



ALIGNING MY WORK WITH MY PERSONAL PURPOSE

ROBIN JOHN

► INTRODUCTION

In 2005, I spent a year in Pune, India, working for a large custody bank. During that year, I hired, trained, and oversaw local employees who were highly educated. Many were slowly emerging from poverty. Being born in India and having moved to the U.S. on my eighth birthday, I quickly connected with my new colleagues and enjoyed watching their progression in life.

One day as I walked into the company guest house where I lived, I witnessed an American colleague speaking very harshly towards the Indian cook, Kamal. "Servants should not use the front door," he insisted. In shock, I looked at Kamal as he looked back at me. He then said something that I can never forget: "Sir, I am a human being too."

A few days later, I visited the guest house kitchen as

Kamal and Amal, the housekeeper, were preparing my dinner. As I looked around the kitchen, I noticed an old traditional Indian mat in the pantry along with a bedsheet. Amal and Kamal both slept in that small hot pantry each night, on a hard floor with no pillow - a stark contrast to the comfortable bed and air conditioner that I enjoyed in the same house. When I urged them to sleep in one of the empty bedrooms, they refused. They were afraid they'd lose their jobs.

I reached out to upper management and sent some unhappy emails back to my superiors in the United States. I couldn't sleep comfortably in that house any longer, knowing that Amal and Kamal were lying on the pantry floor. When senior management responded that the two were not their employees, but subcontractors of a company that operated the guest house, I was still not satisfied. How could such a large company treat me so well but others so poorly? How could they work with a

supplier who would treat their employees this way? For the first time in my business career, I saw that my company had the power to effect change but chose not to do so.

When I left the company a year later, after finishing my project in India, I committed to finding a way to make business deliver something better. I wondered: If companies did not serve only their own interests, but the interests of others as well, how might our world look different?

► DISCOVERING IDENTITY

From a young age, I was concerned for the welfare of others. I lived with my grandparents for the early years of my life in a remote village without paved roads or running water. I remember the time when a little girl who lived next door, named Julie after my sister, choked and died on a balloon. There were no cars to get her to the hospital.

My grandparents were very poor for much of their lives, but they knew that their mission in life was to serve the church among the poor. My parents and grandparents generously shared what they had with those around them, and we lived on very little. Looking back, I see that we were poor, but we did not know it. Those around us had even less, and we were able to experience true life by loving and serving those around us.

When I moved with my family to Boston at age eight, I began to experience inequities that I didn't know existed previously. I entered school, not knowing English, and I endured cultural insensitivities as the only non-White student in my class. Though I graduated in the top 1% of my high school class, I carried with me a strong sense that because of my faith, ethnicity and culture, I did not fit in. These childhood experiences helped build an empathy in me for my neighbors and the world around me.

After I completed my undergraduate degree at Tufts University, I began praying that God would use me for his service. I moved from one job to the next searching for where I might exercise my gifts. I felt out of place in my day jobs; my values seemed in constant conflict with those of my colleagues and the companies in which I worked. In those early years of my career, a question embedded itself in my heart where it remains to this day: What can I do for God? I would often think of my uncle's Sunday sermons. He loved to quote William Carey, "Expect great things from God; attempt great things for God."

At first, I believed that doing something for God required

me to engage in full-time ministry. Living in my parents' basement, I sat beside the washer and dryer night after night and prayed fervently that God would show me where I could serve him. I longed to find my purpose and mission. After I returned from my year in India, I continued to pray in earnest. I asked God to guide me toward a clear mission, to show me how I might use my life in service to others.

► DISCOVERING PURPOSE

In 2007, I overheard my friend, Finny Kuruvilla, talking with my parents about investing in companies that avoided generating profit from products and services that are harmful to our neighbors. Finny and I shared a similar longing for mission, and we both were ready to act. We met together and brainstormed ideas for nonprofits and business ventures, but we both sensed investing was where God was calling us. We found that in the investment industry, it was hard to avoid profiting from activities that were harming and extracting value from society. We decided to create something that would help give Christians and conscientious people the needed guidance to be able to invest with their values so that they were not profiting from activities that did not align with their values.

In John 9:4, Jesus warns that "the night is coming, when no one can work." Eventide means "coming of the night," and we knew that our mission and work of helping Christians and conscientious investors to avoid ill-gotten gains was important because we sensed the night was coming. We named our first product, Eventide Gilead Fund because Gilead means "mountain of witness" or "hill of testimony." We would unwaveringly stand by our mission and use our gifts in service of God's kingdom. Like the lighthouses that line the New England coast, we prayed that Eventide would shine the light of God's truth in an industry that needed biblical direction and influence.

With a clear sense of our purpose to avoid ill-gotten gains, we were ready to move forward. However, God continued to bring wise guides into my life to deepen my understanding of God's call for our work. One mentor that God would bring into my life encouraged me to expand my vision of God's purpose in business. "If God had a business plan, what would it look like?" he asked me once. In encountering pointed questions about our mission, I began to think more deeply about God's intent for business as an agent of blessing. God was honing our mission and preparing me for service.

As we studied Scripture more deeply, we understood that the call to "avoid evil" is coupled with the call to "cling to what is good." We understood that our mission should be to partner with businesses that are serving well the needs of the world. This starts with avoiding businesses that profit from human weakness and expands into embracing businesses that are creating compelling value for their neighbors. Some examples of the types of businesses that we would embrace include drug development for unmet healthcare needs, safer transportation, clean energy, and cybersecurity. We started to really sense that investing was about more than just returns but an opportunity to partner with companies whose products and services make the world better. We believed that the companies that best served the needs of others also prospered best.

In the end, we decided that our company mission would be to honor God and serve our clients by investing in companies that are creating compelling value for the global common good. My role as CEO would be to lead our team to pursue this mission wholeheartedly.

Over the course of my career, I have developed a clearer understanding of God's call for me in business and of God's intention for business as it operates in the world. I strongly believe that business leaders who remain committed to their mission are agents of blessing in their communities.

► STAYING ON MISSION

In twelve short years, Eventide has grown from three friends with a vision for values-based investing to a company of over 40 employees, managing over \$4.5 billion in assets. From a worldly perspective, we've been very successful. However, our metrics for success look very different from our industry's. In order to love our neighbors best, we have committed to remaining mission aligned regardless of our outward success or failure.

I often say that, in the early years, we at Eventide never saw failure as an option. By that, I do not mean that we were relentlessly driven toward quantitative success. Instead, I mean that, as long as we were aligned with what we believed to be God's call, we felt we had succeeded. We began Eventide

with six months of committed prayer and determined that growth would not be the sole measure of whether God had answered our prayers. Instead, our commitment to our mission would be our measure of success. The two core questions that motivated me in the early days of my career -- What can I do for God? and How can I love my neighbor? -- continue to direct all of my work.

As I reflect on the last twelve years, many things in my life have changed. I am now a husband and a father of three children, two roles I did not have when we started Eventide. And Eventide has become something larger and greater than

I could have imagined back in those early days when we sought God's guidance for how we could best serve his kingdom. Today, I am in a position for which I did not plan, one where I am responsible for caring for my employees and stewarding our company's mission well.

Because of Eventide's growth, I have also been able to pursue another dream to build a high-quality high school in India for underprivileged and resilient girls.

I am so thankful to God for placing me in this position to love others. I want to be as faithful today to God's will as I wanted to be twelve years ago when I prayed in my parents' basement. My passion for serving others has not changed.

I want to leave you with two core questions that motivated me in the early days of my career and continue to direct all of my work: What can I do for God? and How can I love my neighbor? I believe Christian business leaders bring unique perspectives and capabilities for answering these mission-driven questions. But staying on mission isn't easy. Worldly success can tempt us away from our convictions, and leaders are pulled in many different directions. For the Christian business leader who wrestles with these same questions, I recommend reflecting on the following:

- **Identify your personal mission and your business mission.** If the two are not in alignment, work to bring them into alignment.
- **Communicate your mission and purpose regularly to your employees.** We are often good at communicating our mission to customers, but we take for granted that employees need to be reminded too.

► **Operationalize the mission across the organization.** Look for ways to bring all aspects of your business (recruiting, hiring, on-boarding, employee development, operations, sales and marketing process, product strategy, investment process, etc.) into alignment with your mission.

As business leaders, if we all seek to remain mission-aligned and neighbor-focused, I am confident we will create value that increases human flourishing and promotes the common good.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



ROBIN JOHN is co-founder, Chief Executive Officer, and Managing Partner of Eventide, a Boston-based registered investment adviser (www.eventidefunds.com) pursuing “investing that makes the world rejoice.” Founded in 2008, Eventide’s vision is to serve individuals, financial advisors, and institutions by providing high-performance investments that create compelling value for the global common good. With \$5 billion in assets under management, Eventide is the Adviser to the Eventide Mutual Funds and other advisory services. As CEO, Robin is responsible for the overall leadership of the organization, and under his leadership, the firm has grown into a leader within values-based investing. Prior to Eventide, Robin held leadership roles for Bank of New York Mellon and has also served as a business consultant for Grant Thornton. He holds a degree in Economics from Tufts University.