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Ministering to Those Who Lose Their Jobs

Kevin Twain Lowery

Introduction

Vocation has long been a major factor in human self-identity. Even in the opening narratives of the Bible we discover that Cain tilled the ground and his brother Abel tended sheep. Unemployment statistics are frequently used as a gauge to measure the health of an economy. Most of us have either experienced the effects from economic recession or depression, and we can say that these situations are truly stressful, but there is a vast difference between tightening the budget and losing one's job. Vocation carries much more significance than financial support for the family.

Whether the economy is growing or shrinking, there will most likely be some who will still be struggling with the loss of a job. This paper will attempt to explore this crisis and the type of pastoral care that need to be given to the person losing his or her job.

Why We Work

When the alarm goes off early in the morning, I've often wondered why we go through the trouble we do just to keep a particular job, or a job in general. Perhaps government welfare support may sometimes seem like a tempting offer, yet we find ourselves driven to put our noses to the grindstone, so to speak, and off to work we go.

At first glance, the reasons for working may appear to be rather simple. Food, clothing, shelter, and all of the other things we deem as necessary or desirable all require money for their purchase or use. However, our reasons for working may be deeper than we would first imagine.

Abraham Maslow is known for defining the hierarchy of human needs. However, I would like to list the basic human needs as seen by Goran Collste, whose approach is slightly different. He

identifies the following as basic human needs: 1) safety, 2) community (love, affection, and social contacts), 3) self-respect (grounded in self-confidence and the esteem of others), 4) comprehension and consistency (understanding reality, having a coherent world view), 5) self-realization (using one's innate resources and gifts), and 6) autonomy (control over oneself, self-determination).¹

Obviously, work provides a type of security and safety, as mentioned above. Nevertheless, work is also a type of self-expression. This can enhance self-respect, self-realization, and autonomy. Moreover, work can be a means of social-relatedness. Often, the occupations we have categorize us, grouping us with some individuals and distinguishing us from others. The work place becomes a place where new social relationships develop, either willingly or of necessity. Autonomy is likewise increased by work in the status and power it confers. The mere possession of the job itself, the income earned from the job, and the new work and social relationships made all bestow status and/or power upon the individual.²

It is not as clear how work can improve the coherence of one's world view, but it is perceivable how our perceptions about reality can be shaken or destroyed by the loss of a job.³ In trying to define human motivation for work, H. G. Wells outlines three classes of "persona," that is, roles that are assumed in work. The first class is that of the peasant. This person works in order to protect personal possessions, reputation, etc. Thus, the peasant's motivation is one of defense. The nomadic workers constitute the second class. Their motivation is that of offense, in direct contrast to the peasants. The nomad seeks to advance rather than to preserve. The final class operate from

¹ Goran Collste, "Towards a Normative Work Ethic," in Howard Davis and David Gosling (eds.), *Will the Future Work? Values for Emerging Patterns of Work and Employment* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1985), 73ff.

² Dorothee Soelle and Shirley A. Cloyes, *To Work and To Love: A Theology of Creation*. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 83–101.

³ Patricia Allatt and Susan Yeandle, *Youth Unemployment and the Family: Voices of Disordered Times*. (London: Routledge, 1992), 75.

other motivations, whether they be religious, social, or the like. Wells calls these people the priestly/educated class.⁴

Understanding the differences between these basic types of motivation can help the care giver to better discern how the loss of a job is perceived by the individual. In addition, these categories may also partially explain why all job losses do not create the same sense of urgency. For instance, the loss of a second income in a home, if it fits into the nomadic category, may not be as urgent as the loss of a sole-source income job, if it fits into the peasant category.

Some believe theologically that work is a result of the fall of Adam and Eve. God told Adam that he would work by the sweat of his brow. (Gen. 3:17–19) However, I am not so sure that we can assume that work is part of the curse. I am inclined to agree with John Oliver Nelson, who believes that from the beginning, both work and rest were good, but the curse of sin made work both frustrating and toilsome.⁵ For this reason, many have come to view work as something that is not worth its required effort, overlooking many or all of its benefits. We dread going to work and live for the week-end. Leisure becomes the thing to be sought, and self-expression is forced into this category, separated from its more natural setting in work. Dorothy Sayers believes that this type of thinking should be reversed. “We should no longer think of work as something that we hastened to get through in order to enjoy our leisure; we should look on our leisure as the period of changed rhythm that refreshed us for the delightful purpose of getting on with our work.”⁶

Perhaps the prevalence of low self-esteem has its roots partially in this reversal of the roles of work and rest. Sensing such attitudes from those in the midst of job transition can further aid the care giver in bringing healing through the trauma by encouraging a healthier view of work and rest.

⁴ H. G. Wells, *The Outline of Man's Work and Wealth*. (Garden City, NY: Garden City Publishing, 1936), 262–76.

⁵ John Oliver Nelson, *Work and Vocation: A Christian Discussion*. (New York: Harper, 1954), 55–6.

⁶ Dorothy Sayers, *Creed or Chaos?* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1949), quoted by Robert G. Middleton, "Revising the Concept of Vocation for the Industrial Age," *The Christian Century* 103, no. 32 (October 29, 1986), 943–5.

Even the period of unemployment may be seen as a type of rest, enabling a refreshed start once again.

Work and Self-Image

I had returned to my office after tending to some matters on the ballistics plant where I was employed as an engineer. A year earlier I had been transferred to a position as an administrative assistant to a program manager, having spent the two previous years in the technical division. Although I enjoyed this new working environment much better, I felt that I had been unjustly slighted when it came time to reduce technical engineering staff. My certainty that I had been treated unfairly only brought feelings of bitterness and hostility.

When I stepped inside the office, I noticed a note on my desk saying, "Stan's office, 2:30." A knot tied itself in my stomach, because I knew what was coming. Stan was the division manager, and today was the day the "Grim Reaper" visited our work place. The rumors were all true. I had seen others packing their belongings earlier in the day, some in anger and others in tears, and I knew that my number was up. I had planned to quit to begin seminary in the fall anyway, and I figured that I would benefit from a furlough, but little did I realize the emptiness of rejection that would ensue.

I don't know which was worse, losing my old job or my inability to get another one of the same caliber. After earning over \$30,000 a year (three years out of college in a depressed area), I finally ended up accepting a minimum wage job after starting seminary. It felt like the last seven years of my life had been basically a waste of time and money. The greatest difficulty was trying to redefine just who I was. My identity as an engineer and rocket scientist was brutally shattered and

now I was left in the dregs of minimum wage employment. Even though my situation has since improved, my self-image was permanently changed.

According to a congressional report in the early 1980's, a 1% increase in unemployment over a six-year period yielded over 37,000 additional deaths, 920 suicides, 650 homicides, 500 deaths from cirrhosis of the liver, 4000 state mental hospital admissions, and 3300 prison admissions.⁷ How can this be? Karen Bloomquist explains, "The losses due to unemployment include confusion about identity, worth, and purpose. These are losses which require the same grieving process as does the death of a relative or close friend."⁸ The fact that job security has become increasingly important suggests that unemployment likewise affects one's sense of overall security.⁹ However, it should be pointed out that these effects are noticeable not only in the unemployed, but also in the underemployed.¹⁰

The loss of a job first affects the person's self-identity. Much of this is derived from the poor work ethic of our society which attaches value to wage. Low-wage jobs are seen as being less important than high-wage jobs, and non-wage jobs are often unrecognized altogether.¹¹ Unless the person losing a job soon finds another job of equal or greater salary, his or her self-image can be greatly damaged. Losing the job and the inability to locate another one quickly gives the individual an unwelcome feeling of equality with those once considered to be on a lower echelon.¹²

Furthermore, job loss is often seen as failure. Since one's perception of success or failure is

⁷ Bluestone and Harrison, *The Deindustrialization of America: Plant Closings, Community Abandonment, and the Dismantling of Basic Industry* (New York: Basic Books, 1982): 65, cited by Karen L. Bloomquist, "The Unemployed: Challenge to the Church," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 11 (1984), 34–5.

⁸ Bloomquist, 34.

⁹ Peter Cressey, "Work Ideologies: Prospects for Participation," 92, in Howard Davis and David Gosling, eds. *Will the Future Work? Values for Emerging Patterns of Work and Employment* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1985).

¹⁰ John C. Raines and Donna C. Day-Lower, *Modern Work and Human Meaning* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), 24, 51.

¹¹ Cressey, 86–7.

¹² Bloomquist, 35.

determined by his or her amount of "ego involvement," the failure will seem greater when the job is more highly valued.¹³

Job loss disturbs and sometimes destroys social relationships. The unemployed is suddenly cast out from familiar surroundings and social circles at the work place, and, in the case of large-scale unemployment, the community is affected as people leave to find work elsewhere.¹⁴ This is not to mention the fact that many find themselves having to cope socially with new situations, such as the unemployment line or a new place of employment.

Self-image is also affected in job loss by the shattering of dreams. Many of life's dreams and ambitions center around or are contingent on vocation. Shattering them can ruin one's self-image, bringing even despair.¹⁵ The person losing a job feels all of these forces and feels the need to blame somebody for this grief.¹⁶ To blame oneself would only do further damage to self-image.

Security is also a vital factor in facing unemployment. According to Dorothee Soelle and Shirley Cloyes, "Being in control of one's time, or discovering and following one's timing is an important part of a person's experience of freedom."¹⁷ People who lose jobs suddenly find themselves not in control of a major part of their lives. Even hiring quotas will not force an employer to hire a particular person, only a particular type of person. When job security is lost, other securities are severely threatened, since they hinge upon earned income. This sudden loss of security often forces people into survivalism.¹⁸ Mary Pellauer describes a period of unemployment that she and her husband encountered. She admits to having dreams that fluctuated between disaster and prosperity. Her belief is that survivalism engenders mixed feelings of fear and greed.¹⁹

¹³ Donald Scott, *The Psychology of Work* (London: Duckworth, 1970), 31.

¹⁴ Raines and Day-Lower, 31ff.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 55–68.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 57.

¹⁷ Soelle and Cloyes, 56.

¹⁸ Raines and Day-Lower, 11ff.

¹⁹ Mary Pellauer, "Dreams of the Jobless," *Christianity and Crisis* 44 (June 11, 1984), 221–2.

Not only do these feelings affect the unemployed and their spouses, the children of such families can quite easily experience similar emotions. Clearly, children will feel insecure when their parents are not as secure. Nonetheless, their perceptions of the world and reality can additionally be affected during this time. If they discern a sense of powerlessness in their parents, then they could quite easily adopt a fatalistic world view.²⁰ Therefore, security and self-image are issues for the whole family during job loss.

Ministering to the Unemployed

Losing a job is too often the type of problem for which people will not seek counsel. Perhaps they do not think that care givers can empathize or are knowledgeable about such subjects. It is up to pastors and counselors to show people their concern and understanding of these situations before they occur. How can the church help the indisposition of unemployment? Karen Bloomquist offers sound advice by proposing three main courses of action, namely: 1) offer psychological, financial, and spiritual support to the unemployed and their families, 2) deal with the shattering of dreams and hopes, helping people to face their vulnerabilities and fears, and 3) decry materialism and our system of work which bases value on money.²¹

The person who loses a job often feels forced to abandon perceptions of self-identity. Parting with self-image can be at least as traumatic as the loss of a loved one. Ralph Barlow asserts that the problem of Protestant theology has been the pervasiveness of the motif of triumphalism. For this reason, people often do not see the redemptive nature of suffering. Barlow believes that self-doubt, humiliation, and defeat should not be seen as weaknesses, but as strengths, following the example of Christ. (Ph'p. 2:2–8) However, we must take caution not to assume the role of

²⁰ Raines and Day-Lower, 39.

²¹ Bloomquist, 35ff.

"Messiah," trying to accomplish too much, or that of "Suffering Servant," punishing ourselves for whatever reason.²²

The period of job transition can be very bewildering. People in such plights must have an adequate understanding of where they have been, where they are now, and in what direction they are headed. This cognition of journey is not limited to vocation, but includes physical, emotional, and spiritual progress.²³ Putting the crisis of job loss into perspective will better enable a restoration of self-image.

Another way self-identity can be rebuilt after a job loss is by gaining a better grasp of the differences between vocation and occupation. Vocation is a Biblical concept that encapsulates the notion of "calling," whereas occupation comes from secular thinking and describes what a person does to survive in society.²⁴ This places vocation into an overarching category, and occupation thus becomes one of the elements within vocation. Hence, occupation needs to be aligned with vocation.²⁵ Here is another important area where Christianity helps the individual to gain a broader perspective. Christian vocation may frequently be fulfilled in more than one occupation. All of life is to be viewed as a mission for the kingdom of God, not limited to any one work place or situation. Every task we do is to the Lord, and our common chores and labor are thus sanctified by Christian vocation.²⁶ (Col. 3:17) If self-identity is centered on vocation, then the loss of occupation will not necessarily be as devastating as when self-image is based on occupation.

In addition to these concerns is the issue of security. Many times there are external conditions that require some type of solution. Job loss may be accompanied by losses in insurance

²² Ralph Barlow, "Unemployment and the Protestant Spirit of Triumphalism," *The Christian Century* 92, no. 40 (December 3, 1975), 1108–11.

²³ Richard Nelson Bolles, *What Color Is Your Parachute? A Practical Manual for Job-Hunters & Career Changers* (Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed, 1983), 83ff.

²⁴ Nelson, 58.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 72ff.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 62ff.

benefits (especially health care), pension, etc. The Christian community must be a strong support system for such families so that they are not overwhelmed by feelings of vulnerability. However, churches must have such support systems in place before these situations take place. The unemployed may also feel insecure due to unjust treatment. Justice is an important element in vocational fulfillment, and as such, the individuals must be reassured in their minds that there are persons who are worthy of their trust.²⁷

Once again, we must be reminded that these effects are not limited to those who become unemployed. The families will similarly experience many of the same problems. Additionally, those who assume the responsibility of helping such families in need may also suffer unexpected stress. Periods of unemployment can oftentimes be intervals of transition. Richard Bolles suggests that when we change careers, we are hindered by a lack of either purpose, tools or instruments, motivation, or time.²⁸ Helping a person change careers is a critical process and cannot be done ignorantly or unskillfully. The care giver must be able to effectively assist in this course. Assistance should include instruction on job finding techniques, resume writing, etc. Perhaps the local pastor will want to implement a plan comparable to that incorporated by the Colonial Church in Edina, MN. They started a "Job Transition Support Group" where the meetings consisted of socializing, a presentation on a job search skill or on some aspect of emotional adjustment or coping, personal sharing, scriptural encouragement, and prayer support. These meetings were headed by trained lay persons who acted as facilitators. This program proved itself very effective in helping the unemployed during their change of careers.²⁹

²⁷ Raines and Day-Lower, 111–24.

²⁸ Bolles, 69.

²⁹ Wooddale Church, Eden Prairie, MN, Job Transition Support Group (Retrieved from <http://jobtransition.net/> on May 31, 2019).

Finally, the church must focus on the community and not just individuals, because the community itself is constituted of individuals. Consequently, the religious community must help to prevent large-scale unemployment as well as minister in particular situations.³⁰ Broadening the focus of the church will increase its outreach into the community, give individuals more confidence in the church due to its increased concern and ministry, and encourage people to put their own occupational situations into perspective with the situation in the community as a whole and with the overarching concept of Christian vocation.

³⁰ Leon Howell, "Plant Closings: Taking Responsibility," *The Christian Century* 102, no. 6 (February 20, 1985), 173.

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