

I never intended to leave my job. Having dreamed of finding language-related work in a charity, I assumed I would stay forever. However, a painful restructuring of the organisation led me to realise this season was ending. Work had gone from a vocation I loved to something mundane-cum-soul-destroying that fitted in with the school run. Careful calculations revealed that, without my salary, our children's university funds might dip, but their nutrition levels wouldn't. It felt like a sign.

However, holidaying in France soon after taking redundancy, I was caught up in some bureaucracy. Cheerfully I told the notary I'd left work, but seeing it in writing I swallowed. "Clare O'Driscoll – sans emploi" – literally 'without work'. It sounded desolate. All those years of working wiped out by a label that defines me, not by what I am, but what I'm not!

A short time later, I attended a seminar on work, run by Jill Alderton as part of her ordination training, and was able to reflect on God's view of work. There, the assumption that your validity depends on having a flash career devolved into a quiet understanding that other ways of living and working are ok.

Jill's own career path has been rather unorthodox and she is no stranger to the "what do you do?" conundrum. Early in her career, she knew the sleep-starved life of a hospital dental surgeon, the calmer experience of a community clinic and, later, the specialised work of an orthodontist's surgery.

When this ended at a key time in her younger son's life, she decided to wait before pursuing a new job. In the meantime, already teaching ante-natal classes, she became a cub leader, helped at her children's school and was increasingly involved at church. Gradually, the different paths of her life converged. She recalls leading an all-age service, "I could see couples from ante-natal classes, cubs in uniform, people from school, from Bible Study, family..." Slowly she recognised God's call to ordination.

While Jill's in-between years might sound patchy to a careers advisor, it was clearly God's on-the-job training for her current ministry. This happens time and again. Women engaged in numerous, apparently unrelated, activities suddenly find God brings all the pieces together.

Those without paid employment can be accused of not contributing to society. But contribution is more than paying taxes. As Jill points out, if all the able-bodied people are out earning money, who will clear snow from the path of her elderly neighbours?

Perhaps it is our definition of work that is at fault. It seems so intrinsically linked to earning money (understandable in some ways), that we are incapable of valuing any other kind, but there are many ways to be fruitful. We must avoid

And what do you do?

It can be a genuine conversation starter, but sometimes it sounds more like who are you and what are you worth? says Clare O'Driscoll

measuring our worth by our payslip. One spiritual director told me, "God is surprisingly disinterested in what we earn."

Often family situations dictate our working possibilities. Mine includes a frequent flyer husband, who couldn't fulfil his role if I wasn't keeping the home fires burning. Likewise, I would not be able to focus on freelance work without his willingness to be the main breadwinner. There are different kinds of work.

It is often women who find career ladder rungs dropping beneath their feet as they take less responsible, part-time roles that fit with the school run or caring for elderly relatives. And sometimes

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this gives all the challenges of working life without the financial or emotional rewards. When one friend was sent on a particularly patronising training course, she spent all day silently repeating, "I took this job for family reasons. This is not who I am."

For me, so many ladder rungs had fallen out that I found myself on the ground. But here's a thing: it was real, solid ground. Stepping back from multi-national life, I discovered more down-to-earth activities. I went from e-mailing people in places I could barely pronounce, to teaching languages in my home, cooking in my church community café and writing, often with good old-fashioned pen and paper.

One friend teases that I've taken early retirement, saying, "You're just doing the stuff you like!" She says this as if it's a bad thing, and that in itself is telling. Do we really have to wait until retirement before dusting off our God-given desires? St Irenaeus said: "The glory of God is man fully alive", which seems to agree with Jesus' own words in John 10:10 "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full".

I still hesitate when I'm asked *that* question. I consider my hotchpotch of bits and pieces (sorry, 'portfolio career') and can only think that my life, perhaps any life, cannot be summed up with a single label. Our work can be significant. Our work can shape us. But it is not who we are. We can enjoy living out God's purposes without bowing to the god of achievement. We can value work without idolising it.

Whether following a dream or simply keeping food on the table, we can be fully present, behaving with dignity and integrity to others. God wants us to be fruitful, but our foot-washing saviour also shows us how to fulfil a role that is maybe less than our ideal, not from a place of inferiority, but with strength and love. Colossians 3:23 encourages us to "*Work...with all your heart, as working for the Lord.*" It's a verse that got me through countless dreary student jobs and demonstrates another kind of fruitfulness.

Visiting our local Quiet Garden, I noticed the shady glen was dotted with memorial plaques. The first, after giving a name and dates, proclaimed "Scientist, Teacher and Innovator". An involuntary "wow" slipped from my lips.

Noticing a second plaque, I thought I'd see how it compared. I looked and felt an unparalleled rush of warmth. Just two words: "Deeply loved". It's wonderful that the first died so very accomplished, but the second – he was deeply loved.

Sometimes we think the only way to be deeply loved is to become that successful innovator-genius type person, but God turns this upside down. Instead, it is from that place of deep love that we can walk into all the incredible things he has planned for our uniqueness. ■