

When Work Disappoints

BY MATTHEW S. BEAL

In a peculiarly modern twist, work is more closely linked to vocation and personal identity. This heightens the spiritual toll of underemployment and unemployment. However a balm is not to be found in modern motivational mantras, but in practicing the presence of God in our work.

So many things in our culture depend on successful employment. At the macro level, stock market analysts carefully examine the monthly employment numbers, because Wall Street rises and falls on those reports and politicians' aspirations may soar on their wings or lie crushed beneath their wheels. On a more personal level, individuals and families scrutinize their work hours and income to see if they can afford healthier meals, enjoy vacations, save for retirement, go to the movies, and give gifts to their friends. Some, in their want, must navigate mounting debt to meet basic needs or maintain a lifestyle for which their level of employment is unsuited. This latter scenario is increasingly common as underemployment in the United States is more widespread and on the rise.¹

When adequate jobs are scarce, and excellent ones are even rarer, life becomes more difficult than anticipated. Dreams sometimes die, and the spiritual toll of underemployment becomes steep. Doug Maynard, who studies work psychology, summarizes the potential hindrances to human flourishing:

Research shows that underemployment, whether it is involuntary part-time employment, underpayment, or intermittent employment, has negative psychological and behavioral effects, including low self-esteem, stress, substance abuse, health problems, and depression. In fact, being underemployed may be as traumatic and damaging as being out of work entirely.²

Engaging in satisfying work, on the other hand, correlates with financial flexibility, relational well-being, personal contentment, and community integrity. Work or its absence, then, holds great meaning in our lives and is an important aspect of our flourishing.

Work is also related to our sense of vocation. John G. Stackhouse outlines three ways of conceiving this relation: work *as* vocation, work *distinct from* vocation, and work *as part of* vocation.³ I will be exploring the third sense, in which work is a vital aspect of vocation but is not equated with it. We often experience work as an integral aspect of our personal identity; it could be described as our identity in motion. Vocationally suitable work is both the accurate embodiment of our current identity and the realization of adequate progress toward our aspirations. In other words, our work takes on the *telos*, or goal, of our identity being developed. When considered from this perspective, major frustrations and disappointments in work can stab at the deepest regions of personal pain.

Admittedly, this is a peculiarly modern understanding of how work relates to vocation and development of personal identity. Through much of human history the idea of vocational disappointment, as characterized here, would have been meaningless. In pre-industrial cultures – whether they were nomadic, hunting, subsistence-farming, or trade-oriented – people were simply born into their vocations and any frustration with them would not be a matter of mere underemployment, but of radical upheaval in the community due to an invading army or natural disaster. The now popular stereotype of idealistic young people successfully rebelling against their domineering parents' superego-infused vocational intentions for them obviously could have no place in such cultures.

This does not mean our contemporary concern with issues of work, vocation, and identity is inappropriate or ethically immature. It just means this concern, from a broad historical perspective, seems peculiarly ours. What was inconceivable for centuries is now commonplace for many people: they confront a plethora of employment paths that promise identity development as it relates to work. So, it would be dysfunctional for us to avoid the matter.

Furthermore, the relationship between work, vocation, and identity I am considering is a product of widespread affluence and prospects of socioeconomic "upward mobility." Thus, when we struggle with vocational disappointment of this sort, we thereby locate ourselves within a framework of privilege. Globally, a multitude of hungry, displaced, suffering, unemployed women, men, and children still experience vocational disappointment not as a deficiency in personal identity in motion but as a desperate need to engage in anything resembling productive work. This does not mean we do not face a real problem; it just means our problems regarding work could be much worse.

To our problem, therefore, let us direct our attention. In the next section I will canvas a model for finding purpose in our work that has become a commonplace in our culture. But, I suggest, instead of providing helpful guidance, it leads to unwarranted disappointment. A more adequate perspective is needed, and in the final section I point to one found in the writings of the seventeenth century monastic, Brother Lawrence.



As a professional counselor, I serve clients whose disappointment with work (as it relates to their vocation and identity) integrally affects their mental health disorders and general sense of distress. As an ambitious Ph.D. student with close ties to others in the academy, I experience in my own life and notice in my friends' lives the stress, anxiety, and disappointment of work and vocation. Doctoral students in the humanities increasingly face the challenge of underemployment. After they have devoted years to making an original contribution to the expansion of human knowledge, to teach or research in an adjunct capacity can shake their confidence and add to mounting financial stresses. After they have developed the passion and skills for advanced scholarship, to teach junior high mathematics can be disappointing. What for many people would be a very rewarding career seems to them more like a vocational setback that impedes their development and threatens their identity with stagnation or disintegration. Of course, this sort of disappointment with work is not limited to ambitious



young academics; it manifests in many fields, including the service sector, science and engineering, creative arts and crafts, the ministry, and so on.

In relatively affluent societies like ours, the prospect of “dreaming big” only heightens the tension. For instance, the “American dream” teaches people “if you can dream it, you can do it” because the economic environment allows single-minded, energetic persons to attain whatever financial goals and attendant lifestyle accoutre-

ments they desire.⁴ Unfortunately, this exhortation to “Dream big!” echoes not only through business motivational seminars but also among evangelical congregations.⁵ Dreaming big has blossomed into an exquisite flower of modern capitalism. However, its pollen is an allergen hazardous to many.

In this dreaming-big project, we are supposed to discover our purpose—what I have described as the *telos* for developing one’s identity—at the

intersection of passion, mission, vocation, and profession. Just search the Internet for images with those terms and you will be rewarded with dozens of variations on the diagram at left.

There are several serious problems with this common motivational model. First, it promotes an unrealistically high ideal. Most people will find it unobtainable. They must do work for which they are underqualified or overqualified, for which they are underpaid, or which they experience as mundane and unfulfilling. Offering them platitudes about holding out hope of a better future—to “dream bigger”—does not change their present situation, which falls short of their life’s “purpose” on this model.

Second, the model points us in the wrong direction. Does the struggling single father who is bussing tables at a diner thereby miss his purpose? Does the independently wealthy volunteer miss her purpose by not being paid? Does the skilled, highly-paid pastor who feels inadequate to the work and struggles to love ministry miss her purpose? This seems unlikely to me. The model predicts that our purpose, identity, and well-being depend on the intersection of passion, mission, vocation, and profession. However, the reality is that many people find purpose and fulfillment in work that is lacking in one or more of these categories.

Another problem is that the model makes flourishing depend too much on external, transitory conditions such as a having a particular job, earning a high salary, enjoying a generous benefit package, living in a certain location, or working on a favored schedule. These are good things, but locating purpose at the conjunction of these aspects of work makes us unnecessarily vulnerable to despair.⁶

Finally, the model depends too much on subjective responses to those conditions. It is a better indicator of things that influence people’s temporary feelings of satisfaction with their work than whether they are finding purpose in their work and being fulfilled by it.

If Christian communities imbibe the cultural assumptions of this model, they will fail to promote human flourishing in the face of vocational disappointments. They will add insult to injury when work disappoints, rather than point people toward abundant life. This will be a tragedy, because the Christian tradition contains resources to cope with discouragement in work and foster human flourishing despite vocational disappointments. To one of these resources, the insights of Brother Lawrence, we turn next.



To buck the culturally dominant model described above, we must shift the locus of “purpose.” With a richly embodied perspective on work and vocation in *The Practice of the Presence of God*, Brother Lawrence (1611-1691) affords precisely this opportunity. He transforms mundane work by recognizing within it the transcendent presence of God.

As a monk he became frustrated when his superiors assigned him a task for which he was acutely unfit. The charge “was a very unwelcome task to him, because he had no turn for business, and because he was lame.” Note, however, his response:

[Brother Lawrence] gave himself no uneasiness about it.... [Rather] he said to God, It was His business he was about.... So likewise in his business in the kitchen (to which he had naturally a great aversion), having accustomed himself to do everything there for the love of God, and with prayer, upon all occasions, for His grace to do his work well, he had found everything easy during the fifteen years that he had been employed there.⁶

Brother Lawrence advocated “doing our common business...(as far as we are capable) purely for the love of God.”⁷ Rather than depending upon a convergence of passion, mission, vocation, and profession for his sense of purpose, he rooted the motivation for his work in love, claiming that despite the apparent lack in one or more such categories “he was pleased, when he could take up a straw from the ground for the love of God.”⁸ His experience of pleasure confirms the Westminster Shorter Catechism’s proclamation that humanity’s ultimate purpose is to glorify and enjoy God forever.⁹

Brother Lawrence’s account of simplicity of heart in work bears striking resemblance to modern conceptions of mindfulness:

I do not say that for this cause we must place any violent constraint upon ourselves. No, we must serve God in a holy freedom, we must do our business faithfully, without trouble or disquiet; recalling our minds to God meekly, and with tranquility, as often as we find them wandering from Him.⁹

Brother Lawrence subverts our culture’s tendency to base work’s purpose in external circumstances. His advice echoes a more ancient source that instructs us to re-center our work priorities around the work of Christ: “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord” (Colossians 3:23, NIV).¹⁰ For Henri Nouwen (1932-1996), this means “our vocation [becomes] to convert the enemy into a guest and to create the free and fearless space where brotherhood and sisterhood can be formed and fully experienced.”¹¹



When we follow Brother Lawrence in being mindfully aware of God’s presence in our daily work, we do not ignore the pain of disappointment, frustration, sadness, anger, and stress caused by underemployment and unemployment. Rather, we realign our purpose in a manner that allows us to cope with this pain productively, by placing our labor into the metanarrative of God’s love and work of redemption.

This is a thoroughly Christian analogue of the counseling treatment called Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), which promotes “psychological flexibility and adaptability” in harmony with our values and arising out of our personal agency.¹² In other words, ACT advises that we can reorient our goals and achieve purpose in the context of disappointment. In more theological language, Brother Lawrence is showing us how to adapt to work disappointment as mature agents, as subjects in the *imago Dei*, tolerating our emotional distress while weaving it into a metanarrative that gives suffering meaning because it serves a greater purpose.

When career dreams are dashed by rejection letters, termination notices, or personal tragedy, or when underemployment proves the only option, we must not assume that we have personally failed God. A more resilient perspective allows for such suffering, disappointment, and barrenness without intrinsic threat to purpose, identity, or call.

Indeed, rather than finding underemployment a frustration of purpose, we might as readily find in it precisely the purposes of God: “Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, when you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance” and can lead to spiritual maturity (James 1:2-4, NIV).¹³ Work can be frustrating, grating against the aspirations of our passion, mission, vocation, and profession. It can be disappointing, unfulfilling, discouraging, exhausting, and brutal. Indeed, often our daily bread comes “through painful toil” and “by the sweat of [our] brow” (Genesis 3:17, 19, NIV). Yet we continue to work in the hopeful conviction that Christ’s resurrection accomplishes not only a spiritual deliverance from sin, but also redeems the entire created order.¹⁴ Therefore it is in faith that our work, no matter how toilsome or disappointing, is imbued with life through God’s presence.

Disappointment in work is nearly inevitable. A commitment to engaging all our acts of work as acts of love and worship while reorienting our purpose from the transient to the transcendent will help us accept the attendant hardships. This is a particular, modern case of finding the secret of contentment that the Apostle Paul knows and spiritual writers like Brother Lawrence embrace:

I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength.

Philippians 4:12-13 (NIV)

NOTES

1 See the Local Area Unemployment (LAU) data collected by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, United States Department of Labor at <http://www.bls.gov/lau/stalt.htm> (accessed April 1, 2015).

2 Douglas C. Maynard, "Underemployment," in Vincent N. Parillo, ed., *Encyclopedia of Social Problems* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2008), 967-969, here citing 969. See also David Dooley, Joann Prause, and Kathleen A. Ham-Rowbottom, "Underemployment and Depression: Longitudinal Relationships," *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 41:4 (December 2000), 421-436.

3 John G. Stackhouse, *Making the Best of It: Following Christ in the Real World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 221-222.

4 This quote is commonly attributed to Walt Disney (1901-1966), who developed an empire of media products that sold the dream to many.

5 "God never gives us small dreams. If your dream doesn't scare you a bit, it's not from God," write Bill Easum and Bil Cornelius in *Go Big: Lead Your Church to Explosive Growth* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006), 13.

6 Nicholas Herman of Lorraine (Brother Lawrence), *The Practice of the Presence of God* (London, UK: H. R. Allenson LTD, 1906), 13-14. Brother Lawrence was a retired soldier who became a monk, but was too uneducated to be ordained. Nevertheless, his practical wisdom came to the attention of Cardinal de Noailles, who requested more information about him. *The Practice of the Presence of God* is the notes of four conversations with Brother Lawrence conducted by Abbe de Beaufort, the Cardinal's envoy.

7 *Ibid.*, 21.

8 *Ibid.*, 12.

9 *Ibid.*, 35.

10 Scripture passages marked "NIV" are from THE HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION® NIV®, Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society®. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

11 Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1986 [1975]), 50.

12 For an introduction to ACT, see P. Nancey Hoare, Peter McIlveen, and Nadine Hamilton, "Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) as a Career Counselling Strategy," *International Journal for Educational and Vocational Guidance*, 12:3 (October 2012), 171-187, here citing 173.

13 See M. Elizabeth Lewis Hall, Richard Langer, and Jason McMartin, "The Role of Suffering in Human Flourishing: Contributions from Positive Psychology, Theology, and Philosophy," *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 38:2 (Summer 2010), 111-121.

18 Cf. Romans 8:21-22.



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