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WORK AND WORSHIP: BRINGING PURPOSE TO YOUR CAREER

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Workplace stress has been called a modern disease. As the poet Henry David Thoreau said, “the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.”

Workplaces are often pressurized and pervaded by the need to extract maximum performance from harassed employees, who do their best in often toxic environments where “dog-eat-dog” is the mantra that seems to serve best. How can society solve this issue?

The Baha’i writings offer some useful perspectives on the nature and purpose of work, and how we can look upon it in ways that can alleviate some of the stress we may feel.

First, we should know that if we are doing productive work, according to the Baha’i teachings, we are doing something good and right:

The best of men are they that earn a livelihood by their calling and spend upon themselves and upon their kindred for the love of God, the Lord of all worlds. – Baha’u’llah, *The Hidden Words*, p. 51.

I would suggest that the word “calling” in this context means work that is well-suited to us. Clearly we are not all lucky or well-qualified enough to be able to do work that satisfies some lofty inner calling, but at the same time, whatever role we fall into hopefully reflects something about our preferences, skills or current life-situation.

Another thing to remember is that the root of our suffering in the work-place can often be our natural desire for appreciation or to be recognized as being good at what we do. If we don’t get such recognition, we may feel dissatisfied and become disheartened. I once took a management course where I was told that up to ninety per cent of all job moves within the organization, promotions included, were precipitated by mistrust or dissatisfaction with one’s immediate manager. So how do we stop ourselves from becoming disheartened if our work isn’t recognized?

One of the key principles of Karma yoga maintains we should do our best in our work, but not get attached to the results. In other words, whether we are congratulated or chastised for our efforts, we should remain un-moved by either of those extremes, and just do our best. If we believe in a personal God, then we should dedicate our work to Him and no one else. Swami Vivekananda put it this way :

“This is the one central idea in the Gita (Bhagavad Gita): “Work incessantly, but be not attached to it.”

All thought of obtaining return for the work we do hinders our spiritual progress; nay, in the end it brings misery. There is another way ... that is by looking upon work as worship in case we believe in a personal God. – Swami Vivekananda, *Karma Yoga*, p. 38; p. 49.

Putting money to one side for a moment, the desire for reward on the worker's part leading to misery is an interesting one. The Baha'i writings seem to support this idea:

One who is imprisoned by desires is always unhappy; the children of the Kingdom have unchained themselves from their desires. – Abdu'l-Baha, *Abdu'l-Baha in London*, p. 87.

Of course, that's not to say that we shouldn't expect to be correctly paid for our labors, or stand up for ourselves if we have been misjudged over something we've done or not done. We must strive for whatever is just and right, but once we have done this, leave the matter in God's hands: **“Tread ye the path of justice, for this verily is the straight path.”** Baha'u'llah, *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah*, p. 250.

This spiritual theme of work being equivalent to worship is also found in the Baha'i writings:

It is enjoined upon every one of you to engage in some form of occupation, such as crafts, trades and the like. We have graciously exalted your engagement in such work to the rank of worship unto God, the True One. – Baha'u'llah, *Tablets of Baha'u'llah*, p. 26.

That's why, for Baha'is, work takes on a spiritual dimension, and even if we have no financial need to take a job, work should still be a part of our lives:

Every individual, no matter how handicapped and limited he may be, is under the obligation of engaging in some work or profession, for work, especially when performed in the spirit of service, is according to Baha'u'llah a form of worship. It has not only a utilitarian purpose, but has a value in itself, because it draws us nearer to God, and enables us to better grasp His purpose for us in this world. It is obvious, therefore, that the inheritance of wealth cannot make anyone immune from daily work. – Shoghi Effendi, quoted by the Universal House of Justice in Baha'u'llah's *Most Holy Book*, p. 192.

One of the fruits of our work helps us to draw closer to God and to understand ourselves and our role in this world better. Does that include, for example, a parent or carer who stays at home to run the household or care for family members? Without a doubt, yes! Useful work of any kind, whether paid or not, especially when it serves the needs of others, fits the Baha'i definition of work as worship.

So it would seem that by doing some form of work, doing it to the best of our ability, seeing it as a service to others and then remaining detached from the results will give us the happiest results. That way we can provide for ourselves, our loved ones and for our own spiritual development, and keep our stress levels in check.