this spurred me on to organise a petition for change.

For the first time, I had the sense of doing something that felt real, meaningful and more-than-myself. The campaign I led pretty much failed, partly because even those that agreed with my vision for change were too fearful to put their name to a petition, or take other action in case it affected their job security or career prospects.

And so I was confronted by this choice between doing what seemed to be the right and good thing or doing the more pragmatic and expedient thing. It was easy for me – I was a young man with few responsibilities but for those around me with families and mortgages etc., it was really hard to take that step. I learned that following through on vision sometimes carries genuine cost.

During my time in community development that followed, I worked with lots of different community groups in London ranging from elderly people on housing estates to street gangs at night. It was an exciting time and a steep learning curve. I saw some good things happen but also some setbacks.

When we're working with communities, it's like organisations. There are many competing agendas, often good agendas as well as those that may be reactionary or defensive.

## SENSE OF DESTINY

I became aware of a situation happening in central America – a terrible human rights situation – and I felt more and more drawn to do something, or try to do something, to help change what was happening there. So my vision became broadened from UK to international.

My approach was naïve, driven more by instinct than strategy, a simple conviction that something had to be done. As Greenpeace says, 'the optimism of the action is better than the pessimism of the thought'.

Nevertheless, I joined a human rights organisation and also a political campaigning organisation for El Salvador. This was a really hard time. Some of the people I was working with had been tortured and some of the people we were working with in El Salvador were murdered.

I felt my vision pressed to the limits and I began to wonder whether what we were trying to achieve was really possible at all. I've learned through this experience that if we're to make progress with vision in really difficult circumstances, we have to find ways to maintain, nurture and sustain that vision. Otherwise we will become disillusioned or cynical or give up.

How has your own vision developed over the years? Who or what has made it most difficult for you to retain it? What strategies have you found that help you to keep pressing forward?

St. Ignatius of Loyola in *Spiritual Exercises* offers wise words of caution and inspiration: 'Imagine yourself at the end of your life. What are the key things you will wish you had said and done? Once you have decided, do it now.'

I have found that numerous things help me to persevere such as: prayer, time out for reflection, supervision, rest, physical exercise, fun, laughter and trusted friends and colleagues that will understand, challenge and encourage me when things get tough.

## ETHICS

The examples I've mentioned so far are very much tied up with questions of what we believe is right or wrong, or what to commit to in real situations. This is the realm of ethics – values with moral dimensions or implications. We need to get to grips with our own ethical principles and practice, even if it just helps us sleep at night. We have to decide for ourselves where the lines are that we won't cross and when we'll take a strong stance on things we believe are most important.

Some call this moral intelligence. Often, organisations and professional institutes provide guiding policies or standards which avoid the need to always rely on our own personal judgement. Most ethical challenges are, however, encountered in the ordinary decisions we face in our day-to-day lives and work.

Imagine, for a moment, you are working with a training group. You need to decide what to disclose and what to keep confidential. You want to provide talented individuals with special input yet to maintain equal opportunities. You struggle to balance push and pull strategies, respecting individual autonomy whilst also trying to achieve the learning outcomes you've been contracted to deliver. You may wonder what fee rates to charge, enabling you to run your business but without being exploitative.

When faced with such dilemmas, trying to decide when we're really not sure what's right, or taking a stand when the cost to us or others could be high, I've found that working things through with others can bring valuable perspective, learning and accountability and reduce the risks of stress and isolation.

I worked with one well-meaning organisation where the leaders decided to open hostels to support young single homeless people who were living on the streets. The organisation had an ethical commitment to help vulnerable people but lacked resources to do it well. As a result, it employed inexperienced volunteers to run the hostels, which placed both staff and residents at considerable risk. This was one of those situations where vision, ethics and pragmatics collided.

Was it wrong to open the hostels without adequate resources? I'm not sure. The residents were helped but it felt very difficult at the time. My way through was to provide staff with support, training and supervision to improve the quality of care. In retrospect, I could have taken other stances such as challenging the leadership more forcefully. The best and right way forward isn't always obvious and things can look much clearer after the event.

Pause and reflect for a moment. What kind of ethical dilemmas do you face in your life and work? Which give you the biggest headaches or heartaches? Where are you most tempted to compromise? What principles or strategies have you developed to protect your own integrity?

I've written my own code of practice that acts as a starting point. I meet with others for peer learning and accountability and I've found some books helpful. These include *Moral Intelligence* (Lennick & Kiel), *Working Ethics* (Rowson) and *Ethical Leadership* (Connock & Johns; Mendonca & Kanungo). I also try to forgive myself and to learn from my mistakes when I get it wrong.

## RELATIONSHIPS

The final dimension is relationships, and by relationships I mean being and doing with others. It's difficult to imagine vision or ethics without some kind of reference to people; the people we work with, live with, have fun with and struggle with. We're surrounded by people and, 'In the end, what everybody discovers is that what (really) matters is other people.' (John Ortberg)

The problem with people is, however, that not everyone is the same as us(!). We each have different experiences, personality types, cultures, languages and values and all of these things influence how we experience the world and how we behave in practice. So, when we bring a group of people together, whether in a family, team or any other environment, all kinds of interesting dynamics can arise.



This takes us straight back to the question of identity (above) because what we believe about ourselves and others has a significant impact on how we choose to relate to other people, and what we believe about relationships, including which values and principles we choose to uphold.

As a follower of Jesus, I believe relationships are an important end in themselves. You can imagine some of the issues this raises when working with people suffering the consequences of injustice and conflict.

An experience comes to mind when I was working in Germany a short time after the unification between East and West. I was working in a small town in a social work project with young people. The unification had resulted in high unemployment in certain areas and a far-Right party was recruiting lots of young people into its ranks.

Our vision was to reach out to these teenagers in order to build relationships, challenge their ideology and influence their beliefs and behaviour. The problem was that the local migrant workers thought that by welcoming the neo-Nazis, we were colluding with them.

Actions are easily misunderstood.

Nevertheless, I have learned that, as a general principle, we can often achieve far greater success if we work collaboratively with other people. Relationships can bring about a better and more fulfilling end, even if managing the complexities of a relationship sometimes demands more time and energy than we would like.

By engaging with others with an open mind and heart we can share our ideas, broaden our perspectives, learn from each other, tackle things in creative and innovative ways, enhance the quality of the human experience and our overall effectiveness. It calls for a genuine spirit of curiosity, courage and humility.

I've found this to be particularly true when living and working with people who are very different to me. Many of my most enriching experiences have emerged in the midst of cross-cultural relationships and contexts.

Yet life is short. We are forced to make decisions and we only have a limited amount of time. We need to choose who we will commit to live and work with, to be clear about the nature of the relationships we will build with other people and to pay attention to the quality of those relationships.

This isn't just a matter of being strategic. It involves growing and helping others to grow too by facing and working through challenges, including with those whom we would normally avoid or with whom we clash.

Take a moment to jot down which are the most important relationships in your life and work. What do you aspire to in those relationships? Do you give them sufficient priority in practice? Who are the people you avoid or find it most difficult to get along with? Do you need to build or rebuild relationships of trust where they feel painful or strained?

## STORY

So we have seen these different facets at work: identity, purpose, vision, ethics and relationships. Our focus and direction should be influenced, at least in part, by what we believe in each of these areas and are willing to commit to. My own experience tells me that, as we work through these things in practice, we grow in character, effectiveness, fulfilment and sense of destiny.

Are there any things I've mentioned in this paper that have a particular resonance for you? Are there areas where you feel encouraged, inspired or challenged? I invite you to write them down, pray earnestly with open heart and mind, discuss with another person, take a stance and see where it leads in your own journey of discovery.

A seagull called Jonathan still calls out to all who will listen, 'Do you want to fly..?'

# NICK WRIGHT

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