

The "Spirituality" of Work

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I suppose it was only a matter of time: "spirituality" is the hottest new management theory. If churches had emergency rooms this development would be posted like those from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta alerting ER docs to the toxicity of the latest "recreational" drugs. Over the last several decades, the ancient and powerful language of genuine spiritual experience has been so besieged, so diluted and misused, that I cringe to think what will be left when this fad has had its day.

I have here a glossy brochure for a conference on "business and consciousness" aimed HRD and management-strategy folks; it was in the first batch of mail I received as Book Review editor. These are the special evening events: "The Dances of Universal Peace," "Special Networking Event and Truth at Work Interactive Game," "Spirit Renewal Celebration," "Shamanic Celebration," and "LifeForce Dance: A Sacred Journey Through the Senses." Concurrent sessions offer more of the same: obviously this is equal-opportunity, fully inclusive exploitation of religious language in the service of corporate profits and productivity. I was tempted to go; but the conference costs \$1600 for five days, plus airfare to Acapulco: the ascetic tradition not yet been appropriated.

"The spirituality of work" is an issue of broad general interest in publishing at the moment: in the last year or so there has been a torrent of books. Broadly-formulated, the problem defined in common is that (a) people feel the spiritual emptiness of their lives; and (b) much of their life is spent at work and yet (c) work itself can feel meaningless, boring, oppressive, etc. and so (d) the solution to their spiritual hunger is renewed, different, or greater investment in work. In short, those who ache from the God-shaped hole in their lives are told that the solution is merely to think differently and to feel differently about what they do for a living so that they can find it more rewarding. That's not exactly building altars to Ba'al, but it's getting close.

Such books use the word "sacred" as loosely equivalent to "very important." That is, whether or not we believe in God or go to church, we all have a sense of the [very important]. Our individual "spirituality," then, is our personal commitment to living in the light of the [very important] as we understand it. The trick is to identify the [very important] element in our jobs. But when God gets defined as an "optional extra" to spirituality, there is very little to keep that position from deteriorating into narcissism raised to a cosmic principle. On the other hand, in the absence of some connection to culturally vital and articulate religious tradition, the truly besieged, truly isolated modern self has in fact no where to turn except within. That's the spiritual famine of our time. As even *Publishers' Weekly* laments (8.30.99), the entrenched split between religion and spirituality in the bookselling markets has led to the dumbing down of spirituality and the marginalizing of religion.

The best guide to the "work and spirituality" issue is Joanne B. Ciulla, *The Working Life: The Promise and Betrayal of Modern Work* (New York: Times Books, 2000). It's a fascinating book— vitally important reading for anyone in ministry who does not have substantial personal experience in the business world. Ciulla has a PhD in philosophy; she was a postdoctoral Fellow at the Harvard Business School, a visiting scholar at Oxford, and a Senior Fellow at the Wharton School. She holds an endowed chair in leadership and ethics at a school of leadership studies within the University of Richmond. That's impressive enough, I suppose, but I'm recommending the book not so much for her credentials as for the intelligence of her argument and above all her engaging grace as a writer. She is not only clear and witty but also uncommonly adept at turning a memorable phrase. Where she traversed historical or theological ground that I know first-hand, I was delighted over and over again by how accessibly and yet accurately she explained things.

The first third of *The Working Life* is a history of attitudes toward work, beginning in classical antiquity, including a very fine section on Luther and Calvin, and concluding in our own times. The middle third is mostly a history of management fads in the 20th century: it rescued me forever from wishing I'd been interested in

some line of work that pays a bit better than literature or theology. The last third, titled "Work and Life" offers her most creative thinking, on the meaning of time and the meaning of consumption in our lives.

Her principal argument is that the implicit social contract between employers and employees has been devastated in the last decade by how the 24/7 demands of globalization and e-commerce have severely "rationalized" the market. Human commitments—the essential exchange of loyalties in the work-place—has given way to all-out attention to profits. As a result, management strategists are trying to get workers to feel a loyalty or to make a commitment that the company itself cannot and does not reciprocate. "Spirituality" is merely the latest in a series of ever-more sophisticated, ever-more manipulative ploys. At first I thought that no employee with any sophistication would ever fall for any of this stuff, but she convinced me that the incessant pressure of such programs becomes morally and psychologically dangerous for everyone, for anyone, no matter how sophisticated they be.

The Working Life would be an excellent foundation for a vestry retreat. The people who need to read it most will by definition have the least time to read it, but Ciulla's writing is so very clear and well organized that one could easily enough pull together from her book several forty-five minute presentations—especially since the business folks on the vestry have probably lived through most of this! What does it mean, or what might it mean, for a parish to embody and to provide a strong alternative to this sort of empty cunning propaganda and sophisticated manipulation? How can the parish make coherent appeals to its members and to potential members without falling into what will be, for most parishioners, a familiar, corrupt, manipulative language from work? Above all, this above all, how can we equip people to recognize the mis-appropriation of religious language for management purposes?

For help in answering such questions, I cannot warmly enough recommend L. William Countryman, *Living on the Border of the Holy: Renewing the Priesthood of All* (Harrisburg PA: Morehouse, 1999). It is one of those rare and wonderful

books that I read straight through in a day or so and then again straight through. It's not on work but on calling, and not on calling as this or that particular activity but rather calling in its absolutely deepest sense: we are called by God to engage with God, and once that happens life is just not the same. The world looks different—and our jobs look different—because we see with different eyes. *Living on the Border of the Holy* offers a rich, accessible perspective from which to bring the power and the resources of faith to bear upon the genuine spiritual issues that might be developed through theological reflection about the role of our jobs in our lives.

Those who want to situate their thinking about work within systematic theology and social-justice issues might begin with Miroslav Volf, *Life in the Spirit: Toward A Theology of Work* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1991; out of print). If the kingdom of God is truly among us now, unrecognized, unseen because unimagined, then whatever work we do might be evaluated in the light of its contribution to the necessary task of recognition and coming-forth of the kingdom. The argument is eloquent, as one would expect. It will take some theological skill and imaginative prowess to get from the systematics back down to useful, practical, theological reflection with the person who hates his job, but that's okay. I'm convinced that mangled, misunderstood, unconsciously internalized theology causes a lot of real grief in the lives of very ordinary people who are, however, honest and reasonably careful thinkers. A theologian like Volf can have a correlatively powerful pastoral importance.

I'd also recommend Stanley Hauerwas's essay, "Work as Co-Creation: A Critique of a Remarkably Bad Idea" in *In Good Company: The Church as Polis* (Abingdon, 1995; out of print). It's a stern and witty corrective for the sentimentality which argues that occupations such as fine craftsmanship and family farms are the only true model for "meaningful work." Hauerwas argues instead that through work we discover how interdependent we all are. That interdependence funds the dignity and meaning available in any work, even in drudgery, especially if one receives an honest living wage and the due regard of others.

Finally, the classic source on the meaning of work in Western culture is of course Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (trans. Talcott Parsons, ed. Randall Collins, 2nd ed. Los Angeles: Roxbury Publishing, 1998). Collins's seventy-five page introduction is terrific, and Parsons's translation reads with an ease and grace that makes me wonder a bit how literal it is. Maybe there are more precisely accurate translations out there—I have not looked at nor, I confess, tried my hand at the German—but here's one you shouldn't miss. It's in print and in paperback besides.

Arlie Hochschild has also documented and criticized the manipulative stratagems common in the workplace. *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (Berkeley: U California Press, 1983), *The Second Shift: Working Parents and the Revolution at Home* (New York: Avon Books, 1989) and *The Time Bind: When Work Becomes Home and Home Becomes Work* (New York: Metropolitan Books, Henry Holt, 1997) are classic, very readable, well-regarded studies that often had shallow, hostile reviews in the popular press. Having read *The Working Life*, I reread *The Time Bind* with even greater admiration than before. She brings to life the business world Ciulla depicts by offering lively portraits of particular households or individuals and by backing up those portraits with powerful statistics and sociological analysis.

Hochschild's particularity and her story-telling ability will help anyone to offer more discerning, more sympathetic pastoral care to people who are both seduced and exhausted by the demands of their jobs. One way or another, we need to identify moral resources for recognizing the illegitimacy of such demands even when, as a practical matter, the demands of the job seem inflexible. After all, no one will find options that they don't first imagine as appropriate and morally legitimate. As Hochschild points out in passing, parishes are one among many organizations in the community that have suffered because management ideology presents the demands of work as inexorable, while the demands of everything else are presumed to be flexible and largely optional. That sounds like the modern version of the context for a parable or a healing miracle, it seems to me.

The extraordinary and rigid time demands of the workplace are only half the story Hochschild tells. What interests her more—what has apparently interested her across the span of her career—is the psychological manipulation to which employees are subject. If home and work have changed places rhetorically, as her subtitle suggests, that is due to the sophisticated blend of threats and lures that now comprise "management strategy." And these lures now increasingly include the co-opting of religious language. If we can reclaim that language, especially in the context of theological reflection upon the meaning of work or of "success" in our lives, we might help people to identify and to resist such ploys.

Ciulla notes, by the way, that GenX-ers seem to resist management strategies rather more confidently and skillfully than older folks—but at the cost of sustaining a corrosive generalized cynicism that generates yet-another layer of difficulty. How would we know, for instance, whether or not management might be genuinely sincere in wanting to re-establish moral responsibility and humane mutual regard to the "corporate culture"? I suspect people may laugh if you ask that. And I think that laughter is worth thinking about. Furthermore, it's naive to presume that the traditional language of Christian faith is exempt from a hermeneutics of suspicion: maybe the rector, like the regional manager, is just defending turf. The more employers use the language of "spirituality," the more reasonable that interpretation will seem.

Another good solid history of management strategy in the 20th century is Al Gini, *My Job My Self* (New York: Routledge, 2000). Gini is a professor of philosophy at Loyola University Chicago, where he also teaches ethics the Institute of Human Resources and Industrial Relations. Furthermore he is co-founder and associate editor of the journal *Business Ethics Quarterly*. Like Ciulla, then, he has an impressive set of credentials. Each chapter is devoted to some business writer who illumines one or another aspect of how thoroughly our jobs define our identities in damaging or at least unsatisfactory ways. Such an organization makes for a somewhat plodding book, but he writes well and offers background that may be useful for those who have limited first-hand experience in corporate life.

Gini contends, point-blank, that paid employment determines identity whether we like that fact or not, and furthermore, then, that the self provided by most jobs is wildly inadequate. He never engages the obvious question that defining ourselves by how we earn money is really quite peculiar. Identity used to be largely given, not individually constructed and maintained through employment. Who you are used to depend much more complexly upon neighborhood and nation, upon kin and clan and personal moral character, or even, as Robert Putnam argues in *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000) upon a network of social relationships built up through civic organizations that were not dependent upon the shape of your career. As Robert Bellah argued years ago in *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: U California Press, 1984; New York: Harper & Row, 1985), such a "given" identity could be confining, narrow-minded, and insensitive to talents where talents were not expected or not welcome. The one thing it wasn't, however, was insecure.

Furthermore, we have a given identity as the beloved of God. That identity is neither confining nor dependent upon how much money we make or the social status of the work we do. How does faith get us past the hazardous equation "my job my self"? It's a very short step from that equation to the more-obviously pernicious one between how much money we have or how much stuff we have on display and our sense of self. Defining and defending our core identity through our ability to buy and to spend is at the generative core of contemporary consumerism. And as Hochschild points out, that leaves most people exhausted, quietly frazzled, and exquisitely exploitable—in the absence, that is, of what faith can offer.

There are sermons by the score waiting to be preached on this topic, and adult-ed series by the handful. Once prepared with background such as these sources provide, I might simply announce "work/life/faith" as an adult-ed topic and get conversation started with a nifty excerpt from one of the books I've discussed here or from one of the new anthologies focused on work. There is, I suspect,

such pent-up anger and grief and confusion—and defenses against all three—that it might be wise to begin by listening.

These two collections are uncommonly browse-able: *The Oxford Book of Work*, ed. Keith Thomas (Oxford UP, 1999,) and *Working: Its Meaning and Its Limits*, ed. Gilbert C. Meilaender (U Notre Dame Press). Meilaender's collection is smaller but includes a far more generous array of religious and theological sources. It also identifies its authors in the table of contents, which the Thomas collection does not. On the other hand, Meilaender offers no index of authors or works cited. Nonetheless, Meilaender is my first choice if you can't afford both.

One way or another, I see a real need for some pre-emptive parish programming—to revert to my emergency-room image—before too many more people come under pressure to find the solution to their spiritual hungers in some greater allegiance to an employer who may, of course, announce another round of downsizing tomorrow morning.

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