

My Career or God's Career?

A Talk to the Men's Breakfast, 17th November 2007 at St Paul's Anglican, Boronia.

I got a new job this week. After five years as General Manager of the Deakin University Student Association, I will be leaving them, and starting a new job in the New Year.

What I thought I would do this morning is talk about my career. Because, in many ways it's not my career at all. It has been very much God's career for me. At so many points in my working life it seems clear to me that a power greater than I has been guiding, or pushing, or impeding. There have been so many surprises. So many coincidences.

A former colleague of mine at World Vision, the late Dr Malcolm Mackay, wrote a book titled "More Than Coincidence." I can point to many coincidences in my life. You can call them coincidences, if you like. I believe they are signs of God at work. Why? Because there are too many of them. Too many coincidences for it to be a coincidence.

Like this latest job I have just signed on for. The story goes like this:

During last year, in my fourth year with the student association, we embarked on a major organisation reinvention. I used the word reinvention rather than restructure because I believed we had to completely rethink what kind of an organisation we were.

The background is that DUSA (Deakin University Student Association) is a medium sized business turning over about \$15million a year. It's owned and controlled by students of Deakin University. It sits within the Uni, and with the benevolent support of the Uni, but it is not owned or run by the Uni. I report to a board of five elected students. Average age – 28.

DUSA owns all the bookshops on campus, and runs a number of other commercial businesses. And it provides a range of services to students. We run trips and tours, short courses, provide a framework for clubs and societies, organise the University sporting teams who go to the Australian University Games, run entertainment events, and importantly help students who are having trouble with the Uni to get it sorted out.

Until last year, all this work was funded from two main sources—some profits from our commercial activities and a \$5 million grant from the Uni. The Uni raised the \$5 million by charging every student a compulsory fee for "General Services."

Well, some of you will know that the Federal Government, in their wisdom (irony intended), decided to make these compulsory service fees illegal. In an instant, and virtually overnight, DUSA lost \$5 million in income.

So we needed, not merely a restructure, but a reinvention.

Well, that's a whole long, and I think, quite interesting story in its own right, but the result for me is that during 2007 I have been looking around for my next assignment.

The job at DUSA got done this year. By August, I reckoned it was complete. All the pieces were in place. A new culture. A new membership system. Some new people had been employed. Some others had been eased onto their future careers. And I was wondering what I would do next.

So I started to read the situations vacant ads in the paper. And started sending off my resumé. And waited for calls from enthusiastic employers wanting to pay me lots of money to purchase my self-evident talents.

Nothing. Nix. Nada. Quiet as the tomb, mate!

Isn't job searching just the most depressing work? Man, I had some low days. And I was working. And had a two year contract if I wanted to keep going. There was a period in my life when I was job-searching from a position of being without a regular job. I know how hard that is.

On the one hand, you're worried about having enough cash to keep going. And on the other hand, you keep getting knock-backs. It's bad for your pocket, and awful for your self-esteem.

But I figured God had something in mind, so I tried not to worry too much. Honestly I can't remember how many jobs I put in for. It wasn't a lot. Maybe half a dozen in the first part of the year. I saw the job of CEO of the Warrnambool City Council came up, and I thought that was heaven sent. Judy and I have a unit in Warrnambool. Maybe this was a sea change opportunity. The Council didn't even call. I guess you need Council experience to get a Council job.

I didn't know what I was supposed to do, but I knew it wasn't sensible for me, or for DUSA, to hang onto my present job. So I took the plunge and told them that, come what may, I would leave the organisation in the New Year.

I suppose I was saying to God, "OK. I'll step out in faith, God. If you've got another assignment for me before the retirement home, let me know."

I told DUSA of my intentions at the beginning of October. Within a fortnight, I had applied for two positions. And within another few weeks, I had been invited for interviews.

The first interview seemed to go really well. I liked the job, although I wondered if it was a bit small for me. I liked the people. Then nothing seemed to happen for a couple of weeks, and I thought, "Oh well, they've got someone else."

Then the second lot rang me up and asked me to come in for an interview.

And the first lot rang me and asked me to come in for a second interview.

And then, a day later, a guy who used to work for me and who went on to manage an inner-city Catholic agency rang me to say he had given my name to a head-hunter about a job he thought sounded like me.

He didn't know I had given notice at DUSA. He said, "I don't know how you're situated at DUSA, maybe you're going to stay on there, but the job sounded right for you."

Judy and I were driving back from Warrnambool when the head-hunter rang. I pulled into the Caltex Service Station at the Werribee turnoff to take the call.

Judy listened to my end of the conversation and then asked what that was all about.

VicRelief and Foodbank is a secondary provider in the Victorian Emergency Relief sector. It is two organisations that have recently merged, under pressure to do so from the Department of Human Services, who provide most of their funding. The merger hasn't gone well as the Board would like, but the new Board, at least, has integrated well, has an emerging vision for where they want the new organisation to go, and need a CEO to work with them and the staff on creating a new culture, and a new corporate structure. "Sounds like they need someone who knows how to reinvent an organisation," I said to Judy. And she said, "Sounds like a match made in Heaven."

Well, within a period of 5 days, a couple of weeks back I was lined up to do a second interview with the first lot, a first interview with the second lot, and an interview with VicRelief and Foodbank.

After the first two interviews, I knew I could do both jobs, and would enjoy them. I decided that the only way to test God's will in the matter was to leave it up to God. I said, "If any of these people offer me a position, I will just take it." In other words, I wasn't going to wait until I had two or three offers and then make a choice. Of course, I might have no offers at all. But whatever, I was going to take the first one offered. Not out of desperation, but as a test of my belief that God is in these processes for faithful people. And I wanted to be one of his faithful.

The last interview went well too. "Which job do you like best of all," Judy asked on the phone as I left the interview. I confessed I like the VicRelief and Foodbank one. It just seemed to resonate so much with my experience and abilities.

In each of the interviews I had mentioned that I was talking to two other possible employers. I felt it wasn't fair to keep this secret, and I admit that I thought it might make me seem more desirable.

Well, as it turned out, VicRelief and Foodbank also seemed to think it was a match made in Heaven. My interview was at 10AM. The head-hunter rang at 3PM with the job offer. And the VicRelief and Foodbank board confirmed the appointment on Thursday. So I start there in January.

This will be the 12th employer I have worked for in a working life of exactly 31 years. I started work on my 19th birthday, and I will start this new job one day after my 60th birthday in January.

I say I have had 12 employers. I was self-employed for a couple of years, so I counted myself as one of those employers.

But actually, although I have had 12 employers I have had 16 actual jobs before this next one.

A bit different to my Dad who worked for one employer his whole working life. And had, on my reckoning, no more than 6 positions during that career.

And there are plenty of Generation Y kids out there who will have 16 actual jobs before they are 25.

So this experience of leaving one position and finding a new one is becoming more and more the norm.

Each time, it will be an opportunity for faithful people to test the will of God for their working career.

Now my story of the last few weeks may not seem very remarkable. OK I had no nibbles for ages and then, like the trams on Burwood Highway, three come along all at once. And all good trams. Anyone of them would have made for an interesting ride. And then things fall into place in a surprising, and apparently coincidental way.

These are just coincidences right? Right.

Well, I don't believe they are coincidences. Such coincidences happen too often in our lives to be just the product of randomness, it's clearly more than mere chance.

I reckon that there have been amazing coincidences in every one of my 17 job changes. If you've got a few hours I would be glad to tell you about every one of them.

But let me mention just a couple. I know that many of you will find that these experiences of mine are just like things that have happened to you. Because God's coincidences are all over the place.

I was telling the folk at Nite Church the other night about how God organised my final year undergraduate study to prepare me for a move to World Vision that I didn't even know about at the time.

I had a ten year career in Queensland radio, after a one year career at the National Bank. And when I was radio announcing in Brisbane I completed a Bachelor of Arts degree, majoring in Journalism.

In my last semester I had to do three Journalism subjects and one elective subject to complete my degree and I had this one hour break between Journalism lectures on a Thursday. So, without caring what the topic was, I just picked an elective that was being taught in that one hour.

The elective was called The Sociology of Revolutionary Movements. My knowledge of revolutionary movements was nil. I thought revolutionary movements is what you have after bad curry.

Anyway, I found the subject interesting, but could hardly see how it was relevant to a career in Journalism.

Well, of course, God knew he was going to call me to work at World Vision. A couple of years later I was seeing how people in poor communities organise themselves against the oppression they experience. And sociology of revolutionary movements was providing me with more keys to understanding than Journalism 301 ever could.

I joined World Vision as a copywriter. Two years later I was the Marketing Director. Four years later I was chief executive of a new World Vision entity in Hong Kong.

I didn't apply for any of these jobs. In fact the Hong Kong one was a big surprise. A colleague in the international office of World Vision had heard me talking about how World Vision should get serious about fundraising in these new emerging Asian tigers. He took me aside, and asked me to write my ideas down in a paper. I wrote the paper. He gave the paper to the World Vision President of the day, Dr Stan Mooneyham. Stan invited me to accompany him on a trip to China where he talked to me about my ideas. Next thing I know I've been labelled as the Hong Kong expert, having hardly set foot in the place.

Just a coincidence. Or a series of them.

We were in Hong Kong for four years before returning to Australia. I did actually apply for the job of chief executive of World Vision Australia, and was short listed along with another internal candidate. But before that, the job of chief executive of World Vision Canada was on offer. Not to me directly, but to anyone who was interested in applying. I really thought about throwing my hat in the ring, because Judy had always liked Canada after reading "Anne of Green Gables". But I thought that basing a life-changing decision on a novel might be stretching God's coincidences a bit far. Anyway, this door seemed not to open for me. And looking back I see why. God had in mind two wonderful men to lead the work in Canada. And I wasn't either of them.

In 1996, while I was in my 8th year as CEO of World Vision Australia I was at a workshop in America and was having lunch with the international President, Dean Hirsch. He wanted to test some ideas he had for bringing in a chief operating officer to the international office. He had two internal candidates in mind. One of them was serving as the Vice President for the Middle East and Eastern Europe region of World Vision—so he was responsible for one quarter of World Vision’s world-wide field ministry work.

I agreed he would be a good COO and I asked Dean who he had in mind to replace the guy in the Middle East and Eastern Europe region.

“I thought I’d ask you,” he said.

Well, I laughed. I thought he was joking. But it turned out he was serious.

“You care about the politics of the region,” he said. I admitted I had been noisy about Israel at least.

“And,” he said, “the region needs to be marketed much better within the World Vision partnership, and you know marketing.”

Well, I thanked him for the encouragement but reminded him I already had the best job in World Vision and didn’t want to change. And he shrugged and said “Fair enough. Thought I would ask.”

I told Judy this story when I got home and she laughed along with me. What a silly idea.

About three days later, Judy said, “You know that job Dean offered you?”

“Yes,” I said carefully wondering where this was leading.

“If you took it,” she asked, “where would we have to live?”

“Vienna, in Austria.”

“That’d be nice wouldn’t it?”

You see, God was putting a seed in Judy’s head rather than mine.

Well, end of the story is that I took the job. As a result of another series of coincidences.

We came back from Vienna in 2001 for a reason quite unrelated to career or job. Richard was going into High School. We had always felt that our kids would be better served if they had their teen years in the home culture. We had seen too many missionary kids who grew up in ten different cultures. And too many of them seemed rootless and a bit lost.

Also, we felt that teenage boys probably do better if their father is not absent. And World Vision jobs call for frequent absences. We had had enough of that.

So I came back to Australia without a job, and for two years I did what every unemployed executive does. I became a consultant. Now for me, consultant meant doing stuff while I waited for something real to come along. I discovered that I really disliked the idea of marketing myself. I enjoyed the endless cups of coffee and the conversations that went with them, but the strike ratio for consultants is about 100 to one. A friend of mine in the consulting business said that one needed to make 100 contacts a month, every month, if you’re going to make a go of consulting. Think about how many cups of coffee that is.

Anyway, to cut another long story short, eventually I applied for the position of GM of DUSA.

It didn't take me long to work out that this organisation was in a bit of a mess. They had recently appointed a GM, even announced it to the Uni and issued a press release. Unfortunately they had overlooked one important conversation with the appointee. They hadn't agreed on a salary. When he found out what they were offering, he withdrew.

That led to two important developments. One, they hired a head-hunter. And second, they revised their ideas about how much they would have to pay for what they wanted.

Anyway, I went through two interviews in which 25 people crammed into a small room and fired questions at me from every direction and most political points of view.

Then I got a call from the head-hunter apologising for the fact that the selection panel couldn't make up their minds between me and one other candidate. And they wanted us both to go through a third interview, in front of the whole Student Council.

I guess I lost patience with them at this point and said that an executive selection process shouldn't come down to a beauty contest, and that the selection panel should just do what they were supposed to, that is make a decision and present a single recommendation.

The head-hunter sympathised but said he wasn't able to persuade them.

So I said I would make the job easy for them. Since they had two suitable candidates I would withdraw and then the decision would be clear.

So I withdrew.

A week later, the then President of DUSA rang me to beg me to reconsider. The Student Council had met with their sole candidate and didn't like him (or it might have been her, I never asked). So now they had NO candidates. Would I reconsider?

Well, I did. And God has taught me a lot in my last five years. Things I would never have learned had I been doing something else.

God has a plan for our lives. Sometimes it doesn't make a whole lot of sense. But things seem to work out. Hard times become learning times. Good times become celebration times. The God of coincidences is there in the middle of it.

Thank you.