

My Father's Hands: Touching God through Daily Work

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First published in *Zadok Perspectives* (69): 22-27, 2000.

As days of the week go, Sunday stands out from the rest in my memories of childhood. Not because it was the Sabbath—the day for church—which it was, but because it was the one day of the week my father wore a suit. I always thought he looked pretty good on Sundays— important, almost regal. Indeed it was church day, and as the youngest I often sat next to dad during the morning service. Sermons seemed to go on for the longest time, so I passed the time by playing with his hands. Dad's hands were always one of my favourite things about him. They were big and callused. I could lose myself for what seemed like hours in amongst the lines, crevices, and scars. I would imagine myself tobogganing down the slopes or hiding from the bad guys in a dark ravine. Underneath dad's nails was always black. We had one of those plastic nailbrushes from Woolworths sitting beside the bathroom sink. Every Sunday before church dad would stand over the sink vigorously scrubbing, but the black grease was deeply imbedded. No matter how hard he scrubbed, it was there to stay. I liked it though. His hands were strong, familiar, and secure.

My father is a turner-and-fitter by trade. When I was just one year old, my parents moved off the family dairy farm in the Gippsland. Financially they couldn't make it anymore. I am one of six sons. With a large family to care for, my parents decided that dad should look for work in the factories of an industrial suburb on the southern edge of Melbourne. For the next twenty years, six days a week, I awoke to the familiar sound of the front door closing as my father headed off to work for another

day. I understood very little then of the responsibility that dad carried as he walked out the door each morning. I understood even less the price he had to pay to meet that responsibility. Supporting a large family on a tradesman's wage made overtime essential. He could never afford the luxury of dwelling upon his own sense of fulfilment or need for personal advancement. Work was simply a necessity; it had to be done. The factories were cold, noisy and impersonal. Dad was one of many workers who shared the factory floors. The work was hard, repetitious and dirty, and the hours long. He would come home tired, strained and smelling of the factory. He was always glad to be home. Work could be forgotten until morning.

Sundays were different though. My dad was an important man in the church. He served as a deacon and an elder for all the years I can remember. In my estimation, my dad is a 'godly' man. He has been consistently passionate in his commitment to God and the church for all the years I have known him. In those days, his love, gentleness, and compassion drew respect from his fellow church members and his own family. In all matters of concern in the church, he was called upon for his wisdom. He was kept busy on boards and committees, and spent countless evenings visiting, pastoring and praying. The Sunday suit seemed more than appropriate to me. In church he was somebody!

Despite all of this, no one in the church seemed to notice my dad's hands. To my knowledge, nobody ever

asked him why his nails were constantly black. It never seemed to matter in this context who my dad was *outside* the church. His value—indeed his spirituality—was always measured by who he was *in* the church. As far as I know, never in twenty years did the pastor or another elder ask him any detailed and engaging questions about his work, the factory, or the people he worked with. Rarely, if ever, did a pastor visit him at the factory, curious to see what he worked at, what he achieved. I certainly cannot recall a single sermon on the subject of work during those years. It was as though my dad lived in two different worlds with two different languages and outfits; the world of the blue overalls and the world of the suit and tie. His hands, however, always stayed the same. His blackened nails wouldn't scrub clean; a constant reminder that whatever he might be called in the church, he would always be a worker.

When I think of the word 'spirituality', certain images come readily to mind; images of solitude, contemplation, hushed Sunday gatherings, stained glass perhaps, or mountain top retreats. Rarely, if ever, would I picture a man in overalls standing over a lathe with blackened hands. Perhaps I'm not alone. The reality is that I've been conditioned to view the 'spiritual' as a realm that stands apart; a world of separation and 'otherness'. I have learned that the things of 'the spirit' stand in contrast to the physical, the routine, the daily. In my estimation, I have become an unsuspecting dualist, a modern day Gnostic. It is when I think of my father that these conditioned responses are so dissatisfying. It is simply not right that people like my father have had to live life in two worlds with no apparent connection, deprived of the resources and encouragement to discover the presence and purposes of God in that which has taken up so much of life.

Of course, the situation is changing. Much more is being said today about the 'integration' of faith and work. Pope John Paul II has called the Roman Catholic community to rediscover "a spirituality of work that will help all people come closer, through work, to God, the Creator and Redeemer." This call has been mirrored widely in Protestant communities. This is indeed welcome. Yet old patterns of thinking do not die gracefully or quickly. William Diehl, a prominent Lutheran and businessman in the United States, has underlined the need for serious and sustained attention to this issue on the part of the church. He writes:

Until now, lay people have not had much help in seeing any part of the work as a spiritual experience. If lay people cannot find any spiritual meaning to their work, they are condemned to living a certain dual life; not connecting what they do on a Sunday with what they do the rest of the week. They need to rediscover that the very actions of life are spiritual, and enable lay people to touch God in the world, not away from it (Diehl, 1991).

The question that I wish to address here is simply this: How is it that we can 'touch God' in our daily work?

Before proceeding further, it is worth saying that although I have focussed thus far on the paid work of my dad, I could just as easily describe the unpaid work of my mother. For though from time to time mum has worked for some form of remuneration, for the most part she has given herself to the multiple and demanding tasks of homemaking. In reality, to speak of work is to describe something much broader than paid employment. Work can take many forms: from standing at a lathe to standing over a kitchen sink; from

voluntary service in a church or community group to the tiring business of searching for employment; from studying toward a qualification to caring for one's own children. All of this, and much more, can legitimately be embraced as work. Whatever forms it takes, the question remains: How can we embrace our work as a part of our spiritual journey?

No doubt, there are numerous approaches we could take in addressing this question. My response comes in two parts: firstly, to affirm two simple yet important theological statements about work; secondly, to explore nine 'disciplines' or 'values' important to Christian spirituality that are, potentially at least, present in our daily work.

Foundations for a Theology of Work

From a biblical perspective, there are, at minimum, two important statements about work that we can affirm with confidence.

1. God works: While any good theology must begin with the affirmation that God is 'mystery'—there is infinitely more about God that we cannot know than there is that we can be sure of or even speculate about—this is surely one statement we can make with certainty. The God of the Judeo-Christian tradition is a working God. From the very beginning of the biblical narrative, God is revealed as one who works. In his appropriately titled book, *God the Worker*, Robert Banks explores the multiple biblical images of God that illustrate this truth: God as composer and performer, metalworker and potter, garment maker and dresser, gardener and orchardist, farmer and winegrower, shepherd and pastoralist, tentmaker and camper, builder and architect. We could add to these other more general descriptors of God as worker: creator, provider, rescuer, redeemer, judge, reconciler, administrator, and servant. In clear contrast to the Greek idea of gods existing above and beyond human work, God of the bible is quite prepared to get

hands dirty. Further, in the person of Jesus, God is embodied as a carpenter, living and breathing the kingdom of God in the midst of human labour. Thus dignity is forever invested in human work, securing it as a legitimate realm of divine encounter.

2. We are created to work: For many people today, the experience of work is more closely aligned with the realities of Genesis 3 than the preceding chapters 1 and 2. Let me explain. As a consequence of rebellion on the part of Adam and Eve, the close of the creation story sees them banished from the garden of God with the divine rebuke, "from here on you will have to sweat to earn a living" (CEV Gen. 3:19). Contemporary workplace realities often attest much more to the 'curse' of daily work than to work as a divine gift. Yet whatever the realities of our present experience, we cannot conclude that work is itself a result of sin and failure—something that must simply be endured until redemption is fully come. Work remains fundamentally a part of God's original created order (Gen. 2:15), and a part of what God routinely affirmed as "good" and "very good" (Gen. 1:12, 18, 21, 25, 31). To fully embrace our personhood as those created 'in the image of God' (Gen 1:27), we must be willing to embrace our identity as workers. We are created to work.

To affirm these two statements is an important first step. For in embracing these truths—that God works, and as those created in God's image, we are created to work—we realize afresh that we have nothing to shy away from in reclaiming our work as an important expression of our spiritual identity.

Work & Spirituality

In our efforts to identify ways we can 'touch God' in our work and workplaces, we can't afford to be naively 'romantic'. The world of work is altogether too real for that. The many

challenges of the modern workplace must be faced, not ignored. If we are to respond to the God embodied in our work, we must honestly confront the 'godlessness' of much that goes on around us. Conversely, to surrender ourselves to a dismissive cynicism—concluding that notions of 'touching God' through work simply fly in the face of reality—does nothing to empower those seeking an all-of-life response to God. In fact, both options simply put us back where we began—with a disconnected and otherworldly preoccupation with the 'divine' that says nothing to our daily life experience.

In our search for a realistic spirituality of work—a daily 'touching of God' in and through our labours—there are any number of 'disciplines' or 'values' that are at one and the same time important to our understanding of Christian experience and present in our work. Let me outline those that come to mind most readily for me.

1. Work as Creation: At its best, human work is an act of co-creation. In Genesis 1:28, God blesses humankind with the words, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and *subdue* it." This blessing-command stands as central to God's original and continuing purposes for the whole of creation. Unfortunately, the English word 'subdue' carries with it some negative connotations. To subdue most often infers domination, control, or the 'breaking' of something into submission. All this sounds anything but creative. In contrast, the Hebrew word from which it comes is *kabhash*, which literally means 'to knead' or 'to tread.' Given my professional background as a chef, both of these meanings are fascinating. I immediately think of kneading bread or treading grapes, activities fundamental to the creation of these two culinary staples, and both wonderfully creative.

Seasoned bread makers will know that successful baking relies upon one's

skill to work with yeast, a notoriously temperamental ingredient. One soon learns that kneading has little to do with domination and control, as though one can beat the bread dough into submission. Rather, it is about working with the basic ingredients provided by God and gently, slowly and skilfully bringing those ingredients to their full potential. It seems to me that at its best, this is what much of our work is about. Think of a musician, a carpenter, a teacher, a parent, a metal worker, a gardener, an architect. Each one takes basic ingredients created by God—be they music, wood, metal, seeds and plants, even a human mind—and through various means endeavour to work those elements to their full potential. In this sense, as those commanded to subdue the earth, we are called to be co-creators with God. The significance of this fact cannot be ignored.

2. Work as Providence: Divine providence is the certain and daily sign of God's on going involvement with creation. The God of the bible is not one who creates and walks away, but one who stays intimately connected with the creation. That God is Provider is not simply descriptive of a role or function that God fulfils. Rather, it speaks of God's character and being. This providence of God is both particular and comprehensive. Genesis 1:30 speaks of God providing food for "everything that has the breath of life in it." Similarly in 1 Timothy 6:17, God is described as the one who "richly provides us everything for our enjoyment." This stands as one of the most empowering evidences of continuing relationship between the Creator and humankind.

As workers created in the image of God, not only are we co-creators, we are co-providers. Providing is a God ordained responsibility. In light of this, it seems to me that this business of working to provide for those who are dependent upon us is an activity entirely underrated. Too often the response, "I just work to

earn a living" is meant to indicate that the activity is a near-meaningless one as far as spiritual significance is concerned. But this is not so. Our call to co-provision is gathered up in the 'image' that we share with God. To provide is not merely an activity we engage in by necessity; it is an expression of our God-likeness. It is a responsibility for the good of creation and for the good of who we are in community. Perhaps this is partly why the New Testament writer speaks so passionately in 1 Timothy 5:8: "And whoever does not provide for relatives, and especially for family members has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever" (NRSV). Obviously there is an important connection between our role as providers and who we are in Christ.

3. Work as Community: As believers in the Trinity—one God in three persons—Christians profess faith in a God encountered in community. The call to conversion is a call to enter into the fellowship of that community nature of God—the 'body of Christ', the 'household of God'—for it is in relationship with those around us that God is embodied. That the two commands of Old Testament law which Jesus draws together as the essence of spirituality are (1) to love God with heart, soul, mind and strength, and (2) to love one's neighbour as one's self, is a resounding affirmation of this fact. Our response to God and our response to those around us are indivisible. God is encountered, experienced and followed in community. An important part of the Christian commitment to the church is a commitment to the nurturing of a community that, by its nature and existence, reveals the presence and purposes of God.

It follows from this that anywhere we are about nurturing human community, we nurture a place or context of potential divine encounter. In some cases, the work of community building is explicit to a role or task. Urban planners, teachers, community workers,

and café proprietors all have community making as an important activity in their job description (or at least they should have). For others, the work of nurturing community is more a choice to be made in the way one works and relates than it is a task on the official to-do list. Either way, community nurture is an intentional outworking of Christian commitment.

This activity of community nurture takes on a more urgent character when we acknowledge that for many people in the contemporary urban environment, the workplace has become one of a shrinking set of daily contexts where any level of human intimacy is experienced. For a steadily increasing minority, the workplace community sets the boundary of one's daily meaningful social interaction. Take note of the number of television sitcoms and weekly dramas that focus exclusively on a small web of workplace relationships. To what degree is this a reflection of reality? Jim Channon, writing not from an explicitly Christian or even religious perspective, believes the reality is all too common:

When people had tribes to go home to, or villages where they could share the seasonal festival, or even neighborhoods with some personal intimacy, the spirit of community was a part of the natural order of life. But as we approach the 21st Century, our business cultures have become our tribes, our villages and our neighborhoods ... if there is no experience of spirit in our corporations, then there may not be much spirit in the civilization at large (Channon, 1992).

Perhaps the business of community making—be it in a local neighbourhood, building site, or corporate office—is more significant than we give it credit for.

4. Work as Service: One of the more defining images of the spirituality of Jesus is provided in John 13, the account of Jesus washing his disciples' feet. At

the conclusion of this very intimate act, Jesus makes it clear to his followers that his commitment to the humility of service defines the essence of Christian ministry: "Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you should wash one another's feet." "I have set you an example," Jesus said, "that you should do as I have done for you." It is clear from the entire gospel story that God places a high spiritual value on service. With Jesus as our model, it is not difficult to see the difference between the profit-driven nature of 'customer service' in the contemporary workplace, and the very humbling, selfless, and routine embodiment of grace evident in the act of foot washing. Perhaps there is a place for Christians working in 'service' industries to reclaim the notion of service as virtue rather than a profit motivated strategy.

When I look for similar examples today of this selfless and routine act of service, it is hard to go past the image of my father. In a very real sense, by walking out that front door every morning to go to work, my father served me, routinely, humbly, and selflessly. Why did he work? In large part, he worked for me. Six days a week, for 20 years, my father took off his outer garments, knelt down before me and washed my feet. I do not mean to be overly nostalgic or idealistic in this assertion. I do not need to be. In assessing my father's actions in this way, I am not suggesting that he left every morning with a divinely inspired sense of purpose, or that there was some stream of heavenly light that circled his head as he stood at his lathe. No, the service of foot washing is not like that. It is an ordinary, routine, dirty, domestic task. Tomorrow it will need to be done again, and again. Surely this is, in part at least, the real test of service as Jesus envisioned it.

5. Work as Perseverance: Given the nature of the journal to which this paper is attached, it is safe to assume that the majority of readers have

benefited from some degree of tertiary education. Many will be 'professionals' and/or engaged in work that is perceived as, to some extent at least, fulfilling and worthwhile. This is certainly true for me. How easy it is to be out of touch with the fact that for many people in society, this is not so. For a significant number of people, work is simply a necessity. Regardless of its nature, outcomes, or alignment with personal gifts or interests, it is a matter of financial survival. For these people, to try and look for more in it than that my well be assessed as pushing the boundaries of credibility.

That we find it difficult to make connections between such work and spirituality is illustrated in the fact that the majority of material published in recent years on the integration of work and faith is written for, or from the perspective of, 'white collar' professionals. Certainly, this is indicative of the make-up of the church and of those who access written material on subjects such as this. However, it also underlines the fact that to wax lyrically about the deeper meanings and significance of work is for the most part a 'middle-class' preoccupation. Surely this has something to do with the fact that it is much more challenging to find the 'God-connections' for those engaged in the more menial and 'unskilled' aspects of work.

Perhaps there are instances when we must look for signs of 'the Spirit' more in the character or attitudes that we bring to a task than in the nature of the task itself. At points this will be true for all work, no matter what it is. One of the character traits valued in the New Testament is perseverance. In Romans 5:3-4, the writer notes that "suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope." Perseverance is an important link in the 'chain' of spiritual maturity. It speaks of our faithfulness to God and to those around us. It mirrors the image of

God—the one whose persevering grace holds human existence together and points us confidently and persistently to the future.

Daily work—most especially work that is routine, mundane or difficult—demands perseverance in great measure. When we persevere in difficult or tedious circumstances for a greater good, we touch the character and heart of God.

6. Work as Grace: On a recent overseas trip I was reminded of the saying, “absence makes the heart grow fonder.” How much more I appreciate my family when I’ve been deprived of the daily gift of their presence. There is a principle at work here that applies much more broadly than within intimate relationships. Think of work. It is often a gift that we do not fully appreciate until we are without it. I have never suffered the challenge of long-term unemployment, but those who have are quick to remind me that to have a job is grace. It is a gift.

There are things going on at all sorts of levels in the deprivation we feel when we are unemployed. Partly it has to do with the values of our consumer society. Sociologically and psychologically, we are defined today by our ability to provide, produce and purchase. To be without work is to be significantly diminished in these abilities and therefore diminished in our sense of self-worth and the worth attributed to us by mainstream society. From a Christian perspective, there is much that should be questioned and challenged in these measurements of human worth. However, it must also be acknowledged that the needs to produce and provide are, in large measure, God-given. When we are deprived of work, the experience cuts at the heart and soul of who we are as those created in the image of God. To be invited into the co-creation and co-providence of God through human work is a part of the on-going and gracious activity of God.

7. Work as Celebration: In the creation story, there is clearly a time when God steps back from the work of creation and celebrates the results: “God saw all that he had made, and it was very good” (Genesis 1:31). Celebration is essential to our spirituality for it is time given over exclusively to contemplating, assessing and enjoying the real worth of who we are and what we have in God. The people of Israel followed an annual calendar of celebratory feasts, each one (i) marking a particular act or provision of God, (ii) restating their dependence upon God, and (iii) reaffirming the bonds of community that bound them together as the people of God. Further, the annual celebrations of the harvest were an opportunity to enjoy together the ‘fruits’ of their labour as those who worked in cooperation with each other and with God.

Celebration is always seasonal and occasional. The depth of celebration is directly proportional to the effort or struggle extended in working toward the goal. In many cases, our work affords us seasonal opportunities to find joy and satisfaction in what we do, celebrating the fruits of our labour and saying with God, “It is good.” Think of the year-12 teacher who works day in and day out with her students, explaining, marking, remarking, prodding, encouraging—sometimes revelling in the privilege, other times longing to walk away from it—who once every year watches with pride as her students ‘graduate’ to the next stage in life. Think of the carpenter who labours month after month, in rain and heat, hammering, sawing, lifting, negotiating, and building a home. There comes the day when he finally stands back and admires what he’s achieved and enjoys a sense of completion and accomplishment. Think of the therapist who meets week after week with a struggling client: the tears, the anger, the ups and downs, 2 step forward, 3 steps backward. Finally, maybe months or

even years later, she watches her client walk out the door for the last time, significantly more whole and stable than before. In so many expressions of work there come moments when we can say with God, "It is good." Such moments bring to us perspective and hope. They remind us who we are and what we are created for. They are moments essential to our spirituality, for in them we touch God.

8. Work as Prayer: "To work is to pray." So said the monastics of some five centuries ago. As lovely as it sounds, it is precisely here that eyebrows are raised by those who face the realities of the contemporary workplace. The fact is that those who have committed themselves to the disciplines of the monastic orders through the centuries are people who take the place of hard work seriously, but they do so within the context of a worshipping community. The daily schedule of the monastic order often involves an almost seamless movement between the disciplines of physical labour and formal, communal prayer. There are not too many workplaces that look anything like this. Simply finding the time to sit with co-workers over a leisurely cup of coffee is challenge enough, let alone finding the time and space to meditate and pray.

However, before we dismiss this business of work as prayer outright, we need to consider again the New Testament directive in Romans 12:1-2: "Therefore, I urge you, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship." Similarly, in Colossians 3:23-24: "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord ... it is the Lord Christ you are serving." Though it sounds so terribly clichéd, it is clear from these two directives that life is potentially a prayer. By offering up to God who we are in our fullness and completeness as human beings, everything that issues from our hands, hearts, and imaginations is

sanctified. It is prayer. It is conversation with the Creator. In all its ordinariness, messiness, and momentariness, we find the sacred and the eternal. It is not about being transported to some spiritual plane where we are constantly attuned to the Spirit around us. It is much more ordinary than that. It is simply going about our daily routines with the confidence that God is present—listening, speaking, celebrating, even grieving.

My list is not complete. I am sure that within it there is much that could be articulated with more profundity and precision, and some that could be questioned. But in it all, I want to communicate this: I love my father's hands. Although they no longer seem quite as big as they once did, they still retain the obvious signs of many years of hard work. They are hands that have provided for me, protected me, and selflessly laboured on my behalf and on behalf of my whole family. The black under dad's nails has faded a little now. It has been a while since he laboured over a lathe. But no matter how many years go by, his hands will always be those of a worker. They say that when we gather in heaven, Jesus will still bear the scars of the nails in his hands; an eternal sign of the sacrifice made on our behalf. It is my hunch that when my dad lifts his hands in worship on that day, God will see his blackened nails and smile.

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