

Is there not a certain satisfaction in the fact that natural limits are set to the life of an individual, so that at the conclusion it may appear as a work of art? The fact that our work is often exactly as large as our life makes it infinite. We are often defined not by “who we are” but rather “what we do.” This would seem to be the quintessential paradox of our times, that the lives of individuals are more often concerned about their work as a means to an end, regardless of what effect it might have on our planet, and not about their work as “prayer.”

The real force in the modern age is the multitude of little decisions made daily by millions of men. Often we seek too much information and not enough transformation. Matthew Fox offers this advice about work:

“...then workers must be trained for this new work that God and the universe are asking of us. What might this new work be? I am convinced it is work on the human being itself. We might call this “inner work.”¹

What if we did change the work ethic of humankind by a re-naming of what we believe to be our “work,” and instead referred to it as “prayer?” Maybe then people would be more conscious about what they do for a living. Maybe if we were more cognizant of the essence of our spiritual nature, we would be more inclined and better able to do meaningful work. When you live and work imbued with a sense of spirit, you are more likely to bring a spiritual energy to your life work.

There is a story that is told about three brick masons working on the same project. When the first man asked what he was doing, he answered

gruffly, without even raising his eyes from his work, "I'm laying bricks." The second man replied, "I'm building a wall." But the third man said enthusiastically and with obvious pride, "I'm building a cathedral."

One could offer a similar analogy for people of a "religious persuasion." Three church members involved in volunteer activity are asked what they are doing. First one answers, "I'm working on a quilt for a fundraiser." The second member responds, "I'm helping us make the budget this year so we can keep the doors open on Sundays." And the third one, enthusiastically and with that same sense of pride as the third bricklayer, answers, "I am serving the ideals of my religious faith."

Regardless of our occupation, at all times we must indeed "serve the ideals of our religious faith." All religions have a Golden Rule in principle, and all religions have compassion as a key element. No matter what we call ourselves, from Roman Catholic to Wiccan or Pagan, all religions revere the Earth and encourage followers to "love one another." So one's religious faith should naturally bring one to a realization that we need to treat our cosmos and all living things with a sense of compassion and respect, particularly through our life work.

In his eight statements on justifying faith, Martin Luther hypothesized that faith alone, without works, is sufficient for salvation, that God does not regard or has need of our works, and that all the works of men, even the most sanctified, are sin. John Dillenberger says,

*Luther can declare that, apart from faith, all works are nothing but "truly wicked and damnable sins." On the external, moral level, they may be better than other courses of action. But in terms of their total orientation, that is, in terms of one's status before God, they are of no effect.*²

In stark contrast to Luther's take on work is the following meditation of Hildegard of Bingen:

*The first seed of the longing for Justice
blows through the soul like the wind.*

*The taste for good will plays in it
like a breeze.*

*The consummation of this seed
is a greening in the soul*

*that is like that
of the ripening world.*

*Now the soul honors God
by the doing of just deeds.*

*The soul is only as strong as its works.*³

I find this of interest when confronted with a headline in our local paper recently, "*Faith is becoming more prominent in business world.*"⁴ Given the propensity to plunder and destroy local economies and the environments of underdeveloped countries at any cost worldwide by multinational corporations, I find the following remark of Sir Edward Coke in 1612 to be an early, and somewhat direct and more descriptive view of big business, "*Corporations cannot commit treason, nor be outlawed, nor excommunicated, for they have no souls.*"⁵

As we learned in our intensive, in corporate mindset, rampant consumerism and the corresponding environmental damage is viewed by many as a necessary by-product of our dependence on the "sacred cow of

economic development.” We live in a time in need of dramatic, radical, fundamental change in the way we perceive our work and relationships with both our work and our fellow travelers on the path.

To address our current situation, we need a new “ideology”, what might be considered a business-spiritual or “work-prayer” hybrid. It would be flexible and fluid, and able to transcend the consumer driven mindset of our world economy and reach the hearts and minds of people everywhere. Only then will people *act*, and work with a new sense of community and live in harmony with our cosmos.

Many companies set up “think tanks” in the hopes of getting a jump on their competition with bold new ideas. What if instead they set up “prayer tanks” and focused on what they could do to contribute positively to our current situation. Then one could truly say that faith *is* becoming more prominent in the business world.

We need to move from an old paradigm, mechanical perspective of our environment to a new paradigm perspective of wholeness and oneness. From the principles of the Unitarian Universalist Association, this would include acknowledging the inherent worth and dignity of every person; seeking justice, equity and compassion in human relations; aspiring to a goal of a world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all; and demonstrating a respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

The fact that we have so many endangered natural resources gives us a moral and ethical responsibility to treat them in an enlightened manner that will better serve not only as individuals, but others in our local communities and the larger world as well. There are times when individuals, as well as companies, barge in to what they perceive as fresh new challenges without a complete comprehension of future effect on our cosmos. In “old thought” thinking, our intellect rules and a linear mode of thought, “bigger is better,” takes over. We are guided by our egos into pursuing avenues better left alone.

In Jeremiah 6:16 we are reminded to “*Stand at the crossroads, and look and ask for ancient paths, where the good way lies, and walk in it, and find rest for your souls.*”⁶ When we are offered promotions, tempted with detours, or any time we are at a crossroads in our lives that requires a decision regarding our work and focus, we must not lose sight of the overall direction of our spiritual journeys, and pause to reflect on what our decision means in “new thought” jargon. There is a subtle, inherent danger in “climbing the corporate ladder.” Chungliang Al Huang offers one of his favorite cosmic jokes: “All his life a man struggles to reach the top of the ladder, and, finally, he does—only to discover it’s against the wrong wall.”⁷

Understanding that we are unique, but also a part of every other human being, as well as every entity in our unfolding cosmological story, if there are not good reasons for changing direction, then why do it. In

the words of Sir Walter Scott, “*When we do not have a good reason for doing a thing, we have one good reason for letting it alone.*”⁸ If one is content with their work, and it impacts our cosmos positively, then one needs to continue that path and seek to bring others to the same understanding of their vocation.

Times of work, when considered as prayer by an individual, can be a time of growth. We must infuse our work/prayer with a sense of the spiritual. Matthew Fox describes the essence of work as follows:

*A cosmology teaches us that there is only one work going on in the universe, the “Great Work” of creation itself—the work of creation unfolding, the work of evolution or creativity in the universe.*⁹

Looking at our labor as part of this “Great Work,” it is said that “*one poor tool, working all the time, but doing bad work, is of small value compared with the sharp, keen perfect instrument, used only a short time but which turns out perfect work.*”¹⁰

Work and prayer represent two forces that will ensure one’s success. But it must be, as Matthew Fox says, the Great Work of the Universe that we are about. Our prayer must be that our work is indeed “good work” that furthers the unfolding of the cosmos in a meaningful and unobstructed manner. In “new thought” jargon again, we attempt to achieve a natural balance, to trust our intuition, to “*catch each moment in its flight*” and work with visions instead of etched in stone goals.”¹¹

This is often difficult because of the “old thought” emphasis on a highly structured and controlling goal-directed, result-oriented work place and, in most instances, work ethic. Rolf Osterberg believes hierarchical systems must be abandoned before human beings can “realize our full potential” and that “*the hierarchical system is a power structure*” and “*...is built upon fear, suspicion and lack of trust.*”¹² Barry Stevens describes the danger for an individual who gets enmeshed in this type of corporate mentality.

*Vertical organization is a machine, and the people who stay in it become little machines within the big machine, and don't understand people who hold out against becoming machines.*¹³

But hold out we must. Our work is indeed a holy journey, and our only goal should be to be mindful of our current path and not some future time when we will “drop out and save the world” to coin a 1960's phrase. We need to focus on the Great Work now. Again, Matthew Fox focuses our attention to this effort:

*“Our work is meant to be a grace. It is a blessing and a gift, even a surprise and an act of unconditional love, toward the community—and not just the present community that may or may not compensate us for our work, but the community to come, the generations that follow our work.”*¹⁴

Mother Theresa had an idea as to what our lives should be about, how our “work-prayer” would be remembered:

“At the moment of death we will not be judged according to the number of good deeds we have done or by the diplomas we have received in our lifetime. We will be judged according to the love we have put into our work.”¹⁵

This puts in mind the story of two adherents to the teachings of Luther, both CEOs of major multinational corporations who went down in a private plane crash after closing yet another big deal to ravage the resources of an underdeveloped country. They ended up in a “place” that was warm and fiery and not quite what they had expected. They saw a fellow CEO seated on a rock with his head in his hands. One asked, “So Tom, what is going on here?” And Tom simply shrugged his shoulders and replied, “it was works.”

Would that all who approach their daily toils aspired to the vision of one of the great Unitarian Universalists, Susan B. Anthony, who said, *“I pray every single second of my life, not on my knees, but with my work.”*

¹ Fox, M. (1994). The Reinvention Of Work: A New Vision of Livelihood for Our Time. New York, HarperCollins, p.21.

² Dillenberger, J. (1991). Martin Luther: Selections From His Writings. New York, NY, Anchor Books, p. xxix.

³ Uhlein, G. (1983). Meditations With Hildegard of Bingen. Rochester, VT., p. 123.

⁴Boyle, A. N. a. J. (2004). Faith is becoming more prominent in business world. Asheville Citizen-Times. Asheville, NC, p. W3.

⁵ Shrager, E. F.-K. a. D. S. (2003). A Concise Encyclopedia of Legal Quotations. New York, Barnes and Noble Inc., p. 29.

⁶ Braybrooke, M., Ed. (2002). Life Lines. London, Duncan Baird Publishers, p. 177.

⁷ Huang, C. A. (1983). Quantum Soup: A Philosophical Entertainment. New York, E.P. Dutton, Inc., p. 127

⁸ Owen-Towle, T. (1982). Unifiers. San Diego, First Unitarian Church of San Diego, p. November 13.

⁹ Fox, p. 61.

¹⁰ Russell, A. J., Ed. (2002). God Calling. New York, Barnes and Noble Books, p. February 28.

¹¹ Osterberg, R. (2003). Corporate renaissance: Business as an Adventure in Human Development. New York, Paraview, p. 71.

¹² Ibid., P. 48.

¹³ Stevens, B. (1970). Don't Push The River (it flows by itself). Moab, Utah, Real People Press, p. 25.

¹⁴ Fox, p. 99.

¹⁵ Gonzalez-Balado, J. L., Ed. (1996). Mother Teresa: In My Own Words. New York, Barnes and Noble Books, p. 65.

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