

THE HEART OF GUIDANCE

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This is what Bill said.

It's time for congratulations. 'Well done!' You've done a lot of hard work. And, today, you receive your well-deserved award. But, most of all, you are equipped with new knowledge and understanding, ready to be tested in a world that badly needs what you are now able to do.

pride

Thinking about this reminded me of other people, whose knowledge and understanding is also badly needed. Shortly after 11th September 2001, New-York-Mayor Giuliani was scheduled to make a presentation to recently qualified fire-fighters. To be honest, I can't remember exactly what he said, but I got the drift – and it came home to me. It went something like this.

'Today a lot of people look up to you. For the meaning of your life is to make other lives possible. There is no greater purpose; it is a purpose which may lead you, at times, to put your own life on the line. Your fellow citizens will admire you for that. You can do your work with pride. I envy you.'

The Mayor was right. For, whenever any fire-truck passed a sidewalk café in Manhattan, the diners would spontaneously stand up, and applaud. We all know why.

Maybe they still do. I don't know. But, somehow, I doubt it. We live in a world in which the celebration of other people's qualities tends to be short lived. But their achievements rated the applause, and still do.

clients

But that is not the point. I can't say that I'm much of a fan of Rudy Giuliani; but that was a good thing to say to young fire fighters. And, today, I say to you that your work is to enhance the lives of others. I don't say that it will be fun – 'though it has its moments. And there will be moments that you will never forget.

One morning, long ago, a kid put his head round my own careers advisers' door and asked, 'Excuse me...', (this was a polite kid) '...but what exam passes do I need to be manager of a professional football club?' You see, the teachers had told him 'pass your exams and you'll be alright'. So he wanted to know how many exams he had to pass to be his kind of 'alright'. You shouldn't forget moments like that. They teach us what kind of sense our clients are making of the help we try to offer. We learn from them.

But the job is not mainly for fun - it's better than that. And neither do I say that your fellow citizens will envy you for the money you'll make. It's worth more than that. But I do say this: every day you go to work, you can travel knowing that your work has meaning. And - whether anybody applauds or not - you can take pride in it.

fairness

Why do I say that in such strong terms? It is because careers work grapples with one of the most pressing issues facing all contemporary societies, or – at least - any society that wants to regard itself as civilised. The issue can be stated briefly and sharply. It is this: 'who gets to do what in our society?'. There is no more important issue. It conjures images of people who, without help, will not get a fair crack at life's chances. Some of them women, a lot of them black, many of them what we used to call 'working class'. All, in one way or another, 'excluded'. These are the people whose lives are confined by arbitrary and unfair pressures. And you now know enough to understand that there are not a few arbitrary and unfair pressures on people living in leafy suburbs, with well-equipped houses surrounded by manicured gardens. Contemporary society has all kinds of ways of trapping people.

And so, all cultures have a version of that story. Dan Greenburg (in 'How to be Jewish Mother') tells one version. It goes something like this.

'Marvin?

'Yeah

Your Father and I have been talking.

'...Yeah?

'We have come to a very important decision.

'You have?...

'I just wanted to tell you that your father and I have decided not to interfere.

We have decided to let you do whatever you want to do, if you really want to do it. Whatever you want to do will be perfectly all right with us, so long as it makes you happy...'

'OK!

'And your father and I think that you'd be happiest if you become a doctor, a lawyer, or a chartered accountant'.

Career is an equal-opportunity issue. Indeed, of all the political principles which sustain your work, equal opportunity is closest to its heart. There have been other policy priorities. And we may be able to jack up the standards of educational attainment; I don't know, neither do I

believe that anyone else knows. Or we may be able to contribute to national economic competitiveness. And so, for all I know, may fire-fighters. But that's not why they do the job. And – in their hearts - it is not what shows them when the job has been well done. Not in their hearts, not in yours.

For yours is a helping profession. Your work is to neutralise the effects of arbitrary and entrapping habits and forces. It is to ensure that as many people as possible have the career privileges that none-but-a-few inherit or can easily access. Your work is to make life fairer, for more people, for more of the time. This ain't 'A-list' celebrity stuff; not even 'C-list'; but there's nothing more deserving of anybody's admiration.

the future

It won't be easy. When it comes to a tussle between arguments for – on the one hand - your kind of wisdom and – on the other - economic and political clout, then wisdom does not always prevail. Think about what is happening in the struggle for the environment. Also, the escape by science from commercial pressure will be a close-run thing. And we should worry about education. But guidance? If guidance cannot work for fairness, then it cannot work at all.

Five-or-so years ago it would have been harder to see any prospect of prevailing in this struggle. But now things start to look different. Five years ago, to argue that fairness is at the heart of guidance might have meant being forced to admit that equal opportunity was the policy issue getting the least air-time. I know that we all nodded in its direction – with pictures of young women in hard hats and lots of smiling black faces in company glossies. But hard cases need more than glossy hats.

And now? Well, things have changed. And, in some important ways, they have changed for the better. You will have heard of Connexions. I'm on record as being a supporter. You may not agree with me about that. Don't worry about it – there is plenty of room for disagreement. And even I can't agree with everything that ministers and their apparatchiks come up with. But, that said, Connexions is the first policy measure in a generation to have the needs of the most vulnerable most sharply in its focus. Now, I know that there are other agendas; and I know that they are not all benevolent. But, if we keep our eyes and ears open, we're going to learn a lot from Connexions - and from other emerging programmes, similarly rooted in their communities.

In such programmes, you will find yourself working in teams - and not just with educators, librarians, technologists, and mentors. You will also be working with youth workers, social workers and a deeper and wider pool of volunteered experience than we have ever yet been able effectively to include in our work. And that means that we may find that even the best of our past techniques cannot do all that, in the future, needs to be done. We will certainly find that some of our most cherished beliefs, about how careers move on, haven't move on enough. Your work and mine is going to realise a more dynamic account of 'career' than anything that we have, so-far, been used to. If we keep our wits about us, we're going to learn a lot from our new partners. We'll may even be able to help them to learn a-thing-or-two from us.

A recent editor of one of my articles introduced it by saying ‘Bill believes that there is a lot to play for in Connexions’. Is there a lot to play for? The fact is I don’t know. What I do know is that there will be something to play for, if we play for it. But, if we pull back from that engagement, if we try to hang onto the past, if we seek only to protect our position, or to hide from new ways of doing things - then the games up. And everybody loses.

That lovely man, and former boss of a guidance outfit, David Peck is writing a history of guidance. We can look forward to it with confidence. I believe it will show us how guidance progressed by working first with the people in the deepest trouble. That is how we got work experience, how we got careers education, how we got records of achievement, and progress files. Indeed it how we got the Juvenile Employment Bureaux – the prototypes for careers companies and Connexions. We got all our starts by working with the most pressurised, the most marginalised and the most vulnerable. But that is how all helping professions advance – by learning from the hard cases. Then we find that what helps the most needy also helps the rest. Understanding career as a ‘sharp pain’ helps us to understand what might be going wrong when career has not yet become more than a ‘dull ache’.

hope

You can be sure that your future will not be like my past.

I was twenty-eight again recently. I've been twenty-eight a fair few times. When my oldest son got to his twenty-ninth birthday, I sent him card saying ‘congratulations kid, now you're older than I am!’. I've got to be honest: I've been twenty-eight many more than twenty-eight times. One of the advantages is that the saner part of you knows, for the first time, that you are not going to die young. One of the other advantages is that you are forced to start taking an interest in tomorrow's people.

One of the things that Connexions is doing to our work is making it more and more clear that we won’t get much farther into our future, working with yesterday’s apparatus. We are going to work less with the structures we have been using, and more with the weaving of stories. Lives are not comprised of so-called ‘neutral’ information, we need other ways of speaking of them – and to them. It means taking account of significant points-of-view, and conflicts-of-interest. Stories do that. And stories resist externally imposed targets, they lead to no predetermined outcomes, and can never be narrated on the basis of other people’s priorities. Stories have a life of their own, driving them on – to turning points, with feelings, under pressure, each finding their own meaning. Learn to take a good, useful and interesting part - in your client’s story.

Back to Rudy: you won’t, as he suggested fire-fighters might, be asked to put your life on the line (at least, I don’t think you will). But your clients will become part of your story. And, if you’re as good as your course here is capable of helping you to become, you’ll become part of theirs – and you will learn from them.

So ‘hihohiho’, it’s off to work you go.... and fair thee well.