

The Spirituality of Being Unemployed

Opening Prayer

Read this prayer aloud together:

Creator God,
you worked to create the world
and you are still working and laboring
on our behalf today.

Help us to cooperate with your grace
so that we may grow as disciples
who are doing what you need done in our world.

Amen.

Sharing

Did you ask God for the grace to let go of some of your worry and to have a little more trust since we last met? Did you notice anything different?

Background

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

A discussion of unemployment might seem to strike a discordant note. After all, the concept of the spirituality of work seeks to identify and enhance the ways that people encounter God in their work. Can the same be true in the work of unemployed workers? Yes it can, because daily work is an essential part of life, even work that is not paid. Unpaid work can enable the worker to deepen awareness of work's spiritual meaning and find the presence of God there.

Being unemployed can either lead to a downhill slide or it can be an occasion for the exercise of the fruits and gifts of the Holy Spirit. Unemployment can result in a period of boredom and idleness, or a time for special retreat and reflection during which we gain a new perspective or fresh outlook on who we are and what we might do.

"Unemployment can be a spiritual experience," argues Terrence Fisher, an employment counselor. "It forces many people to ask, 'Why me?' The difficulty experienced in unemployment can be a cause for reflection and recollection."

Maria Rodgers, who runs a diocesan program for the unemployed, writes: "We tell those who come that the reality is that a new job only takes away part of the loss of the previous one. Your feelings are hurt; you feel as if your personality has been battered. You have feelings that need to be dealt with and you need to take a look at the process of surviving the job transition. Some who come even realize that this is an opportunity to slow down, acknowledge the crisis in their lives, and face the questions they have within."

Unemployment does not lie outside the range of God's power or presence. It can be a fertile field to be harvested, but only by the worker ready to do so. Unemployed workers must maintain an attitude of receptivity to the transcendent. God uses a variety of unexpected tools to break through to us. These might include a friendly conversation, a sermon, a counseling session, a retraining program, or a job tip or reference. It might even be necessary for family, friends or colleagues to prod unemployed workers to "get to work." The divine help offered may seem at first to be insignificant, but faith teaches us that something that appears small eventually can make a huge difference in our lives.

The spirituality of work might help unemployed workers view unemployment as a time during which spiritual disciplines are sharpened and relationships strengthened, rather than dulled and weakened. Unemployment can be an opportunity to find a new vantage point, a different frame of reference.

Don Gramer runs a regular "Retreat for Those Who Have Lost Their Jobs." He noted, "Many who make this retreat make a tremendous lifestyle change afterward. They opt for a simpler life, getting away from things that control them. They come to realize the financial stress that they have put themselves

under by opting for such a materialistic lifestyle. We have heard from quite a few who found new, lower-paying jobs, but seem happier with their new outlook."

Unemployment can supply an opportunity for meditation and reflection on who we are apart from the roles defined by our jobs. It can be a catalyst for deepening our own sense of self-worth and meaning. We can think again about this question of Jesus: What will it profit us if we gain the whole world and suffer the loss of our souls?

"My purpose for work was always the paycheck," says John D. Lentz II, a purchasing agent. "Then I was laid off. I had to actively redefine my purpose. Now I try to make a difference with the people I encounter, those I manage. In the final analysis, we are here to give, not receive. I received much more than I lost during my period of unemployment."

When I myself finally accepted that my job recruiting for the welding school was irretrievably over, I decided to pursue a project I had begun with prison inmates, training them in skills they would need in order to get jobs upon release. I tried to turn this into a full-time job with the state or county departments of corrections, but this objective never worked out. I was finally hired, however, by my local congressional representative when he and his staff became aware of the quality of my volunteer work on the project.

Joseph Belechak, a former personnel manager and now the director of a center for unemployed workers, comments: "You have heard the old adage, 'When all else fails, pray.' I tell people: 'Don't wait; pray first.' Over and over I see a lot of spiritual good coming out of unemployment."



Unemployment can yield many positive results. Sometimes the new job one finds is better than the old in many ways. Unemployment forces many people to reconsider their values and priorities and often leads to a career change. In a family experiencing the unemployment of one or both parents, children can rise to a new level of maturity-gaining perspective on what lies above their material concerns. Their sturdiness and independence of mind are fruits of the family's belt-tightening. Likewise, a wife who becomes the primary breadwinner of a family in which the

husband is unemployed can find pride in her achievements. Meanwhile the husband can experience the trials and rewards of the unpaid work of homemaking and childrearing.

Maria F. remembers when she was a child and her father was unemployed for a year. Looking back, she now knows that this was extremely stressful and depressing time for him, yet she recalls it as a highlight of her childhood because he was able to spend so much more time with her.

If we use it well, the experience of unemployment is just one more opportunity for us to become receptive to God. It can help us realize that every hardship can lead to a deepened participation in the cross of Christ—a cross which always holds the potential of resurrection.

Reflection

1. Has unemployment been a spiritual experience in any way for you? Please share.
2. Have your values/lifestyle changed since you became unemployed? Please share examples.
3. Despite the stresses of your unemployment, has it had a positive effect on anyone else in your family?

Scripture Reading

Read this passage aloud.

Luke 12:15-21

And he said to them, "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." Then he told them a parable: "The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?' Then he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.' But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God."

Reflection

1. How many “barns” are on your property?
2. What would a downscaled lifestyle look like for you?
3. Is there a way in which your unemployment is helping you to store up less and concentrate on becoming rich toward God?

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.

Jot down all of the tasks you do in your household, family, neighborhood, and wider community that are work, even though they are unpaid.

Closing Prayer

Read this prayer aloud together:

Jesus, our Lord and our guide,

You worked tirelessly on behalf of the dignity of all,
especially those most often
neglected, forgotten, poor, or outcast.

You know what it is like
to try to bring love and compassion
into an imperfect world.

Teach us how we are called to serve like you.
Grant us hope and perseverance
when we are tempted to lose hope.
May we do what we can to bring about
a world that values humans
more than possessions.

Amen.

Spirituality of Work: Unemployed Together during the COVID-19 Shutdown © 2020, 2014 The Pastoral Center & the National Center for the Laity. PastoralCenter.com