

## **BEING REAL, PART FIVE**

### **SPIRITUAL TOOLS FOR AUTHENTIC LIVING**

**A Series of Excerpts for Further Study and Reflection**

## **BEING REALLY BALANCED**

In her address at Trinity Institute's conference on Benedictine spirituality, Joan Chittister talked at length about the pathway to an authentic spiritual life. After a brief comparison of contemporary values with the Benedictine rule of life, she argues that it is critical for us to readopt the Benedictine understanding of a balanced life, carefully working out a creative harmony between work, leisure, and stewardship in our daily lives.

### **Benedictine Values**

Benedict demanded a great deal more than the practice of private religious exercises which, good as they are, necessary as they are to the discipline, always run the risk of becoming more personal comfort than they do spiritual growth. Benedict modeled on both mountaintops and [in] cities a way of walking through the world that made the whole world a better place. I suggest that, if the 21<sup>st</sup> century needs anything at all, it may well be a return to the life-giving vision of Benedict the Illuminated One. It may well be that we need now a new respect for basic Benedictine values, a new reverence for bold Benedictine wisdom if civilization is to be saved again ... well, no, my friends, this time if the planet is to be preserved.

--Joan Chittister, Trinity Institute Benedictine Spirituality Conference, 2003, 13-15.

### **Harmony And Balance**

Benedict was quite precise about it all. Time was to be spent in prayer, in sacred reading, in work and in community participation. In other words, it was to be spent on listening to the Word, on study, on making life better for others and on community building. It was public as well as private; it was private as well as

public. It was balanced. No one thing consumed the monastic's life. No one thing got exaggerated out of all proportion to the other dimensions of life. No one thing absorbed the human spirit to the exclusion of every other. Life was made up of many facets and only together did they form a whole. Physical labor and mental prayer and social life and study and community concerns were all pieces of the puzzle of life. Life flowed through time, with time as its guardian. [But no longer.]

With the invention of the light bulb, balance became a myth. Now human beings could extend the day and deny the night. Now human beings could break the natural rhythm of work and rest and sleep. Now human beings could begin to destroy the framework of life and turn it into one eternal day with, ironically, no time for family, no time for reading, no time for prayer, no time for privacy, no time for silence, no time for time. Suddenly, we need the wisdom of the *Rule* more than ever.

--Joan Chittister, *Wisdom Distilled From The Daily* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1990) 74-75.

## **Creative Work**

We're supposedly a most creative country. There are two poles pulling at the modern concept of work. At one pole is the workaholic. At the other pole sits the pseudo-contemplative. Workaholics work because they have learned that what they do is really the only value they have. Or they work because they want to avoid having to do anything else in life, like family or prayer or living. Or they work because they don't really want to work at all. What they really want is money, money, money. Pseudo-contemplatives, on the other hand, want to spend their hours gazing into space or processing. They spend every new year of life processing last year's life. Nobody ever tells them, "It's over, you can go on now." Pseudo-contemplatives have missed the point entirely that Adam and Eve were put in the garden ... in order to till it and to keep it, not to gaze at it. Not to live off of it. Not to lounge around in it like pigs in mud. They were put there to co-create it. Somehow or other in our Puritan heritage we got the idea that work is a punishment for sin. Work is not a punishment for sin. Even in the ideal world, a world in which there was no sin at all, before sin entered the world, Genesis is very clear: God expected us to take responsibility for the co-creation of the world. ...

So the young visionary Benedict required specified periods for manual labor, as well as for prayer and prayerful reading. Benedict was not about saccharine piety and theological niceties. Benedict set out to save the world by putting creative work and meditation, contemplation, on the very same level. To Benedict, work was always to be done with that vision in mind. Laziness and irresponsibility, oppression and exploitation, the oppressive, neurotic, insane production of goods of massive, even global destruction, and the ravishment of the planet are all, then, to the Benedictine mind, forms of injustice and thievery because they set out to tear the world down. They risk the tearing down of the world rather than its building up. Work is our gift to the world. It's really work that ties us to the rest of humankind and binds us to the future. It's work that saves us from total self-centeredness and leads to self-fulfillment at the same time. It's work that makes it possible to give back as much as we take from life.

...

... The goal of life is not to get out of working. The goal of life is to work and work and work because the world is unfinished and it is our responsibility to go on with it in creative ways. No, profit-making has not saved us. We need the wisdom of creative work now.

--Joan Chittister, Trinity Institute Benedictine Spirituality Conference, 2003, 15-19.

### **Holy Leisure**

In the mind of Benedict, life is not only lived by doing. Leisure is an essential part of Benedictine spirituality as well as work. But real leisure, holy leisure, Sabbath leisure, contemplative leisure, has more to do with the quality of life and the depth of our vision than it does with play and vacations. The rabbis taught that the purpose of Sabbath was threefold. The first purpose of Sabbath, the rabbis said, was to free the poor as well as the rich for at least one day a week, and that included the animals, too. Nobody had to take an order from anybody on the Sabbath. The second purpose of Sabbath, the rabbis teach, is to give people time to evaluate their work as God evaluated the work of creation, to see if their work, too, is really life-giving. And finally, the purpose of Sabbath leisure was to give people space, to contemplate the real meaning of life. If anything has brought the modern world to the brink of destruction, it must surely be the loss of Sabbath.

The purpose of holy leisure is to bring this balance of being, not a balance of time, back into lives gone askew, and to give people time to live a thoughtful, a contemplative as well as a productive life. It's the reflectiveness of holy leisure that brings us to ask what it is to follow the Gospel in this situation now and in this place here. ... Holy leisure, in other words, is the foundation of contemplation. And contemplation is the ability to see the world as God sees the world.

The great Benedictine abbot, Dom Cuthbert Butler, wrote once, "It is not the presence of activity that destroys the contemplative life. It is the absence of contemplation." You are as much required, and I am as much required, to the contemplative life as any cloistered monk or nun. Otherwise, how shall you explain the union of Jesus with God the Creator as He walked from Galilee to Jerusalem, taking animals out of ditches, raising women from the dead, and curing lepers? In Benedictine spirituality, life is not divided into parts, one holy and the other mundane. To the Benedictine mind, all of life is holy. All of life's actions bear the scrutiny of all of life's ideals and all of life is to be held in anointed hands. No, personal comfort, purposeless play, vacuous vacations, however rich, however powerful, have not saved the world. Ask the Romans. We need the wisdom of holy leisure now.  
--Joan Chittister 19-21.

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