

# SERVING FOR PURPOSE AND PROFIT



ANTHONY FLYNN

## ► MY CALL TO SERVE

**I** was in my early thirties when I began to understand God's purpose and plan for my life. My early years, however, were mired in pain and trauma. My journey led me to appreciate deeply Rom. 8:28: "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."

My mother was seventeen when she gave birth to me. She met my biological father in junior high school in Memphis, TN. We resided in one of the most impoverished neighborhoods in the United States. My paternal grandmother had eight children, five of whom were still living in a rental home with less than 1,000 sq. ft. when my mom moved in with them. Upon graduation, dad became a dishwasher at a local BBQ joint while mom opted for food stamps and welfare support. Seeing an opportunity to move out of entrenched poverty, we relocated to Peoria, IL four years later when my dad found a job at Butternut Bakery through my uncle who worked there. Life was wonderful until my dad had a traumatic breakup a couple of weeks before Christmas in 1982 with my mom, who packed all our belongings in one suitcase and took

the first Greyhound bus out of Peoria back to Memphis.

From the painful memories that engulfed my childhood I see the grace of God that has continuously sustained me. It was simply impossible that I would ever have been able to negotiate out of being a product of forgotten communities that regularly produced drug dealers, prostitutes, or gang leaders. Yet I would not be the man I am today had it not been for the pain in my early life, which God must have designed for a very specific purpose. I came to the realization that these traumatic experiences happened *for* me, not just *to* me. Through countless hours of self-development, therapy, coaching, and mentorship, I know I will have tremendous, positive impact on the lives of others because of my own painful, yet meaningful journey. For that I would not change a single thing in my life.

Pain can be a good, fruitful seed for producing an incredible harvest in people's lives. The challenge I had in my youthful years is the same challenge many others face on a daily basis. I am committed to helping others with figuring out how to leverage pain and adversity, so they can march forward instead of being held back. Even in the midst of gloom, I pray that people can see the sunshine that brings forth the good fruit. I am tremendously grateful that God has given me this calling.

## ► EMBRACING GOD'S PLANS

Once back in Memphis, we stayed in one of the most notorious gang and drug infested neighborhoods. In spite of his harsh disciplinary style, my stepfather, an ex-Marine and undefeated Marine Corp boxing champion, can be credited with delivering me from the relentless pressures of distractions and bad influences in *the hood*. Something in me always knew that the risk of joining a neighborhood gang, hustling in the streets, skipping school, doing or dealing drugs, etc., could never compare to what I would have to face upon coming home. My stepfather was very clear that if I ever got myself into trouble, I would first have to deal with him and then I would be wholly responsible for dealing with the consequences of my own faults.

In the summer prior to my journey into middle school my stepfather landed a new job with the local power utility company and decided to relocate the family out of *the hood* and into a safer, more stable community. I was not at all prepared for what happened when I actually made the shift from my inner-city school, where I excelled, to a school in a relatively well-to-do suburban community where I was amongst the less than five percent of students who were minorities. I was suddenly exposed to an environment that literally transformed my life. Mothers would volunteer at school; parents attended PTA meetings; dads showed up at football practices and games, and families went on vacations together! Seeing this gave me a vision for what life could possibly look one day for me and my own family.

Yet at Middle School, I immediately became a failing student. The rigors of the academic environment, the stress of being uprooted from my comfort zone in the hood, and the rejection by kids who saw me as being so different from them rocked my world. I was an emotional wreck - feeling unwanted, longing for my biological father, the harsh punishments from my stepfather - which landed me in fights and my first out of school suspension. Thanks to Ted Wells, our Head Principal who was also African American, I was lifted from my emotional nadir when he sat me down in his office before my suspension, held up his fists and said, "Instead of you fighting with these, you need to learn to fight with THIS," as he gently placed his index finger on my left temple and pointed at my brain. I walked away from that conversation knowing there was someone who actually saw the potential in me. I made the decision that I would take Mr. Wells up on his offer to fight back with my intellect, work ethic, and athletic ability. I would refuse to allow the labels people put on me to be a hindrance to my unlimited, God-given possibilities.

Mr. Wells' admonition enlightened my curiosity in my own intellectual potential. Through the encouragement, challenge and disciplined instructions by my math and English and Literature teachers, I excelled in these subjects during middle and high schools, even becoming President of The Junior Classical League on campus and a member of the Latin Honor Society which allowed me to compete against other schools across the state. It was an amazing season of my life and offered me a tremendous boost of confidence. At the same time, I also managed to become a decent athlete, in particular as a football player. During my senior year,

I was even named Captain of the team as we played in the state championship at the highest division. My "talent" caught even the attention of Cornell University, which I was told showed interest in recruiting me to play there. Yet neither I nor my stepfather would show much interest in the Cornell proposal and I ended up at Tennessee Technological University in Cookeville, TN on a full football scholarship. I soon, however, realized that the small town I was in did not have much to offer my personality nor my dreams. Despite the lack of financial support from my stepfather, I decided to give up my full scholarship and headed back to The University of Memphis after just one semester. I had already chosen to position myself for a career with a major corporation in some capacity.

## ► NAVIGATING CHANGE

Following several hamstringing injuries while at The University of Memphis, I realized that football was simply no longer for me. This was the first time in my life that my faith was truly being tested as football was so woven into the fabric of my life. I was forced to submit to the will of my Lord, Jesus. I decided to pursue an internship through INROADS, the top corporate internship organization in America that focused on helping minorities assimilate into Fortune 500 companies.

My internship experience soon thrust me into an internal battle that I since learned is what millions of people face on a daily basis. Whether it was as an accounting intern with a global logistics industry leader or a finance intern with a top institutional brokerage, I quickly realized that my personality was not built to be in an office all day crunching numbers. I observed that many people seem to be miserable at work while chasing, and getting, the material things they desire. I could not imagine why someone would spend decades of their life doing anything that did not make them leap inside. I was offered good money to go full time with one of the intern opportunities, but I decided to turn down the offer. I wanted something that would give me joy when coming to work every day, even at the cost of lots of money. For me, intrinsic values trump extrinsic gains.

A life changing dialogue with my academic advisor propelled me to select Sales as my major at The University of Memphis. It was in my negotiations class, taught by an adjunct professor who worked for Fedex, that I realized I had found something that aligned with my soul. Little did I know that the skills development in that arena would eventually transfer into me "selling" the Gospel of Jesus Christ to non-believers. My love for the subject made me the top graduate in my major, resulting in many job offers from Fortune 100 companies. Through a connection from my marketing professor I landed at R. J. Reynolds, even though I had never smoked a cigarette in my life. I was assigned to Tupelo, MS and had the No. 1 sales territory in America in my very first year. However, the job and my core values simply did not align. I realized that although I was on a fast track to success, I just could not reconcile it with the conviction that I was selling something that harms people. I had become a glorified, legitimate drug dealer.

Through a recruiter I moved on to 3M where I was responsible

for a four-state region distributing asthma and cardiovascular products to physician practices. Humorously, almost overnight I transitioned from selling a harmful product to a healing solution for people. At 24 years old, I had a dream job with complete autonomy to run my region. I had a company car, unlimited expense account and earning good money. It seemed I had arrived at the destination I had envisioned. Yet, I had no peace. I still did not like who and what I saw in the mirror. I was still broken on the inside and in search of meaning. I realized I had spent all of my years running from the pain and brokenness of my childhood in hopes that the right job and the right amount of money would heal me. I discovered that I had been attempting to fill a God sized hole in my heart with anything but God.

Dr. Stacy Spencer, still the Lead Pastor of New Direction Christian Church in the Hickory Hill community where I grew up, is the man that broke the Gospel down for me in its simplest form. His wife, Rhonda, was my internship coordinator who had invited me to come join them at their newly planted church after sharing her moving story of her new-born son who was diagnosed with achondroplasia (dwarfism). Pastor Spencer challenged me to think about what adjustments I needed to make in my life in order to follow Jesus, sit under his earthly leadership and become a fisher of men. I called my boss at 3M and told him that I had found my calling. I walked away from a promising career and all the earthly treasures that come with it for a \$25,000 salary (and no benefits) as the very first full time hire at New Direction Christian Church, which we grew from 60 volunteers to more than 10,000 members in a matter of six years.

## ▶ MARKETPLACE MINISTRY

Full time pastoral work, however, did not dull my passion for business. I equipped myself with a seminary education but became the founding CEO of The Power Center Community Development Corporation (PCCDC), a parachurch organization from which was birthed an entrepreneurship institute, a real estate venture, several charter schools and other programs that are still making a difference in the community today. Even in my mid-twenties I was fortunate enough to merge my business, nonprofit and ministry interests into a career that leverages both purpose and profit. What many people had tried so hard but unable to realize, I found myself landed early in a space where money and meaning can co-exist.

Nick Vande Steeg, retired President and COO of Parker Hannifin, a Fortune 200 company, was one of those larger-than-life figures who helped me see the profound meanings in the value of leveraging my gifts for the Kingdom in a way that allowed business, ministry and nonprofit work to be conjoined. When Nick was about to resign and go into full time ministry, Pat Parker who founded the company persuaded him to stay by asking him, “what church can you go to that would allow you to ‘pastor’ tens of thousands of people all over the world, transform the lives of so many families through wealth generation and make a huge impact on the marketplace in the process?” Nick told me that story as he was recruiting me to relocate to Southern California to serve as

COO and eventually CEO of a national, nonprofit organization where he served on the board of directors.

In September of 2013, Nick invited me to speak to 100 CEOs in his ranch in the Santa Ynez Valley, just north of Santa Barbara where some of the wealthiest people in the world reside. I was initially puzzled by what I would say to all of these wealthy, high powered executives who seemed to have “gained the whole world.” But soon I realized there is something in common that we all struggle with in spite of what we might own. Nick saw in me the courage to walk away from idols early in my career and not allow the “things of this world” to be the primary drivers and lords of my life – a courage that allowed me to experience the fullness of God’s plan for my life without the entanglement of serving two masters. Almost everyone in that room was looking for ways to move from “success to significance.” Secretly perhaps they would envy someone like me who had found freedom from the pressure of living up to the standards of others and discovered the joy of living.

In more than two decades of involvement in church, parachurch and nonprofit services, I truly experienced what Jesus taught in Mt. 25:40, “Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.” Among the many initiatives we launched were a venture that over seven years empowered more than 200 high school students, through over \$20 million in scholarships, to enroll in some of the top (including Ivy League) universities in the country. Another one was serving in a consulting role for the Bill and Melinda Gates Millennium Scholarship agency where each year I helped in the selection of the 1,000 scholars who would receive full ride from college and all the way through their doctorates if they major in Computer Science, Mathematics, Library Sciences or some other STEM approved fields. Both these initiatives are targeting kids who live in poverty. Their outcomes, in my experience, were simply unbelievable. The success stories still bring me to tears to this day.

Today I have the privilege of serving as the CEO of WorkFaith, a faith-based training and coaching service headquartered in Houston for seekers of long-term stable employment. I relocated my family from Atlanta to Houston because of the opportunity to make an impact on the lives of those who many in society would have abandoned because of their backgrounds. Many of the people we serve are justice involved to a point that aside from collaborating with us, most companies would not be willing to take a chance on them. We provide them with the hope emanating from the Gospel of Jesus Christ, but we also provide them with the “how” - practical skills and tools they can leverage to locate, stay in, and advance through satisfactory employment opportunities in the marketplace.

The WorkFaith appointment was actually further validation of God’s lesson on purpose over profit. Before the call, I had started my Executive Coaching and Consulting practice in Atlanta. In fact, we had just moved into a dream house in a very nice suburb of Atlanta when the recruiter called. I literally thought God was playing a practical joke on me as my wife finally got her wish on the home, business was doing well, our church and community involvement was very gratifying, and our kids had just found their strides at school. Yet, God was once again positioning us at a fork in the road. After a very rigorous process of evaluation and us examining each other, we chose “purpose” and decided to accept the new challenge.

This time, however, life had trained me so that we did not have to choose purpose at the expense of profit. We could do both!

Because I had demonstrated such substantial impacts on the leadership of many top companies, my board at WorkFaith was willing to accept my proposition to evaluate me solely based on my performance with respect to some very specific KPIs (Key Performance Indicators). The fact that I also had a practice that was profitable and growing was agreed to be not a matter of concern. In spite of the need to shut down the offices during COVID, WorkFaith had indeed achieved exponential growth to the tune of ten times the impact compared to when I started. It was obvious that such an outcome could not have been achieved without the leadership and trust of the board which also collaborated with me by sacrificing their own time, talent and treasures.

The birth of my Executive Coaching and Consulting practice, Amazing CEO, came from the time I spent at Nick's ranch with all those powerful business personalities. After my session had concluded, I literally had a line of men standing there waiting for me. One CEO literally gave me a hug, wept on my shoulder and then spent a half hour hanging around so he could speak with me afterwards. I knew I had scratched an itch and pinched a nerve. Many of the leaders at that level do not have someone like me whom they trust, to pour their hearts out to, and share about life and business. I happened to be able to talk their business lingo, but I could also help them navigate the pain they were feeling – whether it be the peace they still lack after their third marriage, or the struggle of their business which they were uncomfortable sharing with their peers.

A strong desire to support these “accomplished” leaders with the practical skills and tools they need to not just be good, but Amazing CEOs was the impetus for my consulting and coaching business. An Amazing CEO would literally feel like life and business, together, were amazing. I was blessed to be able to develop a unique approach and process that empowers these leaders to focus on themselves and their companies, but not one at the expense of the other. I am privileged to be in a position where my clientele has included the senior leadership in such household names as Pfizer, Coca-Cola, FedEx, UCB Pharmaceuticals, Bank of America, Morgan Stanley, among many others. I was also able to work with a number of smaller businesses, NBA Teams, professional athletes, entertainers, and celebrities. The work is incredibly rewarding and turns out to be also beneficial to the nonprofit mission I was engaged with. I am living out the Gospel and sharing the love of Christ at every level.

## ► THE ALIGNMENT OF PURPOSE AND PROFIT

The time I spent with hundreds of top executives at major corporations left me amazed at the extent of separation between purpose and profit, impact and income, or meaning and possessions in people's lives. Too many people would suggest that they labor not for fulfillment and significance but for life's necessities and material pleasures. Frankly, most people have not figured out how to do both. I spent much time and energy collaborating with some of the smartest people in the world to develop strategies to live both

the life and lifestyle they desire. Here are some suggestions I find helpful for anyone who is looking for creative ways to align purpose and profit in his/her life:

### *Change Gods*

Many of us know and proclaim Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. However, our calendars, energy and lifestyle don't necessarily align accordingly. I am reminded of Mt. 6:33 which says, “But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.” Oftentimes, we are guilty of reversing that Scripture and we find ourselves seeking all these things first and hoping that we can still experience the joy that truly comes from seeking God first. Unfortunately, our human formula doesn't quite work the way we desire it to work in our favor. In fact, Mt. 6:24 states, “No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.” We need to challenge ourselves to truly and sincerely think about the God we serve. One thing I can guarantee is that if we happen to be serving the wrong God in our heart, we will never truly find the fulfillment we have been seeking in life or in business.

### *Change Careers*

There are millions of people who get up every day and, like me, have the privilege of spending 50 to 60 hours weekly generating the highest levels of fulfillment they can imagine through their work. Candidly, I am able to work long days and oftentimes around the clock because I genuinely love every facet of my work. Growing up, I never imagined I would be able to blend ministry, nonprofit and for-profit work together. Even more so, I never imagined that in blending all of these worlds together, a central theme of fulfillment would emerge for me: Leadership Development. If we spend more time at our current job thinking about what we might do if we had the time, freedom and financial resources to do it, we might want to strongly consider developing a transition plan and actually making the leap to do something else. I would truly hate to see us spend the remainder of our life wishing we had pursued our dreams. Understand that we will have to sacrifice something in order for this to be a reality. We might have to relocate, take a pay cut for a season, earn some additional education or a certificate, develop a new skill, etc. Oftentimes, people want change without changing. We will have to be open to change if we would like to truly see different results in our lives.

### *Change Routines*

I wish there were more hours in a day, days in a week, weeks in a month or months in a year. What we can do is to make some adjustments in our lives that would empower us to bring more time, energy and resources to bear in such a way that it brings more fulfillment. Consider volunteering at our local church, at a local parachurch organization, or even at a conventional nonprofit organization. There are many ways to find outlets of expression that allow us to seek God first and live out the core elements of the Gospel on a consistent basis. Oftentimes, people will use phases of life as an excuse. One of my favorite stories is that of a good friend of mine who runs a very successful architectural firm. While in the peak stages of growing his business, being a husband and father, and

having very few hours left over during his week, he would volunteer at church on Sundays. He would attend two services. He would personally experience worship during the first service with his wife. During the second service, his wife would go home to allow herself to have some free time away from the kids. He would check the kids into “children’s church” and then he would volunteer with kids who had disabilities. He would also go on three or four mission trips throughout the calendar year to work in third world countries in support of children with disabilities. While he ran his firm and allowed that to pay the bills, he made room in his life to ensure he could find fulfillment at work and keep the Gospel at the forefront of his life.

### *Trust In the Lord*

Prov. 3:5-6 says, “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.” When we don’t know what else to do, trust in the Lord and lean away from our own logic. Things that are important to God are not necessarily always the things that are important to us. I had to learn this the hard way. The most miserable points of my life were in moments where I trusted far too much in the world around me and in my human instincts. I trusted people, capitalism, accomplishments and many things that accentuated pleasures in my life more than I trusted God. Not that those things do not matter as we seek fulfillment on earth as it is in Heaven. What matters is not to trust those things more than we trust the Lord. My life has become far more fruitful as a result of laying all down before the Cross and submitting myself to the authority of Jesus Christ. My hope and prayer is that we all will experience the fulfillment and the joy from doing the same.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



ANTHONY FLYNN is the CEO of WorkFaith, a faith-based training and coaching service provider headquartered in Houston, and Founder of AmazingCEO, which advises and equips entrepreneurs and business leaders to be masters and influencers in what they do. Anthony has been an executive with several Fortune 100 giants, such as Kraft Foods, RJ Reynolds and 3M, and a leader in several multi-million dollar ventures. He has also been a featured speaker at multiple college campuses and media venues, including Harvard, Emory, Georgia Tech, Biz 1190 (Wall Street Journal syndicated radio show), TEDx, Q Conference, and other TV, radio, and podcast platforms. Anthony is the author of *The Execution Pipeline: A Step-by-Step Guide to Moving Your Business Idea from Dream to Reality* and *The Happiness Map: Finding Fulfillment in Life and Work*. Anthony graduated from the Goldman Sachs 10,000 Small Businesses Program in 2017 where he won 1st place for the business pitch competition. As a trusted advisor to senior executives, he has consulted with many high net-worth individuals, companies, professional athletes, small businesses, non-profit organizations and churches. He holds a Bachelor of Business Administration in Sales from The University of Memphis and a Master of Arts in Religion from Memphis Theological Seminary.