

## **Grow Your Own Spiritual Practice**

In Studs Terkel's 1985 best seller, **Working**, he comments on:

the happy few who find a savor in their daily jobs; the Indiana stonemason, who looks upon his and sees that it is good; the Chicago piano tuner who seeks and finds the sound that delights; the bookbinder who saves a piece of history, the Brooklyn firefighter who saves a piece a life ... [these people] find a meaning in their work well over and beyond the reward of the paycheck. Therefore, work must be about "a search for daily meaning as well as daily bread, for recognition as well as cash, for astonishment rather than torpor; in short, for a sort of life rather than a Monday through Friday sort of dying.

The current emphasis on spirit in the workplace might be characterized as an attempt to make this "happy few" a "happy many."

### **Meaning is an inside job**

There are many factors that contribute to the possibility of a "happy many" – a good fit between personality and task, good pay, good relationships with co-workers and superiors, good opportunities for professional and personal development, and a sense the work contributes to the common good. The more these and other considerations are in place, the better the chance workers will "savor" and find "meaning" in what they do.

However, meaning is an inside job. Outer considerations are important, but they are not determinative. Meaning making doesn't just happen. It is personal, interior, intentional activity. If we do not engage in it on a regular basis, even what looks like optimal circumstances lose their power to generate zest and satisfaction. ("I don't get it. Why is he depressed? Good work. Good wife. Good kids. Everything.") If we do not figure out how to open our minds to spirit, we can find ourselves cut off from the deepest, life-giving resources of our being. We become one of Meister Eckhart's hapless examples, a person with a vintage wine cellar who seldom drinks from it

### **Spiritual Practices: Gifts from Others and Grown at Home**

Spiritual traditions have long faced this problem of meaninglessness, and they have developed spiritual practices to address it. The mainline practices are usually communal (worship services, etc.) and relate the believers over and over again to the foundational revelation. However, there is also a plethora of individual practices. These exercises are ways to put “faith into practice” or “to sanctify everyday life.” As such, they accompany the inevitable dynamics of human living – major transitions like birth, adolescence, leave-taking, marriage, menopause, midlife, aging, death and the repeatable everyday events of waking, eating, working, being with others, moving, sleep etc. These spiritual practices are gifts from our ancestors to help bring spirit into every aspect of life.

Recently, there has been a strong interest in spiritual practices. Spiritual teachers have been retrieving spiritual practices from religious traditions and adapting them to contemporary life. At the end of this article there is a selective bibliography of these works. All of these books are worth consulting. To mention just two: Greg Pierce outlines ten practices that are specifically tailored to workplace concerns. In **Work as a Spiritual Practice** (Broadway Books, 1999), Lewis Richmond shows how work situations bring us face to face with worry, anger, boredom, failure, discouragement, ambition, control, generosity, gratitude, power, etc. Our attempts to deal with these experiences put us on a spiritual path. Although this approach is inspired by Buddhist teachings, it embodies Pope John Paul II’s insistence on the primacy of the person throughout the work process. “Human beings do not serve work; work serves human beings.” (**Laborem Exercens**, 6) As strange as it may sound to those who have read and lamented Studs Terkel, work is a place where human beings can develop spiritually.

Although these books provide already-established spiritual practices that can be engaged in, I would like to suggest another way. People can grow their own spiritual practices and use them as long as they are fruitful. This possibility does not replace the communal practices of a religious faith or the individual, carefully crafted exercises of a specific spiritual tradition. Rather, it attempts to honor the unexpected graciousness of personal experience as it provides the “next step” of an individual’s spiritual development. Also, these homegrown spiritual practices can be inspired by and geared toward the idiosyncratic dynamics of particular work situations.

### **From Experience to Memory**

At a recent session on spirituality in the workplace a senior woman executive talked about a moment of insight. She was listening to a speaker interpret the story of Martha and Mary from the Gospel of Luke. She knew the story and, like many Christian women, identified with Martha the worker and felt vaguely guilty about not being drawn to Mary’s contemplative qualities. However, the speaker suggested the goodness of Martha’s work was only compromised because she worked without knowing the “Lord was in the house.”

This insight impressed her and showed her a way forward. Her challenge was not to become a contemplative but to work knowing the “Lord was in the house.” As she told the group about this, she was obviously animated and enthused. She had heard this insight over six months ago. Yet when she remembered the experience, it still energized her.

As I listened to her, two thoughts simultaneously came to mind. First, there is a gratuity to our experiences. We often see a sight, hear words, and entertain thoughts that are precisely what we need. The sights, sounds, and thoughts “somehow appear” and

show us something that helps us. Catholics might call these actual graces. They are ideas and inspirations that lure us toward wholeness.

In this case, the woman encounters an interpretation of a Gospel passage that opens her mind to a new possibility. But insight moments need not have this “officially religious” flavor. They may be triggered by remarks of a co-worker, or some ethical struggle we witness, or just the sight of someone. Could it be that the universe is conspiring to offer to us “just the right food” for our particular hunger? I do not know the answer to that question, but I have a theory about what happens when actual graces arrive.

Often our minds close to our spirit; they shut off the flow of life from deep, interiors resources. Then “something happens” to open the mind to spirit. We do not control this something; nor do we manufacture it out of our need. However, there it is, opening us to spirit, and bringing us the gifts of spirit - zest, creativity, and passion. We are surprised into renewal. Perhaps we can only be renewed by surprise, by the arrival of what we did not see coming. But once it has arrived, we know it is exactly what we needed. Naturally, we try to hang onto it.

My second thought concerned trying to hang on to it. The experience is momentary, fleeting. It had enough impact to cut a new groove in the recording of her mind. However, the newness means it must be cultivated to grow into an established sound she hears and a consistent way she sees. At the moment, every time she remembers the experience and retells it, its wisdom more fully permeates her. But memories fade and the opportunity to retell experiences does not always present itself. Therefore, the teaching of the experience may be lost unless the memory takes on the shape of a practice.

## **From Memory to Practice**

To remember is a form of practice. It is the interior hosting of the past event so its blessings may be fully appreciated and integrated. At appropriate times, this interior hosting is translated into speech and told to others. However, this may not happen often. Quite frankly, people don't want to hear it. ("I've heard that one, Frank.") Yet the teaching of the experience needs further pondering. Its implications have not been fully mined. How will the memory be turned into a sustained practice?

One way is to turn the memory into a mantra. In this situation, a mantra is a phrase that is shorthand for the remembered experience. Perhaps, "the Lord is in the house" becomes a phrase that is repeated several times during the day. The repeated phrased brings this awareness into situations where it may be difficult to imagine the Lord is in the house. But the more the phrase is said mindfully, the more the mind opens to this reality. The truth that was fleetingly seen in the experience and was hosted in memory is now being established in consciousness. It is becoming a permanent way of seeing.

There is often a need for creativity and experimentation for a memory to become a practice. I know a woman who was greatly impressed by a Buddhist story about a man who thought his son was murdered by pirates and his body burned. The man found what he thought was the charred body of his son, cremated it even further, and puts the remains in a sack that he wore around his neck. However, he was mistaken. The son was not killed. He was abducted by the pirates, and eventually escaped. He returned to the village, found the new house of his father, and knocked on the door, saying, "Father, open to me. It is your son." But the father told him to go away, saying, "I carry my son in a sack around my neck." The boy continued to knock and the father continued to refuse to open. Finally, the boy went away. The Buddha comments: "Sometimes we cling to

what we think is true so tightly that when truth itself knocks on our door we refuse to open.”

This story had a powerful effect on the woman. She could feel its truth in her bones. But her cognitive grasp of what it was teaching her was murky. However, what was clear was the practice that she could use to develop the teaching. She wore necklaces, and she said that every time she would put a necklace on or take it off or touch it during the day, she would bring to mind the “sack around the neck of the father.” This she was sure would teach her the truth she needed to know to enrich her life.

### **From Practice to Integration**

The point of homegrown practices is to outgrow them. They are tools for a more variegated and developed consciousness. Once the new consciousness is well established, it may be time to go on to other practices. The Buddha is reported to have said: once you cross the river you do not have to carry the canoe. The gift of the experience, remembered and practiced, has come to fruition. The result is a more spiritually developed person with more possibilities for understanding and action. The realization of the past experience has become integrated into the present reality of the acting person.

I heard a doctor say that every time she washes her hands, she says a Jewish prayer of purification. She tries to say the prayer mindfully, and through it become more aware of what is happening. I asked her what she was purifying with the prayer. She said that she did not use the prayer for purification. She used it as a way of remembering that the next person she met was not their disease.

My suspicion is there will come a time when this prayer practice will “fall away.” She will not make a decision to stop, but she will notice she is not saying it as regularly as she used to. She may think she has become lax; and that may be the case. But she may also have integrated respect for the person of the sickness so deeply that she no longer

needs the tool for remembering. The practice has done its work. It has contributed to the spiritual development of the person and made that person a more effective agent of divine purposes in the world.

### **Just Begin**

“Is all this worth it? Isn’t there enough to do without trying this? Can’t we get on with life without these practices meant to improve us?” The answer to these very good questions is: “Don’t go there!” Just begin. The proof is in the pudding, not in pondering the values of the pudding beforehand.

- (1) **Find an experience that told you what you needed to hear or showed you what you needed to see.**
- (2) **Host it in memory.**
- (3) **Design a practice that will deepen your realization of its truth.**
- (4) **Practice regularly and mindfully.**
- (5) **After three weeks, evaluate the practice to see if it is working, i.e. is it changing your consciousness and influencing your behavior in a positive way.**