Meaningful work while pursuing a PhD

An idiosyncratic reflection on the benefits of self-flagellation

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Meaningfulness has a lot to do with attitude (and possibly experience)

‘Over 800 years ago a traveller happened upon a large group of workers adjacent to the River Avon and making a detour he moved toward the first of the three tradesmen and said “my dear fellow what is it that you are doing?” “I am cutting stones” the man grumbled. The traveller moved toward the second who stated that he too was a stonecutter adding “I came to Salisbury from the north to work but as soon as I earn ten quid I will return home.” The third mason when asked, replied, “I am a mason and I am building a cathedral” and then said, “So I am prepared to be away from my family because I know it is the right thing to do. I hope that one day my son will continue in my footsteps and perhaps even his son if need be.”

(Adapted from Girard & Lambert, 2007, p. 161)
So what is meaningful work?

* Bailey and Madden (2016) suggest 5 qualities of meaningful work as self-transcendent, poignant rather than euphoric, episodic, reflective, and personal
* The ‘Meaning of work research team’ suggest “the significance, beliefs, definitions and the value which individuals and groups attach to working as a major element of human activity that transpire over much of their lives”
* I went with Lips-Wiersma and Morris, who, following Pratt and Ashforth (2003), suggest as ‘It helps to answer the question “Why am I here?”’
Reflecting on reflexivity

- Understanding positionality is important since data has to be interpreted to have meaning.
- Reflexivity allows for ‘ethical mindfulness’ and ‘a picturing of ourselves’ (Pillow, 2015 p. 419)
- It is the ‘starting point for gaining new perspectives’ (Lundgren & Poel, 2016, p. 3) which is helpful to accumulating knowledge and understanding.
Reflecting on reflexivity – a personal note

* Pio and Singh (2015) note that some areas of research might result in issues of researcher harm.
* Seeing hundreds of exhumed bodies and interviewing survivors of genocide (particularly children) has certainly affected me in negative ways.
* Result: Frustration (taken out on inanimate objects) and impotent rage helped by debriefings of properly trained staff.
Some background to my pre-PhD days

* Volunteer fire fighter and cliff rescue unit while a Baptist minister
* Helping establish business in majority world red light district to give real alternative to entrapped and trapped sex workers.
* Helping provide literacy programs to women in squatter settlements in PNG
* Helping get food to families trapped in concentration camps and being the victims of a slowl genocide.
* Supporting and encouraging workers in post-conflict zones in achieving community reconciliation
So pre-PhD a meaningful life was:

- Action packed and occasionally dangerous
- Sometimes knowing you were saving a life or creating a real future
- Secured in the ideology that the trajectory of the universe was sacrificial love and kenosis (Polkinghorne, 2001)

Can PhD research and writing compete with that as meaningful and if so how?
Meaningful work in a PhD?

* A Ph.D offers little possibility in the way of providing motivation through the design of work, although, as Hackman and Oldman note, the process gives support to those focused on individual growth need (1976, p. 258).
* As most PhD students will attest:
  * the grind of literature searches,
  * the head-hurting process of dealing with philosopher’s polysyllabic words and their very fine nuances of meaning
  * the frustrations of endnote, NVivo and large document formats in various versions of Microsoft’s ‘Word’ has little that inspires the thought ‘meaningful’.
For someone that has spent many years immersed in ‘life and death’ meaningful action the narrowness of topic and pedantic rules of academia felt like self flagellation.

It was hard work!

I had to rethink ‘meaningful work’ quite dramatically
What helped?

* Superb and caring supervisors who empathized with my struggles without letting up on the demands of academia
* Support from the department in provision of things like an office where engagement with department staff was a daily occurrence
* A superb system of post graduate support within the school offering regular seminars and staff willing and able to give advice
* A university wide focus on supporting PhD students to success with writing retreats, workshops and social gatherings
Final remarks

So has AUT ‘managed meaning’ for me or have they enhanced my internally generated sense of ‘meaningful work’? As Lips-Wiersma and Wright note, meaningfulness comes from multiple sources of meaning (2012, p. 658) and one key is to have balance between “Being” and “Doing” as well as “Self” and “Others”. I think that AUT have happily managed to do both and in that process have rendered any sense of self-flagellation void.


