

Listening to Unemployed Workers

Opening Prayer

Read this prayer aloud together:

Thank you, God,
for bringing us together again
to pay attention to how you are present
in our lives.

May your Holy Spirit guide our conversation
so that we may be led to any insights
you want to give us.

Let us notice how you have
been at work in our world recently.

We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Sharing

Were you any more aware of God during your waking hours since we last met? Did it change anything about how you spent your time or went about your responsibilities? How so?

Background

Read this passage aloud, with each participant reading a paragraph. Anyone who prefers not to read is welcome to pass.

In order to discover the spirituality of unemployed workers, it is necessary to listen to their stories. Anyone who has not experienced the fear and despair, the rejection, and self-doubt of being involuntarily unemployed cannot fully understand the special relationship—at times comforting, at times stormy—that develops between an unemployed worker and his or her God.

Let us start our search for the spirituality of unemployed workers by hearing how differently several of them feel about their situations and how differently they respond.



Edward Z. was employed as a mechanical engineer for eight years and then suddenly laid off. "I don't know that being unemployed made me look at God any differently," he says. "I do know I have to trust God more. When things are going well it is easy to say you trust in God. When things are out of control, you must wait patiently to see what is in store for the future. Someone like myself, however, tends to get impatient and wants things to happen in my own time frame instead of in God's."

Thomas S. has been laid off from his job at a steel company. "I believe in God," he says, "but I don't go to church very much. I hope God has something to do with my situation and my finding work. I feel depressed more than anything—working all these years and not getting anywhere. I got more done when I worked; now I don't feel like doing as much. I get lazy."

Daniel D. is an advertising writer who has been unemployed many times. "I always told my wife that God would provide for us," he says, "and, sure enough, I would call friends and often come up with a better job than the previous one." When he was employed again, he felt that he was obliged to reciprocate with other unemployed workers: "God has helped me all my life, and I have felt responsible never to say no when asked for help by others. I have been able to help numerous people obtain work."

Marilyn Campen was employed for 13 years as an insurance claims representative when she suddenly lost her job. "I had always been a part-time worker, yet with a lot of job security. When my office closed, it was traumatic for me since I was then over 55 years old. Before this happened, I had earnestly prayed to God to simplify my life, but when I lost my job my initial reaction was shock. Did I really want God to take me that literally, or did God have something else in mind?"

Robert Parmley was laid off from his administrative job with a construction company. "In earlier jobs that I lost," Parmley notes, "I felt bitter and

disappointed. But this time I did not feel that way. If you think about it, we have no control over these situations. I know it was difficult for my boss to lay me off since I was a hard worker. So I looked on my job search as a new mission or assignment. I didn't know what I was supposed to be doing, but I welcomed the opportunity to find out."

Donald L. worked in marketing and sales in the financial industry and was out of work for 16 months. "I began to search for answers in areas of my life that I had neglected," he says. "I found that I needed a strength that money could not buy and a peace of mind that I needed to look for inside myself. I needed answers that the world cannot provide or take away."

"The experience of being unemployed and not finding anyone who valued my experience or expertise was very disturbing and depressing. In order to counter-balance the deafening silence I found in the marketplace, I started going to the 6:30 Mass every morning. I also joined a prayer group in my parish. That's where I found the strength to continue my job search."

Paul Traynor worked as a political consultant before taking the bar exam to become a lawyer. He then took 18 months to find a job in his new field. "I was well-educated, well-spoken, fluent in three languages, and lucky to get one interview," he says. "The constant problem was either that I was over-qualified or that I lacked the proper experience. I began to doubt my own self-worth and abilities. I began to withdraw, to avoid others, to fear the phone ringing."

Traynor finally began to work as a consultant doing contract work for insurance firms. "I went back to my religious upbringing, which I had really set aside in my college years. When I got hit by unemployment, with no opportunity for work, I returned to regular religious practice. When I felt worthless, I found that my religious values were still there. I found the support I needed in my church."

Eugene Kopyar worked for 34 years as a national account manager for a single company. He received a letter of dismissal with no option except to leave with a modest severance payment. "Unemployment has tested my spirituality," he says. "I thought I could just make some calls to old friends and get

work. This was not the case. They did not feel they owed me anything. I would have despaired and lost hope without my faith and my family."

Howard Bushey was a widower with two teenage children when he retired from the army and entered law school. "I thought going through law school would provide me with a simple entry into a second career," he explains. "But when I graduated I found that a 50-year-old retired lieutenant colonel with a law degree is not the hottest commodity in today's job market."

Bushey is currently unemployed. "Like many others," he says, "I found that God is using my unemployment to take me off the pathway from point A to point B. I have finally let go of my self-pity and decided that I am no longer going to identify with my work. My work will have to identify with me."



These are the reflections of just a few of the millions of people who are or have been unemployed, many millions more recently because of the novel coronavirus. Although each unemployed person experiences it differently, there are common threads which this series will try to explore.

The concept of a spirituality for unemployed workers is not an attempt to make unemployment palatable. Nor is it meant to minimize the need or desire for paid employment. In fact, a spirituality for unemployed workers very often includes an active search for meaningful and paid employment. For many today, it is a strange, in-between time when employment options are severely limited because of COVID-19 shelter-in-place orders. Many of those unemployed due to the pandemic have no choice but to find other ways to contribute to society while they wait for the economy to recover.

Wrestling with life's meaning and worth in the context of unemployment can be the very ground from which workers—those in the paid work force, those who are unemployed, those who are full-time or part-time homemakers, those who are students—fully comprehend the spirituality of work. When we are cast out of our familiar contexts, we are called to turn toward something new. Not unlike Abraham leaving his homeland for unknown territory, we are

sent forward on a journey of faith, where we might find a new, often enriched, spirituality.

Reflection

1. Some of those quoted in this series are in shock, some are bitter, several are positive. Name the primary emotion(s) you felt when you first became unemployed.
2. Depending on how long it has been since you became unemployed, has there been a shift in your feelings since then, i.e. do you still feel the same now, or have new emotions set in?
3. Has your unemployment led you back to an earlier time of faith in your life or sparked a renewed reliance on God?
4. Do you have anyone else in your life with whom you can share your need for spiritual support during this time of unemployment?
5. Has God used your unemployment to “take you off the pathway from point A to point B” and set you in a different direction?

Scripture

Read these passages aloud.

Isaiah 43:1-3a, 4a, 5a

But now thus says the Lord,
he who created you, O Jacob,
he who formed you, O Israel:

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.

When you pass through the waters,
I will be with you;
and through the rivers,
they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you.

For I am the Lord your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.

Because you are precious in my sight,
and honored, and I love you,

Do not fear, for I am with you.

Reflection

1. What is your greatest fear during this time of your unemployment?
2. Is the metaphor of *passing through the waters* or *walking through fire* anything like your experience?

Action Response

Consider this question for your week ahead. It does not need to be discussed now with the group, but we will reflect on it briefly next session.

Sometime this week jot down a moment in which you feel God's presence and/or a sense of trust that God is with you during your trials.

Closing Prayer

Read this prayer aloud together:

Lord Jesus, you once walked this earth as a human like all of us. You know what it is like to feel all of the human emotions, including uncertainty, worry, and even fear. Help us to learn from you about how we can keep walking this path with the trust that you are with us. Like Peter walking on the water, keep our eyes trained on you and not on the storm and the waves around us. Give us peace in our days. We pray this in your name. Amen.

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