Worries in the Workplace

Four forty-five in the morning. From the window I see the darkened, dead-still office buildings standing stories high above the maze of empty streets below. In just a few short hours, these same buildings and streets will swarm with workers like the colonies of ants moving up and down the city-scape of a hollowed-out old tree trunk.

For most of the population, save the children, the retired and the unfortunate unemployed, work weighs in with a substantial amount of the time we spend in our daily living. Work dictates our schedule, our dress, our space, our identity, and in the context of the most human of ventures, the relationships in which we will be engaged for a third of our day.

Though we maintain some of our autonomy and the ability to make some choices, the structure of the work environment stands stories high in determining our movement during the eight or so hours before the lights, machines, and telecommunications are clicked off in completion of another workday.

With the movement of cars, public transportation, taxis, bicycles and walkers navigating their way to the workplace come also the worries and concerns of family, friends and home. Oftentimes these worries and concerns become enmeshed with the already present worries and concerns in the stress of the job itself. How much of the stress of the workplace is then a source of the dis-ease that diminishes or threatens to diminish our wellness and health?

I was just thinking of all the jobs I have had over the years. Delivering papers, cutting lawns, making pizzas, caddying, bagging groceries, then later working fish and deli at the supermarket, working the assembly line making plastic milk bottles (my hands twitch even now when I recall, on either side of me, the Russian man and Greek woman with missing fingers).

Then there was the shortest and hardest job I think I ever had. At the end of my first and last day working on a farm, I approached the boss aching and bone-tired with exhaustion (itching red and raw from the hay), to collect my money, only to discover that the farmer claimed that he agreed to $1.15 an hour, not $1.50 (the minimum wage was $1.60). In my heart I became a union man on
that hot summer day.

One of the best jobs I ever had was during three summers in college where I was docking ferries for the Steamship Authority to the islands of Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket off Cape Cod, Massachusetts. Catching lines from the boat, rays from the sun, and glimpses of attractive tourists made for lazy, hazy, crazy days of those youthful summers.

Then ministerial work in the parishes, hospitals, college campuses, prisons, health systems, and currently, national leadership.

If you reflect back to all of the places of your work history: the worst, the best, and the mostly in-between, there were always those moments of tension and worry, particularly in the strain of relationships, whether with the boss, co-workers, customers or clients.

Two questions arise for me in this context. First, how do I personally live out my working life in my present work environment? And then secondly, how do I in my ministry to others help people create a more healthy work environment? One of the most important skills of our CPE training is this ability to begin the process with self-reflective learning which then empowers me to move out in relationship to empower others.

For both myself and for those to whom I minister, the first task might be to separate out my personal life from my professional life. A wise seminary professor, affectionately called O’D by generations of Boston priests, used to be fond of quoting the saying, "good fences make good neighbors." This wisdom reflects the reality of the necessity of boundaries. The word I used earlier, "enmeshed," points up to the dilemma that occurs when unmet needs and expectations from my personal life find their way into my professional life, oftentimes without either myself or the other people being aware.

In constructing a "good fence" between my personal and professional life, I am then better able to have "good neighbors" in the workplace. A way of doing this task might be to do some personal inventory as to the relative happiness or peace that you and I might be experiencing at this moment in time.

Mitch Albom, author of *Tuesdays with Morrie*, relates his story of returning to the "classroom" of his favorite college professor after a hiatus in their relationship of over fifteen years. Only now the professor is dying, and his desk and his classroom are his bed and his home. Mitch relates how quickly and poignantly
Morrie moves back into the heart of the questions of life so different from the perfunctory "how are you?" He writes:

Yet here was Morrie talking with the wonder of our college years, as if I had simply been on a long vacation.
"Have you found someone to share your heart with?" he asked.
"Are you giving to your community?"
"Are you at peace with yourself?"
"Are you trying to be as human as you can be?"

What wonderful questions for a personal inventory of the state of my happiness, or in other words, the state of my health and well-being. How many people, for example, single, married or widowed -- remember, beginning with ourselves -- might cast down our eyes in sadness when touched by that question? In the workplace, how might this emptiness affect the daily interaction with my boss, my co-workers or my customers or clients?

The second question, concerning community, pushes the issue of how small or large my world is or has become. How many people -- how many of us -- get so self-absorbed that we box ourselves into moods that dim and darken our vision in the small corner of our own world?

I remember a spiritual director who once described self-absorption like being a donut. We are turned all inward, and when we get in that position what is it that is at the center? Nothing.

The third and fourth questions, about peace and being human, seem to touch the core of the spiritual life. What is warring inside of me? And especially for us in ministry, what does it mean to be human, instead of constantly measuring up to some standard that is divorced from what St. Irenaeus calls the "glory of God," men and women "fully alive"?

How does my inner state of war or peace get projected out onto my boss, my co-workers, my customers or clients? How do my sometimes unrealistic expectations of myself then get put on those around me in the workplace?

This task of a personal inventory can help bring to consciousness some of the personal issues and thus disentangle, or, if there were such a word, dis-enmesh me from worries and concerns that are not properly those of the workplace. I
then construct a "good fence" between work and home.

The second task focuses on the work environment itself. Managers, particularly, have the responsibility of knowing, refining and adhering to the "rules of engagement" in the workplace. This task is often found in the formation and implementation of good policy and clear communication.

The legitimate worries originating in the workplace then can be dealt with in a fair and equitable manner. The regularity of communication, the procedures for legitimate complaint, and the processes for negotiation and the redress of wrongs all can create a more healthy environment where people are treated and treat one another well.

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One of our roles as chaplains is the ministry we exercise in the work place. So often we are the ones who listen to the worries and witness the distress levels of staff in both their personal and professional lives. Through skilled listening, we have the opportunity to help the stressed person(s) to differentiate the personal issues from the workplace issues and intervene accordingly.

In today's cost-reducing healthcare environment, workers so often squeezed "to do more with less" can often experience what they perceive, oftentimes rightly, as unfair practices, or at the very least, the burden of additional stress. For the chaplain, these situations challenge us to use our influence in the institution to advocate and help negotiate the stress in the work relationships, especially the conflicts between managers and staff.

Some leaders in Catholic health care, reflecting upon their mission at this time in history, are directing their energies into the development of a spirituality of the workplace. Separating out, and addressing, the worries of workers, it seems, is the beginning of a spirituality of a workplace.

Winding down at the end of the day, a less worried worker goes home a little healthier, and the spirituality of the workplace carries into a spirituality of the home. And with tomorrow's movement of cars, public transportation, taxis, bicycles and walkers to the workplace, perhaps there will be a quickening of the step toward a healthier, more desirable place to work and be well.