

The courage of confidence: the role of faith in career choice

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Introduction

Faith may be defined as a state of confidence in the face of uncertainty, a positive mindset or mental attitude which accepts a degree of uncertainty, remains open to events as they unfold and trusts that the best course of action will become clear in time. Faith therefore may be found in the religious, the spiritual and the agnostic and, in an increasingly uncertain and rapidly changing world, may be regarded as an asset to both career management and employability. However, there is evidence to suggest that UK policy and practice is largely influenced by a technical-rational approach to decision making that neither reflects the fluidity of the market nor the complexities of the human psyche (Bimrose, 2006). The challenge for career practitioners is to move beyond an over-reliance on traditional matching theory and incorporate the reality of how decisions are actually made.

This paper considers the findings of a small scale study into the career decision making of people who identified as having faith. The majority of respondents appeared to balance a high degree of personal responsibility for decision making with an acceptance of not being able to control events. To support decision making they tended not only to research options and talk with others, but also to use prayer and meditation to discern the best course of action. Rather than regard faith-aided decision making as lying outside the remit of professional practice, the paper argues that there are existing approaches such as *Narrative* and *Planned Happenstance*, which not only provide practitioners with a framework for understanding and working with faith, but which may also enhance wider practice.

The nature of faith

It is outside the scope of this paper to review the various definitions of faith and how this may be expressed via religious and spiritual beliefs. However it is important to clarify the concept of faith that underpinned the study. One of the difficulties of defining 'faith' is that there is often an emphasis on the *content* of what people believe rather than the *state of being*. In exploring the concept of faith the existentialist theologian Paul Tillich (1952:172-173), asserted that 'faith is not a theoretical affirmation of something uncertain, it is the existential acceptance of something transcending ordinary experience. Faith is not an opinion but a state'. Tillich argued that this state gives people 'the courage to be' in the face of anxiety, meaninglessness and death, to have the 'courage of confidence', which does not deny difficulty but enables people to fully enter into and face the experience. If we are to bring such a concept into the field of career guidance then we may talk of faith as being akin to a positive attitude of optimism and resilience: the ability to accept uncertainty and remain open to whatever comes one's way. To possess an attitude of faith may be desirable for the religious, the secular and the agnostic alike.

In the National Curriculum there is an increasing emphasis on enabling young people to develop 'personal well-being': the ability to embrace change, manage complexity and risk and to do so with confidence and self-esteem (QCA, 2007). It is recognised that in a world which is rapidly changing and increasingly uncertain, qualities such as optimism and flexibility are becoming essential for both career management and employability (Neault, 2002). A study into the decision making of 14-16 year olds in the UK, found that some young people displayed a 'confident aspirational mindset', that is, optimistic and open-minded, valuing intuition and inspiration and believing that success is down to hard work (Blenkinsop et al, 2005). Therefore, rather than regard faith as lying outside the remit of career practitioners, it may be timely to explore the role that it plays in career decision making; how advisers may work with faith and whether there are lessons that can be applied to general practice.

The study

From 2006 to 2008 I ran a series of workshops throughout the UK on guidance theory. The idea for the study emerged as a result of conversations with practitioners attending these workshops about the element of unpredictability in career management. Some shared how they used faith to navigate uncertainty whilst others raised the question about how to work with clients who used prayer in decision making. The need for further investigation into this area became apparent.

Subsequently I invited volunteers from the workshops to take part in the study and to distribute questionnaires to any faith groups to which they belonged. 45 questionnaires from both adults and young people were returned.

The initial question asked whether there was a term that described their faith, their answers leading to the following classifications:

- 9 Christian young people (aged 12-19)
- 21 Christian adults (aged 20+)
- 6 agnostic adults (those who answered 'maybe' to having a spiritual life and did not identify with any particular religion)
- 1 Buddhist adult
- 3 Muslim adults
- 5 adults who answered yes to having a faith and defined it as 'spirituality' rather than a particular religion.

Semi-structured interviews were subsequently held with 6 of the respondents who were identified to represent a range of beliefs: 2 adult Christians, 1 Muslim, 1 Buddhist, 1 spiritual and 1 agnostic.

The importance of faith

The respondents were asked to identify the extent to which faith affected their career decisions by using a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 corresponding to 'not at all' and 10 'totally'. Career was defined as including decisions about work, learning and training. The findings (figure 1) indicate that faith was more likely than not to have a significant impact on career decision making (71% scored the importance of faith as 5 or higher with 18% regarding their career decisions as being 'totally' affected by their faith).

Scale	Christian young people	Christian adults	Adult agnostic	Buddhist adult	Adult Spirituality	Adult Muslim	total	% (rounded to nearest figure)
1: not at all	1		1				2	4%
2		2	3				5	11%
3	1	1	2				4	9%
4	1					1	2	4%
5	3	2		1	1		7	16%
6	2	1			1	2	6	13%
7		1			1		2	4%
8		5			2		7	16%
9		2					2	4%
10: totally	1	7					8	18%

Figure 1: The importance of faith in career decision making

For some clients the point on the scale may not be static, for example, the Buddhist stated that her score would change from a 5 to a 10 if the career choice was incompatible with her faith. She quoted the example of being a Butcher as being incongruous with being vegetarian.

Faith and personal agency

Although respondents were asked to declare whether they identified with a particular religion, the study was more concerned with their beliefs and their behaviour relating to career choice than with the nature of their religious belief. Respondents were provided with a range of statements derived from preliminary interviews and asked to tick any that reflected how they made decisions about education, training and work. There was also space to add their own comments (although few chose to do so). The results (figure 2) indicate that the vast majority believe in personal agency; that in order for a divine plan to come to fruition or for the universe to provide, they need to take personal responsibility.

A larger and more diverse sample would be required to explore whether there is any relationship between particular religions and the degree of personal agency, although it is apparent that within one religion, Christianity, there was a broad range of responses. All three Muslims and the Buddhist ticked statements 1 and 4 which indicate a high level of personal agency: ‘I think there is a fine line between trust in another power and being complacent/ not being active in making decisions that affect your life’ (Muslim respondent). Out of the 45 respondents nobody identified with the statement ‘I leave it totally in the hands of God. There is nothing that I can do’ and only one person identified with ‘There is no such thing as free choice – my life path is already mapped out for me’ (a Christian adult). Therefore, within this illustrative study, it would appear that having faith in God or the universe does not negate taking personal responsibility for one’s life.

	Christian young people	Christian adults	Agnostic Adults	Buddhist Adult	Spirituality adult	Muslim adult	total	% of respondents who identified with the statement
1. Although I trust in God/the universe, I still see it as my responsibility to decide	3	11	1		3	3	21	47%
2. I leave it totally in the hands of God. There is nothing that I can do.								
3. There is no such thing as free choice – my life path is already mapped out for me		1					1	2%
4. I need to put the effort in, to try to make my own decisions, but I still trust that what turns up is meant to be	4	10	1		4	3	22	49%
5. I believe there is a plan for my life but I still have to work out the next step on that path	3	13	1		1	1	19	42%
6. It's a combination of thinking, feeling and trust	4	9	3	1	4	2	23	51%
7. I see what turns up and trust that it's meant to be	5	1			2		8	18%
8. I remain open to possibilities that I couldn't have predicted when I started	2	9	4	1	4	1	21	47%
9. I see what turns up and trust that it's meant to be	5	1					6	13%
None of these: faith/ trust doesn't really play a part in my decisions:			1				1	2%

Figure 2: Beliefs about career decision making

How career decisions are made

Moving from beliefs to behaviour, the respondents were asked, from a range of given methods (figure 3), to identify those which they used to aid their career decision making. They were instructed to underline all that applied and provided with space to add any other methods used.

	Christian young people	Christian adults	Adult agnostic	Adult Buddhist	Adult Spirituality	Adult Muslim	total	% of respondents who used the method
Talking it over with people	7	20	5		4	2	38	84%
Prayer	6	17			2	3	28	62%
Being open to unexpected opportunities that may arise	3	12	4	1	5	2	27	60%
Researching opportunities	1	14	2	1	5	3	26	58%
Listening to inner voice or feelings	2	10	2	1	5	1	21	47%
Meditation		3	1	1	5		10	22%
Noticing patterns or coincidences		2	1		3		6	13%
Other (1 non-specified, the other crystal dowsing)					2		2	4%

Figure 3: Methods used to aid career decision making

Respondents use a variety of methods to aid their career decision making such as research, talking to people and prayer. Whilst it may be tempting for practitioners to separate the prayer element and concentrate on those aspects traditionally regarded as the remit of career guidance, it is apparent from some of the comments that these methods are regarded as inter-dependent: ‘I pray and ask God what he wants me to do. I also think about it, weighing up the pros and cons, trusting God to guide me to the right decision’ (Christian adult).

Community Interaction

The most popular method used is that of talking the decision over with other people (84% of respondents). The significance of community interaction has been identified in a number of studies both within the UK (Law, 1981; Hodkinson et al, 1996; Green and White 2007; Bimrose et al, 2008) and beyond (Alrumani, 2007; Sultana, 2009). Not only are communities influential in the formation of identity and career beliefs, but also who you know is important; for example, family, political and religious networks may actually open doors to opportunities (Sultana, 2009). The significance of others within communities of faith poses a challenge to traditional guidance models. According to Bimrose et al (2008:32), UK policy and practice remains largely dominated by a trait and factor matching approach or what Hodkinson et al (1996:121) call ‘technical rationality’; in other words, a model which advocates that clients make career decisions ‘in a systematic way, moving logically from a consideration of their own strengths and achievements through to a decision about what they want to do’. If we are to take into account the realities of how people make decisions then we need to move beyond such individualism and explore more holistic approaches to working with clients.

Prayer, meditation and discernment

Equal in significance to community (84%), is the use of prayer (62%) and meditation (22%). Given their centrality to career decision making within the study, it is important for practitioners to understand how these methods are actually used. Whilst it is beyond the scope of this paper to explore all forms of prayer and meditation across the different religious traditions, it is hoped that the examples may provide some insights into how to support such clients.

Within the Christian tradition there is a form of contemplative prayer based on the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius. This prayer of 'discernment' can be used for every day decisions such as what career to pursue or how to manage unemployment or retirement (Hughes, 2008). In such prayer, one must engage the imagination to enter and experience each option available and to notice any feelings aroused. In doing so one must work on being completely open-minded, to let go of any attachment to the alternatives being considered; 'the object is not to predetermine the decision, but to ensure that the decision is made freely' (Hughes, 2008:141). One of the respondents explained her experience as follows:

Throughout the day I was praying to God for Guidance. The only way I can describe it is as a feeling of peace when I thought about leaving the course and a feeling of oppression when I thought about staying. Suddenly, my future plans with computers didn't seem important and I decided it wasn't what I wanted to do (Christian adult).

Using prayer to face career decisions can therefore be a process which requires time, effort and discipline - not a quick fix or passive waiting for a voice from above. Its centrality to the decision making process may lead some practitioners to feel anxious about whether they can support such clients beyond the provision of information. This paper proceeds to assuage some of these anxieties by drawing comparisons between faith-aided decision making and professional practices which appear to share similar principles and processes.

The role of the imagination

'Our body, feelings and emotions respond to events more quickly and sensitively than our reasoning minds' (Hughes, 2008:92). In the Christian practice of discernment the skill is to spot the qualitative difference in the after-effects of the imagination exercises. Hughes suggests making a provisional decision and then noting whether this leads to an increase in feelings of peace or feelings of agitation, boredom and sadness. One of the respondents described such an approach: 'I make the decision with prayer and time. I decide one way in my mind and see if it feels right. Then I decide another way and see how that feels' (Christian Adult). Citing Ignatius, Hughes suggests that such signals from the body can provide signals as to what course of action to take.

There appears to be a great deal of similarity between the spiritual exercises used in prayer and some of the professional but secular methods used to harness the imagination. The Narrative Approach, with its emphasis on exploring meaning rather than facts (Savikas cited in Reid, 2005) is particularly close to faith based decision making. Indeed, Cochran (1997: 88-89) actually cites the example of St Ignatius' spiritual exercises when outlining the use of *guided fantasy* in career counselling, whereby the client is asked to imagine an unknown wise person (representing the client's 'higher' self) and the advice that they would give to the client. Imagination is also engaged in the method of *reality construction* in which the client immerses themselves in the realities of an occupation through methods such as talking to people, tasters and reading (reading is regarded as too dry a method on its own). The client then envisages themselves working in that environment with a view to putting constructions to the test, generating questions and making adjustments (Cochran, 1997: 106-107). Practitioners, when supporting clients who use prayer or meditation in a contemplative way, may therefore consider suggesting or using some of the above narrative techniques.

A flexible and open mind

One of the potential pitfalls when noticing one's feelings, is discerning what you should listen to and what you should not; that is, whether a reaction is healthy and creative or merely the result of bias and fear of the unknown. Therefore the practice of true discernment requires the discipline of detachment, the ability to be honest with oneself as to one's own attachments and a willingness to be truly open minded as to the eventual outcome. In Buddhism, this Prajna 'is a state of basic intelligence that is open, questioning, and unbiased' (Chödrön 2003:145). The Buddhist respondent explained how this works for her:

I would talk it over with people first and then I'd sit down to meditate. This would take place over a period of time as well. It wouldn't just be the once. I would try and really get in touch with my body, my feelings and what I'm feeling in my body when I think about certain options. I suppose that's listening to the inner voice. I'd sit there and ponder it but I'd have to be quite quiet and still, to rest with the feelings and the effect those feelings were having. It might be that I'd be slightly anxious or nervous but that wouldn't in itself make me not do something because there's a certain sort of anxiety that's just about change. What I mean when I say I remain open is that I know that my own knowledge of what's available is limited. So I have an intention at the beginning to get work or whatever and put energy in that direction but I may get results that I might not have thought of.

Similarly the Istikhara, the Islamic Prayer of Guidance, recognises the importance of suspending one's personal desires and being open to whatever comes one's way. According to Imam Al-Nawawi (1996), before the Istikhara prayer, one should seek advice from those in whose knowledge, wisdom, and concern one trusts. One of the benefits of this approach is to suspend one's own egoistic inclinations and incorporate other perspectives. One Muslim respondent explained how he used the Prayer of Guidance:

It's saying that if this matter is actually good for me then please accept it, but if it isn't then turn this matter away from me and me from it, and provide me with something else. So if I was applying for a job I would do the Istikhara and then, if it felt right, I would go for the job. If I got the job it would be part of God's will for me to do that. If I did the prayer and went to the interviews and didn't get the job, then it was not meant to be.

This desire to maintain an open and flexible mind is a challenge to policy which solely measures impact via the possession and implementation of a focused career plan. Yet this challenge is worth addressing as there may be a practical wisdom in the faith-aided approach which is more in touch with the realities and complexities of how people's careers unfold.

Planned Happenstance: engaging with the unknown

The Planned Happenstance theory of career choice (Mitchell et al, 1999; Mitchell, 2003; Krumboltz and Levin, 2004) shares a similar philosophy with the faith-aided approach and may provide a viable alternative way of working with clients. Whilst there will always be the need to consider the routes and qualifications required for careers, Planned Happenstance acknowledges that unexpected events happen and that the best laid plans may go awry. Therefore it is sensible to adopt an attitude of curious and open-minded enquiry, to be willing to change one's plans as events unfold and respond to the immediate rather than clinging to the security of previous decisions. In addition to information management, the role of guidance is to enable clients to develop a more positive and open mind through activities such as reframing, and to build career management skills such as self-awareness, risk taking and networking (Mitchell, 2003; Hambly and Neary-Booth, 2007). The key principle is that

you cannot control all events, but you can actively plan for the unexpected and be willing to try options never considered previously.

This approach would therefore appear to offer practical strategies for believers and non-believers alike who wish to remain open to what comes their way, whilst remaining actively engaged in the process. It would also appear to be a sensible model to adopt in times of high unemployment and uncertainty, where developing optimism, flexibility and networking may be more effective ways of supporting clients than conducting a standard 'skills check'.

The career practitioner

According to Scharf (cited in Bimrose, 2006), there is no evidence to support or refute the effectiveness of the rational matching method. Indeed, this decision making style may only be employed by a minority of people (Bimrose et al, 2008). Therefore there is a professional call to move beyond technical rationality to a more pragmatic approach which reflects both the complexity of a rapidly changing world (Gelatt, 1989) and the reality of how career decisions are made (Mitchell et al, 1999; Hodkinson et al, 1996; Colley, 2000; Krumboltz and Levin, 2004; Bimrose, 2006; Hambly, 2007; Bimrose et al, 2008). People possess diverse decision making mindsets (Blenkinsop et al, 2005) and styles (Bimrose, 2006). Furthermore, decisions are not so individualised as rational matching approaches suggest, but part of a wider choice of lifestyle influenced by culture and social context (Hodkinson et al, 1996; Alrumani, 2007; Sultana, 2009). As Bimrose et al, (2008: 57) state, 'Understanding how decisions are made, allowing for diversity and working from the client's frame of reference are challenges that must be faced by policy makers and practitioners alike'. Practitioners need to be sensitive to the career beliefs of their clients and facilitate insight into the potential impact that these may have on career planning (Alrumani, 2007); however practitioners also need an awareness as to how their *own* career beliefs about decision making may impact on the guidance process. Rather than regard the rational method as best for all clients, advisers may use techniques such as questioning and reflecting back to enable the client to explore, understand and evaluate the effectiveness of their current approach and, having done so, consider which decision making method may be useful for the situation in hand (Hambly, 2007).

Building bridges

Whilst practitioners may possess a positive attitude to faith-aided decision making, there is always the question of whether clients will recognise this and be willing to work with the practitioner. One respondent's comments about how honest she would have been within the career guidance process are quite revealing: as a teenager she used the process of prayerful contemplation to decide whether to change her university course and yet, when asked by a tutor, she pretended that she had gone through a rational process of weighing up the pros and cons:

I wouldn't have revealed that to such a person when I was young. I probably would have done if I had known that the adviser was also a Christian and that they understood what I was saying.

I think we expect a lot of young people if we assume that they will talk to a 'strange' adult person about something so personal, even if ground rules and assurances of being non-judgemental are offered. At my age now, I would be confident to discuss my faith with strangers and how this affects my decision making.

This raises the issue of how many clients, in particular those younger or less confident, may perceive that any method other than rational matching will be adversely judged. As a consequence they may feel too inhibited to share how they make decisions and pretend to engage in the matching process. If practitioners are serious about working within the client's framework then a number of practical

responses are required. Ground-rules such as being non-judgemental can be overtly raised within one-to-one work, but perhaps a stronger message would be conveyed by addressing the topic of diverse decision making styles in group work. Another practical way forward is to work more closely with religious organisations to support and develop the career education and guidance activities that may be taking place within the community. In the US there has long been a tradition of grassroots delivery by Churches of career education and guidance programmes, including 'career counselling groups that incorporated prayer and worked to improve self-awareness, career awareness and job-seeking skills' (Fox, 2003:173). In order to work effectively with religious groups, career practitioners must seek to understand the role that faith may play in career choice and the methods used.

Furthermore, there is a wider challenge for practitioners, researchers and policy makers. As a small scale study the focus was largely on people who defined themselves as having a spiritual faith. However, the definition used at the outset was of faith as 'a state of being', a state of optimism and open-mindedness which may have a wider application. Our understanding of faith-aided decision making may therefore lead to more general insights into how to develop well-being for *all* of our clients and, in doing so, bridge the divide between the religious and the secular.

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