

Extracts

Principle 5: Work

I commit to bringing myself fully present to the work I do, whether paid or unpaid, holding a heart of gratitude for the ability to express my gifts in the world in meaningful ways.

*In Benedictine spirituality, work is what we do to continue what God wanted done. Work is co-creative. Keeping a home that is beautiful and ordered and nourishing and artistic is co-creative. Working in a machine shop that makes gears for tractors is co-creative. Working in an office that processes loan applications for people who are trying to make life more humane is co-creative. . . We work because the world is unfinished and it is ours to develop. We work with a vision in mind. . . Work is a commitment to God's service. - Joan Chittister, *Wisdom Distilled in the Daily**

We live in a culture where “work” almost seems to be a bad word. We trudge to our jobs, complain about the hours we keep, work ourselves to exhaustion, and come home and buy more things so we need to work longer hours to sustain us. For many of us, work is a way to pay the bills, and nothing more.

For others, our work may feel like a calling, but perhaps we go underpaid, under- appreciated, and are moving towards depletion and burnout, especially if we are also trapped in the cycle of overconsumption the world around us lures us into. The giving that once enlivened us may be starting to wear thin, we may be feeling frayed.

Many great spiritual teachers write about how the most tedious of work, our household chores, can become a place for spiritual transformation. Thich Nhat Hanh writes about the poetry of doing dishes:

“To my mind, the idea that doing the dishes is unpleasant can occur only when you are not doing them. Once you are standing in front of the sink with your sleeves rolled up and your hands in warm water, it really is not so bad. I enjoy taking my time with each dish, being fully aware of the dish, the water, and each movement of my hands. I know that if I hurry in order to go and have a cup of tea, the time will be unpleasant and not worth living. That would be a pity, for each minute, each second of life is a miracle. The dishes themselves and the fact that I am here washing them are miracles! Each bowl I wash, each poem I compose, each time I invite a bell to sound is a miracle, each has exactly the same value.”

We may be tempted to think that we are working now so we can retire later and finally enjoy life, but the monastic way reminds us that if we do not cultivate contentment in this moment now, we will never know how to savor life later on.

Benedictine monk David Steindl-Rast offers this invitation:

Work, if we don't approach it consciously, will suck us into its demands. Then we become slaves, no matter how high up we are on the ladder . . . Even people who have jobs they don't like and find meaningless can still be free within them . . . by reminding themselves deliberately and often, why they do them. As long as we do work out of love for those whom we love, we do it for a good reason. Love is the best reason for our labors. Love makes what we do and suffer rise like music, like a soaring line of chant.

What would it mean for you to find freedom within the work you do and not feel trapped by its demands? What would it mean to bring love to your work?

What difference would it make if you believed that your work makes a difference in the world, that the world needs what you have to offer? Contemplative practice reminds us that God invites each one of us in every moment to respond to our unique call.

