

The Dilbertization of Work

B Y A L H S U

In Dilbert's world, work is meaningless and the whole corporate structure engenders laziness, frustration, and even despair. Many disillusioned office workers identify with him. Some of us are deeply unsatisfied with our work, but we hang on—we need the paycheck. How should we think about work when we are unhappy with our jobs?

I'm a Dilbert fan. I have a plush Dogbert toy on top of my office computer, and one of my coffee mugs depicts one of my favorite strips. The pointy-haired boss tells Dilbert, "I've decided to be more of a hands-on manager." Looking over Dilbert's shoulder, the boss commands, "Move the mouse ... up ... over ... more ... now click it! Click it! NO!!! YOU FOOL!!!" Dilbert sighs, "This has 'long day' written all over it."

Dilbert, which appears in more newspapers than any other comic, symbolizes a paradigm shift in our approach to work. Older comics had a certain work ethos, displayed in characters like Dagwood Bumstead of *Blondie*. Dagwood might symbolize the workers of the World War II generation: a lifelong company man whose years of loyalty had earned him his own office. Mr. Dithers may have yelled at Dagwood when he fell asleep on the job, but Dagwood never worried about job security or corporate downsizing.

Contrast this with Dilbert, the quintessential worker of the postmodern era. Despite Dilbert's education and specialized training as an engineer, his work is meaningless and unsatisfactory. Instead of an office, he has a cubicle. And his coworkers drive him crazy.

Dilbert's colleague Wally embodies the cynicism of the workplace; his purpose in life is to do as little as possible on the job without getting fired. In one strip, Wally rejoices because he realizes that he makes just as much

money whether he works or twiddles his thumbs all day. Beetle Bailey was lazy, but that was more a statement of his individualism within the military industrial complex. In Dilbert's world, the whole corporate structure engenders laziness, frustration, and even despair.

One positive aspect of *Dilbert* is that it serves as a critique of workaholicism. Christians can applaud this. But what about those who, like Dilbert, feel as if their jobs are meaningless? *Dilbert's* vast audience suggests that a large group of disillusioned office workers identify with him. Some of us are deeply unsatisfied with our work, but we hang on because we need the paycheck. How do we think about work when we are unhappy with our jobs?

THE NEW REALITIES OF YOUNG ADULthood

In previous eras, people had little career choice. Children would inherit their parents' farm or follow a father's trade. But today vocational counselors say that a recent college graduate can expect to have an average of ten to twelve jobs over a lifetime, including three or four different careers.

In addition, how we conceive of adulthood itself has shifted tremendously. Adulthood used to be thought of as beginning at sixteen or eighteen, or even twelve or thirteen, at which time we would begin the work that would continue until our death. In 1900, the average life expectancy was only forty-seven years. The concept of "retirement" was almost unknown simply because many people did not live to reach their sixties. Now life expectancies are about seventy-four years and increasing.

The actual beginning of adulthood has been postponed by the normalizing of the college experience, facilitated in the postwar era by the G. I. Bill and accelerated by the advent of the information economy. College graduation, moving out on our own, and landing our first job now signify the transition to "adult life" in "the real world." This first job out of college is likely to be what one of my coworkers, a recent college graduate, calls a "whatever job."

Twentysomething authors Alexandra Robbins and Abby Wilner, in their book *Quarterlife Crisis: The Unique Challenges of Life in Your Twenties*, paint a stark portrait of this postcollegiate life.¹ Recent graduates become disillusioned with salaries too insignificant to justify their college expenses and student loans. Some with master's degrees find their academic fields so specialized that their only options are administrative work or waitressing. Many move to metropolitan centers for jobs, but find they are lost in the masses and unable to meet people and make friends. Many find that the abstract studies of their college years have little to do with the corporate office setting. Some pursue graduate school, attempting to recover the collegiate experience. Others move back in with their parents, facing crises of self-confidence and feelings of failure.

"The bewildering central task of the Tryout Twenties is to choose a life

course,” Gail Sheehy writes in *New Passages*. “Today, in the absence of any clear road map on how to structure their lives and facing an economic squeeze and the terror of unlimited choice, many members of the Endangered Generation have a new goal: *Stay in school as long as you can*. The twenties have stretched out into a long Provisional Adulthood. Most young people don’t go through the Pulling Up Roots transition until their mid-twenties and are still in Provisional Adulthood until close to 30.”²

First adulthood, according to Sheehy, doesn’t really begin until age thirty. By then we have probably tried enough different things to have figured out in a general sense what works for us and what doesn’t. We come to recognize that some kinds of jobs fit our personality while others do not. We find that some kinds of work are deeply motivating and satisfying while others are not.

In his book *Courage and Calling*, Gordon Smith says that most people don’t know who they really are until their mid-thirties.³ The years up until that point are a time of figuring out who we are, what we are interested in, what motivates us, how we work, what we want to do. It is a time of discerning our calling.

FEELING GOD’S PLEASURE

Richard Florida studied 20,000 information-technology workers to find what gave them the most job satisfaction. Of thirty-eight job factors, the three most significant factors valued were challenge/responsibility, flexibility, and stability. Compensation was ranked fourth.⁴ This suggests that today’s workers don’t see their job as “just a job” or paycheck. Whether they realize it or not, people are looking for a job fit that matches an intrinsic, God-given sense of calling or vocation in which they experience challenge, significance, and the satisfaction of meaningful work.

While vocational counselors may use a variety of assessments and indicators

to help people discern their calling, ultimately the question is experiential. The runner Eric Liddell in *Chariots of Fire* said that “God made me fast, and when I run I feel his pleasure.” All of us need to discern where we feel God’s pleasure. How has God made me? And when do I feel that I am doing what he created me to do? When I teach, when I sing, when I design, when I nanny, when I mentor or craft or diagnose or whatever it is that

The runner Eric Liddell in CHARIOTS OF FIRE said, “God made me fast, and when I run I feel his pleasure.” All of us need to discern where we feel God’s pleasure. How has God made me? And when do I feel that I am doing what he created me to do?

makes me say, "This is what God put me on the planet for. This is what I'm wired to do!"

This is what psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi calls "optimal experience" or "flow," those times when we are completely immersed and satisfied with our work or activity.⁵ In contemporary terms, we might say that these are times that we feel like we're "in the zone." While all jobs will

By the mid-to-late forties, many find that they have plateaued in their jobs and feel stuck in their careers. Whereas in earlier centuries most people had no choice but to stick it out in their trade, today many people are making a transition to an entirely different venture.

have times of frustration, jobs where we experience regular times of "flow" or "feeling God's pleasure" may be good indicators that our work fits our calling. Absence thereof suggests the opposite.

Vocation and calling are very much tied to issues of spiritual giftedness. Theologian Miroslav Volf's "pneumatology of work" is based on Paul's discussion of the parts of the body in 1 Corinthians 12.⁶ Work is a

matter of doing what we are created to do. If we are gifted to be a teacher, then teach. If we are created with evangelistic skills and personality, then we will be most satisfied when we are doing evangelistic work. If we are wired to love detail and administration, then we will find deepest sense of vocation and calling when we are doing logistical planning work. Self-knowledge leads to discernment and optimal work fit.

Rick Warren's *The Purpose-Driven Life* uses other terms to describe this same reality. He says that all of us are shaped by God in a unique way. His acrostic SHAPE stands for: Spiritual gifts, Heart, Abilities, Personality, and Experience.⁷ This model shows that people with the same spiritual gifts might have very different vocations because of different passions, personalities, or experiences. For example, Andy, Jenny, and Fred may all have the spiritual gift of teaching. But Andy has a heart for second graders, Jenny is geared toward teaching college English majors, and Fred is particularly excited about mentoring inner-city youth.

Personality assessments like the Myers-Briggs can also show us what careers might or might not be a good vocational fit. Most youth pastors tend to be wacky extroverts, and most accountants tend to be detail-oriented introverts. But not always. In youth ministry, an ideal scenario would be one where a team of youth sponsors has a mix of personalities, including more reserved introverts. After all, some teens will not respond

at all to a boisterous extrovert, but would gradually open up to a sensitive introvert. A ministry setting working with a mix of people requires a mix of personalities.

And experiences can profoundly shape the direction of one's calling and career. Many folks have gone into overseas missions because of the experience of a short-term mission trip. Chuck Colson's life took an unexpected turn when he was imprisoned for his involvement in Watergate. That time in prison impressed upon him the need for Christians in prison ministry, and as a result he launched the parachurch organization Prison Fellowship to minister to inmates, victims and their families.

The editor of *Fast Company* magazine wrote, "We believe that work isn't simply a paycheck; it is the ultimate expression of a fully realized self."⁸ While this may overstate the significance of work, it does get at the idea that work should be the convergence of one's life and calling. As Paul Stevens writes, "Our vocation comes out of our identity, not the reverse."⁹ Our being precedes our doing. Once we have a clear picture of who we are and who God has called us to be, we come to understand what kind of work we are called to do.

FINDING A FIT

By the thirtysomething years, many people will have found a job where what they do matches who they are. First adulthood lasts through the thirties, usually a busy time of hard work establishing a career and family. By the mid-to-late forties, many find that they have plateaued in their jobs and feel stuck in their careers. If they are parents, they may be facing the empty nest as well. At this point of midlife crisis, a renegotiation takes place. Whereas in earlier centuries most people had no choice but to stick it out in their trade for another twenty years, today many people are making a transition to their "second adulthood," which may be an entirely different venture.

Author Bob Buford says that this "halftime" period marks the transition from success to significance, when we are less interested in accomplishments and more interested in meaning and purpose.¹⁰ Therefore many midlife businesspeople leave their work, retire early if they are financially able, and begin a new phase of life. For some Christians, this might be full-time Christian ministry in church or parachurch work, either domestically or in overseas missions contexts.

On the other hand, Christians who have had lifelong "Christian work" may make the opposite move. Paul Stevens had been a local pastor for many years when he realized that his church work had isolated him from the realities of the marketplace. So he quit his pastorate and became a carpenter. There he rediscovered his sense of calling and ministry, through a new trade that opened up opportunities for physical work and interaction with non-church members.¹¹

Stevens' experience suggests that we can honor God's call in many different jobs. A Christian physicist told a friend that he feels like his work is not very "spiritual." He thought the only way he could be a Christian on the job was to evangelize non-Christian coworkers. His friend replied, "But God created the physical world. He delights in it. And he has called you to explore it and study it and to make that knowledge known to others. That's your way of declaring the glory of God." The physicist's work as a physicist could be a deeply meaningful Christian vocation.

While it is true that all work is potentially meaningful and significant, it is not true that all work is equally strategic. Some work may in fact be immoral or irrelevant. If a job seems meaningless and we don't discern that our presence there is of any long-term benefit to either the company and other people or our own well-being, and if the job doesn't fit our skills, interests, personality, or sense of calling, these may well be indications that we should pursue other opportunities, either within this company or elsewhere. A plateaued career can be a sign that God has something else in store for us.

Ideally, at some point in our career we will find congruence between who we are, what we do, *and* the organization we work for. "To thrive vocationally within organizations we must find congruence between ourselves and the organizations in which we serve," writes Gordon Smith. "People who have vocational vitality are in organizations whose missions they own and whose values they can identify with."¹² This usually only comes late in our career, perhaps in our fifties or later. By this point in life, we know who we are, and we know our gifts, abilities, and skills. By then, our cumulative experience and accomplishments may well lead us to a position and place where the organization's mission or purpose lines up precisely with our dreams and aspirations. All pistons are firing, we are in the zone, we experience flow, and whatever we do, we feel God's pleasure.

Like many young thirtysomethings, I've had five different jobs in the last decade. But compared to my fellow Gen Xers, I'm unusual in that all five of those jobs were at the same company. I concluded some time ago that rather than changing companies in search of more lucrative opportunities, it was more important that I work for a company that I believe in. It does not matter so much what I do as who I work for. Fortunately, I have been able to hold jobs that fit my interests and skills, and I have experienced a good degree of vocational congruence between my sense of calling and the company I work for. For that I am grateful.

HOPE FOR THE DILBERTESQUE

Scott Adams, *Dilbert's* creator, spent nine years as "a necktie-wearing, corporate victim assigned to cubicle 4S700R at the headquarters of Pacific Bell."¹³ He quit that dead-end job to pursue his love of cartooning. The rest is history. Has Scott Adams found his calling? He has certainly found a ca-

reer that matches who he is, where his work is tremendously successful and lucrative. But I don't know if he sees it as the fulfillment of a calling, or acknowledges his work as something that God created him to do. The cynicism that suffuses his cartoons, though amusing to a point, does not reflect the gospel hope offered by the One to whom he is called.

In contrast, another cartoonist, Johnny Hart, is known for his work on *The Wizard of Id* and *B.C.* Not only does Hart delight in his work and success in syndication, he also sees it as the fulfillment of a God-given call on his life. One of my favorite *B.C.* strips is posted in my office. A stone rolls away from a cave. A confused caveman sees footprints emerging from the cave and follows them. They go across the top of a pond. In the final frame, we see the footprints go right on top of a snake, who says, "Well, that was rude! Some guy just stepped on my head."

Many non-Christian readers might not catch the biblical allusion, and some Christians may be skeptical about Hart's evangelistic use of his comic strip. I find it a wonderful example of Christian vocation lived out in the marketplace, where a Christian cartoonist lets his Christian identity permeate his work in subtle and clever ways.

What if you hate your job? What if your pointy-haired boss is making work hell for you? On the one hand, Christians would counsel forbearance and perseverance. After all, it is still true that all work is significant. Wherever you are, be fully there. You may be there for a reason.

But consider whether your job is the most strategic fit for your identity and calling. Ultimately, we have only a few choices. We can change ourselves—either adjust our attitude so we are happier with the job, or develop our skills so we are better suited for it. We can change jobs and find something that fits better with who we are. If the job is fine but the environment is not, we can change companies. Or we could change careers entirely. None of these choices are easy, but this is why Gordon Smith titled his book *Courage and Calling*; it may require true courage to make the choices to answer God's call on our lives.

It's entirely possible that God does not want perpetually frustrated Christians working in what they feel are dead-end jobs. If we suffer from chronic Dilbert-feelings, this might be an indication to us that God has something better in store for us somewhere else.

Yes, God needs Christians in every field: he needs Christian lawyers and doctors and journalists and engineers and so on. But it's entirely possible that he does not want perpetually frustrated Christians working in what they feel are dead-end jobs. If we suffer from chronic Dilbert-feel-

ings, this might be an indication to us that God has something better in store for us somewhere else.

For those of us who find ourselves doing meaningless, Dilbert-like work, we would do well to reexamine the role of work in our lives. We know that we'll never find fulfillment in a mere job. If we are clueless about what our occupational future might be, then we might come to see job insecurity and even unemployment as blessings. By the grace of God, they can become opportunities for us to discern our true callings.

NOTES

- 1 Alexandra Robbins and Abby Wilner, *Quarterlife Crisis* (New York: J. P. Tarcher, 2001).
 - 2 Gail Sheehy, *New Passages* (New York: Random House, 1995), 48.
 - 3 Gordon Smith, *Courage and Calling* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 63.
 - 4 Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 87-91.
 - 5 Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1990).
 - 6 Miroslav Volf, *Work in the Spirit: Toward a Theology of Work* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).
 - 7 Rick Warren, *The Purpose-Driven Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 236.
 - 8 John A. Byrne, "The Promise of Reinvention," *Fast Company* (August 2003), 16.
 - 9 R. Paul Stevens, "Vocational Guidance," in *The Complete Book of Everyday Christianity*, edited R. Paul Stevens and Robert Banks (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 1080.
 - 10 Bob Buford, *Halftime* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995).
 - 11 R. Paul Stevens, *Liberating the Laity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 13-20.
 - 12 Smith, *Courage and Calling*, 176. See Smith's article, "Following Our Vocations in Organizations" on pp. 36-42 of this issue of *Christian Reflection*.
 - 13 Scott Adams, *The Dilbert Principle* (New York: HarperBusiness, 1996), dust jacket.
-



AL HSU

is Associate Editor of General Books for InterVarsity Press and lives in Downers Grove, Illinois.