A Firm Persuasion in Our Work

A Firm Persuasion in Our Work permits a glimpse of professional lives and their development while also revealing convictions that have either shaped or emerged from the practice of occupational therapy. An apt citation from David Whyte (2001) launched Wendy Wood’s (2004) inaugural piece: “To have a firm persuasion in our work—to feel that what we do is right for ourselves and good for the world at exactly the same time—is one of the great triumphs of human existence” (p. 4). Awareness of such a triumph no doubt comes in reflective moments or at times of joy or success. The hope, of course, is that an abiding sense of rightness will sustain a professional life through even difficult times and, in so doing, deepen into a persuasion.

I have a firm persuasion that complements those that have preceded mine (Coppola, 2005; Hasselkus, 2004; Wood, 2004; Yerxa, 2005). I believe that occupations are life strands that create coherence. Excerpts from two readings that support my persuasion will weave through my discussion: Whyte’s (2001) Crossing the Unknown Sea: Work as a Pilgrimage of Identity and Charles Christiansen’s (1999) Slagle lecture on personal identity.

Understanding Coherence

Dictionary meanings of the term coherence are important to any discussion of the topic. Coherence is the quality of being integrated, consistent, and intelligible. Coherence is congruity; it is logical or natural connection (Neufeldt & Guralnik, 1994). To see coherence in a life is to see congruity and intelligibility in its unfolding, to see logical and natural connections among even widely different events occurring across time and place. Coherence in a person’s life can be seen from many perspectives. One might say that a person’s character and personality lend coherence to a life, in that wherever one goes, or whatever one does, one takes one’s self along. But Christiansen (1999) and Whyte (2001) have asked us to see that occupations also create coherence and a sense of rightness. Having considered my life’s coherence in terms of its occupations, I agree.

Not long ago, I began crafting self-introductions that included an occupational theme. Here is one:

Some see unusual occupations in this mix. I see the list as one piece, however, and as a personal expose that affirms Christiansen’s (1999) view that “occupations are more than movements strung together, more than simply doing something. They are opportunities to express the self, to create an identity” (p. 552).

The kind of practitioner, educator, and scholar that I have become reflects the occupations that have engaged me, honored my inclinations, and shaped my sensibilities. My grasp of coherence in the odd mix of my biography supports Christiansen’s (1999) argument that “occupations are key not just to being a person, but to being a particular person” (p. 547).

Seeing Coherence as Occupational

Whyte (2001) argued that a firm persuasion in one’s work comes from self-knowledge, from “paying close attention to an astonishing world and the way each of us is made

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differently and uniquely for that world" (p. 6). Later in his book he said that “each of us, somewhere in the biography of our childhood, remembers a moment where we felt a portion of our world calling and beckoning to us” (p. 65). I remember early callings that felt right, and I can name core occupations that originated in early childhood. I see these longstanding occupations as life strands that give me a sense of coherence. A few such strands are reflecting in solitude, teaching, and making things beautiful.

To perceive occupational strands in my life, I’ve engaged in a form of selfing—a unifying, integrative, synthesizing process—introduced in the occupational therapy literature by Christiansen (1999) from the work of McAdams (1996). Given the brevity of this piece, I will trace the course of but one occupational strand, that of teaching. I believe that many individuals can find coherence-making strands, and I encourage that process for the sake of the meaningfulness that Christiansen (1999) described: “To the extent that we can successfully weave together the various and multiple short stories that comprise our lives into a meaningful whole, we can derive a sense of coherence and meaning and purpose for our lives” (p. 550).

Teaching: Origins of an Occupational Strand

Whyte (2001) said, “There is something very trustable about the original enthusiasms of the very young that point directly toward the way we are made” (p. 65). As a serious child with one younger brother and a mother who prized nurturing, I fell into helping early. Photos of me proudly pushing my brother in a doll carriage predate my arm draped over his shoulder at neighborhood parties. My mother told one story often, hoping perhaps to reinforce its virtue during less virtuous times. It was Michael’s first Halloween outing. Mom walked with us, staying at street’s edge while coaxing us to several front doors. Because Michael’s eyes rarely aligned with those in his large rubber mask, and because it had rained that day, we dodged puddles with more hand-holding than he liked.

When we got home, Michael removed his mask to find an empty bag. Small as he was, his paper bag had dragged on the wet pavement, creating a hole through which his candy had disappeared. His disappointment led to wails. Barely an inch taller, I had been spared. I led him to the living room and dumped the contents of my bag onto the rug, telling him to help himself.

Another early story: Kindergarten was a tough time. Extremely shy, I spent recess quietly wedged in a small space between two large trees in the schoolyard, watching others play. A turning point came when Louise Ferras came to school with her arm in a cast. I became her helper, removing her sweater, opening her schoolbag, putting on her galoshes. Helping Louise gave me a purpose while forging a bond. We were best friends through eighth grade.

We are creatures of belonging, and out of this sense of belonging, the world seems to call to us, to recognize us, and to speak to us directly, the voice itself an embodiment of our particular nature and the way that nature finds a home in the world. (Whyte, 2001, p. 65)

Such early helping turned readily to teaching. I remember the table and chair set-up in the basement of our home and classroom tasks as varied as writing lessons and dissecting a frog. Due to the timing of our birthdays, Michael was 2 years younger but 4 years behind me in school. We played school often. These words come to mind: “Already, at an early age, children know themselves as individuals capable of acting on the world, and they understand that their actions have social meaning” (Christiansen, 1999, p. 549).

Strengthening the Occupational Strand

Teaching others was something I liked to do. When I finished my own work early, the teaching sisters at our bilingual Catholic school set me to helping slower classmates at the back of the room. My mother followed suit, encouraging me to tutor neighborhood children. I felt good in this role and loved finding ways to help them understand. “One of the most compelling needs that every human being has,” Christiansen (1999) said, “is to be able to express his or her unique identity in a manner that gives meaning to life” (p. 548).

By junior high I was babysitting, with even more opportunities for teaching. One day my mother asked if I would cross the street to help a neighbor. She was struggling to teach her son to tie his shoes and remembered that I had taught her older son a year prior. The same woman later called me over in a storm to tell her three youngsters stories about thunder and lightning lest they absorb her dread. As their summer nanny, I taught these children to tell time, use scissors, and craft imaginative stories.

In high school I volunteered on Saturday mornings to teach Catholic Christian Doctrine (CCD) classes to public school youngsters. I loved these classes, trying my best to make them interesting. I also loved quiet mornings with my father who rose early. Although he had never finished high school, he read voraciously. He shared news of the day over breakfast, reframing its meaning from his liberal view. I was always a bookish kid, pleased to be seen as bright, articulate, and concerned about grades.

In grammar school, I had suffered the consequences of my bookish behavior, earning taunts of “brownnose,” “show-off,” and “four-eyes.” So at Precious Blood High School I became part of a popular in-crowd and got in trouble for pranks, wisecracking, and small acts of rebellion. My valedictory speech included John F. Kennedy’s plea that we ask what we might do for our country alongside a reflection about Ford’s Model T and the shortsightedness of even the brightest among us: That very first car had lacked a reverse gear.

As maturity develops, the task of understanding what constitutes social approval takes on even greater importance, and becomes even more challenging. (Christiansen, 1999, p. 550)

Teaching as a Vocation

To have even the least notion of what we want to do in life is an enormous step in and of itself, and it is silver, gold, the moon, and the stars to those who struggle for the merest glimmer of what they want or what they are suited to do. (Whyte, 2001, p. 11)
It was easy for me to see myself teaching as a life choice. It was not so easy for me to persuade my parents that becoming a teaching sister in the Sisters of Saint Anne (SSAs) was the best route. In the end, they relented, wishing that I had instead accepted a scholarship from the University of Massachusetts. So at 17 I headed for a small cloistered room with permissible possessions, including black hose, Oxford shoes, and white bonnets packed into one small footlocker. The sisters were dedicated teachers, and I wanted to be one of them.

Given restrictions on the college education of postulants and novices in the teaching order, I could not take secular (nonreligious) courses until after pronouncing temporary vows, an event that would occur some years later. My college education slowed to a standstill after I finished theology courses. Nonetheless, when sisters fell sick in various parishes, I was sent to teach their classes. Then, after pronouncing vows, I taught full time in parochial schools while working summers toward a degree. By the time I was 20, I had worked in several Massachusetts parishes, teaching every grade from 1 through 8. At 21, I was teaching English literature and art in a large central high school. Although some older students were nearly my age, the holy habit concealed that fact.

My decision to leave the teaching order had to do with the maturation of my thinking about helping and the realization that my beliefs were no longer “Catholic.” For example, I counseled sexually active students toward birth control when it was clear that they would not abstain. Such paradoxical actions seemed breaches of integrity in the idealism of my youth. When I left the community in 1973, I did not have a teaching degree.

Good work done in the same way for too long, or done in the wrong way, for any amount of time, eats away our sense of being right with the world. (Whyte, 2001, p. 77)

An Unforeseen Path to Occupational Therapy

Finding a work to which we can dedicate ourselves always calls for some kind of courage, some form of heartfelt participation. It needs courage because the intrinsic worth of work lies in the fact that it connects us to larger, fiercer worlds where we are forced to remember first priorities. (Whyte, 2001, p. 35)

I moved to Boston to adjust quickly to life on the outside. I lived in a YWCA and took the jobs that I could handle, working several at once to support myself: evening counselor in a halfway house for alcoholics, pre-nursery school teacher, and substitute emergency room aide on weekends. My formal learning path detoured, but I learned a lot about people. I folded teaching tasks into my jobs, doing artwork with residents of the halfway house, for example. Before long, a sister from the SSAs convinced me to seek work at the college where I had earned credits, so as to finish my degree. So as an admissions counselor and later director, I counseled young women about the merits of a liberal arts education as I also took courses. In 3 years I returned to full-time teaching, this time in the public school system. There was a real sense of coming home in that return.

Often in life, we have to unmake a living in order to get back to living the life we wanted for ourselves. It is this cycle of making, disintegration, and remaking that is the hallmark of meaningful and creative work. (Whyte, 2001, p. 77)

Public school teaching presented familiar and new challenges. I was often assigned junior high and high school groups of surly youngsters. I noticed how readily they engaged in art classes, and I found even the toughest of them willing to engage in appealing projects. I saw the merits of meaningful occupation without yet knowing about occupational therapy.

Five years later, state regulation Chapter 766 mandated the integration of children with disabilities into classrooms, and I felt a need to learn more about such youngsters. It was in the library stacks that I found occupational therapy. Not long thereafter, I enrolled in the certificate program offered at the University of Pennsylvania. Occupational therapy would help me be a better teacher, I thought.

As I learned more about occupational therapy, it seemed like the best of engaged teaching. I loved the sciences, and I was drawn to the teaching aspects of rehabilitation and mental health practice. I will always remember my first patient on affiliation in Burlington, Vermont. Olive T. had had a stroke, and I was to help her relearn dressing. I remember how frustrating it was for her to don a bra and how, in the end, we switched to camisoles. I remember how choices as small as which dress she’d wear meant so much to her. I’ll never forget her grief on leaving the center for a nursing home.

I soon knew that I would not return to Massachusetts classrooms and instead explored openings in occupational therapy. Given what I had done prior, mental health practice seemed a good fit. And in Charleston, West Virginia, much teaching would also be required because there had not been an occupational therapist in the setting for years. Although workers at Highland Hospital helped patients through scheduled activities, their approach would not earn accreditation. Staff needed to learn (1) why it was better for patients to do their own projects, (2) that the patients in lock-up wards could benefit from occupations, and (3) that certain activities, when analyzed, proved better than others.

Staff had been happy doing things otherwise, however, and they had not sought an occupational therapist; the administration had imposed on them the necessity of hiring one. I learned that directing a department under such circumstances would not be easy. I thoroughly enjoyed implementing a psychoeducational program among patients from the Appalachian hollows, however. My very first publication described practices that helped patients grasp the purpose of occupational therapy while indirectly teaching the staff (Peloquin, 1983).

While working at Highland, I had also completed a master’s degree in counseling to better relate to others. When an opportunity to pursue a doctoral degree arose in Galveston, Texas 5 years later, I sought an occupational therapy position there because the courses within the medical humanities program resonated with my developing philosophy of patient care. In the end, Randy Strickland convinced me to hire on
in his department at the University of Texas Medical Branch a year before I had planned on enrolling. I very much liked my role as a clinical specialist, rotating through several psychiatric units—geriatric, closed ward, adolescent and child psychiatry—and helping with staff development. I later valued increasing clinical time with patients by day while immersing myself in humanities subjects by night.

Back in the Classroom Again

A deeply held desire is a star that is particularly our own; it might disappear for awhile, but when the skies clear we catch sight of it again and recognize the glimmer. (Whyte, 2001, p. 78)

The classroom lured me back 5 years later. Specifically, Don Davidson, then chair of the Occupational Therapy program in the School of Allied Health Sciences did so in 1989. On prior occasions I had told him that I did not want to leave patient care. He argued that in education I could affect students who would touch the lives of far more patients than I could reach on my own. He offered a more flexible schedule in which to finish a PhD. His logic was unassailable, and I moved to the academic side of campus, where I have stayed for 15 years.

My identity is now that of an occupational therapy educator. I am, as always, a teacher, but I am also and essentially an occupational therapist. The best of my teaching has been like occupational therapy. And the best of occupational therapy has felt like collaborative learning. I love writing and presenting, two modes of teaching. I’ve published work on educational approaches in the occupational therapy, physical therapy, physician’s assistant, and allied health science literature, and I’ve earned teaching awards, the most cherished of which is the Eleanor Clarke Slagle Lectureship. The best parts of my day are those spent with students. With them, I am happy and at home.

Conclusion

As an exercise in selfing, the identification and tracing of one strand of occupation in my life has been integrative and meaningful. I would recommend it to anyone capable of reflection. Christiansen (1999) offered a reason for doing so that transcends my own endorsement: “Research on the sense of coherence during the past 20 years has shown that people with this attribute, or way of viewing the world, are healthier and better adjusted than people without a strong sense of coherence” (p. 555). I am firmly persuaded that occupations can create coherence and a sense of rightness in the world. ▲

References


