

The Soulful Side of Work

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Did you know that the most common question asked at any social gathering is this: "What do you DO for a living?" The second most common question – which is equally related, is asked at many high school graduation celebrations. It goes like this: What are you going to major in when you go to college? Or to vo-tech? Or... you fill in the blank."

You all know the questions. And, most of us can relate to how awkward it feels to NOT have an answer to those questions. In fact, I remember stammering to answer the first question, the one about work, at a family gathering in May of 1984 – right after I'd been fired from my job as a newspaper editor...My mother's friend, Susie, asked me how my job was going. When I said I'd been fired, there was an awkward pause...my self-esteem already shattered, I didn't know how to go on and finish our conversation in any decent fashion. I felt humiliated.

The subject of work has been addressed in religious literature across most major world religions. Witness today's readings – one from the Christian New Testament and one from Buddhist texts. The reading from Luke in the New Testament presents a pretty harsh view of what happens when one wastes one's talents. The two servants who invested their talents were rewarded. The servant who hoarded his 'talents' was chastised. By the way, as a kid, I never understood the intent of this reading until I learned that 'talent' had a double meaning in this text: both money and human gifts. So, based on my subjective understanding of the text, readers are challenged to use the talents they are given, multiplying good by giving.

In the Buddhist approach to life the value of work is deeply embedded. The Buddha taught that actions bring results, whether for good or ill. He also taught that nothing just happens by itself - all things are conditioned and each thing as a cause. To work hard and conscientiously has beneficial consequences, whether this is working on spiritual practices or cleaning the streets. Idleness, lethargy, and dissolute behavior are decried by the Buddha as unwholesome. Again and again, the Buddha urges us to act - to meditate, to do good deeds, to build good relationships with others. Indeed, it is notable that the Buddha's last words were 'strive on with diligence!'

Personally, it took me many years to really understand the positive nature of work – how it might benefit my soul and the souls of those around me. You see, I had never really stayed in one place long enough to integrate ANYTHING. As a self-proclaimed career gypsy, I've worked the gamut of employment opportunities: waitress, newspaper reporter, newspaper editor, calendar and pen salesperson, nanny for willful teenagers, domestic violence shelter organizer, and cornhusker...yes, my very first paid job at age 13 was to husk tiny pickling corn as fast as I possibly could for Robb Ross Co. I was paid 9 cents a pound on weekdays and 11 cents a pound on Sundays...I lasted exactly five days at this job.

Here's what it took for me to 'get it', that is to really see that work benefits the soul. Only by seeing work's soul value in others did I understand its significance.

For example, about 8 years ago, I worked as a career counselor in the South Dakota Women's Prison. At this institution, being able to work was a reward for good behavior. For 25 cents an hour, the women of the SD Women's Prison rewired area schools, cooked prison meals, cleaned prison bathrooms, and planted greenery for the government grounds in Pierre SD – the state capital where the prison was also located. One summer night there was a terrific thunderstorm in Pierre, accompanied by strong winds and golf ball-sized hail. The flowers and many plants that the prison women had spent the week planting were all destroyed. Several of these women wept when they learned their week's worth of work had been wiped out. After the

tears were shed, these same women took up a collection in the prison to buy new bedding plants to replace the destroyed greenery...imagine that...at 25 cents an hour, these women didn't earn much. Despite that, the end result was more important to many than what a week's work could purchase. I know some of you might be doing the math and here's how it works: At 40 hours per week and 25 cents per hour, these women earned \$10 a week.

And then there's Violet. Violet works for The University of South Dakota in Vermillion. She's been a longtime employee of the university, working in the Facilities Management Division. Every weekday, and some weekends, Violet gets up at 3 a.m. to be at work by 4 a.m. She cleans bathrooms and hallways in student housing and she also cleans the USD Career Development Center where I used to work.

One day I arrived early enough to catch Violet cleaning my office. I asked her what she liked most about working at the university (...as a career counselor, it's an occupational hazard). She paused for a moment, and then said to me: "I make students' lives better. It's easier for them to study and feel at home here when they live in a clean place."

It's amazing what we can learn from people around us. After years of study, I learned this from both Violet and the SD female prison population: How much joy and meaning we get out of our daily work largely depends upon our perspective. When we can look at our life's work – no matter how small – as adding merit to the world and to the lives of others, THEN we really understand the soulful nature of work.

Soulful work answers a calling. It addresses *who* we are being and *how* we are contributing, rather than *what* we are doing. I must add that seeing ones' work as soulful isn't always easy to master. How many of you sitting here would rather be filling your days with something else right now than what you're currently doing? How many of you like your job, but would jump at the chance to do something better if it came along? How many of you don't like your job and have never liked any job you've had?

The last question is a tough one to answer, isn't it? I know I could have raised my hand to that one about 20 years ago. You see, my job title and what I DID seemed more important than how I saw what I contributed in the world. It may be the case for some of you as well.

Soulfulness with Work

I'd never suggest that anyone here quit a job to find something more rewarding – the perfect soul-feeding profession. After all, we must work and – as my mother always said – it's easier to find meaningful work when you're already working at something. I do, however, offer five suggestions as guidelines in making work a more soulful experience.

- *Practice gratefulness.* At some point in your day, identify three things for which you're grateful. Write these three things down on your calendar, or say them aloud at the dinner table to the people you live with...shock them! Integrating this practice in your daily life can make it easier to reframe how you see your world and your current job. American psychologist and philosopher William James would agree. He had this to say: "Human beings can alter their lives by altering their attitudes of mind.
- *Strive with diligence.* The Buddha said it best. Meditate. Do good deeds. Practice random acts of kindness. Be as mindful as possible about the current contributions you make to the things you do in your life.
- *Consider that work is a part of the sacred rhythm of life.* Some of life's greatest soul lessons come from the most miserable jobs. My first job as a pickling corn husker was a miserable experience: hot humid Iowa sun; mean and tough girls from the west side of Sioux City, IA – where I grew up; and pruny-faced supervisors. However, I learned that, if I put my mind to something (earning at least \$25 to buy the three dresses I wanted to

- start the new school year), I could accomplish it. I was capable of reaching goals. You, too, have probably learned great things about yourself from past jobs.
- *Take a break.* Ecclesiastes, Chapter 3, Verse 1 reads: “For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.” Vacations, pacing, self-reflection should be part of one’s work practice. In his book, *The Tao of Pooh*, Benjamin Hoff writes that “the Puritans practically worked themselves to death in the fields without getting much of anything for their tremendous efforts. They were actually starving until the wiser inhabitants of the land showed them a few things about working in harmony with the earth’s rhythms.” Don’t work yourself to death. Take time out to think and to recharge. In addition, take time out to think about what makes you happy and what makes you miserable. Ask yourself this: Can I change what makes me miserable? If not, see the last suggestion.
 - *Craft the story of your life.* Think of your life as a story. I invite you to approach the story of your life as a great novelist would. Decide what life questions you want most to explore. Ask yourself: If I could read my life story objectively, what would I want it to say? Does your life story have the elements of a good story: challenges to overcome, growth, direction, confidence, a larger-than-self purpose? If the answer to the last question is no, then think about how you want to rewrite your story. You are the author of your life; the good news is that you can rewrite your life story with any kind of ending you want. If your story contains seamy characters, misery on the job, and the endless gray of institutionalized, mind-numbing chatter, how do you want to change it? If you write it, you can live it.

In summary, there’s much to savor about life and life’s work. What we contribute to the world does enrich our souls. Be thoughtful. Give back. Strive diligently. You will be living on the “soulful side of work.”