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## **“The Spirituality of Work”**

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We don't know how many moments of life have been given to us, but each moment is gone forever and each moment means that there are fewer and that means that every one of them is precious. For most people, many of our moments are taken up with work. For those who have retired, many moments of your life have been given to work. So, I thought it might be useful for us to reflect on the subject of work on this Labor Day Sunday.

One study has found that many Americans are more comfortable at work than at home. Because of downsizing, because of our work ethic here in the U.S., because of great and ever-increasing demands that employers are putting on workers today, people just spend so much time at work and people at home get to be more and more of strangers and relationships at home neglected become problems and it's no fun at home, but you know the people at work and that's where you have community. A third of us don't take all of the vacation that we are entitled to. I never understood that. This is voluntary exploitation. Remember, each single moment of your life means fewer and every one is precious and are you sure your employer will reward that kind of loyalty if it suits your employer's purpose to just let you go. Meanwhile, your families, your friends, your community, and your spiritual life are crying for those moments. Okay, don't take all of your vacation for yourself, but what about the rest of us? What kind of an expectation is that setting up for our society? There is proof that overwork leads to less productivity. More vacation leads to more productivity. Most of us, whether we take all of our vacation or not, are going to be spending a lot of time at work. Sometimes we enjoy it and sometimes we don't, but we are spending a lot of time there.

We think of spiritual practice as something we do at a set aside time and certainly that is a very good thing to do, to set aside some time for spiritual practice. But we think of it as something that is exclusive to that time. It isn't just something that you do at that time of day on a meditation cushion or in a reading chair. You see, all of life is an opportunity to do spiritual practice, including work. That's recognized by our common language, professions practice. People profess, they take an oath, and then they practice. Doctors, lawyers, therapists, they have a practice which is their work. Our language is already recognizing how work can be a road to our wholeness, our learning, our spiritual completeness and that we needn't make a sharp distinction between our spiritual practice and our work life. Unitarian Universalist and Buddhist author, Lewis Richman, has written a wonderful little book called, *Work as Spiritual Practice*. He talks about the *koan* of everyday life. Let me describe for those of you who don't know what a *koan* is. It's a Zen practice. If somebody in quest of enlightenment comes to a Zen master, the Zen master will give them a puzzle which has no rational solution and it leads the aspirant to completely reorder their world, their thinking, and opens up the world as it is instead of the world as we think it is. A *koan* is something like: “What is the sound of one hand clapping (that has become a cliché)?” “What was your face before your mother and father were born?” “Does a dog have a Buddha nature?”

They're puzzles that we cannot figure out by exerting control, they are puzzles that we have to figure out by surrendering to them. Richman says that work can be a *koan*, a puzzle that we figure out by surrendering to it. He says, "Human life itself, the mystery of being thrust into the world by birth and swept out of it by death is and imponderable puzzle, one that we can try to ignore, but cannot escape. So much or what passes for ordinary life is, when seen through different eyes, not ordinary at all but full of potential for spiritual learning. To practice the *koan* of everyday life means to confront every situation as though it were a profound spiritual question." He goes on to say that all of this is under your control. I had to pause on that because I know that so much of work life today is not under people's direct control, that the social contract that was hammered out between labor and management in America at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, an industrial era compact which allowed a manufacturing worker middle class to arise is gone; it's over under the new technology of the information age. People are being exploited and falling through the cracks and we don't yet have another social contract. It needs to be developed. People are more and more seen as simply units of production, costs of production, and not human beings. But, I listened to what Richman had to say and, you know, he's right. You shouldn't blame your boss, your clients, or your customers. I'm quoting him, "Set aside for now the notion that on the job you work for somebody else. In your spiritual life you are self-employed, you work for yourself. No one needs to know about this inner job. It can be your secret. Everybody thinks you're punching the clock and grinding out the numbers, but you know you're striving for enlightenment." Cool.

So how do you do this? You pay attention. Pay attention to the moments. Especially pay attention to the moments that are not comfortable. When does anger arise? boredom? depression? ambition? failure? success? Even the ringing of the phone can be a lesson in spiritual growth because it stands for everything in life that we cannot control. Howard Cutler, a psychiatrist, had an interview with the Dalai Lama on the topic of happiness. He came up with a book on happiness and that's a later sermon, but there was so much about work in that interview that there was a second book called *The Art of Happiness at Work*. In that book the Dalai Lama talks about self-understanding and self-understanding is something that can happen at any time and can be cultivated under any circumstances. What we need to understand is that we all want happiness. Whatever we say, our deepest longing is for happiness. As a series of sermons that I began a couple weeks ago, very often we look in the wrong place for happiness, but the key to happiness is in our hands. It has naught to do with having enough money, or having a great job, or being well-known, or having a lot of stuff. It really has a lot to do with how you treat others. There is a Hungarian-American psychologist name Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi who talks about a concept called "flow". Flow is when you're so absorbed in a task that you have no sense of time, you have very little sense of a separate self doing the task, in a way you become the task. Athletes talk about being in the zone and a lot of people, most of us really, have had a time, whether in work or leisure, when we were so concentrated and so completely involved in a task that we had lost our sense of self and time. It's a great feeling. So, Cutler asked the Dalai Lama, "Isn't this what we should be doing, trying to find flow in our work just as much as possible?" And in his gentle way, the Dalai Lama points out how unrealistic this is.

You know, Americans are materialists in so many ways, including spiritual materialists. Spiritual materialism is going for the cool mind states, going for the highs of spiritual practice and thinking that achieving these highs is the answer to spiritual growth and the higher you are the more spiritual you are. It's really not true. Let me quote the Dalai Lama, "I think this flow state is not reliable or sustainable and I think it's more important to develop new forms of satisfaction through one's work that are brought about by training one's mind, shaping one's outlook and attitude, integrating basic human values in the workplace. For example, dealing with one's destructive emotions while at work, reducing anger, jealousy, greed, and so on, and practicing relating to others with kindness, compassion, tolerance, these are much more important and stable sources of satisfaction than trying to create flow as much as possible." The milestones of your personal growth, I would say, are not the mind states, it's how you treat others.

The great rabbi of the first century, a contemporary of Jesus, named Hillel, he may have been Jesus's teacher actually, said this, "In a world where no one is behaving as a human being, you must behave as a human being." That says a lot about work. To behave as a human being at work is the first thing we need to do. We need work that is honest and productive that creates products and services that are useful and not products and services that are harmful. This work needs to be done without lying, stealing, and cheating. Not even lying, stealing, and cheating a little bit. This seems obvious but one look at the headlines and a survey of the people who have come through my office throughout my career talking about their spiritual dilemmas at work teaches me that ethics in work are losing ground. A lot of people, a lot of people, are in jobs, some of them where they are outright breaking the law out of pressure to get ahead or get more, and others where they cannot do their job without telling half-truths, manipulating people, and playing games. If you are in a job like that, spiritual growth is going to be very difficult for you. If you spend most of your day lying, cheating, and stealing, or even a little bit, then it doesn't matter how much you meditate and pray, your mind will not be at peace. So, if you're in a job like that, get a new one as soon as you can for your spiritual health.

Many people believe that they cannot be happy until they have their dream job. That simply is not true. People can be happy doing honest work and then developing themselves at work and outside of work and enjoying life. Finding the right job is not the key to happiness. Studies show that about a third of the workers view their work as a job, as a way to put food on the table. That's fine. Give an honest day's work for an honest wage. Do your work carefully with pride. Treat your fellow employees, your clients, and your employer with respect. Live a life of integrity, learn there. Another third of workers view their work as a career and it's tied up in achievement, accomplishment, status, and recognition. That is great, too. The problem with that sometimes is that people identify too much with their career. That's why retirement can be dangerous. People who have become so identified with their career, their work, don't know who they are when that work disappears. So if you're into accomplishment and status and that, it's fine, but remember it's not all of who you are. A third see their work as a vocation, it's from the Latin word "to call out", so it's a calling. There seems to be for them a sense that there is a divine or mysterious call to do that kind of work.

A vocation is where your deepest joy and the world's deepest needs come together, to paraphrase Fredrick Boikner. This is a great thing when that happens.

So again, you don't have to have the perfect job. Your vocation may be something that you do in your spare time. You're lucky if you get paid for it, but do it anyway even if you don't get paid for it. Because these are gifts that you have to give the world; the world needs them. Also, you don't have to have a high-status job to see your job as a vocation. Howard Cutler, the psychiatrist who interviewed the Dalai Lama, talks about when he took a summer job in an orange juice canning factory and his learning curve for that job was 11 seconds. What he had to do was stand at the end of a conveyor belt and lift canned orange juice boxes onto a wooden palette which would then be taken away on a forklift by somebody else. That's what he did all day. There was another guy on the other side of the conveyor belt and this guy didn't even tell him his name, hardly said a word, 45 minutes later he just said, "This job sucks." Then, Cutler noticed that he was loading twice as many orange juice crates as this guy who had worked there forever and obviously hated his job. The next day there was a shift adjustment and a guy named Carl took the place of his silent coworker on the other side of the conveyor belt. Carl knew everybody in that factory, was liked by everybody in that factory, took an interest in everybody in that factory. Carl told Cutler all these stories and he seemed to find out all kinds of stuff about what this product meant. Where was it shipped? How many cases of orange juice were created everyday? He had all of these facts and figures that meant something to him. Then he said, "Be careful with that crate of orange juice. That's going to the Queen's yacht where bored diplomats will be sipping it. Be careful with that crate of orange juice. That's going to Nebraska where a little baby with colic will be sipping it." He had a sense of where his low-status job fit in to the whole. Unloading crates of orange juice onto a palette was this guy's vocation.

We do need to avoid exploitation and we do need to work in this global economy to help figure out a new balance between productivity and human values. Generation X and Generation Y, people under the age of 40, are a lot better than their Boomer elders. They know that life is also about interests, hobbies, friends, and spiritual development. They know that they won't have a job for life in the new economy. They want jobs where they can learn and get new skills and they want to be able to enjoy where they are. They can be their elders' teachers in this regard. You may want to think about where your life is out of balance in regard to work and play, work and love, work and spirit. You'd be surprised how many people do what is called "down-shifting," going from a high-pressure profession to part-time work, or less pressured work, or retiring and then taking some work that they wanted to do for their whole life. The point here, every moment of our life is precious. We can't afford to waste any moment. By being present and by using it to grow our hearts, to grow our minds, and to grow our spirits, we inhabit our full humanity. In a world where no one is behaving as a human being, you must behave as a human being.

Amen.