



Right Livelihood Dilemmas of Joining Work and Service

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It has become commonplace, almost inevitable in American society, that many people spend much of their productive lives working at a job for which they are unsuited, or that involves a good deal of tedium and strain, and rarely, if ever, inspires or ennobles them. We have necessarily resigned ourselves to this unhappy situation, as one of many adjustments to our complex, fast-paced, and high stress world. We naturally seek happiness elsewhere. With sleep about one-third of our lives and work almost another third, we don't have much time left to succeed, especially since we commonly spend a good portion of our remaining time preparing for, or recovering from, our jobs. No wonder that weekends and vacations are so important to us and that television and other passive forms of entertainment occupy us so profoundly.

A current poll indicates that almost no one has achieved the elusive goal of "job satisfaction." Out of over one hundred working people in various careers interviewed by Studs Terkel in his book, *Working*, very few loved their work. The common logic of the job search today is geared not so much to finding



the career for which you are uniquely gifted as it is in to choosing a career that both pays well and confers social status. Thus we are a nation full of physicians who are not healers, lawyers who do not uphold justice, educators who can't teach, and builders who construct poorly. No doubt many of our pressing social problems are directly or indirectly caused by this unfortunate state of affairs.

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From Buddhism, I borrow my favorite phrase for a concept common to many religions and systems of philosophical thought: "right livelihood." It is the fine idea that the manner in which an individual earns a living in the world ought to serve his own character development and higher or spiritual growth. Contained in this concept is the understanding that to earn a living in some fashion that fails to serve others or that harms or exploits others can accomplish neither goal. In our own culture we have "Christian vocation," which signifies either a direct call to the ministry or the monastic life, or insures that the conduct of business and professional affairs will conform to high moral and ethical principles. *Mitzvot*, "the good work," is a Hebrew term for the same basic idea.

The original meaning of the term vocation is a "summons" or "call" to a particular line of work, and only lately has it become interchangeable with other terms such as occupation or business. So, finding in yourself the natural talent to serve others in a certain way and diligently following that calling is one meaning of right livelihood. The most fortunate among us in this regard are probably those who from an early age feel a special mission in life and are able to fulfill it in the world. They usually love what they are doing, work long hours, and because of their high level of energy, commitment, and purposefulness often seem set apart from others.



But the concept of right livelihood is necessarily broader than this. It includes also the possibility that you can do practically anything with a service-oriented attitude and thereby transform your work into something meaningful for yourself and others. Everyone probably has the memory of someone who seemed to succeed in this. I remember one janitor from my grade school days, his kind eyes, whistling at his work, endlessly cleaning up after endless children. I know of another custodian at a prestigious small university, who because of his quiet radiance, earned the open respect of some of the higher-ups. Perhaps these humbly placed individuals and others like them were happy with their jobs not because the work itself was challenging or fulfilling, but simply because they learned to labor with integrity and with an attitude of service. I doubt that they felt a "calling" to be janitors. A very different example is that of an investment banker, well situated himself, who makes loans to "risky" lower income groups for critical neighborhood improvements. He too, is working with integrity. Service then, is the principle that creates the reality of right livelihood, whether you find the right work to do or just do your work right.

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My personal effort to find right livelihood has been complicated by a couple of old fashioned choices – "place" and "people". That is, I did not first choose a career and follow it wherever it may lead, as our mobile corporate culture now generally compels us to do. My wife and I chose to live simply on a small farm in the mountains near Berea, somewhat self-sufficiently, and to stay closely connected to both our families. We wanted to know our grandparents, nieces, and nephews, and to be available to our parents in the coming years. I am told these decisions reflect an orientation that is almost extinct in today's America, still strong only among less sophisticated rural peoples or perhaps the very wealthy. To make matters more difficult, the education I received equipped me with neither the desire, the discipline, or the ability to work. I was raised in a fine middle class family with hard working parents who have both made real contributions to society. I received a "good" liberal education from both a top high school and a major university, finally graduating with



both leadership and academic honors. But nowhere in all of that did I seriously encounter the concepts of service or right livelihood, or even a respect for work itself, something I would spend the next fifty years of my life doing!

Work and drudgery were somehow synonymous. Suffice to say that my first few years following college were tough ones during which I literally taught myself to work and survive by the bootstrap method. Building a home from native materials and developing a small farmstead were the postgraduate courses through which I earned a degree in hard work and its appreciation, as well as in responsible living.

For fifteen years I made a living as a waiter, a musician, a tobacco field laborer, a guitar teacher, a lifeguard, an apple picker, a teacher of ancient Chinese philosophy, a house painter, a market vegetable garden manager, a teacher of high school students in special programs, a farmer, an editor, a conference organizer, a tender of horses, hogs, chickens and cattle, and a builder of several houses. This last is a bit ironic, since running a small construction business was about as far from my natural inclinations and abilities as possible. Tests that students are given early on indicated I would do OK if I stayed away from any field having to do with numbers or putting things together, since my scores in spatial, mechanical, and abstract reasoning were so low that I was given the test twice to make sure they were accurate!

Our choice of a rural lifestyle both limited and led me to the building trades. Making a living in construction is a course common to countryfolk everywhere, since rural areas are often economically depressed and the surrounding cities usually have ample need of hard workers good with their hands. The work itself was often difficult and dangerous, and occasionally thankless. We took pride in the fact that we were known for fine quality, were almost always busy, and never left a disgruntled homeowner behind. Which brings me to the real point I want to make in this paper. The work was a compromise; in many ways certainly not "right" for me. I had to literally transform my thinking to find joy and meaning in this work. Happily, my current job as director of a campus community service program suits me very well and fulfills a long search.



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Many of today's graduates are also likely to find themselves in job situations that involve compromise and that will challenge them mightily to uncover joy and meaning. It therefore seems vitally important for both the happiness of those individuals as well as for the good of the society that will receive their productive labors, that they be taught about "right livelihood." The true work ethic is the ethic of service, the desire to make a contribution, and working with character is a high calling, whatever one does. Colleges themselves practice right livelihood when they send forth individuals who are learning to labor as service.