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WORK *and* CONTEMPLATION



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Work and Contemplation

In these days we are in the way of recovering some of the satisfactions that come from work with the hands and the body. The widespread interest and participation in handicrafts and gardening, the revival of native handicrafts in the Appalachian Mountains, the use of the crafts by occupational therapy as a way of restoring a sense of validity to those suffering from nervous tensions, the use of work with the body as the basic foundation of the whole educational technique in certain advanced schools on the continent, these are all weather vanes that point in that direction. Nowhere is this satisfaction in labor more genuinely experienced than in the voluntary work camps in this country where young men and women donate a summer of physical work to help provide some much-needed service that will improve the standard of life in some hard-pressed community.

This recovery is overdue. More than fifty years ago, Tolstoy, Ruskin, and William Morris, with a prophetic eye for what the technical advances of science might do to rob man of the sense of integrity that comes with physical work, issued their warning of the terrible toll both of mind and of body that nature exacts from those who do not regularly apply themselves to the creative disciplines of physical work. Aldous Huxley has echoed this same note, "A man misses something by not establishing a participative and living relationship with the non-human world of animals and plants, landscapes and stars and seasons. By failing to be, vicariously, the not-self, he fails to be completely himself. There can be no complete integration of the soul without humility toward things as well as a will to subdue them. Those who lack that humility are bad artists in life."

Spinoza's ready support of himself by lens-grinding after he had been excommunicated from the synagogue in Amsterdam reminds us of the provision of the ancient Jewish law that every Jewish boy should be taught a trade. This was not alone as a protection against the migrations that

"Work and Contemplation" has been translated into Finnish and has been reprinted several times in the United States. It is a formulation of the philosophy that has guided the Quaker work camp movement in the United States since its beginnings in 1934.

The author, Douglas V. Steere, served for a number of years as chairman of the Work Camp Committee of the American Friends Service Committee.

persecution might make necessary, but was a wise provision for assuring that even the intellectuals would know the balance that manual skill gives to the mind. Gandhi's program of Khaddar (spinning) which he urged on all of his followers is said by those who knew him best to have more than an economic significance.

This sense of "belonging" again, of having paid their ground rent, of knowing what it is to have given all of the body to a task, not for the initial honeymoon period of an hour or two, but through a full work day—day after day, week after week—has given to many of those who have participated in the work camps the deepest satisfaction they have ever known. And they are eloquent witnesses to the sheer satisfactions of physical work itself.

Work Without Contemplation Is Blind

There is, however, a realization among the more thoughtful members of the work camps that the whole story of work has not been told when this elemental goodness of work itself has been witnessed to. For they are continually saying that, try as they will, they do not share the insecurity of those in the community who are wholly dependent upon the work of their bodies for the support of their families. They also note that their work is voluntary, that it is set in the happy role of being a gift to this community, that they share in an astonishingly rich and congenial fellowship of interesting persons, that the management of their enterprise is, through the democratic plan of running their camps, very largely in their own hands and hence any grievances can be swiftly registered and cleared or any constructive suggestions readily incorporated if sound. This raises the deeper question in the minds of some: is physical work good in itself? Does physical work of itself build people up, restore their integrity, quicken their self-respect? And it does not require much scrutiny to discover that work does these things only when it is set in a frame of significant meaning—a frame that is often operative even when implicit but that is most effective when it is explicit.

Whatever you may think of how he has used

his findings, the labor expert, Whiting Williams, has sought as few other men in the country to understand the psychology of the worker by working with him and identifying himself with the worker's role. He tells a story of a little squad of day laborers who were hired one morning and put to work under a taciturn grounds foreman. He set them to digging holes some three feet deep. When a hole was finished it was inspected and the workman was ordered to fill it up and to come to another point and to dig another hole of the same depth. This went on for most of the morning and finally the foreman noted the group talking in a huddle and then their spokesman came over and said sullenly, "We're gonna queet; you give us our money. You ain't gonna make damn fool outa us." The foreman's eyes narrowed and then understanding broke over him and he said quietly, "Can't you see, we're trying to find out where the broken pipe is." "Oh!" said the man, and after a hurried word with the other workers, he returned and said, "Where you wanna us to dig next?" When the frame of the meaning of this physical work was absent, it seemed to debase these men, to rob them of their validity, to destroy their spirit; and it finally became intolerable. When, and only when, the frame of meaning was supplied, the physical work became a good.

In the summer of 1934 the American Friends Service Committee established a work camp in western Pennsylvania for preparatory school boys where they were to build a much-desired road for the Westmoreland Subsistence Homestead. After the boys had got the work on the dirt road well along, the engineers employed by the government on the project discovered that they had made a mistake in placing the road and gave the word to begin it in another place. It was a difficult matter after that to get these boys to work with spirit. If they and their work had so little worth and meaning as to be trifled with by faulty and careless planning, why should they exert themselves again as they had before? The frame of meaning of the work having been seriously damaged, the goodness seemed to bleed out of the work.

An acquaintance of mine visited a mental hospital of the less enlightened type not long ago and was taken to a room where the patients were assembled and apparently were taking satisfaction in sewing together old rags. She was then taken to the next room where other patients were working with considerable entertainment and satisfaction tearing apart these rags which the others had prepared. She asked the official how they could do this day after day and not get together and perceive its futility. His only comment was, "They are insane." Complete absence of concern about the frame of meaning of their work is only possible for the mentally deranged.

The English philosopher Watkin has put this in another way, "Man is indeed not primarily the talking or the tool-making animal—these are but external expressions of his mental life—but the contemplative animal. To be human and to be contemplative is one and the same thing. In so far as a man or a society is false to the primacy and order of contemplation, that man, that society is unhuman." (Philosophy of Form, p. 146.)

Dostoevsky, who for suspected revolutionary activities spent four years as a young man in a prison camp in Omsk, Siberia, and suffered the torture of the "made-work" he found there, wrote later in the "House of the Dead," "I have sometimes thought that the way to crush and annihilate a human being completely would be to set him to do an absolutely senseless and useless thing. If he were condemned to pour water from one tub to another and back again, or to pound sand in a mortar, or to carry a heap of earth backward and forward, I am convinced that he would either commit suicide within a few days or murder some of his fellow sufferers in order to suffer death at once and be delivered from his moral torture, shame, and degradation." This secret of the way meaningless physical work can swiftly destroy the fiber and even the nervous stability of men is not unknown in some of the punishment camps in the world today.

Ade Bethune writes of work, "When any work

is deprived of its contemplation, it becomes mere physical labor. The workers who are not able to think responsibly of what they are doing are no more than slaves chained to meaningless action." It becomes increasingly clear, then, that for normal men and women, not action alone but sufficient contemplation to reveal the frame of meaning in which the work is done will be a decisive factor in whether their work acts creatively or destructively upon them. We neglect the frame of meaning only at our peril. To learn and practice contemplation—to discover, to enlarge, to renew the purpose for which we work, the frame of meaning within which we work, the frame of our relationships with our fellow workers—becomes, then, not an accessory or a luxury, but a central concern for those who understand most deeply the nature of work. Most of this can be gathered up in the remark of a Virginia peanut farmer to his mule who had gotten the cultivator well tangled up in a clump of brush, "Why don't you-all study where you're goin'?"

All "studying where you're goin'," all reflective processes, all learning to understand the setting of the work project, the motivations of the community, all field trips naturally add to this frame of meaning. But back of these and gathering these up, and searching the reflective individual and uniting him as thinker with the springs out of which his work comes, is the direct exercise of contemplation.

In this exercise the individual opens himself up to the springs of creative love that expand his frame of meaning, that draw, gather, and re-focus his partial purposes and relate them to the very grain of things, to the creative life of God himself. Hans Denck, the 16th-century German spiritual reformer, once wrote, "Oh my God, how does it happen in this poor old world that Thou art so great, and yet nobody finds Thee; that Thou callest so loud and nobody hears Thee; that Thou are so near and nobody feels Thee; that Thou givest Thyself to everybody and nobody knows Thy name! Men flee from Thee and say they cannot find Thee; they turn their backs and say they cannot see Thee;

they stop their ears and say they cannot hear Thee." Contemplation is an exercise which is designed to waken men from their drowsy sleep and arouse in them the awareness of the presence and power of the life and love of God.

It has been quite natural then that from the beginning the work camps of the American Friends Service Committee have given an important place to the practice of the direct act of contemplation and have regarded the corporate cultivation of this practice as a discipline that was integrally connected with the work experience of those it recruited to share in its camps. In the period of corporate silence in which the members of each work camp gather in the early morning before the manual work begins, it is a common experience that members report they have recovered the frame of meaning of their lives and of their work. They have often mentioned that they have become aware of incongruities, in the work or in the community or in themselves or between themselves and other members of the camp, that must be straightened before the work can become truly creative. In these periods of silent meditation, of waiting, they have felt the cold, icy capsulation in themselves and in their personal claimful demands melting down and a new and living sense of fellowship with, and responsibility for, the wider community springing up in them. And they have been brought to know by inward experience what the book of Ecclesiastes means when it says, "For him that is joined to all the living, there is hope." At times there has come a new sense of inward responsibility for the minute details of their work.

"And he sang as the threads went to and fro,

Whether 'tis hidden or whether it show

Let the work be sound for the Lord will know."

The Practice Of Corporate Contemplation

There is no single set of instructions for learning to use these periods of contemplation helpfully. There are those who would refuse to give any in-

struction for a week or two and simply let the newcomer make his own adventure in the silence, believing that the way to begin to contemplate is to begin to contemplate, not to study instructions on the subject; that only after you have begun and then actively come seeking help will the help be of any value. There is much truth in this, and anything that could be written here will take on different meanings as the newcomer gathers his own experience; and since what is suggested here is most elementary, it may become quite obsolete and be pushed aside very early in each person's own experiencing if he finds he has come into a freer use of the silence.

The body should be got out of the way in meditation by getting it settled in a position that is comfortable enough to keep it from intruding on consciousness but not in such a relaxed position as to induce a vegetative state of half slumber.

Stilling the octopus of the mind by calling in its tentacles so that it may act as a whole, so that it may be open to receive, is the counterpart of stilling the body. This is much more difficult. That it does not succeed all at once is not surprising. Distractions from sounds send a tentacle of the mind whipping out to ascertain the source, distractions from wandering thoughts that come floating into the mind or that insistently elbow their way in are both especially disturbing to the beginner in contemplation. The sounds can be quietly drawn into the meditation by using them as though they were reminders of what the mind was seeking to draw itself beneath in order to understand. The distracting thoughts need not be resisted but can best be simply acknowledged and ignored. Cloud masses are forever changing their position overhead but we are not compelled to keep watch of them.

In beginning to meditate many have found it a help to give some conscious guidance to the gathered mind and to lead it gently through some chosen areas. These areas each person may select for himself. It often helps to write them out in advance. A hint of several suggestive fields might include: What at bottom am I longing to accomplish

through the summer's work? What in the day past has made me and my work fall short of this? Where will I find the source of strength for effecting the necessary changes? Why do I not draw upon this?

What would it be like to know the members of this camp and to know the employers of labor and the workers of this community, not as prejudice and opinion paint them, but to know them in that which is eternal? Is there honestly a center in even the most outwardly forbidding person "that is not of dust or of earth or of flesh or of time but of God"? How can I reach it? How can I answer to it? How can I hold it in my mind's eye and salute it? How can I appeal to it? In my work am I in each person I meet seeking to answer to it? What in me will have to go before I can answer to it? In what particularly crucial situation that I face today do I need help to answer to this center? Confront this situation in the meditation and draw on the source of strength for lifting this situation into a frame of meaning that can alter it.

What excess baggage am I carrying: of preconceived vocation, of stiff unchangeable plans and commitments, of material possessions or desires for possessions (remember Bernard of Clairvaux's warning to his ascetic Cistercian monks who blamed the luxury of the monks of Cluny, "You blame their eating of flesh, but you yourselves are glutons in the matter of beans"), of self-pampering, of neglected duties, of unfinished business?

In what conflict situation do I stand where I need to be elevated to a third point, where I can see not only my side or the opponent's side but the creative right side which is identical with neither the one nor the other? What would the situation look like from the third point? Do I quickly identify myself with one side or the other in existing conflicts or do I help draw the situation over into the third point? In discussions am I on defense or am I teachable, honestly listening, learning, and exploring?

Now after gently conducting my gathered mind over one or more of these areas, do I dare simply

to wait in the silence, quite easy, for any intimations or concerns, for the restoration of perspectives, for the rekindling of patience and humor? Do I dare simply to wait on the Source of strength in order to be simplified, in order that the many in me be made one, in order that I be refreshed and renewed, in order that the good in me may rise and the evil in me may recede?

At any point in this meditation the gathered mind may find itself taken beyond its own effort to contemplate and be fixed by the Source which it contemplates. When this happens it is the best of all and meditation has ceased and a state of inward prayer has replaced it.*

Occasionally in the corporate meditation a member of the group may feel drawn to share some insight that has come and will speak it out quietly. The others need not open their eyes. When it is rightly given, such vocal expression during the corporate period of contemplation will be less a breaking of the silence than an articulation of the silence. Isaac Penington once wrote of such corporate contemplation, "For absolutely silent meetings (wherein there is a resolution not to speak) we know not, but we wait on the Lord either to feel Him in words, or in silence of spirit without words, as He pleaseth."

There will very naturally be a frank discussion of these periods of contemplation among the campers as they work together and many helpful suggestions may be exchanged in that way.

The daily period of corporate meditation in the work camps has seldom been more than twenty minutes. This may seem like a long time to some and there will be a temptation to shorten it at the beginning, a temptation that should be resisted. Anyone knows that when he steps from a brightly lighted room into the darkness of the night, it takes some minutes for his eyes to adjust to the change. After the adjustment to twilight vision is made, he can discern objects and go on his way quite safely.

*Further discussion of the deeper stages of contemplation can be found in Chapters 2 and 3 of the writer's Prayer and Worship or in A Quaker Meeting for Worship.

But if he despairs in the first moments of the darkness and turns back into the lighted room, he conceals from himself the powers he possesses. Even this twenty minutes is in the judgment of Gerald Heard far too short. In the section of his last book, *Pain, Sex and Time*, which deals with a program of training for the inward power which a genuine reconciler must possess, he writes, "Everything will be found to hinge finally on the idea of meditation. . . . Two clear hours, one in the morning and one in the evening, is probably the narrowest allowance with which a beginner should provide himself. This time must be reserved whether benefit is felt from it or not. The deeper mind will at last recognize that these periods are being held for its emergence and it will emerge."

Contemplation Without Work Is Empty

But important as contemplation may be to work, the reverse is equally true. For "without it (action) thought can never ripen into truth," and it is in work that contemplation finds both its proving ground and the body in which to incarnate itself. "Work," says Kalil Gibran, "is love made visible," and only if contemplation can overcome the stubborn resistance of nature and habit, which are present with all of their power in physical work, can it reveal itself. Work is a stern disciplinarian to any contemplative who has a tendency to feel an imaginary sense of mastery. "Anyone who makes a mistake in regard to his material, its composition or its resistance, will be punished by the result of his labor. An error of judgment means a broken tool. A miscalculation may destroy a machine," to say nothing of injury to a worker's own body. "The greatness of contemplation can only be given to those who love," wrote Gregory the Great. It would seem as though this might apply equally to work, the visible manifestation of love. For just as work is the natural issue of contemplation, it in its turn searches out one who resists work and declares the great contemplation can only be given to those who will reveal it in

work. "I went upstairs and tried to pray," wrote Katherine Mansfield in her *Journal*, "but I could not for I had done no work."

There is something in commonly exercised physical work that prepares and cements and opens a community for common contemplation. For work breaks through reserves, physical work exposes hidden surfaces in men's lives to each other as conversation and ordinary social intercourse can rarely do. Work reveals sham, it reveals generosity, it reveals endurance, it reveals genuine capacity to cooperate. Work reveals a common humanity that runs through its own natural hierarchy of skill. Physical work breaks down barriers of age, and class, and race, and forms an outer brotherhood that calls for further common exploration. Only upon rare occasions today is it possible for a working community to share common corporate contemplation. But there is nothing that prepares for corporate contemplation more effectively than a community of common work. The absence of such experiences may hint at one cause of the poverty of many formal services of worship today.

When, on Saturdays, Pastor Jean Frederic Oberlin led the men in his congregation in a day's work on the Vosges mountain roads of his parish and then gathered with them about the altar of his little church in Ban de la Roche on Saturday night to partake of the Lord's supper together and to contemplate the destiny of their lives, the day's work had prepared them in a unique way to partake in the evening's hour of contemplation. When a Benedictine monk who has spent his long day working in the fields with his fellow monks and has shared with them in the community of work, when he meditates with them at vespers in the evening, he gives the kiss of peace to his neighbor with a reality that has come out of his contemplation having been tested by his work and found valid. It is the rare good fortune of the work camps to be able to mingle these two inseparable moods of man's deepest craving.

It might be well to conclude this discussion of contemplation and work with an adaptation of

Immanuel Kant's famous phrase and to declare that contemplation without work is empty and that work without contemplation is blind. But Meister Eckhart, a German predecessor of Kant's, has put the matter even better when he speaks of learning to work "not as if one were running away from the inner contemplation . . . but one should learn to work with this contemplation in him, with him, and emerging from him so that . . . one becomes accustomed to working collectedly . . . for then he becomes a fellow workman with God." To learn to hold work within its frame of meaning, to learn to unite work and contemplation, to learn to work collectedly is an objective that one summer's experience will not exhaust.

American Friends Service Committee,

a Quaker organization, attempts to relieve human suffering and to seek for non-violent solutions to conflicts — personal, national, and international. The Committee was organized in 1917 and since then has drawn into this service persons of many faiths and skills. Its work is carried on without regard to race, creed, or politics. The Committee works in about 15 countries on relief and rehabilitation, social and technical assistance, community relations, work and study projects for young people, and seminars and institutes on international relations. It is supported entirely by voluntary contributions.