

THE SPIRIT OF WORK

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I

TODAY, AS I PUT THE FINISHING touches on this manuscript, I received a telephone call from a man who had no knowledge of my research in the meanings of working and unemployment. He merely was looking about for some guidance.

'How long you been out of work?' I asked him.

'Seven months,' came the reply in a voice filled with sadness and that barely perceptible timbre of hopelessness. It sounded reminiscent of the voices I have heard of men unemployed for years.

'Benefits gone,' I stated flatly.

'Long gone.'

'What kind of work do you do?'

'I'm glad you said "do" and not "did";' he responded. Years ago, before I met the men known as discouraged workers since they have been without jobs for six or more months, I would have said 'did'. 'I was a construction worker.'

'Bad time for that, huh?'

'The worst.'

'Feeling depressed?'

'Real.'

I didn't pause for a second. 'Suicidal?'

'I may be, I'm not sure. I mean, I don't think I'd ever do it. I mean, I can't see myself doing it, for the kids.'

'How many you got?'

'Three.'

'How old are you?'

'Thirty-nine. I did call the Samaritan hotline a few weeks ago. They asked me the same things you are.'

'What'd you say?'

'That I couldn't see myself doing it.'

'You think about it though.' Again my words came forth as a statement.

'I guess all the time now.'

I tried to shove back the feelings that came rushing forward. Staring at the shelves of books in my office, I imagined the living-rooms where I have sat with those special men, those unemployed men. 'Look, you

don't have to say anything now. I won't ask for your name. Call me if you want to.' I was following the procedure Alfred Syre had taught me years ago. A man in his fifties, Alfred had died in a car accident after four years of being unemployed. To this day his wife believes it was suicide. 'Don't come at people too strong,' Alfred had advised. 'Tell them where you are and let them come to you. They're frightened jungle cats. Be kind, available, stay still, and they'll come to you. They want to, 'cept they don't know how.'

After a pause I heard the caller whisper, 'That would be great. I mean it. I really appreciate it.'

'I will await word from you,' I responded. 'Thanks a lot for calling.'

'Yeah.' And that was that. Alfred, I hope I did it right. This man is drifting closer to the end of the line, like you and the others, and he knows it. He'll get there too, if someone doesn't see fit to do something about it.

II

All of us remember surely, asking the youngest of children what they're going to be when they grow up. The question is hardly absurd. It shows how we define human beings in terms of the work they perform. No matter what the child's response we are supportive, for the child is thinking about his or her future and career. Indeed, this is the reason we ask the question in the first place. At very least, we have caused the child to appreciate the future's significance.

The question is no different from what we ask each other. 'So, what do you do?' It's the age old conversation starter. For men, it may be the central question of life, the essence of the material they draw upon to assess their successes and failures. Almost everything men experience in the early decades of their development leads them toward considerations of jobs, job training, career and employment.¹ When families wish to know what a man has planned, they inquire about work. When a man asks a woman to marry him, she considers his present work situation and what we still call his 'prospects'. No doubt work sits at the core of a man's life as he reaches his later decades as well. Clearly men change as they age, as Levinson describes,² but in their ever changing identities, the significance of work remains relatively constant.³

Curiously, a man's job is so essential to his identity and self conception one sometimes fails to think about it. It merely goes without saying. And this is the point. Much of a man's consideration of his work life does indeed go without saying. The little boy grows up knowing that some day he will have a job. He knows this as surely as he knows that tomorrow the sky will be there, as big and beautiful as it is today.

It is expected, in other words, that he will make something of his life, which he will do by working. In many homes, moreover, the boy learns that he must do better than his father if he is to consider himself a success, and this too is tied to his employment, and to that question: What are you going to do when you grow up?

It is also the case that girls are asked many of these same questions.⁴ And, presumably, as time goes on, more and more girls will be asked these questions, an indication, surely, that in some cultures things have changed, and men no longer remain the sole proprietors of occupational achievement, career and power. Nonetheless, as my own work has focused on the world of unemployed men, I direct this essay to this world, believing still that work resides at the epicentre of this world, and that nothing destroys this centre as much as the inability to locate regular employment.

On a theoretical note, it must be stated that women may be as devastated by short- and long-term unemployment as men. The single mother, for example, on whom an entire family relies, surely places work and regular income at the centre of her personal universe. But it also may be argued that, given the nature of women's particular socialization patterning, families, children or more generally human relationships, occupy this centre alongside employment and career.⁵ If this is the case, then it may be further theorized that women, through their development of a self system founded in great measure on social relationships, are better able to withstand the trauma of long-term unemployment than men whose self-defence, literally, is constituted essentially by work and career issues.

In this regard, if one examines Robert Kegan's concepts of the *institutional* and *inter-individual* selves, one discovers some justification for this theoretical position.⁶ According to Kegan, adults move from an interpersonal self system into a system called the institutional self wherein one is expected to gain authorship of one's life both in terms of careers and lifelong partnerships. Succeeding this developmental step is the final stage, labelled by Kegan inter-individual selfhood, in which people come to perceive others as self-sufficient, self-sustaining systems.

While insufficient evidence exists to corroborate the allegation, it seems that men, reared on the philosophy of agentic action and institutional affiliations,⁷ are better able to gain authorship of careers than they are to move beyond the institutional-self stage to where their personal definitions might be carved from personal relationships in which they grant others autonomous status. Women, on the other hand, because of their socialization histories, seem better able to reach this

final stage of self-development, and hence may gain strength in reacting to assaults on their careers such as occurs in long-term unemployment.

Future research naturally will be required to confirm or disconfirm these notions. For now, it remains my observation that in an overwhelming majority of the cases I examined in researching long-term unemployed men, most were unable to, shall I say, soften the blow of unemployment by turning to the joys of family life, or even gain sufficient resilience through daily friendships and intimacy. Accordingly, I carry on with the work, collecting increasingly more material on unemployed women and children, but occupying myself in this essay solely with the lives of hard core unemployed men.

Built into all children's emerging identities are such factors as industry, competence, esteem. To feel inferior or incompetent, not to believe in oneself, is to experience shame, guilt, failure. Indeed it is to be failure. The solution to a man's struggle to understand the reason he is alive is found in work. At least when he wonders about these matters he is instructed to find the answers in work. Religion teaches that work, its own reward, will lead him toward the virtuous life if not salvation. Work, like children's play, defines the realm of being for many men who dare not believe that joy and emancipation could be found elsewhere.

Work is the natural course of action a man follows to find his role, niche, position and, in many instances, the shape of his soul. And if some feel it misguided that men would perceive work to be the natural and predictable purpose of living, they have not viewed up close the trauma of long-term unemployment,⁸ a condition literally overtaking the being of a man. The mere news that his job is in jeopardy does more than send shock waves through a man and his family. His essential life energy now is in danger of being transformed. He trembles at the thought that life itself has been transformed. Without work there is neither purpose nor intentionality. In pragmatic as well as spiritual terms, a man unable to work risks being uncoupled from his future.

It is not merely that a man assumes he will work until retirement. Nor is he oblivious of the numbers describing gloomy economic pictures. Rather, he has to make himself believe, almost as existential delusion, that irrespective of personal exigencies and economic fluctuations, or the talk in the pubs, he will be going to work tomorrow.

As much as the long-term unemployed men I have met over the years struggled to maintain control over their lives, in the end, economic and market forces, along with human decisions, combined to take control of their destinies and broke them down. Or killed them. How regularly did I find myself in the presence of strong, articulate, even eloquent men,

people who believed fiercely in the goodness of their country, listening to their lamentations and expressions of incredulity. They could neither fathom nor reconcile the idea of their nation forsaking them, given the dues – in all meanings of that word – they had paid. They felt cheated and abandoned. Worse than that, as the expression goes, their spirits were broken.

Like the sociologists that they were, these men understood the power of a government as well as the implications of a government's decisions on employment and unemployment. They read labour reports, newspaper accounts, hunting, I believe, for the humanity that regularly is lost in discussions of unemployment. They hunted for themselves and for something they long ago had lost and now were convinced they would never regain. In the end, they hunted for a single reason to keep going, and many of them despaired over the fact that the presence of their families no longer sufficed as that reason.

As much as anything, they despised the notion that they would be considered merely as numbers, if anyone outside their immediate families even thought of them, and that no one saw fit to mend their lives. Still, they were keenly aware of the group to which they belonged, and despite their competitive feelings and collective shame, they seemed to find the network of unemployed men, seen and unseen, to be a sacred congregation. 'Lost sheep,' Alfred Syre had called them, shaking his head so that his yellow silver hair fell over his forehead, 'and all of them could be saved.'

III

Years ago in undertaking research on perceptions of time,⁹ I asked men and women to play a game of fantasy. Instructing them to pretend they possessed an infinite amount of money while I possessed access to time, I inquired how much they would offer to know the future in advance and regain the past. I asked furthermore, what they would do with time retrieved.

The results suggested that whereas women disliked the idea of knowing the future, men intimated that while the future's mystery remained important to them, knowing something about it might prove enlightening. More of this in a moment.

As for the fantasy of regaining past time, women and men alike leaped at the opportunity to play the game of time retrieval. Where the sexes revealed a difference, however, was in the use to which they would put this time. Women generally claimed they would return to good past times and *relive* them. Men, in contrast, wished to return to those troubling times, times actually of failure, and *re-do* them.

These data are suggestive at best, but they point to something fascinating. Men are raised to engage life in terms of what Bakan called *agentic* reasoning.¹⁰ They are instructed, in other words, to conceive of the present moment in terms of how it may be used to shape future moments. It goes without saying that one can only live or tell one's story from the perspective of the here and now. As Polkinghorne writes, 'At the individual level, people have a narrative of their own lives which enables them to construe what they are and where they are headed'.¹¹ But Bakan's agentic man is meant neither to savour the present nor experience it in and of itself. Rather, he employs it to make possible future moments. Women, in contrast, appear to enjoy the here and now by embracing it as the only time they possess and thereby can directly experience. Bakan called the feminine orientation *communal*, inasmuch as women seek connections with the immediacy of the present for whatever it offers, not for what it portends.¹²

One sees in these orientations a potentially dangerous strain for men, in that one is never allowed fully to engage the immediacy of the moment. If a man constantly prepares for the future, if his present signifies little more than the future's origin, then inevitably he is alienated from time. It's a bit like asking children, why do you attend first grade? The girl answers, so I can learn reading, writing and arithmetic. The boy answers, I *have* to if I want to reach second grade.

Whereas women appear content to let the future arrive in due course, men seem unable to reconcile the reality of time's natural flow. Instead, they prefer to employ the present in order to sculpt the future according to their immediate as well as anticipated needs and desires. Rarely are they satisfied merely to let it 'come to pass'. Accordingly, men become more preoccupied with predicting and projecting than do women, and seek to use historical materials not merely to explain present circumstances, but to provide insight into the future's structure and content.¹³ (Then again, as one unemployed man told me, 'When you have a situation like this that gets worse every day, you begin to see the future very clearly'.)

Quite possibly, some of men and women's philosophical conflicts derive from fundamental differences in temporal perceptions. A man claims, for example, that his wife's argument lacks logic. While objectively he may be correct, more significant is his need to have the past, present and future flow together in logical, continuous patterns of thought.¹⁴ Illogical reasoning implies for the man not only psychological deficiency or cognitive incompetence, but a break in the continuity of time zones to which men's entire rational life is devoted, and upon which it rests.

Seeking to shape and hence know the future stands at the centre of a man's most important endeavour, or so he has been taught. Barely was he able to talk when adults urged him to give serious thought not only to the idea of a career, but to the idea of his eventual and active – or agentic – role in the future.

How then does this boy grab on to the future – a time which by definition can never come, for when it does arrive it is properly described as the present – and still maintain himself on a *rational* course? The answer is provided him by society in the name of work. It is his commitment to job and career that transports him directly from the present to the future. It is not by accident that a man may plan his life during his adolescence. Nor is it by accident that he draws a reasonable timetable of prospective personal and career steps. It is not by accident that he explores savings plans and retirement programmes decades before his actual retirement. He reasons these matters out cogently, often hearing his wife criticize his efforts as being morbidly premature.

Other aspects of his life, too, are predicated on this inherent temporal orientation. Betting, financial speculating and planning, investing, purchasing items on time, all provide a man direct connection to the future. But it is more than attachment to the future that involves a man. It is more than mere hope that things will work out. Rather, men wish to believe they can *personally control* the future's content.¹⁵ A man cannot view life as grand mystery, each day delivering something new and different. Tomorrows take form, a man imagines, because of what he accomplishes today. Indeed, that series of accomplishments may be the greatest reward and essential purpose of today. A day is wasted not only if concrete products cannot be seen and measured, but if the content of tomorrow has not been established.

Thus, a master plan for living emerges, and every man contemplates it. Constantly he makes his list of things to be done. In quiet hours he dreams of success. As Ken Wilkinson, an out of work welder, once remarked, 'I don't know myself, what I feel about my life. I don't think about it that much. Oh, I'll think about Friday afternoons a lot on Monday mornings, but just as often I'll think about Monday morning on Saturday night when I'm supposed to put work out of my mind. But most men are like that.'

Max Weber noted¹⁶ that action becomes *rational* and *purposeful* when you can *calculate* it (my emphases). What better way to calculate life – whatever one means by that term – than by planning one's career? It is the grand dividend of work. Steady employment, a life in which one's lot continually improves, sits as the cornerstone of rational, calculable male

action. It may well be the cornerstone of physical and mental health as well. And how can it not shape the nature of his spirituality! What other activity does a man entertain for which he has been assiduously, albeit implicitly, trained, that could better prepare him to take on life? And death! As Ollie Sindon, another of my long-term unemployed friends observed, 'I may not love what I'm doing, but I'm working, and working is the act we're put on earth to do'.

When a man asks, 'What does it all mean?' or, 'What's the point of all this?' he invariably receives one response: Go back to work! It is in the work and in working that his consciousness takes shape, and life reveals its meaning. For in working a man believes he has made sense of life's mystery, and found reasonable methods of avoiding vexing metaphysical questions. In work, the irrational, the incalculable becomes calculable, the meaningless assumes meaning. When things have crumbled around a man, when he feels battered down by the unfairness of a political system, the idiosyncrasies of fate or the seemingly inexplicable actions of the universe, a man can always say, 'Thank God, at least I have my job'.

But when, after months of unsuccessfully hunting for employment, he is left without benefits, income and hope, the entire plan, the entire orientation to time, fate and destiny fall away, he finds nothing within himself, no philosophical or psychological basis to carry him beyond the immediate circumstances of unemployment. The present, future and past come to be redefined, and as the one hold he has maintained on life gives way like a rickety bridge in a storm, he may well pray for death to take him. Or perhaps he feels it already has.

'Beware the man who tells you he lives day to day, moment to moment,' Albert Syre warned me. 'That is a man who's either recovering from serious alcohol abuse, or a man planning to die. No healthy man with a job lives that way. He lives with one eye on the present and one eye on the future. When there is no future, he only looks to the present, because now he's lost sight in one of his eyes. And you don't have to know anything about eye surgery to know when you lose one eye you're bound to lose the other one pretty soon. A man knows this too. He knows he's going blind.'

Albert's words seem right on target. Men are fascinated looking down long stretches of road and seeing the line of the horizon, the endless space beyond the clouds. These are traditionally masculine visions, developed in part not from spatial orientations, but from temporal ones.¹⁷ When he looks down the road, he sees end-points, goals, the final results of effort. Men live with the Greek notion of *telos*, goal or end-

point, embedded in their minds. The idea of purpose invades the mind's lining. Men hunt for action because in action there are means and ends, beginnings and conclusions, and above all, enactments of *intention*, no matter how frivolous they may appear to others. This in part is what Weber meant when he spoke of the rational and calculable life-style when we now merge with masculine concepts of reality, work and success.

George Hawkinson took the argument one step further: 'Society says there's one kind of work only. You leave your home to do work in the morning, and you *travel* to your place of work, and you *travel* home before dinner. You do this five days a week, Monday through Friday, and you get paid, and then what you do is called work.'

IV

Take work away from a man and you take rationality and calculability away from him as well, which necessarily means to him, and feels like, mental illness. The saying captures it all: You leave him without spirit. Of course losing a job causes mental stress. But the problem extends far deeper. Work accomplished over the period of a lifetime provides the purpose, rationality, calculability and spirit a man requires in order to stay sane. Without purpose, without the belief, however much it appears as illusion or delusion, that he is making time unfold through purposeful action, there can be no healthy way for a man to engage the world.

In response to a man losing his job, well-meaning people (like me) push him into support groups and meetings of all varieties. Our intentions are noble; at times the activities seem helpful, even therapeutic. Yet beneath the surface of these gatherings is the man's reaction to Bakan's communal orientation, an orientation normally associated with femininity. It is no surprise that so many men feel themselves 'feminized' by such meetings, just as they feel infantilized and dispirited by unemployment.

It is no surprise, moreover, that so many unemployed men would feel that their world-view and sense of order have been eviscerated and replaced by an utterly foreign and alienating structure. Like children watching their balloons rising in the air and disappearing, many unemployed men perceive their futures as vanishing in the mist of unemployment, and taking any sense of personal effort and purpose with them. What is left when explanations and assessments are based on a reading of the future? When there is no hope, life ends, even though the human heart continues to beat strongly.

Sadly, the long-term unemployed men I have known found little or no relief in communing with others, either in support groups or in their churches. We understand why they could not find that certain life force in their families either, despite their love for their families. At some level, they knew they engaged in perspectives representing the end of their world outlooks, purposes and intentions. Purpose, rationality, sanity, goal-orientated behaviour, agency, instrumentality, intentionality, personal integrity, all the components of a man's life-support system collapsed with the recognition that there will be no more work. That their funds dry up is but one ingredient of their dilemma. This is what these men meant when describing how their very souls had begun to disappear.

Along with their souls went their humanity, and with it their physicality. 'Human behaviour above the level of reflex', Polkinghorne noted, 'is infected with the features of meaning.'¹⁸ Simply stated, when life for these men lost its meaning, which it did upon recognizing there would be no more work, they were left with little more than reflexive capacities. The acts of communion left to these men also disappeared, and humanity came to lose its meaning. Every man spoke about it with almost pristine unselfconsciousness. Their 'deadness', as some called it, was now a fact of life.

It was that issue of death, soul death, the cutting of the tether binding a man to his future and hence to his world, community and family, and rendering him exquisitely obsolete and alone. Tell a man he's worthless and you may spur him on to perform great deeds if only to prove you wrong. More likely, however, he will lose any and all motivation; his machine will turn off.

In the end, it is essential that we understand that work is not merely something a man *does*, or even his reason for living. Work provides the structure and substance of his life as well as his thinking. It is the dynamic causing him to feel sane and complete, the dynamic assuring him he is who he is, whatever his deficiencies and failures, whatever his unfulfilled dreams and wasted efforts. For the content and structure of a man's consciousness, story and spirit remains his work. Or his lack of it.

NOTES

¹ See Michael Dorris, *Working men* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1993).

² Daniel Levinson, *Seasons of a man's life*.

³ See Mirra Komarovsky, *Unemployed man and his family* (New York: Octagon, 1970).

⁴ On this point see Carol Gilligan, *In a different voice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).

⁵ See Jean Baker Miller, *Towards a new psychology of women* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1976).

⁶ Robert Kegan, *The evolving self* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).

⁷ See David Bakan, *The duality of human existence* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1966).

⁸ See Donald W. Tiffany et al, *Unemployed: a social psychological portrait* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1971).

⁹ Thomas J. Cottle, *Perceiving time: a psychological investigation with men and women* (New York: Wiley, 1976). See especially chapter 5.

¹⁰ See his *Duality of human existence*, *op. cit.*

¹¹ Donald E. Polkinghorne, *Narrative knowing and the human sciences* (Albany: State University of New York, 1988), p 14.

¹² These notions are familiar to readers of Henri Bergson. See for example his *Matter and memory* (New York: Humanities Press, 1970).

¹³ On this point see J. B. Burg, *The idea of progress* (New York: Dover, 1955).

¹⁴ For a general discussion of this point, see Robert Brumbaugh, 'Logic and time', *Review of Metaphysics* 18 (June 1965), p 656.

¹⁵ See for example J. T. Fraser (ed), *The voices of time* (New York: Braziller, 1966).

¹⁶ See his *Economy and society* (New York: Bedminster Press, 1968).

¹⁷ On this point see Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The structure of behavior* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963); and Martin Heidegger, *Being and time* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962).

¹⁸ Polkinghorne, *op. cit.*, p 17.