

Book Review for 1/15/04 by Terry Kinnear

Title: "Crossing the Unknown Sea: Work as a Pilgrimage of Identity"

Author: David Whyte

Publisher: Riverhead Books

Copyright: 2001

Length: 257 pages

Price: \$14.00

Reading time: 5 hours

Reading rating: 4 (1 = very difficult; 10 = very easy)

Overall rating: 4 ( 1 = average, 4 = outstanding)

"Crossing the Unknown Sea" takes the reader on a metaphorical sea voyage enabling the development of who one is in relation to an occupational role and a life's work. David Whyte, in his best-selling book, makes frequent use of poetry and other literary references. These help navigate the difficult task of understanding one's identity and place in the world, which is contrary to the more common cultural experience of having work largely define the individual.

The sea crossing metaphor - leaving shore and sailing mid ocean on to a distant land - aids the reader in capturing the difficulty of self-work. Using this journey facilitates a deep understanding of both the self-discovery process and knowing oneself.

To Whyte, "Work is not a static endpoint . . .but a journey and a pilgrimage in which the core elements of our being are tested in the world." The text closes with ideas for reflecting on the arduous journey and continuing one's development.

Considerable emphasis is placed on the need for continuous inner conversation. "The depth of our identity," the author states, "is dependent upon the depth of our attention" to who we are and who we want to be. Referencing Emily Dickinson, he states paradise is sheer presence, emphasizing the rewards of paying attention in a world where nothing is at rest.

The richness of literature adds clarity to Whyte's contribution and prompts the reader to reflect on who she or he is, as well as a desired place in life. Building upon William Blake's notion of firm persuasion, we are challenged "to feel that what we do is right for ourselves and good for the world at the exactly same time." In a letter, Blake writes, "My fingers Emit sparks of fire with Expectations of my future labours." Such a passionate promise reflects a deep connection with work and commitment to a patron.

This book can be helpful to a wide range of readers, not only those in mid life with considerable experience, but also younger people facing a lifetime of work. Employment experience is only meaningful when it is part of an internal conversation about the personal-work relationship.

The frequent use of poetry, due to the nature of the art form, enables the reader to become one with the poems as well as with the meaning of the text. This literary experience is part of the book's power; its allure lies in the encouragement to see work as a very personal experience.

Attention to some literary figures and their places in the world are underdeveloped. While the poetry stands alone, it would be helpful to know a bit more about the poets' lives. Furthermore, readers who do not appreciate the value of classic literature will either miss the meaning of the references or will not be interested in reading the book at all.

At times, Whyte's autobiographical discussions are distracting. It is not that illustrations cannot help the reader understand a point, but the author's own story and first person narrative are sometimes too sketchy and one-sided. At other times, their lesson is not driven home.

On the other hand, Whyte's own poetry is invaluable in supplementing the narrative. His writing is poignant at times such as when he writes, "A life's work is not a series of stepping-stones onto which we calmly place our feet, but more like an ocean crossing where there is no path, only a heading, a direction, which of itself, is in conversation with the elements." The journey simply has no precise map.

The author's "lessons" are offered to any person intent on learning more about himself and establishing a better personal fit with an occupation and a life's work. Whyte offers a ticket to a more satisfying life, as well as one of the many paths to making greater contributions to organizations and others.

Although not referenced by Whyte, Spanish poet Antonio Machado, in a poem from "Proverbs and Tiny Songs," writes, "You walking, your footprints are the road, and nothing else; there is no road, walker, you make the road by walking."

Terry Kinnear is associate professor of management in the College of Business at Western Carolina University. His current professional interests include virtually all topics addressing the well being of people in the workplace.