

Losing One's Job as a Spiritual Experience

Opening Prayer

Read this prayer aloud together:

Gracious God,
we come together again asking that you
open our eyes and ears,
our minds and hearts,
to how you are working in our lives,
especially while we are unemployed.

May your Holy Spirit be here among us,
guiding our conversation and gifting us
with insights and wisdom
in the words and experiences of others.

We pray this in trust,
knowing that Jesus promised that
those who seek shall find.

Amen.

Sharing

Was there a moment since the last session when you felt God was particularly present and/or you had a sense of trust in his presence amidst your trials?

Background

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

Unemployment can and does happen with little respect for age, experience, education, or dedication. The experience of being "fired," "terminated," "laid off," "let go," "downsized," or any of the other euphemisms for losing one's job can be devastating. Yet it can be an opportunity for the worker to turn toward—rather than away from—God.



Daniel Kale III worked in quality control in the nuclear industry for twenty years. He was stunned

when in recent years he found himself seriously unemployed. Whenever business was down, there were "reductions in force"—another euphemism. "I was shocked when it happened the first time," Kale recalls. "It bothered me more at the beginning. I was close to mental illness from being home with nothing to do."

Robert Campanella is a young engineer, a graduate of a prestigious university. When he could not find new employment after being laid off his first job, he wondered if all his education had been worthwhile. He was overwhelmed at this unexpected and devastating turn of events and wondered about his future. At the time, Campanella was single and dating his future wife, Linda. He vividly recalls standing with Linda on a rooftop in Atlantic City six months into his layoff looking out at the immensity of the ocean. He found there a poignant symbol of his separateness from the world.

Lorraine Thai was a case worker at a small, not-for-profit criminal justice agency which monitored clients recommended for alternative sentences. After a three-year grant expired, funding for the program could not be obtained and the agency was closed. "I felt that everything I had accomplished was washed away like sand from the shore," Thai said. "I wondered if the sun would ever rise again. I am proud of my social work background, but after the grant I have either been doing odd jobs or been entirely unemployed."

Unemployment can rise suddenly, like an unexpected sea squall, and toss any person—regardless of age, occupation, geographical location or length of experience—like driftwood on the waves. The unforeseen need for the United States to practically shut down huge sectors of the economy due to the COVID-19 pandemic has caused the sudden lay-offs of millions of people. In this case, unemployment has been caused by forces outside a worker's control. Unemployment in these situations often could not be prevented even by the most effective managers in the field.

The loss of a job, especially when it happens suddenly, is often traumatic, and reactions can range from resignation to anger to, in some cases, relief. When I myself was let go after five years as an admissions counselor at a welding school, for example, my first reaction was shock and disbelief.

I began looking for another job without much success. It was only after a long period of prayer and the encouragement of my family and friends that I eventually came to see that my unemployment was an opportunity for me to learn more about who I really am and what I really want to do. I discovered that losing a job is not about being abandoned by God.



Donna Cuning, who worked full-time for many years as a secretary of public relations for a physical rehabilitation facility, found that being let go allowed her to pursue her interest in free-lance writing and public relations. "The strongest influence on my spiritual life has been the belief that my unemployment was for my greater good. In my darker moments, I've had to fight to maintain that belief, but as a result it has opened me to a deeper trust in God."

There is a basic problem, however, in the fact that the more we develop a true spirituality of work, the more we might possibly put unemployment in sharper, more painful contrast with a paid job. If we try to cultivate the spiritual in our work and then end up unemployed, where do we then find God? The more we tie our spiritual values to our daily work, the more painfully we might feel the emptiness of unemployment.

In many cases, therefore, an honest spirituality of work for unemployed workers must begin at that apparent low point—the frustrating, often unexpected, anxiety-inducing, involuntary, lack of paid employment. The spirituality of work cannot gloss over the deprivation and emptiness of losing a job. While it is true that we tend to link meaning and worth to what we do and produce for pay, a spirituality of work for the unemployed challenges that idea at its root. Ultimately, it is a mistake to confine the search for the spiritual meaning of work to the paid workbench. We must find it in the wider context of our lives.

Reflection

1. In casual conversation, how do you respond to the question, "So, what do you do?" What is it like for you to answer such a question?
2. Do you agree with Donna Cuning who holds the belief that "my unemployment was for my greater good"? Why or why not?
3. Has anything positive come about because of your unemployment?

Scripture Reading

Read this passage aloud, taking turns with each paragraph.

Matthew 6:25-34

"Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?"

"And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith?"

"Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."

"So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today."

Reflection

1. Where do you think Jesus got his money? Do you think he ever worried about where he would get his next meal from?
2. Is it possible “not to worry” about these things?
3. Can you imagine trying to take Jesus' words more to heart at this point in your life?

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.

Whenever you think of it, ask God for the grace to let go of some of your worry and to be gifted with a little more trust. (And don't beat yourself up if you still worry sometimes!)

Closing Prayer

Read this prayer aloud together:

Gracious God,
grant us the ability to help each other
in whatever challenges that
our unemployment brings to us.

May we assist each other in our efforts,
strengthen each other in our hardships,
and comfort each other in our
frustrations and disappointments.

Give us the courage and grace we need
to do what it is you would have us do.

In everything that we experience,
remind us that you are with us always.

Amen.

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