

Always do your best.

Last month, I began speaking about Don Miguel Ruiz, who wrote the book, *The Four Agreements*. I was intrigued by the book, because of its good, common sense, and because of its consistency with our Quaker understanding of what it means to be a spiritually alive person. Ruiz says there are four principles or habits in life, which, if followed, can help us know happiness. We've spoken about three of them. *Be impeccable with your word. Don't make assumptions. And Don't take anything personally.* This week, I want to conclude by inviting you to think about the fourth and last agreement, *Always do your best.*

Of all the agreements or insights, this is the one we're most likely to ignore, because of its familiarity. It is such everyday wisdom, we tend to forget its significance. I was in Oregon once, with a friend of mine who lived there, and we were driving east to west, from the high desert into the mountains, on Highway 20, west of Bend into the town of Sisters. I asked him to pull over so I could see a particularly beautiful sight. He slowed down, then laughed and said, "Yeah, when you first get here, you're all the time looking around at everything, but after awhile you get used to it and don't even notice it anymore."

This advice, *Always do your best!*, is kind of like that. We've all heard it said so often, by our parents, by our teachers, by our employers, that after awhile its familiarity blinds us to its importance. We don't even notice it anymore, though it is no less significant, no less profound, no less imperative.

So today I want us to think about doing our best, and what that really means.

In high school, I worked at a grocery store after school and on weekends. There was this kid named Mike who worked there with me and sometimes we'd work the same shift. One evening, Mike and I had to set up some new displays at the front of the store. Our boss, a man named Orville, said, "This will be the first thing people see when they enter the store. So do your best." Orville left for home, so Mike and I began setting up the displays of canned foods. We worked quickly, made some signs, got the job done, then stood back to look at our work. The display was kind of crooked, some of the cases were upside down, and we'd misspelled a couple of words on the signs, but Mike turned to me and shrugged and said, "Close enough for government work." I had never heard that saying before, but thought it was hysterical and I laughed and told myself I'd have to remember that saying. Close enough for government work. Oh, that was good.

The next day I went back to the grocery store, through the front door, and there stood Orville, waiting for me. He said, “Philip, please come with me.” We walked over to the displays and looked at them. Orville was very quiet. After a few moments of uncomfortable silence—I don’t know whether he felt uncomfortable, but I sure did—but after a few moments, he asked, “What do you think of the job you did?”

I said, “Well, it’s close enough for government work.”

Orville apparently had higher expectations for government work than I did, was not impressed, and I had to redo all the displays.

This week, I remembered that incident, and had a new insight. Sometimes that happens. We revisit an event from our childhood, believing we had learned everything we could about it, but when we re-examine it later, from the vantage point of adults, with the benefit of cooled passion and acquired wisdom, we realize there were other lessons in that experience we didn’t learn the first time around. That happened to me this week.

Here was my insight: I didn’t do my best setting up the display. I did Mike’s best. I let Mike’s best define my best.

Be careful of letting someone else’s definition of *best*, be your definition of *best*.

We'll return to that in a moment, but I want to make one observation first. When I first read this, *Always do your best!*, I heard it as *Be perfect!*. But that isn't what this says. A lot of times we go through life and anytime we get something wrong, we beat ourselves up. "Oh, I'm worthless. I can't do anything right. I'm so stupid." Because we think our *best* should be *perfect*. But *best* and *perfection* are not the same. We're not always going to be perfect. That's a fact of life. We are hindered by our incomplete knowledge, by our physical limitations, by our limited aptitude or skill. In some instances, in certain circumstances, we will achieve something close to perfection. Perhaps others will notice it, and will admire our accomplishments as a thing of beauty. But what makes it beautiful is its rarity.

Doing our best doesn't mean doing something perfectly. It means that in any given moment we are summoning our utmost skill, initiative, creativity, energy, and thinking to accomplish a given task.

Now here's the thing: Only you can define whether you're doing your best, because only you know whether you have given your utmost to any endeavor. That is why you must always do *your* best, not someone else's best. Not your parent's idea of best, not the church's idea of best, not your grandparent's idea of best, not your spouse's idea of best. Always do *your* best, not someone else's idea of best.

And if someone starts pressuring you to do their idea of best, smile, thank them for their concern, and do *your* best, not theirs.

Let me close by returning to Mike, my fellow worker at the grocery store. Mike and I spent a lot of time together when we were teenagers. But after awhile, I noticed how mediocrity was taking root in every aspect of Mike's life. In school, close enough for government work. In his relationships, close enough for government work. In his appearance, close enough for government work. In his job, in his speech, in his conduct, in his bearing, and finally in his marriage. Close enough for government work. His satisfaction with mediocrity infected every facet of his life. Except now it isn't hysterical. Now it's sad, because his life is a faint shadow of what it could have been.

Jesus told a story about a farmer sowing seeds. Some of the seed fell on the path, where it was eaten by birds. Some of the seed fell on rocky ground, where it couldn't take root, so the sun scorched it and it withered away. Some of the seed fell among thorns, which choked it out. But some of the seed fell on good ground and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold.

Be good ground. Always do your best. Summon your utmost skill, initiative, creativity, energy, and thinking to accomplish a given task.

If you want to be happy tomorrow, do *your* best today.