

Spirituality of Work

The spirituality of work is a disciplined attempt to align ourselves and our environment with God and to incarnate God's spirit in the world through all the effort (paid and unpaid) we exert to make the world a better place, a little closer to the way God would have things.

In order for the spirituality of work to become a reality in our lives, we have to develop a way of practicing it, a set of disciplines that we can follow right in our workplaces without people even recognizing what we are doing. These disciplines must help us discover the meaning of our work, deal with others, balance our responsibilities, decide right and wrong, and maintain and change the institutions in which we work.

How Can Work Be Spiritual? How much we connect to our work in a spiritual sense is determined by how we answer five major questions. How we respond to these questions is based on our spirituality, but also shapes our spirituality.

1. What is the meaning of work?

This is variously described as “putting bread on the table”, being true to my profession or building my career, work as a vocation or a “call from God”, doing a good job, providing high quality of goods and services, working out of a sense of duty, and considering work as part of God’s ongoing creation.

2. How do we deal with others at work?

We treat others with friendliness and common decency, we avoid doing anything illegal, and therefore, we value honesty and integrity. Loyalty and encouragement are important. Justice and generosity become normal practice.

3. How do we balance work with the rest of life?

Most people have commitments to their work, family, church, community and to themselves. Few things are less spiritual than allowing our paid employment to overwhelm our responsibilities to self and others. How we respond to the pressure of trying to balance all of these elements differs, but respond we all must.

4. How do we determine what is right and what is wrong?

Most of our decisions at work get made on the basis of our values and priorities, which are (or should be) spiritually informed. Part of the problem with deciding

right and wrong at work is that it depends on how much power we have. In any case, wherever we are in the hierarchy of power, we need a spirituality with which to grapple with ethical dilemmas.

5. How do we maintain – and sometimes change – the workplace?

Our concern is to maintain what “works” in the workplace and change what doesn’t. Institutions that are organized correctly are those that enable human potential and productivity to flourish.

What spiritual disciplines can work in the workplace? While contemplative spirituality (devotional reading, prayer, meditation and contemplation) is helpful for the individual, the disciplines of the spirituality of work must be different from those of contemplative spirituality. They are done in the workplace without disrupting the flow of the work. The litmus test for all spirituality is twofold: it must both raise practitioners’ consciousness of the divine presence yet also increase their commitment to making the world a better place. The discipline must grow out of our work and workplaces themselves. We practice the discipline in the workplace. We practice it without disrupting our work. It is done regularly and consistently. It must be triggered by some event, task, or situation that occurs in the workplace. We must practice it without anyone knowing that we are doing so.

If there is a spirituality of work, it must be disciplined, and if we can discover and practice the disciplines, then our work will indeed be spiritual. Disciplines are practiced regularly over a long period and can be refreshed, adjusted or replaced from time to time.

Ten disciplines are,

1. Surround yourself with “sacred objects.” A sacred object can be anything from a piece of traditional religious art to a photo of family and friends, or to a secular item that carries for us a very deep and spiritual meaning.
2. Make a positive out of a negative. The negative is that we all make mistakes in in our work. The positive is that we can find God in the midst of them. We live with our imperfections. We accept that we are not perfect. Imperfection is a condition of growth. Learn to live with the imperfection of others in the workplace. Try to understand where their imperfections or mistakes come from (stress, exploitation on the job, or inattentiveness, etc.).
3. Our best work, for the most part, will be imperfect. Yet, if our work is to be worthy of feeding our spiritual lives and incarnating God in the world, it must be of the best quality of which we are capable.

4. Offering thanks and congratulations to others (colleagues and competitors) and self is a specific discipline within the spirituality of work. If done on a regular basis, it can put both the giver and recipient in touch with the divine. Giving thanks and congratulations makes the workplace the way God would have it. Giving thanks includes a just compensation for all. It includes thanking God.
5. Build support and community in the workplace. Build relationships and be supportive of others. Offer welcome to others in the workplace and to customers. Be loyal. Loyalty in the workplace is backing people up rather than reveling in their difficulties. Backbiting and gossiping erodes loyalty. Be compassionate to those experiencing personal difficulties or traumas. Introduce some fun and joy into the workaday world. The workplace is not a place for “evangelism” (to convert others). The disciplines discussed here are a witness to your faith. Feel free to speak about your faith beyond the work place if asked what helps you act the way you do or if asked directly about your faith.
6. Deal with others as you would have them deal with you. In doing so, honesty is good; you offer your best customer service; you are generous in negotiation; you respect your competition; and you pay a just wage and you expect to be paid a just wage.
7. Build into your workday (and into your life in general) ways of reminding yourself of what is enough and strategies for sticking to your decisions: What is enough money, enough time, enough effort and success (or failure), and enough spirituality (your spiritual disciplines or practices are enough and never enough). Ask: When will enough be enough?
8. Balance work, personal, family, church and community responsibilities. Feel okay about saying yes or no. When you say yes, you must be able to follow through on your promises. Institutionalize your commitments by noting them in your datebook or calendar and doing them at the time noted, such as, a regular spiritual practice or date with your spouse, etc. Be flexible. Build in quality time. Some quantity time can be quality time, like hanging out with friends, shooting hoops, or attending meetings and committees.
9. To the best of your ability, make the system work. Christians call this “social justice.” Individually and collectively, aim your actions towards transforming social institutions and structures to achieve the common good. This can be done from the “inside” or from the “outside.” Organizing is the most effective way of achieving social justice goals. Break problems down into manageable issues. Celebrate and build on small victories. God works through us to make the world a better place.

10. Engage in ongoing personal and professional development. This means sharpening your personal spiritual practices (prayer, meditation, communing with nature, art as spiritual practice, etc.) and the spirituality of work disciplines listed here. Engage in ongoing professional development. Maintain good physical and mental health. Engage in ongoing, lifelong education. Interact with colleagues in faith sharing groups, book groups, breakfast or lunch meetings, etc., to discuss the meaning of your work. Private or group spiritual practices helps many people to go into the workplace better equipped to discover God there. If we are going to be the most spiritual workers we can be, then we will follow every path that improves our awareness of the presence of God in our work.

God is present in our workplaces... As Pierre Teilhard de Chardin put it in *Hymn of the Universe*, “[God] is, in a sense, at the point of my pen, my pick, my paintbrush, my needle – and my heart and my thought. It is by carrying to completion the stroke, the line, the stitch I am working on that I shall lay hold on the ultimate end towards which my will at its deepest levels tends.”

The author of this book, of which this paper is a summary, states in conclusion, “...if we cannot develop a functioning spirituality of work, then both our work and our spirituality are impoverished.”

Gregory F. A. Pierce, *spirituality@work, 10 ways to balance your life on-the-job*, Loyola Press, Chicago, 2001