

## Rest and Re-Creation ©

A sermon by Rev. Roberta Finkelstein

Sunday August 27, 2017

The poet Marge Piercy says, "People yearn for work that is real." As we approach the Labor Day week-end, I want to take some time to talk about work, and what it is that makes it real. The Labor Day holiday is the final gasp of summer - we are so busy with back to school and zucchinis that we may forget the historical significance of Labor Day; a nod of gratitude to courageous generations of workers who learned that by coming together in labor unions they could make their experience of work more bearable and more satisfying. In those days, low pay, long hours, unsafe conditions and exploitation of workers were common. Paid vacation and sick leave were unheard of. When people are underpaid or exploited, they are not happy.

That is why the labor movement began; it was a response to an imbalance between employers and employees. It is important to remember that factory owners and other employers fought the formation of labor unions tooth and nail. They poured money into opposition research and propaganda. They enlisted the forces of law and order in the fight. But eventually the labor unions established themselves and we entered a time of negotiated balance between owners and workers. Over the last several decades, that balance has become seriously eroded. Income inequality has increased dramatically. Employers have figured out how to avoid the expectation of fair wages and benefits by taking advantage of the so-called gig economy. You know even in the baddest old days, nobody thought corporations were people! I truly believe that some of the social and political upheaval we are seeing today is caused by the erosion of worker rights and benefits. And I sigh and tell myself that is a sermon for another day.

Today I want to talk more about the spirituality of work. Early in my

ministry I was given a book called *Zen and the Art of Making a Living* by Laurence Boldt. It is a big, thick, long book and it sat unread on my shelf for quite a while. When I finally opened it, I was surprised to find that page after page, there was a synergy between his premises and the basic tenets of liberal religious philosophy. Boldt defines Zen as that which integrates the spiritual and the material, holding up the sacredness of the ordinary. "Very UU," I thought as I read it. He says that realizing your life work is a life-long process - an unfolding rather than a discrete point in time. "Very UU, " I thought again. Finding your true vocation takes both inner and outer work. The inner work is cultivating self-knowledge, clarifying values, separating yourself from the expectations and opinions of other. The outer work is investigation: reading, talking to others, learning, doing. "Very UU," I thought.

Many of you are familiar with the seven Principles that bind us together in covenant. You can find them on the frontispiece of the hymnal. Note that the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> principles address this process of self-discovery. "We covenant to affirm and promote acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations; and a free and responsible search for truth and meaning."

In other words, our faith assumes that all of us are life-long learners and that our spiritual journey is based on learning from each other as well as finding what is already inside of us - reflecting on our lived experiences. That is the very purpose of our small group ministry called Soul Matters. To gather intentionally with others, to reflect in a disciplined way on our lives. That is how we learn and grow in faith. Tracy Spinka-Doms would like to talk to you for a moment about Soul Matters.

Now, back to the sermon! In his book (remember the big, long book *Zen and the Art of Making a Living*?) Boldt claims that a truly satisfying vocation will have a service orientation of some sort. We work not just to make money and get ahead;

we work for the common good. When we work in congruence with our values, when we are cognizant of the impact our work has on those around us, we are far more likely to feel good about what we are doing. And as he described this understanding of the impact of our work on others and on our world, the image of the interdependent web, from our seventh principle, came to mind. "Very UU, " I thought.

Boldt's ideas about work are captured in what he calls "a practical philosophy of work in four acts plus a prologue". In the prologue Boldt uses the genre of the mythical quest - when a hero or heroine sets off into the world to do some great deed - usually with a grand vision that few others share. Questers meets many challenges, learns new things about themselves and the world, are oft defeated and discouraged, eventually figure out who their real friends are, and finally succeed in reaching their goal.

The point of the prologue to the quest is to say, "I SEE" - in a Zen-like manner. " I SEE" is not just a statement, it is an acronym. The I stands for integrity - knowing who you are, and being faithful to that identity. The S stands for Service. The first E for enjoyment - What do I love to do? And the final E stands for excellence - What can I dedicate myself to enough to pursue it to excellence? Now, I have a philosophical disagreement with Boldt around excellence. I advocate the "good enough" approach to things. Things like parenthood, ministry and vocation. But the acronym becomes very un-Zen like when you replace the E with GE, so I'll let the excellence stand as an ideal rather than a concrete goal.

This prologue is the heart and mind and soul-searching stage of the quest for meaningful work. Boldt believes that a good career choice is made from the inside out. Once you have said, "I SEE' you move on to Act I - the Quest for Life Work. Like mythical heroes we must each embark on a vision quest - asking what is our

word view? what can we imagine ourselves doing? In Act I we create a heroic identity for ourselves. Having a heroic identity means knowing one's purpose (what am I doing here?), acknowledging one's unique gifts and talents, and coming to a realistic appraisal of the outcomes of one's efforts. Act II is The Game of Life's Work - he calls it a game because you have to be willing to play, and to play roles. At this stage, you are no longer imaging and imagining, you have made a choice, often despite the disapproval or disbelief of others and the incongruence between your choice and the expectations you grew up with. I experienced some of that when I announced to my somewhat startled colleagues in nurse-midwifery that I was leaving to go to seminary. "You're going to be a what?" At General Assembly one year I heard a story about a well-known preacher recounting the reception he received when he made public his intended vocation. At a dinner party he was asked, by a very loud and imperious hostess, "I understand you are going into the ministry. Is this your own idea, or have you been poorly advised?"

ee cummings says, "to be nobody-but-yourself in a world which is doing its best, night and day, to make you everybody-else, means to fight the hardest battle which any human being can fight; and never stop fighting." Only by calling it a game, Laurence Boldt would add, and playing at it, do you resist the temptation to become grim about it. A strong purpose allows for playfulness - purposeful playfulness.

Act III is the Battle for Life's Work. Boldt uses the term battle deliberately to make it clear that in any vocation, power is a reality that must be dealt with. The reality of power is something we are not always comfortable with. It is easier to think of ourselves as powerless than it is to decide how to exercise our power to bring about the world we believe in. Our relationship to power feels particularly important right now. To embrace and use power is to effect change. These days our power may be fueled by anger. How did you feel when you saw the pictures of the

horribly racist graffiti that has been appearing in Wilmington over the last few days? Disgusted? Afraid? Angry? Our anger, when properly channeled, can fuel an effective response to the increasingly bold and vicious actions of white supremacists and Neo-Nazis. Our anger at the sight of swastikas and ugly epithets makes it possible for us to persist in our resistance to this movement of hate. Anger makes us mighty warriors in the battle not only for our personal life work, but in the battle for the soul of our nation.

Boldt says this about being warriors. "No doubt, some of you are still having difficulty with the warrior metaphor. As we use the term, warrior isn't limited to combat veterans, but applies to anyone who uses their aggressive energy in a disciplined way. Aggressive energy is a part of life. There is no getting around it. It can be used creatively, or it can be used destructively, but it cannot be eliminated. Non-violence is the creative use of aggression."

Next month we will once again celebrate Peace Week here in Wilmington. We will be hosting at least one of the Peace Week events. But all over the city you will have the opportunity to learn from people who are righteously angry about injustice and violence and oppression. People who have learned, in various ways, to channel that energy in peaceful but powerful non-violent resistance. (Ask people involved in Peace Week to stand.)

In these epic battles, we need to use the inner strengths that are an intrinsic part of our make up. Courage. Integrity. Resourcefulness.

Finally, after the quest, the game, and the battle, we arrive at Act IV -The School of Life's Work. The end point is not an end point at all. He calls it school because all of life is just an on-going process of learning and change. We are never finished finding our true vocation. The humanist psychologist Carl Rogers once said, "The only person who is educated is the one who has learned how to learn . . . and change." "There is nothing," said George Washington Carver, "that will not

reveal its secrets if you love it enough." In the School of Life's Work, we love our lives and our work so passionately that we continue to wrest meaning from them no matter what stage of life or work we are at.

So, there is a quick and basic overview of a very thick and dense book. What Boldt sees as the essentials of pursuing meaningful life work - work that brings health and satisfaction to the individual and improves the world in some way, work that does not destroy self-respect, burn you out, stress you, or eat you up inside. A Labor Day gift.

There is one more factor in this equation, and to identify it we need to consult another model for work and re-creation: the model given to us in Genesis. Here's what I take from the Creation story in Genesis. We are called to work from a grand vision and to enjoy doing what we are able to do well. On a regular basis, we should all pause to examine our work and bask in the warmth of success. And then we get to take a day off! Think of it this way: if God needed rest every six days, so must we.

Time off is part of my spiritual discipline. I always take Fridays off. Other than pastoral emergencies, Friday is Sabbath day. Often, I spend it with my family in Virginia. Other times I spend it doing things I enjoy, like reading mystery novels or watching re-runs of *The West Wing* on Netflix.

The summer is almost over, vacation time is coming to an end. School, church, office, all are calling us back. But still we need recreation, no, re-creation time so that we can renew our capacity to give to the world, receive from the world, and feel the better for our giving, and our receiving. The moral of this sermon is really two-fold. First: seek that which is meaningful with which to fill your days. Second: Look at the fruits of your labor, see that it is good, and then rest a while!