

First Unitarian Church

September 9, 2018

What do you do? For such a common question, this can be surprisingly sensitive.

It makes a few assumptions: that the person being asked is gainfully employed, that their job title is a significant part of their identity or is something they want to share, that they won't have to reveal something very personal in order to answer you. Most answers also reveal something about a person's socioeconomic status. Can you imagine asking *that* when you first meet someone? What's your socioeconomic status? Or, how much education do you have?

This is why many ministers have called the question the bane of coffee hour.

In the context of church, I always encourage us to ask different questions when we are first getting to know each other. "What stood out to you in that service?" or "What are your thoughts about the theme today?" or even the more general, "What do you like to do when you aren't at church?" are often much better conversation starters.

At the same time, the work we do—whether it is gainful employment or parenting or household chores or something else—whatever feels like work to us is a significant part of a life. If you are employed full time, then by the time you've gotten ready for work, traveled there, spent the day, and traveled home again, work has taken up more than half of your waking hours.

Meanwhile, many people who work for a living are unhappy in their paid jobs. A while back a Gallup poll made a splash in the business world by reporting that about fifty-one percent of workers don't feel any real connection to their jobs, and therefore put in only the minimum effort.<sup>i</sup> And another sixteen percent actually resent their jobs, complain to coworkers, and bring down everyone else's morale with their unhappiness.

A business school professor I know has been wondering aloud (to me) whether spirituality might have a positive role to play in the American workplace. Not corporations-as-people, we-won't-pay-for-your-birth-control spirituality. (I have yet to see a corporation walk through these doors—they do not attend churches. They are not people). Rather, could people-based spirituality play a meaningful role in work? Can it increase happiness and a sense of satisfaction?

To which I say, absolutely. Spirituality can play a healthy role in every part of our lives.

Before I talk about that, there are some structural factors I want to lift up. Being poorly compensated is associated with employee unhappiness.<sup>ii</sup> No surprise there. That has not been helped by wage stagnation and the growing gap between rich and

poor, by those who profit the most from big business rewarding themselves and each other with obscene amounts of money, while workers at the bottom languish economically.

Businesses and organizations that treat people and natural resources merely as means to an end, as disposable and not as having value in and of themselves do not sow happiness. Not for anyone, in the long run.

And other abuses sometimes occur: like wage theft. Anyone working in customer service has probably experienced abusive customers. And workplace bullying is an issue many people have experienced: sometimes from supervisors, other times from coworkers. It can involve intimidation, harassment, a climate of unrelenting criticism, or even spreading rumors about the bullies' target.

These things certainly make an unhappy atmosphere.

But other times—a lot of the time, I'd say— unhappiness flows from the relationship between a person's sense of self and their work or work environment. Where self meets life, and where self meets others. That meeting—between self and life, between self and others—is what spirituality is all about.

It's also true that starting out with the right mindset or relationship with work will be helpful in dealing with an unjust or unnecessarily miserable work situation.

So let's think about work today. Since paid employment makes up a large portion of most people's lives, I'm going to center this sermon on that kind of work. But I've found, and I think you'll agree, that most of what I'm going to say also applies in other contexts, because spirituality has a healthy role to play in every part of our lives, and because none of what I'm about to describe is new. We talk about them at church all the time. We just may not think about how to apply them in certain other parts of our lives, or we may be inconsistent about it.

Mirabai Bush is an author and the co-founder of the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society, which means she has spent her career teaching organizations—for profit, non profit, educational—how to apply contemplative practices to organizational life.

She was one of the creators of a wildly popular employee program at Google called "Search Inside Yourself." (Get it? Google is a search engine...). It's called "Search Inside Yourself: Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction."

Bush talks about the tendency to think of work as something we have to do, and then we get to go home and "be a real person."<sup>iii</sup> It's like we turn some part of ourselves off when we arrive at work—our real selves, I guess—and just get through whatever we have to do (nose to the grindstone) until our shift or workday is over and then we become real again.

Last week, when I introduced this month's theological theme of "vocation," I explained that the notion of vocation does not have to be associated with paid

employment. Rather, it is something deeper that has to do with that concept of our “real selves.” Vocation can be defined as what happens when authentic self meets service. Self, meets...there it is again. That’s where spirituality happens.

If you missed last week, I invite you to check it out on the church website because it connects with what we are thinking about today.

Even if your job title is not what you would think of as a vocation, it is possible to bring your own sense of vocation to work.

In last week’s reading we heard the words of Parker Palmer, who writes about vocation. He says:

Our deepest calling is to grow into our own authentic self-hood, whether or not it conforms to some image of who we ought to be. As we do so, we will not only find the joy that every human being seeks— we will also find our path of authentic service in the world. True vocation joins self and service...<sup>iv</sup>

We can find ourselves in jobs—or other situations—where we feel impatient, bored, unappreciated, or like a body occupying a role rather than as a whole person. In other words, rather than as our real selves. Over time, this can lead to chronic negative feelings like resentment, and take a toll on our health.

How do we bring our whole selves to that? We have to fit into our workplace cultures. We have to be professional. We can’t just throw up our hands and say, “Enough of this, from now on I do things my way.” At least, not usually.

Well , what if you viewed your workplace as a spiritual laboratory? Or classroom for the life of the spirit?

What if we incorporated spirituality at work?

I’m going to share a few approaches to doing that. Now, because today’s sermon relates especially to the business world, and the business world loves acronyms, I’ve got a handy little acronym for you. The acronym is PRAXIS.

Praxis is a word that may be unfamiliar. It’s more common than *lodestar*, but still not that common. The word praxis means the practical application of knowledge, philosophy, or theology.

In this case, it is set of approaches applying spirituality in work.

So here we go: PRAXIS. P-R-A-X-I-S. Practical application of the spiritual.

P stands for **practicing mindfulness** when we are working. Turning on our awareness, getting centered, not letting ourselves merely be on automatic, or so caught up in the whirlwind that we forget our own minds. This is something we can incorporate into the way we already spend our time when we are working.

For example, at Google, Mirabai Bush introduced the concept of mindful emailing.

She says,

... like most mindfulness practices, it's so simple, and we don't do it. You just type out your email, either a response or an initiating email, and then you stop, take three deep breaths, follow your breath in and out, and in and out, and in and out, and then you read the email. And you read it from the perspective of the person who is going to receive it.

At Google they were focused on emotional impact. "... is the person likely to be agitated or angry or frustrated ...? Or maybe, even, is this person likely to think... you're offering more than you actually are?" Employees were invited just to breathe, and take a moment to visualize the receiver.

When she followed up with the employees after one week, they described the experience as "radical." One man even said he had done something very radical... after considering the experience of the person receiving his emails, he had decided instead to *pick up the phone*.

Mindfulness just means spending time noticing. Noticing our own minds and bodies. Noticing what is in front of us. Noticing the spirit or self within. Noticing the self of another person.

There are lots of ways to do it. Breathing, a moment of meditation, a visualization, a short, quiet walk between tasks.

When we do the work of the church in committees and teams, we often begin by lighting a chalice. That, too, is a form of mindfulness. It's taking a moment to remember the deep reason for everything we do.

Because it takes us off of autopilot and connects us with the present, practicing mindfulness leads to increased emotional intelligence and creativity. That's the P in praxis. Practicing mindfulness.

The R stands for **regarding others with compassion**. Last week I mentioned that I used to work as a housekeeper, and I told you a story about Lola, a gentle, wise woman in her 90s. I felt lucky to work for her.

Years earlier, I worked for another person. I'll call her Mrs. De Vil. As in Cruella De Vil. This woman was Cruella De Vil's mother. She was unpleasant. Mrs. De Vil was in her eighties and had a lot of money, nice clothes, and jewelry. I, on the other hand, was nineteen and pregnant and could not afford maternity clothes, so I wore my fiancée's shirts a lot.

Mrs. De Vil seemed to enjoy telling me to do meaningless tasks, like dusting the underside of her dining room table. On a regular basis. There was nothing there. I promise. She was perpetually unhappy with my work. And she made *comments*, like the time she said, "Do you always carry a lot of weight in your behind, or is that the pregnancy?"

You get the picture. She was not compassionate. You might even call her a bully. But I needed the work.

Here's the other thing. This lady had terminal cancer. Her house was perfect. Beyond perfect. So was her hair. But something in her body was out of control. She was also alone. Her husband had already died. And although she had family, I never saw any of them come to visit. Who knows, maybe she had been mean to them, too. But I'm pretty sure she was mean because she was terrified.

Most of the time we don't know another person's story—what is going on behind their face, or what is behind their behavior. When someone is chronically unpleasant, in whatever way, it is as though they are wearing information on their sleeve about their inner state. Is a sign that says, "I'm hurting." Beneath the surface, they may be sad, afraid, isolated, scared of vulnerability, or in chronic physical pain.

And a person who is chronically unpleasant may be emotionally unskillful. Unable to sort themselves out, they project their feelings onto everyone else in the form of unpleasant behavior.

We are all unskillful at times.

Compassion does not mean being a doormat. It is right to set boundaries. But we can do so while regarding the other person with compassion. "Mrs. DeVille, when you say that, I feel self-conscious. I would really like to be on friendly terms with you."

Praying for another person, or silently saying an affirmation for them, is a good way to cultivate compassion, too. Sometimes here at First Unitarian we do the metta, or lovingkindness meditation. "May I be healthy. May I be happy. May I live with ease." You start with the self, and then extend it outward, saying it for someone you care about, and then for a stranger... and then for someone toward whom you have negative feelings.

Why should you make such a lovely wish for someone who is being a royal pain at your workplace? Because people who are healthy, happy, and live with ease do not treat others badly. And because through practicing compassion, we grow. As humans. As spiritual people. As whole people.

We must also be compassionate toward ourselves. One of the things that happens when we practice mindfulness is we start *noticing* our own stuff. And that's not always pleasant. Parker Palmer says

My life is not only about my strengths and virtues; it is also about my liabilities and my limits, my trespasses and my shadow. An inevitable through often ignored dimension of the quest for "wholeness" is that we must embrace what we dislike or find shameful about ourselves as well as what we are confident and proud of.<sup>v</sup>

That's why the lovingkindness meditation starts with the self. The R in praxis stands for regarding others—and ourselves—with compassion.

Next, the A. A stands for **aesthetics**. It is about incorporating beauty and the senses into your workspace. The transcendentalists, who were important in the formation of Unitarian Universalism, were fascinated by the way the soul is naturally drawn toward beauty.

I don't mean social ideals of beauty, which are fickle and based on who holds the most power at any given time and place. I mean beauty as in nature, and the expression of human nature through creativity. A person can see a thousand New Mexico sunsets without tiring of them.

A plant or fresh cut flower in a little vase can bring beauty into a workspace. A piece of polished sandstone or smooth carved wood in your pocket does not require a desk, yet can be both beautiful and a reminder, whenever your hand finds it, to take a few centering breaths.

For the other senses, essential oils like peppermint or citrus, if that suits you and your workspace, are invigorating scents. Music or the trickle of a fountain can also energize or calm through sound. And taking time to make a lunch that is appealing, healthy, and delicious, rather than an afterthought from the freezer, will nourish your senses as well as your body and mind.

The A in praxis stands for aesthetics.

P.R.A...X.

The X is for **eXploring** meaning. If you do not think your work is meaningful, perhaps you've been regarding it too narrowly. Even if it is not your ideal job, consider whether there is anything meaningful within it, whether that's a sense of community with coworkers, or the role of your work or your employer in the larger community. If your work empowers you to care for yourself or others, that's important. What is there to give thanks for in your work? Have you grown as a person in it? Or might you, if you see it as a laboratory for your own growth?

X. Exploring meaning.

The I in praxis stands for **i**ntention and **i**ntegration. It's about intentionally integrating work life into your journey as a human being. This is an orientation we have within. Instead of "I work all day (or evening, or night) and then I go home and be a real person" ...be you all the time. This is about remembering work as a laboratory or classroom for spiritual growth. About keeping all the parts of your life connected to the deep part of living. I is for intention and integration.

And finally the S. That stands for **S**piritual practices. Beyond the practices I have just described, what others might you incorporate into your work? There are more possibilities than I could ever list:

coming up with mantras to chant or repeat in your mind, trying out apps that remind you to breathe, taking yoga breaks, you name it.

PRAXIS. Practicing mindfulness. Regarding others with compassion. Aesthetics. Exploring meaning. Intention and integration. And spiritual practices. PRAXIS.

I invite you to try it out by setting a goal... and then don't be hard on yourself about it. If you miss it, just gently bring yourself back to it again, or ask yourself whether you should start with something different. It's for you. Make it your own. But here's the interesting thing: when we change from within through these practices, it has a way of rippling out and changes the energy and people around us too.

In that way, whatever your title or role, you not only nurture your own soul and your own happiness, you also lead others with the light within.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/why-so-many-americans-hate-their-jobs/>

<sup>ii</sup> <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2016/10/06/3-how-americans-view-their-jobs/>

<sup>iii</sup> <https://onbeing.org/programs/mirabai-bush-search-inside-yourself-contemplation-in-life-and-work-2/>

<sup>iv</sup> Palmer. *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*. John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 2009.

<sup>v</sup> Palmer. *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*. John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 2009. Digital.