

A REFLECTION ON THE MEANING AND PRACTICE OF WORK WITHIN A FAMILY GOVERNANCE SYSTEM

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In every one of the world's spiritual traditions there is an emphasis on each individual within the community discovering and fulfilling the meaningful work to which he or she is called. This process of discovery and fulfillment is recognized as a critical element in each individual's journey first to adulthood and then to happiness¹. Learning to work is the process of learning discipline toward the end of establishing one's own dignity as a person. The successful completion of this journey by the individuals who form the spiritual tradition is also seen in each such group as the foundation for the growth of a prosperous community. This process of individual discovery and fulfillment through work is equally essential to the growth of a flourishing family. After all, a family is a form of community, and like all communities, is only as strong as the sum of its individual parts. Families who seek to overcome the universal cultural proverb "shirt sleeves to shirt sleeves in three generations" begin with a decision that long-term family wealth preservation depends on the entire family's decision that its' mission is to enhance the individual pursuits of happiness of each family member. A family's wealth is defined as its human, intellectual, and financial capital. These families know that the more common family practice of the older generation asking the younger to dream the older generation's dreams will ultimately defeat their family's wealth preservation efforts. They know, as I believe, that no one can dream another's dream. In my opinion the secret to successful long-term family wealth preservation lies in the older generation asking the younger: "What are you passionate about and how can I invest in it?"; In discovering what the individual members of the younger generation are passionate about both the older and younger family members begin to recognize the work which will best fulfill the journeys of life to which the younger generation are called. Once such work is defined, the family can then invest in the process by which each individual learns to do the work to which he or she is called. Through this process, which I call "discovering the avocation to know the vocation", comes clarity on the significance of work within the family.

Assuming a family pursues this strategy there is one cultural myth in American society which it must immediately exorcise from its belief system; the idea that only work for wages is admirable work. Until the late nineteenth century most work within society was either agricultural or artisanal. In agricultural societies families worked primarily to sustain themselves. If there were any excess it went to the government as a financial contribution to the military and judicial sectors of society in order to provide for external defense and internal order. In the artisanal sectors of pre-industrial societies, the artisan manufactured and sold or bartered his own goods retaining directly any profit. Rarely did men and women work for others on a wage basis. With the advent of the industrial society there was a need for people to work in structured organizations. This need led to the system of wage labor we define today as the only form of meaningful work. Thus, until recently, an individual's work was not defined by the wages it earned, but by the contribution it made to the individual's self-esteem and to an understanding of his or her role in family and society. Work was how the individual defined him or herself within the community and how equally the community evaluated him or her.

In my experience with American families at the beginning of the twenty-first century I increasingly discover that very few of them have an historical understanding of how to evaluate the success of work in an individual's life. Very few have read the modern view of this subject as "being in flow"; by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi^[2] or as achieving happiness in the ancient view as articulated by Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Whether family members discern the importance of the question of work through the lens of a modern or ancient vision, I believe they will determine that the central questions today regarding work are the same profound questions as have always been asked: "Is the individual undertaking the work to which he or she is called?" and, if yes, "Is he or she pursuing that work toward personal mastery of it?"; In some cases, significant wages and even great financial wealth may grow out of an individual's search for the work to which he or she is called. Much more frequently, given the vast number of choices of work available, and the uniqueness of each individual, this will not be the case. For a family seeking to preserve its true wealth, its human and intellectual capital, the outcome the family seeks from each individual's choice of work is healthy, life-long learners. Only with such family members can the family hope to sustain itself. I believe the most important factor in judging the merits of an individual's work is knowing that all work is of equal value to the

family's success if it meets the criteria of leading to healthy, life-long learners. Of course, the family system must produce the financial capital necessary to sustain itself. Although those members pursuing work which yields financial capital are of great importance, they are not, in George Orwell's words, "more equal than others";. They are simply individuals who through the process of first seeking and then knowing themselves, pursue the work to which they are called.

Once the myth of work for wages as the only measure of useful work within a family has been dispelled, a family can move successfully to the development of a process for teaching individual family members how to work. As I said in the beginning of this reflection, learning to work is the process of learning discipline toward the end of establishing one's own dignity as an individual. In my view, what the work consists of is immaterial, it is learning to do work that is the critical component in an individual's journey to adulthood and ultimately to the achievement of his or her individual happiness.

How do we learn to work? First we apprentice ourselves to a master. Second, we learn to do the work of a journeymen. Third, we achieve personal mastery of the work so we can fulfill the journeys of life to which we are called.

All too frequently today individuals are permitted, and often urged, to avoid the role of apprentice. This pattern is most prevalent, in my experience, in families of privilege and particularly in families whose first generation is living and has created very substantial financial capital. To these families it often seems easier, and more generous, for the older generation to buy its younger generation members into organizations in senior positions or to simply promote them within family organizations. These acts of generosity are in fact practices which defeat the process of self-discovery through work. Worse, if the work assigned does not match the individual's calling, the lack of enthusiasm it generates within the individual frequently leads to unproductive, worthless lives full of anger and empty of self-esteem. At worst it leads to children and grand-children who, through personal frustration, end up as remittance addicted "trust funders";. These road blocks to growth must be avoided and the family must affirmatively encourage its members not to avoid apprenticeship as a fundamental step in learning the discipline to which each is called.

Why is apprenticeship so important and what is the process we undergo as apprentices? When we apprentice ourselves to a master we say to the master, "teach me and in return I

promise to do the work you ask of me so I may learn from you". This fundamental act of honoring another, of submission, and of surrender of self is the beginning of the ritual of every learning process. For an individual to be so proud, or worse through the mistaken views of others never to be given the freedom to enter into such a relationship is to foreclose the possibility of learning the discipline of how to learn any subject. Every learning situation is a process of work. Doing the work to which we are called will allow us to learn the most. Why? Because the joy of learning what we have to learn, while becoming who we are truly meant to be, will lighten the burden of doing what we have to do to learn that lesson. Apprenticeship is the commitment to the process of learning. If we start at the beginning as apprentices, rather than in the middle as journeymen, we experience the whole process of learning the particular work to which we are called. Ultimately when we master that work, our self-esteem will grow as will our powers of discovery and discernment. We can use this process over and over again as each stage of life brings us new opportunities to learn the skills necessary for that stage of life, so our individual missions in pursuit of happiness can be achieved.

To learn to work by apprenticing one's self to a master is to understand that it is through the process of learning to work, (not through the doing of any specific form of work, and specifically not through the doing of any work for wages for which one is not called) that we discover who we are and pursue our most important duty which is, as Socrates said, "To know thyself".

Work, for human beings, is not labor. It is the essence of human discipline and dignity. It is the expression of the curiosity that distinguishes our species. Work that accords with the avocational passions of individual family members and which can be channeled to form the vocational activities of these individuals will over time yield a stronger family whole. It will produce healthier, life-long learning individuals. Such families will find their human, intellectual, and financial capital growing and the risk of the proverb "shirt sleeves to shirt sleeves" diminishing. It is in this way that the discipline of work forms such a fundamental part of the fabric of a successful family.

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^[1]In this reflection I am speaking of happiness in the Aristotelian sense that the purpose of each individual's life is the successful pursuit of happiness through the living of a life inspired by, and successfully balancing, the virtues of courage, justice and temperance, by participation in family and in the community, and with an appreciation of aesthetics and, finally, doing no harm to others. See Aristotle, the *Nicomachean Ethics*, translated by J.A.K. Thomson, revised Hugh Tredennick, London. Penguin Books, 1953.

^[2]Csikszantmihalyi, Mihaly, *Flow, The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, New York. Harper Collins, 1990.