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Making a Living, Making a Life:
Toward a Spirituality of Work

“Cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life... by the sweat of your face you shall eat bread” (Gen 3:17, 19). For many Christians, this biblical image dominates a spirituality of work. We see Adam and Eve standing forlorn outside paradise, exiled for an act of willful disobedience. Now bereft of God’s shining presence, they carry with them a life sentence of hard work, sweat and pain. In this biblical memory, human work is one of the wages of sin.

For most of human history, this somber forecast has been well proved. In much of the world even today—including countries sustained by “advanced” economies—work often takes the form of demanding, dangerous, and sometimes degrading physical labor. A spirituality of work developed within the Christian tradition must be accountable to these stark realities.

During this century the Catholic Church has addressed these inhuman conditions of work in its social encyclicals and through a range of innovative and sometimes controversial ministries, such as the worker-priest movement in France, Young Catholic Workers and similar associations in many countries. An essential thrust in a Christian spirituality of work has been and must continue to be this intent to promote economic justice and to protect the dignity of workers worldwide. But our brief discussion here moves in a complementary direction. We will examine the experience of work as a potential opening to life in the Spirit.

Work reveals us to ourselves—our talents and limits and ambitions. In our first jobs we begin to discover who we are. Even when we enter the employment scene haphazardly—stumbling into our first job or taking the only work available—over time the work that we do helps us craft a durable identity. To the question “who are you?” we answer “I am a nurse” or teacher or manager or electrician. But caught in the vortex of today’s market forces, more and more of us find our work lives recast by false starts, disappointed dreams, and the necessity to start over again. These dynamics challenge earlier self-definitions and raise new questions of meaning.
SPIRITUAL DIMENSIONS OF WORK

Why do we work? Our initial response comes quickly: to make a living. Paid employment provides the financial resources we need to sustain ourselves, provide for our families, share with others in need, and save for the future. But beyond the promise of a paycheck, does our work have any value in itself? Is there any significance or delight in what we actually do on the job? Work may be how we make a living, but how does it help us make a life?

Working people today—Christians and others—ask these questions of identity and meaning, often as part of an explicit spiritual search. Tracing their response can help us sketch a contemporary spirituality of work. Our discussion will begin by exploring three spiritual dimensions of work: work as calling, as creativity, as contribution. We will close with a consideration of how the dual economies of gift and marketplace shape the spirituality of our working lives.

Work as Calling

For many of us, work connects with the spiritual journey through an awareness of personal call. In U.S. culture, where people are likely to use psychological rather than religious language to describe their inner life, this awareness is often expressed as a harmony or “fit” between work and one’s sense of self: “This is what I have always wanted to do with my life!” Other convictions about work echo this sense of congruence: “My job brings out the best in me” and “I love my work; it gives me a chance to do who I really am.”

For other people, the sense of call comes as an explicit awareness that their worklife connects with values of larger significance. A wide range of issues can support this richer sense of participation: a union steward committed to advancing racial harmony on his shift, a paralegal who values her research tasks as part of the firm’s efforts to monitor integrity in political life, the manager at a local supermarket who establishes an in-store recycling program out of concern to heal the planet. However different the focus, the dynamic is the same: people report that their principled action at work is prompted by a sense of being part of something larger than themselves. For many, this participation is personalized. More than simply something they have decided to do, their commitment is experienced as a response; they know themselves called to this work. And people of strong biblical faith—whether Jewish or Christian or Muslim—identify the source of this invitation as God. For them, the call they experience in their work is a religious vocation.

Conventionally in Catholic tradition, the language of vocation was reserved for only certain careers. Priests and vowed religious were understood as called by God to genuine vocations. Lay Catholics had
important work to do in their families and jobs and civic communities, but they did not have “vocations.” Devout laity might also pursue an apostolate of religiously-inspired service, but this was almost always understood as a commitment to good deeds apart from and in addition to their secular work. Following the reforms of Vatican II, Catholics have begun to reclaim an older and richer meaning of vocation. God’s call does not divide the faith community into “first class” (priests and vowed religious) and “second class” (lay) members. Rather the Christian vocation—to attend to the action of God’s Spirit in God’s world—is shared by all the baptized. Expressed in our communal actions of worship and justice, this call is also registered in personal commitments of love and work. Whatever our lifestyle, the context of daily work provides repeated opportunity to act on our deepest values and express our faith experience.

“Ministry in the Marketplace” initiatives in many Protestant congregations today are encouraging local faith communities to recognize the ordinary work of their members as their essential ministry and to support individuals in developing a lively awareness of personal vocation. Like Catholics, Protestants must struggle against their heritage of a world divided between sacred activities which take place in the church and are led by formally designated ministers and secular work which lay members pursue in their daily lives.

Work as Creativity

Good work expresses and expands our life; it nourishes the human spirit. Psychologists point to the fruit of positive work experiences. A creative work setting supports the development of competence—a consistent readiness to do one’s best, according to standards that have been personally validated, even in the face of obstacles. The feeling of accomplishment that comes in work well done can mature into an abiding sense of confidence—“my inner resources are trustworthy.”

The worksite is also the place where our creativity has a chance to develop. We are challenged to devise a better product, to control costs, to protect the environment against the hazards of our culture’s technological advances. Creativity at work gives our labor a personal stamp, leaving on the product the mark of our own vision and talent and desire. And creative work, with its challenges that test our resources, also nourishes us. In the U.S. today personal free time seems very limited, and much of it is spent in activities intended to distract us from physical and psychological stresses associated with our work. But, paradoxically, most Americans report being happier at their work than when they are involved in their usual leisure activities—watching television, “taking it easy,” and shopping. These activities we turn to for relief seldom seem to satisfy. Instead, distraction dissolves into dissipation.
Sensing we are “on hold” during that time rather than really living, we quickly become bored. Psychologists studying creativity have identified the psychological experience of flow, in which we are completely absorbed in something outside ourselves that engages the full range of our resources—thinking and feeling, skills and values—and stretches us just a bit beyond our current comfort level (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). In moments of flow, when they are successfully dealing with real challenges, people report they feel most alive. And it is in these moments of minimal self-consciousness, which are closely associated with creative work, that people report themselves happiest. Although these experiences of creativity are enjoyable, we do not seek them out primarily because they are pleasurable, but because they are worthwhile.

When we feel creative at work, we know what we are doing and why it is important. We cherish our work “for itself,” not just for its extrinsic payoffs in salary considerations, career advancement or prestige. Many businesses today are abandoning “incentive plans” as they realize that such pay-for-performance programs end by being manipulative and distracting people from the worth of their work.

Carrying us beyond productivity and responsibility—simply doing what needs to be done—creativity brings us to delight. People on the journey of faith sometimes hear, in these resonances of their own creativity, the echo of God’s own delight in creation. We turn again to the book of Genesis, but now to different memories. We recall a Potter God entranced by the clay as it takes shape in God’s hands; we remember Adam and Eve’s initial God-given “work” was to name the animals. These images remind us that creation continues as we name the world and shape its future through our daily work (John Paul II, 1981).

**Work as Contribution**

The longing to give something back to life marks a significant threshold of spiritual growth, beckoning us beyond the cramped confines of self-concern toward a wider engagement in the world. Many adults see their work as the most immediate and practical means they have for making a difference in the world. By providing products that people need, by distributing goods that bring comfort and convenience, by offering services to help society thrive, they try to make their contribution.

Psychologists have tracked this longing as it matures into the midlife strength of generativity, a commitment to use one’s resources responsibly in the service of interests that go beyond oneself. Generative adults embrace the world, not just to prove themselves or to defend the narrow boundaries of self-interest. Their commitment is to
“leave an afterwards,” to give birth to something that will outlast their own lives and make the next generation fuller.

In midlife, the future makes new claims. For some people this leads to a re-orientation of personal responsibility at work. Larger moral concerns—ethical norms in the workplace, fair access to employment and career advancement, the regulation and reform of larger economic structures—now take on added significance. Resolution of these complex issues is unlikely in our lifetime. But this sober realization does not exempt us from the effort. These complicated questions will shape the world we leave to our children’s children. Aware of this legacy, we recommit ourselves to the patient work of crafting a world worthy of the future, a world worthy of God’s hope for humankind.

Often, of course, work provides a setting for neither creativity nor contribution. Many Americans feel stuck in dead-end jobs, with hope for a pension being the only lever that lifts them out of bed in the morning. Other workers spend their shifts on mindlessly repetitive tasks that seem to contribute little to life beyond a paycheck. Philosopher Paul Ricoeur has observed that when public life sours, people turn to private domains for compensation and revenge. If our jobs and careers are meaningless, we will demand that our private lives furnish the consolation we so sorely miss. Leisure time then carries the full burden of providing meaning and delight. This is, as Ricoeur described more than thirty years ago, a formula for addiction. And the prevalence of alcoholism, pornography, and eating disorders in our culture today seems to attest to the accuracy of his insight.

AT WORK IN TWO ECONOMIES

Experiences of calling, creativity, and contribution help us hold our work in a more relaxed grasp. This new embrace acknowledges that “the work of our hands” is not just ours. We are neither its sole authors nor its only beneficiaries. Our work initiates us into a more mysterious dynamic that ultimately escapes our control—the reign of God being made real among us.

We witness this worldly realization in the interplay of two complementary economies, that of the marketplace and the gift. The market economy envelops us in our work. This is the world of buying and selling, of supply and demand, of concern for the bottom line. The gift economy encircles us, too, even if its functions seem less obvious and less urgent. The exchange of resources here is more subtle but equally real: we volunteer our time in the parish program of religious education or social outreach; we serve on a citizen’s committee promoting the arts or work pro bono for a person or group in need.

These complementary economies fuel the creativity of a culture. Each is a necessary and valued element of social life, though the
current preoccupation with “market forces” threatens to absorb our culture’s attention to the neglect of the more delicate economy of the gift. The health and vitality of a society depend on its honoring the economies of both the market and the gift.

The Market Economy

This economy—the most obvious dynamic in our working lives—exists to create abundance: business is about growing and distributing a fuller harvest, providing better medicine and health care, making more cars and computers. Productivity is the watchword here. This economy alerts us to limited resources. We have only so much time and energy in a day. If we take a half day away from our work to care for a sick child, we may well lose a half day’s pay. If we donate funds to this worthy cause, we will have less to give to another. An exhausting week on the job may so deplete us that we have little energy left for our family.

This lesson of the market economy—that needed resources are in short supply—warns us to save our money and conserve our energy. It counsels us to accumulate savings against a time of illness or other emergency. The market economy also teaches us the lesson of quid pro quo: “you get what you pay for.” We purchase the cheapest toaster on sale at the discount store, and it breaks a month later: we got what we paid for. This homey lesson of investment and return finds echo in the biblical admonition: “As you sow, so shall you reap” (Gal 6:7).

The logic of the market economy supports another expectation: that life should be fair. Many of us function under the assumption that if we work hard, we will be justly rewarded. Or if we exercise, eat well and do not smoke, we will not get sick. Then, of course, we learn with Job a more complicated truth: life is not “fair.” Good health and good fortune are not assured according to some clear calculus of personal merit.

The Economy of the Gift

As we learn the lessons of the market economy, we are also recruited into the more mysterious dynamic of the gift exchange. Like the marketplace, the gift economy pursues abundance, but its abundance accrues according to different rules. In our families and friendships, in public service and generative care, we experience an exchange in which giving is not losing.

As parents and teachers and caregivers, we spend ourselves—but the donation does more than deplete us. Sharing knowledge and concern is not like a bank transaction, leaving our account void. Instead what is shared is multiplied. What is given enriches both the giver and those who receive.
In the gift economy, unlike the marketplace, we learn that not every interaction is a zero-sum game. Visiting a sick friend—or struggling with others to solve a complex issue of the common good—is an effort that takes considerable time and energy. But most often we come away not only exhausted, but enriched. Where we had expected only to give, we experience our life enlarged.

Another lesson of the gift exchange is that we do not always get what we deserve. We do not merit, in advance, our life or love or health. No financial payment to our parents can adequately square that account. No well-negotiated contract will insure that we will never be sick. When we are forgiven a serious offense, we know we have not earned this reconciliation; rather it arrives as gift.

The gift economy teaches that what we are given is not just for our own benefit. The benefits we have received—from a nurturing upbringing or a good education or other fortunate opportunities—are not to be accumulated or hoarded. As Lewis Hyde reminds us in his evocative essay *The Gift* (1979), gifts are not meant to be taken out of circulation. They must be handed on.

A spirituality of work flourishes when we learn to respect both economies. Christians do not inhabit some separate domain, a cozy world that operates only on the gift economy. We, like everyone else, have to earn our keep and join in the labor that builds a better society. But, like many others of good will, we are blessed with the conviction that human life is about more than cut-throat competition and blind market forces. We work, but not just to accumulate wealth and protect our own. For we have experienced the invitation to share in God’s economy of the gift.

The parable of the talents in Matthew’s Gospel (ch. 25) brings together these two economies in human life. A master commits different sums of money to the care of each of his servants while he is away. On his return, several show him the increase they have generated through shrewd investment. One of the servants, fearful of losing his already small deposit, has buried the coins in order to preserve their full value. We read that the master was displeased with this cautious strategy; this servant has misplayed the market economy. But underlying the story of investment return is the generosity of the initial donation: all these servants—whether market-savvy or fearful—have received their initial talents as gift.

In Christian life today these two economies continue to intersect and overlap. Singing a hymn at the Sunday liturgy (a song, perhaps, of thanksgiving for the many gifts God has freely bestowed upon us), we look more closely at the songbook to notice the copyright notification at the bottom of the page. The songwriter who reminds us of God’s unending generosity has, nevertheless, a right to make a living from her creative work. The two economies touch.
The parish itself is a curious meeting place of the two economies. On the one hand, we have priest and vowed religious spending themselves in generous service in this community of faith. Their work, flowing from dedicated lives, appears to be a rather pure example of the gift economy. But looking more closely we recognize that their unselfish service is possible in part because other members of the community have contributed some of their hard-earned money to support this communal generosity. Both economies are necessary dynamics in every human community.

In American life, where the market has become so dominant, we must work hard to keep alive a recognition of the significance of the gift economy. Dedicated to productivity and consumption, the market economy constantly focuses on quantity; thus the priority given to productivity and the job-related stress of trying to get more done. To this dynamic, the gift economy contributes a corrective emphasis on quality: does high productivity make human life better? Are our cultural patterns of consumption actually nourishing us? Is the wealth generated by productivity gains being hoarded by a few—“taken out of circulation”—or is the common-wealth benefitting? A society that does not face these questions puts itself at risk.

Two economies—the gift and the marketplace—create the context for every work that we undertake. At work we raise one of the important considerations of the market economy: am I being paid what I am worth? But we also ask: is this work worth doing? Behind this question, the haunting gospel query: “what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their very life?” (Matt 16:26).

CONCLUSION

So we end where we began. Open to the Spirit, many people today long to “make a life” in the midst of “making a living.” Immersed in dual economies of marketplace and gift, they strive to honor daily work as a career and a calling, both a job to be done and a personal vocation shaped by skills developed and gifts received. Knowing that gifts are to be shared and handed on, they embrace the labor of gratitude. In this fruitful embrace, a spirituality of work is born.

REFERENCES


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