

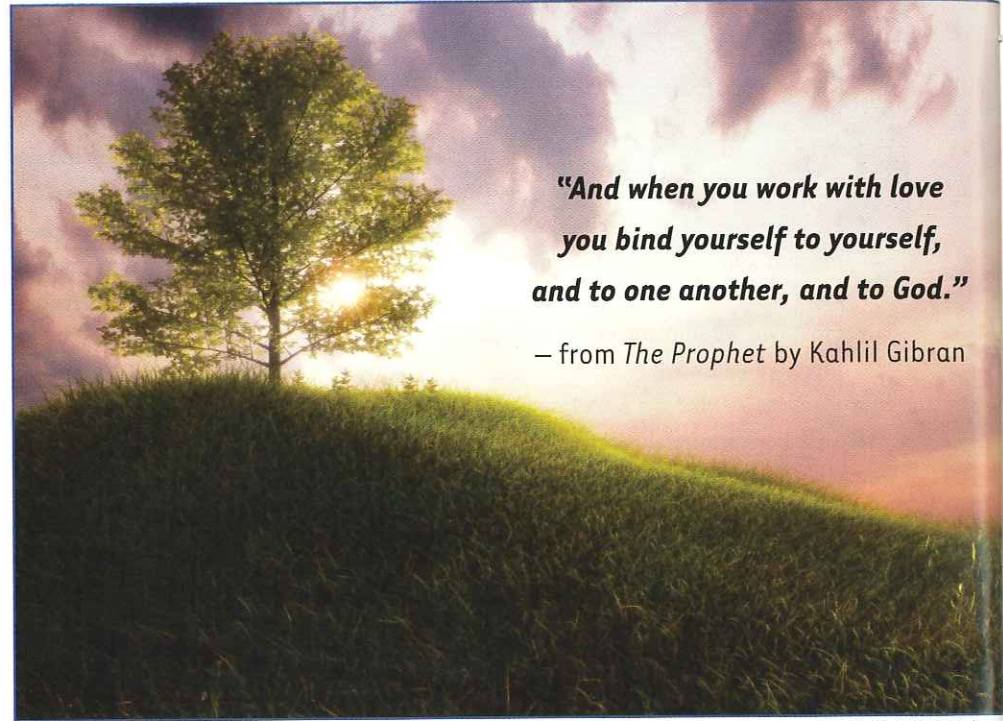
Vocational Truthfulness: Having the Courage to Discover Deeper Meaning in Our Work

By Louise Phipps Senft and Michael John Aloï

On the surface, the search for how to satisfy a need for personal and professional fulfillment may appear to be a selfish act. Upon closer and deeper inspection, however, there is a very practical reason to make the commitment to both love and need our work. The more we love, the better we are at it.

Do you want your weakened physical health in the hands of a surgeon who does not love his or her work? Do you want your impressionable child in a classroom with a teacher who does not love his or her work? Do you want to entrust your most personal suffering during a time of great vulnerability to a mediator who does not love his or her work? Loving our work fuels our excellence. To love our work deeply and passionately is a gift to others. When we mediate with love, our clients experience their own potential strengths and responsiveness, and so do we. The more excellent we become in our interventions and actions, the more we build our personal capacity to be more responsive in the moment when the imagination and real work of transformation happens.

This belief about vocational love, however, is not to be viewed as a simplistic shortcut to the serious and hard work that is necessary to be a competent and qualified mediator. Michael Jordan may love and be deeply passionate about basketball, and that may set him apart from other basketball players. However, what made Jordan truly great was his understanding of the fundamentals of his profession and the daily ritual of working at those fundamentals coupled with an attitude of defiance of the common standard and an imagination for what could be, until both were as



**“And when you work with love
you bind yourself to yourself,
and to one another, and to God.”**

— from *The Prophet* by Kahlil Gibran

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much a part of his being as breathing. The deep love of the game and Jordan's need to play made him extraordinary and provided the world with awesome moments.

While loving our work is our gift to our clients, *needing* our work is a blessing for us, for as it opens us to being our full selves, we find vocational truthfulness. As mediators, *we* become more open and understanding, more accepting, and less judgmental of others in our lives. We become better people because we allowed our love of work to take us to the vulnerable place where we *needed* our work. We are moved by our clients' stories and situations and we are compelled to handle our own conflicts differently. The natural byproduct of both loving our work and needing our work is that we are propelled to evolve into our best human selves. And, this

grace is, in turn, reciprocally offered back to the world that gives us so much.

Like Jordan, with a solid foundation and practice, we, too, can master the fundamentals. And we can choose to mediate beyond the ordinary by waking up to the nuances in the room, the subtleties in the interaction. We can have the courage to search and go to the deepest places of our hearts where we can be more responsive to the human potential that disputes and disagreements present for our clients and for humanity. We can remain mere conflict resolvers or only problem-solvers, or we can find and sustain a deeper vocational truthfulness.

The poet Rainer Maria Rilke, in his *Letters to a Young Poet*, gave the following advice about vocation, “No one can advise you, no one. There is only one way. Go within. Search for the cause,

find the impetus that bids you to write. Put it to this test: Does it stretch out its roots in the deepest place of your heart? Can you avow that you would die if you were forbidden to write? Dig deep into yourself for a true answer. And, if it should ring its assent, if you can confidently meet this serious question with a simple 'I must,' then build your life upon it. It has become your necessity. Your life, in even the most mundane and least significant hour, must become a sign, a testimony to this urge."

We have looked within for our answers to the question, "Do we love and need our work?" and we have found these tenets of vocational truthfulness as mediators:

Grace

Being received by others into the most private and intimate spaces of their lives, protected by the sanctity of confidentiality, is a moment of grace, a blessing. It allows us to learn and to experience appreciation. It requires of us an attitude of profound respect for the people with whom we work and a desire to be fully human in the space we occupy with them. Grace allows us to be fully present in a non-judgmental way: to listen, to care, and to offer hope. Mother Teresa was once asked how she does not judge the beggars, the homeless, and the diseased whom she meets in the streets of Calcutta. She responded, "I never judge anyone because it doesn't allow me the time to love them." Helping to create and foster the sacred space where people can find their truthfulness, where their situation becomes more focused and clear, where they respond, forgive, honor the past, make meaning of the present,

and move forward, is a grace that gives us the strength to appreciate and to be fully loving human beings in our own lives.

Connectedness

Entering into a sometimes dangerous, often intimate, conflict dance with others creates a connectedness with humanity that lets us know instantly and immediately that we have a place in the world. When we have the confidence and skill to make a significant difference through our presence and actions, we help mediation participants reconnect to themselves. Alienation from one's true self, being wrongly viewed by others, or turning against the other, are perhaps the most disturbing aspects of conflict and disputes for most people. Being reconnected to oneself in the midst of an otherwise distracting and fracturing experience is what many yearn for in a conflict and dispute, and what we can foster. How simple. How profound. Helping to restore our clients to a reconnection to themselves, and possibly to the other people, is a great opportunity that we have the power to highlight and help foster. Like the choreography of any dance, there will be moments of awkwardness, stepping on toes, being either too close or not intimate enough, and struggles as to who should lead and who should follow. And, as it also goes in mediation, whether between suspicious strangers or between intimate foes, the movements become effortless; there is no pushing or pulling, but moments of reprieve, relief, greater understanding and willingness, and of creating something new. And in these moments, clients are connected to each other and

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reconnected to themselves; and we, too, are reconnected to something larger than ourselves.

Witness

Our clients extend to us an invitation to take part in their conflicts and disputes as witnesses to their struggles and potential transformations, which often unfold before our eyes. In any mediation, we may see a mother who is dealing with the loss of two children because of a drunk-driving accident thank an insurance adjuster for allowing her to speak completely. We might see a proud man struggling with the loss of his home in a house flipping case stand up to a bank officer to speak his peace and not be told to sit down. We might see a

middle manager facing the loss of his job and his dignity cry and whisper his thanks when the severance agreement is signed. Or we might see a husband confirming his affair of years prior express his deep remorse. These and countless other stories of the paradoxical simplicity and depth of humanity are legion in mediations where we bring our full, loving selves. When we mediate in this way, we are given the chance to witness extraordinary exchanges and awesome moments, and are reminded of the incredible capacity of human beings.

Energy

Experiencing the personal energy that is emitted in the midst of conflict and transformation is like an elixir reminding us of how blessed we are to be alive and engaged in the world. It is perhaps only by accident for many that such transformation occurs from time to time. But, with purpose and practice, the negative to positive shifts in conflict happen regularly. When we bring our compassionate selves and our energy for the rigors of expert practice, we have an unexpected impact on our clients' experiences of quality interaction and quality decision-making. Once our clients taste these, they return hopeful of another such changed experience; they come to need it, and they should. It will not be a fluke. They will need the experience as much as we need to be able to offer it. The transformation is palpable and it energizes us.

Grateful Humility

We are humbled by our clients, who are our teachers showing us what to do, as well as what not to do, in our own

experiences of conflict. Their journeys are regular reminders for us to be profoundly grateful for all that we have in our own lives. We are humbled that they are grappling with difficulties that we have experienced, too. We are humbled that we also are often spared the same problems they face in their lives because we have learned from clients who preceded them. We are profoundly grateful to our clients for their courage to participate in mediation, and of taking the risk of engaging in difficult discussions and interactions with those who have harmed and threatened them, as well as with those for whom they care deeply and from whom they are estranged. The experience propels us forward in our own growth to be full human beings. We celebrate the unique opportunities that the mediation process offers people to engage in the broad human spectrum of transformation such as from closed-mindedness to receptiveness, hostility to openness, anger to acceptance, greed to generosity, and vengeance to forgiveness. We give thanks for such an honor.

Authenticity

It is imperative that we be authentic about our work and bring to it a genuine sincerity. If we are not authentic and sincere in our work, then we have no right to expect the same from others. It only follows that inauthentic conduct leads to inauthentic resolutions that are empty and fleeting. When we mediate authentically, we have the chance to be fully alive and to be ourselves – to be our full selves, to be our full, loving selves. There is a Hasidic tale that reveals, with amazing brevity, the universal tendency to want to be someone else

and the ultimate importance of being one's self. Rabbi Zusya, when he was an old man said, "In the coming world, they will not ask me: 'Why were you not Moses?' They will ask me: 'Why were you not Zusya?'" At the end of your mediation, you must ask yourself if you were true to your best self in the process, and if you cannot answer, "Yes," then you must ask, "Why were you not?" Choosing to mediate authentically often inspires outcomes we could not have imagined.

Spiritual Sustenance

It seems to us that the ultimate expression of vocational truthfulness is when your work binds you with something larger, more beautiful and more powerful than all of us. This is not about a religious mandate or an ideological imperative, but an acceptance that to experience the full measure of our work and to sustain it, we must embrace the spiritual dimension.

Surely if there is God, and we believe there is, we begin with the belief that God's presence is there in the mediation room with us. Any loosening of suffering, whether in thought, words, or in action, is a reflection of something more than mere conflict resolution. In mediation, we want to be open to a greater spirit at work in the process, whether it is in the whisper of acknowledgment, a small behavioral change lending some reprieve, a word of stark truthfulness that pierces the tension, a gesture of openness, a desired truce, an understanding of the other, the full contemplation of an offer, the thoughtful consideration of a demand, a complete and thoughtfully crafted settlement, a

meaningful end, or a new beginning. While many mediations may not seem to have this type of quality, we believe it is not because God was not present, but, more likely, because the spirit went unnoticed by the mediator.

Whether a spiritual dimension to you is God, or a spirit, or love, or compassion, or gentleness, or majestic strength, or simple beauty or goodness, acknowledging that our work has a spiritual component is an important first step to take. While it is certainly not mandatory that every mediator do this, we have found that to overlook the spiritual dimension of mediation does not allow us to mediate from our best selves and does not allow the process to reach its full potential. We believe that mediation work can be sacred and that the opportunity to do such work is a blessing. We have found that when we merely view our work as a chore, a task, another fight to break up, another loud voice to hush, or another settlement victory to claim, it is that and only that. When we acknowledge that our work is larger than ourselves and that we are the instruments for a larger truth and peace, it seems every time that the space each of us occupies as mediator becomes fuller and more open to all the possibilities that arise in the crucibles of our clients' conflicts.

To do our best as mediators to ensure that we do not miss the potential of our clients' authentic expressions and openings for transformation, we must surely practice our techniques like Michael Jordan. We must also take daily care of our souls so that we may continue to sit in the fire of conflict and not get burned or burnt out. We want to be

more than mere conflict resolvers, more than mere problem-solvers — we want to be mediators. If you, too, are on the path of fulfilling this vocational truth, listen to the spirit within you. It may be moved and best engaged by prayer, meditation, breath work, mindfulness practice, exercise, music, walks, or yoga. Whatever your spiritual practice is, it is a courageous commitment to make it intentional, to tend to it, and to nurture it on a regular, daily basis.

In making the commitment to our spiritual practice, we have experienced moments of terrible emptiness in our mediation practice. At those times, this is the vocational truthfulness we discovered:

“It was not because we did not know enough,
It was not because we did not do enough,
It was because we did not love enough.”

- Louise Phipps Senft and Michael Aloï



Louise Phipps Senft is an experienced attorney and transformative mediator. She has mediated more than

4,000 disputes, is founder of Baltimore Mediation, faculty at the University of Maryland School of Law, and one of 2009's Maryland's Top 100 Women.



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