

## MAKING YOUR WORK HOLY

Did you know that most heart attacks occur at 9:00 a.m. on Monday morning, when people are restarting work they don't like? That's really disheartening news, isn't it?

But I don't plan on my Labor Day reflections being depressing but rather uplifting; for I truly believe that we can and must make our work holy, whether it's paid or volunteer or a combination thereof.

Yet discovering our singular and sacred work remains one of the trickiest and most personal things we ever do. It involves listening hard to societal cries to find out precisely where we can be well-used, while, at the same time, launching our deepest passions. We're fortunate indeed when our job creates some joy, exults in some beauty, and delivers some compassion to a world starved for all three. But that's our goal, isn't it?

Now, there's no slick formula for locating someone else's right livelihood. I've been lucky; since, around the age of 9, I knew I wanted to be a minister, and as I enter my forty-first year in this worthy and wondrous profession, I've been blessed to have found such a good fit. I've been frustrated, yea disappointed, upon occasion, but I've never come close to having a heart attack on Monday morning, only heartburn, and occasional sleepless nights. But I've never seriously contemplated throwing in the towel on my ministry. Finding a job that's enabled me to serve the world while also serving my spirit...has proven to be a gorgeous blend of grace and grit. Lucky me. My job is still a joy!

And even though I'm nearing the close of my professional run, I refuse to coast, because when you coast, you go downhill. So, I'm not taking anything or anyone for granted this year. Every encounter and every decision will be virginal, a fresh and irrepeatable moment, and treated with holy touch. Indeed, staying on purpose is even more critical, now that my work months are numbered.

So, in a spirit of deep humility, I offer some six lessons for making work a spiritual practice, whatever and wherever your post might be. And, remember, just because you've closed up shop, doesn't exempt you from my counsel this morning. What I'm offering should

prove relevant whether you're working for pay or laboring as a volunteer. So here goes.

## **I. MAY YOUR POST BE USEFUL**

As our 19<sup>th</sup> century Unitarian forebrother Ralph Waldo Emerson put it:

“God has need of a person here.” Think about that potent little sentence. Consider yourself (not someone else) as being needed right where you are (not elsewhere). Right where you are in that imperfect slot, is precisely where you can prove to be a useful, honorable, compassionate contributor, where you can make some difference in the universe. Yes, “God has need of a person here,” right where you and I are set...at home and work, at play and service.

Hopefully, at some juncture in our lives, we awaken to the fact that we're placed on earth primarily to be meaning-makers. We come to understand that who we are may be God's gift to us, but who we choose to become constitutes our gift back to the universe. Of course, we can never truly repay the Creation for showering us with life, then bountiful blessings beyond our deserving. But we're not here to repay but to respond—to respond with lives radiating with exuberance, gratitude, and service.

Our main purpose, as religious beings, is simply to increase the odds on love succeeding throughout our one and only cosmos. The Lebanese poet Kahlil Gibran put it similarly when he asserted that “our work is love made visible.” May that be true for each of us as well: may our work be love made visible during the days given us to walk upon this earth, be it our work at home, at the office, here at the Fellowship or in the larger world. And may our work as partners, parents, professionals, and citizens of the universe prove to be useful, for God has need of a person here.

## **I. MAY OUR JOB BECOME A PROFESSION, AN OCCUPATION OR A VOCATION**

I charge each of you to consider your post—volunteer or paid or a combo—to be a

*profession* where you're able to profess the dearest values of your deepest being. And think of your work as an *occupation*, wherein you're well-occupied, not merely preoccupied. Again, I'm not talking about a perfect fit but a sufficiently good one. And think of your job as a *vocation*, literally a calling where you're pulled toward a purpose beyond your own ego.

I like the word "calling" a lot. What's calling you, my friend, from within your soul, what's calling you in this beloved Fellowship...and what's calling you from beyond in the greater world? What are you, in particular, right here and now, being called to be and do? And when you hear the call and answer with a resounding yes, does it make you come more alive? Is there some call, some mission that truly enables you to serve your spirit while serving society?

In the Hebrew scriptures, it says, "whatsoever thy hand findest to do, do it with thy might." Might, strength, power. Isn't it interesting that our word *craft* comes from the German word "kraft" which means power? So in a profession, occupation, or vocation that genuinely fits us, when we're performing our chosen craft, we possess the capacity to empower others as well as be empowered ourselves.

## **I. PRACTICE MINDFULNESS**

Holy work embraces the underrated virtue that Zen Buddhists call "mindfulness": that quality of being utterly attentive to each task, no matter how menial. The mindful worker contends that the sacred encounter dwells in the modest and mundane more often than during a spectacular event. I'm thinking right now of parents chauffeuring kids to soccer games and professionals cleaning their own offices as sacred endeavors. Yes, indeed, the holy dwells in the ordinariness of our days! God lies in the details, for sure.

For example, the guts of my profession transpire not amidst the public drama of preaching and community action so much as in seemingly routine exchanges with parishioners and strangers or in dealing head-on with pesky administrivia. And, like it or not, we ministers know down-deep that meetings are entirely essential to strengthening the web of community life. The trick is to make our Fellowship meetings not merely times when

business is transacted but engagements where our lives are potentially grown. As you Fellowshipers know well, even check-ins can sometimes vitalize the mood of an individual soul and occasionally transform an entire room.

I recently came across a passage from the comic writer Roy Blount which relates to ministers as heavy meeting-attenders. Blount mused: “I’m just not the kind of guy who feels right about calling himself a writer. I mean, I’ll bet Jesse James, when asked what his line of work was, never could bring himself to say, ‘Well, I’m a desperado!’ He probably said: ‘Oh, something in trains.’” So, when asked what my line of work is, I’m currently prone to say, “Oh, something in meetings!”

Stan Kenton, the brilliant jazz musician, once responded brusquely to a frustrated young band member who was bone-weary of all the scut work and boring travel necessary to being a professional performer. Kenton said: “Hey, quit whining, remember you aren’t paid for blowing your saxophone. You’re primarily paid for making the bus rides!”

That’s it; I’m paid not so much for Sunday sermons (although their importance is unquestioned!) but for the countless connections, minor and major, that draw the personal confidence and create the resources to keep our San Dieguito Fellowship humming, indeed, a well-functioning beloved community where all kinds of sermons can be given...sometimes good and sometimes average or below.

For me, holy work means staying on purpose, living in the present, rather than dreaming about yesterday or anticipating tomorrow. When Buddhist ecofeminist Joanna Macy was asked how to create a life with purpose, she offered but three fundamental phrases: “Work with your passion, work with your pain, and work with what is right at hand.”

She’s absolutely right, and working with what is right at hand is what working with mindfulness means. I try to make my ministry focus upon passion, pain, and the present. For life is indeed a series of small acts done with great love, one by one by one...mindfully.

## **I. BECOME A COLLABORATOR**

Our work also becomes holy when we acknowledge that “we never work alone!” Now,

I'm not denying the wildly imaginative notions we sometimes generate in solitude, not at all. I'm simply declaring that our work comes fully alive, is an authentically spiritual practice, whenever we realize that it's undeniably linked with countless others, known and unknown, both near and far.

We truly never work alone, and I'm not merely referring to office mates of our vocational team. I'm also recognizing sisters and brothers in whose debt our profession stands. Those who've paved the way for us, others who are coming after us, and individuals who are the current beneficiaries of our gifts and wounds, be they students or clients, parishioners or patients or customers. I always try to remember that I'm a colleague: literally "leagued together", yoked with others as allies on the mission of building a more beautiful cosmos. Oh, yes, we never work alone.

In the novel *Heaven Help Us* by Herbert Tarr, the veteran seminary dean who preaches at Rabbi Gideon Abel's installation offers this wisdom to the gathered congregation.

*Though he is a person of dedication and kindness, intelligence and good humor, Rabbi Abel cannot serve you if you do not assist him. Your rabbi is not a soloist, and you are not his audience. He is not a professional Jew, and you are not amateurs. But together, you are a holy congregation.*

I think you know, but it doesn't hurt to remind you, that the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of San Dieguito is an utterly shared ministry, we're a full-fledged co-operative, and we're all, every last one of us, called to become professional Unitarian Universalists, each of us serving in our own fashion.

## **I. MAINTAIN A SENSE OF HUMOR**

Holy work also requires us to keep an active sense of humor. As George Bernard Shaw reminds us: "Ever-deeper wisdom and ever-broader compassion; laughter lubricates the job." You and I know that without laughter, we can quickly turn into joyless crusaders. Yes, we're called to be serious workers without turning grim, playful workers without turning foolish.

In the midst of inevitable turmoil and trials at work, we're summoned to keep a sense of perspective, not get too high or too low, knowing well, as one of my early ministerial

associates shrewdly said: “Remember, even Confucius and Jesus had their bad days.” We always lighten our load and that of others with the healing gifts of humor and silliness. I’ve found, in my closing career laps, that good deeds aren’t of much value unless accompanied by good times.

So, here’s a real corny joke about a serious-minded activist like Gandhi no less. Gandhi walked barefoot everywhere, to the point that the bottom of his feet became quite thick and he had calluses. And even when Mahatma wasn’t on a hunger strike, he didn’t eat much and became quite thin and frail. Gandhi was also, without a doubt, quite a spiritual person. Furthermore, due to his diet, he ended up with very bad breath.

So, in sum, Gandhi became known as a “super-callused fragile mystic plagued with halitosis.”

Yes, laughter provides the saving grace in all holy work.

## **VI. ENGAGE IN SELF-CARE**

Finally, self-care remains our greatest resource as human beings and human doings. Taking good care of our own mind and body is central to being an effective, gratified worker. Self-care means honoring quitting time. It may entail taking one’s watch off when you arrive home, as one friend recommends. It surely means taking regular, scheduled days off, for vacation is integral to sustained healthy vocation.

Buddhist activist Thich Nhat Hanh took Thursdays off, even during the days when the South Vietnamese government was trying to suppress the peace movement he was involved in. “Sir, they’re raiding your office and taking your papers!” And Hanh calmly replied: “It’s Thursday, my friends; I’ll get to it tomorrow!”

I challenge you, whatever your labor of choice is, to stand ready and willing every day to stretch your mind with a wild, fresh notion. Every day to warm your heart by touching the heart of another. Every day to stir your conscience by doing something to make our globe more safe and sane. Every day to lift your spirit by singing or soaking in natural beauty or

meditating alone in the early afternoon. Every day to center your soul by facing a fear, by unearthing some hurt, by showing righteous rage. Every day to feed your body with healthful nutrients, keeping your temple fit and energized. Every day to do something zany and off-beat.

I'll say it again: nothing is more important in the shaping of our days than engaging in intentional self-care. You yourself are what you most have to give, so take good care of your one and only being.

Let me close with a bit of Hasidic realism that puts every holy quest in perspective. Rabbi of Zans loved to tell this story about himself.

*In my youth when I was fired with the love of God, I thought I would convert the whole world. But soon I discovered that it would be quite enough to convert the people who lived in my town, and I tried for a long time, but didn't succeed. Then I realized that my program was still much too ambitious, and I concentrated on the persons in my own household. But I failed at that too. Finally, it dawned on me. I've got to work upon myself, so that I may give true service to Universe. But I didn't even accomplish this.*

And so it goes. There's no way we'll ever accomplish full self-care or any of the other five lessons I've suggested today, but never forget: we're pulled by our aspirations rather than resting on our achievements. So we religious pilgrims plod, we persist, we keep our eyes on the prize. And we say thank you to the Creation by taking good, not perfect care, of our whole beings.

May your Labor Day weekend continue to be happy, healthy, and holy!

Tom Owen-Towle  
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