

Women Transforming Culture - “Work as Vocation- A Single Woman’s Perspective”:

I was asked to sit on this panel as an example of a single woman trying to live her work as a vocation. To be honest I had never thought, with any depth, about my professional work relative to being a single woman. It was an interesting exercise to go through as I prepared to come here today.

From my “vast” experience at the single life, I would like to share a couple of points on both being single and being single in the workplace. Whether one is single by choice or by circumstance, I believe these points are worth considering. The first point is a bit of an **error** into which a single person in the workplace can sometimes fall. The second is what I consider a **myth** about single life. The third point could be described as a **surprising** role for a single woman.

The first – **the error** – is becoming a workaholic. This certainly isn’t unique to single people and a case could be made that it is a greater danger for a married person because of the direct negative impact on the family. However, a single person tends to have a bit more opportunity to fall into this error. There is also often a tone in the workplace that assumes this behavior is a way of being for the single person.

I speak from my own experience that working unnecessarily long hours is not only unhealthy for the individual but a terrible example for your co-workers, especially the people you may be called to develop as future leaders for your business. It is something I have had to battle myself throughout my career because I love to work and I love the hotel business. In addition, the hotel business historically has required managers to work longer hours compared to other industries. In fact, it has always been the requirement of Marriott for managers to work a minimum 50-hour week. Since I am single, live on my own, and love what I do, I found it very easy to work around the clock and barely be aware of it. I have had to work, over the years, to develop better work habits. Discipline, setting priorities, living order are all means to avoiding a workaholic mentality. I also try to remind myself, as St. Josemaria has taught us, that work is merely the instrument. Converting work into prayer is our daily goal. Of course, not every day is a perfect success. Priorities go awry and resolutions made the night before are often blown shortly after sunrise. However, I hold dear to another constant teaching of St. Josemaria Escriva that we will live our entire lives “beginning and beginning again”.

The second point – **the myth** - is that being single is a “lonely” existence. Several years ago, I was sitting in my office at my hotel in Washington, D.C. sharing with one of my managers - who had become a good friend - the fact that I had made the decision to remain single, to live celibacy, for the rest of my life. I went on to share a few details as to what had led me to this decision. Her first reaction was to say that she was happy and excited for me – because she could see that I was happy and excited. The very next thing she said was, although she was happy for me, wouldn’t I be lonely not having a husband and children of my own. I remember, so clearly, thinking – she doesn’t get it. She had recently gotten married so I said to her – “you have recently made a commitment to someone out of love. With my decision, I have also made a commitment to someone out of love.” My “someone” just happens to be God! How could I possibly be lonely?

What I have found in my life is that loneliness is a choice. We choose on whom to focus our attention. I manage a hotel with a staff of 200 employees and on any given night there are between three and five hundred guests staying in my hotel, many who are battling cancer. Because of my travels and the various places I have lived, I have been blessed with friends throughout the country. I have a mother, father, seven brothers and sisters and numerous nieces and nephews. All of these people – family, friends, colleagues, customers – I believe God has placed around me for a reason. It has been my experience that if I stay focused on their needs, I never even come close to the idea of loneliness. Ultimately I have found that loneliness has nothing to do with being alone or being single but a lack of focus on others and too much focus on myself.

The third point – **the surprise** – is that single women are mothers too. I have found this to be particularly true in my work environment. I have several managers that report to me. Every week I meet with each one of them to discuss their particular departments – staffing, projects, issues that have come up, etc. I always try to make it a point to ask about their personal life. One manager just lost her 10 month old daughter to meningitis, another is making plans for a two week vacation to join her husband in the Mideast where he has been working for six months, a third manager is in a panic because her day care went

out of business and she's not sure what to do. I see my "maternal" role taking the form of making my heart available to those around me. The single woman's heart is totally available for this "giving". The husband and children of a married woman have a just claim on her time, attention, affection, etc. I see it as the responsibility of the single woman to make herself equally available for those in her care, be it her family, friends or employees.

I have always found my professional work fulfilling, even when circumstances, at times, made it difficult. The idea of viewing work as a vocation is familiar to me in that I see work as a "calling". The divine goal of professional work really did not occur to me until I encountered the teachings of St. Josemaria Escirva. That great formula of "sanctifying work, sanctifying yourself in your work, and sanctifying others through your work" was a huge revelation to me. It has had a dramatic impact on my professional life – not what I do, because what I do largely has not changed – but why and for whom I do it.

Being of service to others and, hopefully being focused on their needs, is what initially drew me, in my professional career, to health care, and also, for the past 17 years, to the profession of hospitality.

I have been a manager at nine different hotels in five states over the past 17 years with Marriott. Without a doubt, the highlight has been the diversity of people I have encountered over that time and the experiences we have shared. Before joining the hotel that I currently manage in Houston, I was a Regional Director. I traveled around the central part of the United States and inspected hotels. I loved that job – the travel, the freedom to make my own schedule, officing out of my home. However, towards the later part of my time in that position I remember sharing with colleagues how much I missed having my own hotel, both the responsibility of a business and especially having a team of my own.

Two of the nine hotels I've managed were new hotels where I had the opportunity, as general manager, to build a team from scratch. These two experiences are particularly dear to me because opening a new business and dealing with new construction can be very stressful. The opening team bonds in a very special way and friendships, quite naturally, grow through the shared experiences of the workday. It is an important part of the job of the General Manager to create an environment for those friendships to flourish. I have also found the workplace to be a perfect environment to develop the "apostolate of friendship" that St. Josemaria encouraged us to live. Most of my friendships, as an adult, have come from the workplace. I still keep in touch with the managers who opened those properties with me. I will never forget opening day at my first hotel in Boston. We did all we could to make sure everything was working properly before opening the doors but some things are bound to slip through the cracks. On opening day the first maintenance request from a guest read - "my toilet only flushes when the shower's turned on". A sense of humor is certainly an invaluable tool in the work place!

My experience in the various work environments has shown me that the relationships built in the workplace are often the driving force behind the success of that workplace. When those relationships are weak, particularly at the leadership level, the entire operation is weakened. The saying "people don't care how much you know until they know how much you care" is very true. Developing others and seeing to their needs is a managers' primary responsibility. In fact, in a job interview I recently went through I was asked the question – "How many hourly employees have you promoted into management positions." It was a great question to reflect upon– In the effort of realizing my own professional goals how many people had I helped to realize theirs.

The hotel that I currently manage in Houston is a very special place. The hotel is owned by a cancer hospital similar to the hospital many of you are familiar with here in New York –Sloan Kettering. The hotel was built to provide a "homelike" environment to patients receiving cancer treatment as well as their families staying with them. It is still a hotel, but a very different one than any of the others I have managed. If there were any environment in which I have worked that could be labeled a "vocation" this would be it.

In the hotel business, you provide for some of the basic needs of a person – bed, bath, food. What is unique about this hotel are the intimate details and circumstances the guests often share with the staff of the hotel. From the point of taking the initial reservation, to the numerous hotel stays, over many years, the staff accompanies the guest on their journey fighting cancer. Each of the staff has an opportunity to touch the guest in a particular way - the housekeeper tries to fulfill all the specific needs in their room, the

waiter gets an update on their treatment program as he serves them dinner, the front desk clerk helps with a room change so the guest has a better view while lying in bed. Over the last six months, I, myself, have had the experience of sitting with two different women, in their rooms, as we waited for the medical examiner to come. Both women had woken up to find their husbands deceased next to them. I remember the first time it happened a few months ago. As I walked to the room, I prayed I would have the right words to provide comfort. However, what I encountered in both situations is their need to talk – about their husbands, their children, their fight with cancer. Again, I go back to the idea of relationships. Perhaps this “relationship” was only for a short period of time, but still a relationship.

In general, what I have discovered in the workplace is that people want to be “known”. Whether I am dealing with employees or guests, I find that most people want to share their “story” and know that someone is interested in hearing it – not just doing their job. What I try to do, and to teach others to do, is to take the time to give that willing ear to someone needing to be heard.

The life and teachings of St. Josemaria Escriva that we have heard at this conference have helped me in many ways, not least of which is my perspective on professional work and career. Initially, I was both attracted and caught off guard by the teaching of St. Josemaria, that a persons professional work could and should be used as an instrument to grow in holiness and to help others do the same. My spiritual life was, for the most part, separate from my professional life. God has taught me, through the teachings of St. Josemaria, to bring these two lives, professional and spiritual, together and live one life for love of God and in service to others.