

Without Work: Beginning Again

Leaders of retreat centers continually ask the question, “How best do we serve those who come through our doors?” At a Benedictine retreat center, there is a yet more interesting question, “What difference does our 1500 year old tradition make in what we choose to do and how we do it?” At this time in history a significant number of guests to St. Paul’s Monastery are without work or worried that they may be soon. Data abound that attest to the widespread impact of the recent recession. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the figures for national unemployment have just eased down to 9.7% in January 2010 (<http://www.bls.gov/>, viewed 2/9/10). Still, it is possible that nearly one in ten guests is without work. Add to that number those who are uncertain of their long-term employment prospects, and the quantifiable need for service increases.

As a staff member of a Benedictine retreat center, the natural impulse for me was to plan an experience tailored to serve these guests living with employment insecurity. When the nation-wide jobless issue moved from theory to practice and impacted volunteers and friends of our monastery, I became aware of the wide range of needs and the variety of ways that people respond to the experience of being without work. Designing this retreat required consideration about how best to serve people I actually knew—Joe, Margaret, and Jeri. The next section introduces these individuals in more detail, but let me first share the retreat suggestions that they provided and which challenged me to think more deeply about what it means to be without work and what Benedictine retreat centers have genuinely to offer such guests.

Some Suggestions from those Without Work For Benedictine Retreat Centers

1. Do what you do best by helping us appreciate the wisdom of the Benedictine Way.
2. Respect the diversity of our experiences. We have varying degrees of comfort and confidence in our situations.
3. Ask the monastic community to pray privately and publicly for those without work and for those precariously or under-employed.
4. Help us pray through our unique forms of loss and rebirth. A ritual may be nice.
5. Don’t be afraid to talk with us about diet, rest, and exercise. Taking care of our bodies is an important part of balance.
6. Provide alternatives to the financial costs of using retreat center resources. Some of us are able to pay the full cost and more; others may need assistance.
7. Invite us to use our personal or professional skills. This benefits the retreat ministry and allows us to learn new skills and deepen relationships.
8. Remember that this may be a long period of transition for us. Stay in touch.

Obviously, guests to the monastery are blessed by the work that we do, but the process of preparing for this retreat reminded me that retreat leaders also receive a gift when we are called to examine our assumptions and return to what is core to the Benedictine identity. Rather than provide here the definitive format for an unemployment retreat, I hope to share some of the most useful insights I gained as I explored the intersection between actual guest experiences and the Benedictine way.

Varieties of Experience

Conversations quickly taught me that all forms of unemployment are not equal. Resources, responsibilities, key questions, qualities of hope, and even the range of possibilities vary person by person. For purposes of this reflection, three characters composed from actual life stories help illustrate different kinds of unemployment.

Those who are unemployed by choice are often comfortable financially and have little pressure to return immediately to work. They may be retired or have elected to take some time to explore vocational options. Joe, for example, worked for a Fortune 500 company for nearly 30 years and accepted a buy-out about a year and a half ago. His wife is employed full-time as a medical professional. While two children are college-aged and they have had to cut back in some areas, Joe still sees this time without employment as a window of opportunity. He has started his own software business, volunteers a great deal, and kicked-off the long-awaited basement remodeling project.

In contrast, others are unemployed by circumstance. Without sufficient financial resources, there is a great deal of pressure to return to work. Margaret is a single woman in her mid-fifties who was originally trained as a teacher. Due to health complications which prevent her from standing for long periods of time, she has worked the last 20 years as a receptionist for St. Paul's largest hospital. Margaret was let go during a restructuring process six months ago. Lacking the office skills most positions now require, she has been taking classes and using computers at the library to search job postings and prepare letters and resumes. The last few months have been especially draining and frustrating.

The third group of people, to borrow a phrase coined by one of our Oblates, is what we might call "precariously employed." They are employed full-time, for now, but perceive that they may be let go in the not too distant future. A paycheck contributes to more financial stability than unemployment benefits, but the emotional pressures of uncertainty are costly. Jeri works for a nonprofit organization that hired her as the first full-time director to expand women's services just before the market turned downward. Now in the second year of budget deficits, tensions are starting to increase. Cost-cutting measures have already led to reduced staff. Wondering how long the board will continue her employment, Jeri is caught between committing more personal energy to the organization's effort and using her time to seek a more stable position.

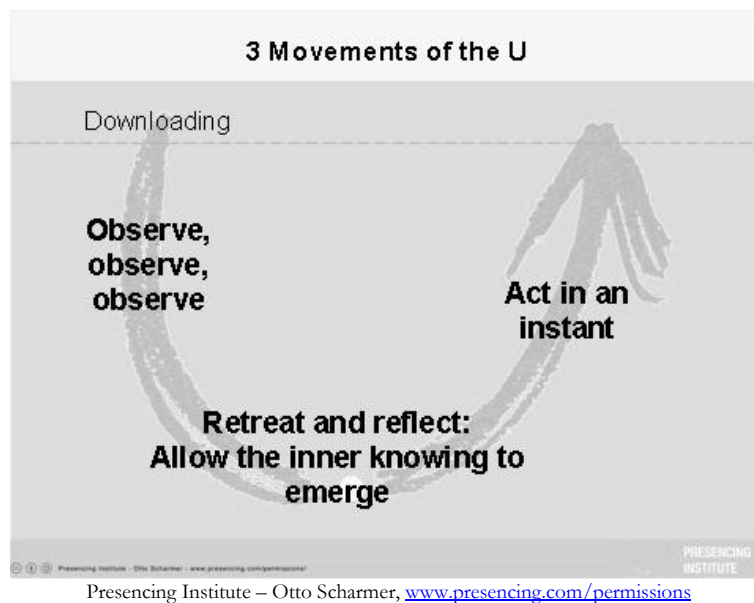
The unique situations in which Joe, Margaret, and Jeri find themselves demonstrated for me a range of experiences that would not be easily addressed by any one-size-fits-all response. I am now more aware of other forms of unemployment, including recent graduates who remain jobless and unable to establish a work history, those who are under-employed, and those who have become so discouraged by long-term unemployment that they have given up searching for work. Financial pressures, family responsibilities, and personal values mix differently in each of these situations to affect a person's related questions about security, meaning, and how to persevere. Respecting this diversity, I recommitted to draw on the Benedictine charism of attentive hospitality to create a space for dialogue and renewal.

Creating Space

Joe, Margaret, and Jeri, each in their own way, describe the intensity of managing their ongoing task lists. For Margaret, necessity makes looking for work a full time job, but even those who have chosen to be without work may find themselves more active than they expected. The particular items on the task list may differ, but that list can, over time, crowd out reflection. Without creating intentional space, people can be carried away by the flurry of reworking resumes, exploring options, volunteering spare time, or otherwise exhausting their energy in arguably constructive ways. A retreat center can help people suspend the task list for a time and open the door to deeper learning and new beginnings.

As I considered possible ways to approach a retreat for those without work, I found the writings of sociologist Otto Scharmer and theologian Ronald Rolheiser to be helpful in creating a framework for conversation, especially in articulating the common movements amid diverse experiences.

Otto Scharmer, in his book about Theory U, suggests that we need to “suspend” activity in order to tap into a knowledge that emerges from a more profound place within us. Briefly, Theory U suggests that the process of learning and implementing well what we learn has three movements: (a) observation (b) reflection and (c) action. Refer to the diagram below.



The process begins with observing, positioned at the upper left of the U, moves down to reflection at the bottom of the U, and then moves up to action at the upper right. Scharmer goes so far as to use the word “retreat” for the movement at the bottom of the U in order to describe a space created for grounded reflection. According to Theory U, we retreat to suspend activity and let new insight emerge. Then, with centeredness and fresh energy, we respond accordingly.

Theory U affirmed for me that Benedictine retreat centers can help guests uncover their more fundamental concerns, values, and desires by inviting them into retreat and reflection. To some degree, the particular questions do not matter. Of greater importance is the process of welcoming

these guests as they experience their own movements into deeper learning and then supporting these guests however their new beginnings emerge.

In addition to Theory U, the more theological language of Ronald Rolheiser helped deepen my sense of the movements that diverse experiences hold in common. Particularly helpful was his description of “paschal transformation” (*Holy Longing: The Search for a Christian Spirituality*, 1999: p. 148). The paschal cycle of death and rebirth follows the pattern of Christ’s journey of death, resurrection, time in between, ascension, and pentecost. Drawing on Rolheiser’s sense of Christ’s journey, I found that we can help those without work explore these five important movements:

1. Name your loss or suffering
2. Claim your new beginning
3. Grieve your loss and adjust to the new reality
4. Let go of the loss and recognize what it adds to your story
5. Accept the new spirit to live the life that is before you

In naming the shared pattern of loss and renewal and by grounding that pattern in Christ, I grew more confident that such a framework would help guests process their own experiences and draw on the presence of Christ within them to take a step forward. Joes, Margarets, and Jeris might each articulate their loss differently and in their own time, but all would likely agree that their lives are moving and changing—Rolheiser might say that their lives are being transformed. With that change comes an invitation to let go and to begin anew. As each wrestles with their own questions or stretches the boundaries of what has long been familiar to them, Benedictine retreat centers, I believe, can help people explore the resources for sorting through the array of pressures and possibilities. Personal retreats, spiritual direction, and programs related to the spiritual life are each beneficial, but the distinctive gift that Benedictine communities have to offer those without work is their model of life together and, more specifically, the experience of that way of life as it undergirds new beginnings.

Undergirding New Beginnings

Since the notion of compiling a list of “Benedict’s 10 Steps for the Unemployed” seemed to do little to honor the fullness of the monastic tradition and even less to respect the diverse experiences of those who are without work, I turned back to *The Rule St. Benedict* in search of cues for what might be more true and lasting. One important truth that *The Rule* conveys is the sense that the journey will be a long one made up of many new starts. Reassuringly, the phrase “this little rule for beginners” comes at the end of 73 chapters of instruction on biblical discipleship, life in community, and prayerful attention to the presence of God in our lives. Each person, Benedict would have us understand, practices falling and rising repeatedly over the course of a lifetime. Having heard from guests who have been without work for six months, eight months, and even more than two years, I asked, “What is it that guests could glean from monastic communities about enduring a long process and beginning over and over again?” The Benedictine rhythm of life and exercise of community both seemed key.

What many guests come to see as a result of their time at a monastery is that life is more of a marathon than a sprint (Rolheiser says something like this in *Holy Longing*, p. 214). Monastics model for them a rhythm which incorporates body, mind, and spirit and which enables a person to continue the long journey. Guests come to monasteries to enter into the flow of monastic life and

downshift into a more peaceful way of engaging their own lives. The liturgy of hours and its pace is quieting, the invitation to dine with sisters is affirming, the time for study is freeing, and the realization that even monastics have work to do is refreshing. Guests continue to direct my attention to the living rhythm of the monastic community as the distinguishing mark of our retreat centers and the greatest asset for ministry. Experiencing the interdependence of work, prayer, learning, and holy leisure (S. Joan Chittister explores this rhythm well in *Wisdom Distilled from the Daily*, 1991) and carrying that monastic framework into their own situations helps them intentionally shape their activities in ways that contribute to balance and endurance.

The other aspect of the Benedictine life that I found to be most useful to those without work is the commitment to ongoing relationships. For that reason we are including as part of the retreat experience a number of ways to keep in touch with the guests. Job seekers are acutely aware of the need for professional networking, but the Benedictine sense of community helps guests explore their deep hunger and appreciation for meaningful and lasting connections. It can be isolating and discouraging to become separated from colleagues while enduring a prolonged search for work. After a while, even friends may be at a loss for words. Being welcomed into a community that attends to conversations, no matter how difficult, can help guests rekindle their sense of identity and worth in Christ. The Benedictine way—even though the practice of hospitality is not without its difficulties—holds up a vision of interconnectedness that is grounded in the presence of Christ in each person. At their best retreat centers can demonstrate this Christ-centered community by receiving each person with full acceptance, listening with undivided attention, and anticipating that this relationship will extend beyond a few days of retreat. By tending these relationships, we can help guests see how mutuality helps round out one's perspective and renew one's hope. In this way guests may be led to recognize and nurture relationships in their own lives that provide lasting support and encouragement as they begin again.

In Conclusion

Retreat centers in general, and those of monasteries especially, are neither designed nor equipped to put people back to work. The gift that Benedictine retreat centers offer those without work and those who are precariously employed may not be the implementation of the newest and most creative job search program in the region. So what can Benedictine retreat centers offer? What we have that is authentic and enduring is our willingness to journey side by side. Monasteries embody hope and long term perspective by extending the invitation to participate in the rhythm of monastic life, offering opportunities for deep listening, and creating settings that allow guests to name their experience as sacred and to recognize that they are not alone. For at least a few people, the experience of being wholly received and reassured that this is but one of many life transitions will be the impetus needed to sustain beginning again.

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