



“I am building a cathedral to my God.”

the third stonecutter

There is a tale about three stonecutters originally told by psychotherapist, Robert Assagioli, that captures the essence of finding joy and meaning in our work and in our lives.

One day, a visitor travelled to the site of a medieval cathedral that was being built. The visitor encountered a stonecutter and asked what he was doing. With a sour grumble, the first stonecutter replied, “Can't you see, 'I'm cutting these @!#% stones,” showing his disgust toward this seemingly valueless labor. The visitor asked the same question to another stonecutter, who replied, “I'm earning a living for myself and my family.” His even-tempered manner spoke to the satisfaction he gained from functioning well in his work. The visitor came to a third and final stonecutter: “And what are you doing?” *This third stonecutter replied joyously:* “I am building a cathedral to my God.” The visitor turned and saw the cathedral with new insight.

Each stonecutter approached their work in three distinct ways. The first found no value, meaning, or purpose and as a result was sullen and angry – one can imagine that same gloom followed him into his life outside of work as well. The second stonecutter found value in the work for the function it played in his life – the material security it offered. The final stonecutter had embraced the higher purpose of the work and the joy it brought was palpable.

I first heard this story early in my career life and it has remained formative to this day. Each of the three stonecutters within me has served at one time or another as a bellwether of my connection (or lack thereof) to purpose and meaning. Fortunately, I learned to recognize the plight of the first stonecutter early on and have steered away as much as possible. On the other hand, distinguishing between the second and third stonecutter hasn't always been as easy. The line drawn between feeling good about functioning well in my work vs. staying connected to a higher purpose can sometimes seem fuzzy, and certainly overlapping. What has been clear in my personal experience is that my first and second stonecutters seem more at risk to becoming dissatisfied and prone to burnout in work, while the third stonecutter experiences the numinous quality of vocation and service – and as a result is more energized and joyful.

Learn to recognize your own inner stonecutter. What messages are they conveying? How might you embrace the higher purpose of your work to experience a palpable and visible joy?