

Work and Spirituality
A Holistic Approach to Healthy Living
By Dr. John W. Gilmore

© September 10, 2005
Diana Sarah Wellness Center,
Centro de La Mente Iluminada, S.A.
San Ramon, Alajuela, Costa Rica

Chapter 1

Now

*Today well lived makes every dream a dream of happiness
and every tomorrow a vision of hope--Kalidassa*

Mathew Fox mentions three types of work in *The Reinvention of Work: the inner work, the outer work and the greater work*. Mathew Fox and his idea of reinventing work and spirituality can rid you of the idea that you have to bare eight or more hours of a horrible job everyday, and try to forget how rotten it is when you get home. You can stay where you are and turn that job into something good. That's right. You can do it. You may think I'm full of crap. That's okay. One or two people have told me that in my lifetime, but they were wrong. Let's explore how we can do this and then you can decide. Ok?

First it's important to realize that your spirituality, or your present belief system, is important. What do you believe at the core of your being about life? The answer to this question is very important when seeking a job. We all have certain mental frames that we received during the socialization process that influence our thinking. They have been constructed by us, and by society, to help us live in the world.

"You can't see or hear the frames. They are part of what cognitive scientists call the *cognitive unconscious* structures in our brain that we cannot consciously access, but know by their consequences: the way we reason and what counts as common sense." ³

These beliefs and feelings shape and are shaped by every experience. Our lives can seem like a journey we must suffer through until we drop dead, or we can fill ourselves with the pleasures and narcotics of the world to deaden the pain of life to avoid some of the negative frames.

A third and better option—I think, is to be on a journey called life, and to explore this world through our work and loving relationships. The first thing you need to do for the third option is to begin to live in the present—living in the *now* is the most important step that you can take to make your life more exciting.

Now is the time to change your life and to build relationships—not after work, or tomorrow. Sometimes our work and our lives can be made more painful by living in the past or future, or by just doing what has become comfortable.

Psychotherapist and Reiki Master Teacher, Paula Horan, describes this in her book as something that often takes place:

“Sometimes we just plug our brains into each situation and play out a variation of an old scenario that has proven itself to work in the past. Thus most of us, most of the time, are not experiencing life, we are reacting to life and plugging into old patterns of response.”⁴

Have you experienced this at work? Perhaps the work is often painfully boring, because we are not fully present to enjoy the parts that might be pleasurable. We will never find out, however, if we don't take the first step at re-discovering real work. Now is the time for your first step. Tomorrow may never come, or you may have problems with your health because of job dissatisfaction or stress from your job. No one wants that. Maybe someone who hates you wants you to drop dead on the job, but no decent, sane individual wants that! Wouldn't you agree?

Have you ever seen anyone actually drop dead on a job? A long time ago I was working at a major security guard company at an oil refinery. I will not mention the name of the company or refinery because I don't want to draw attention to them; I just want you to see what can happen there when one man thought that making enough money to pay off his bills was more important than taking care of himself. He was the typical American male—raised to think of himself as the primary provider. His life's mission was to provide for his family.

I was working with him for a while. He was in his 50s and seemed to be in good shape. He had been laid off from a well-paying factory job. The place had decided to relocate and left a whole community jobless. His unemployment had just run out, and he was very far behind in his mortgage. His credit cards were run up as high as they could go. He was in so much debt he thought he would never get out of it.

Around that time Desert Storm, the war, had just started. We all got temporary jobs at the oil refinery working twelve hours a day, seven days a week from 6PM to 6AM. He had finally found a place that would hire him. The work was checking entering trucks and workers for about two hours at the beginning of the shift, and exiting workers and trucks about two hours at the end of the shift. After that, the gate wasn't very busy. Once in a

while, traffic came that needed to be checked. This man—let us call him, Joe, just so he will have a name, was ecstatic regardless of the long hours because he could pay off all of his bills with the overtime that we were making.

There were two guards at each gate, so one could take a nap every so often, if they were careful. That was the way that we did the job, anyway. It wasn't part of the job description, if you know what I mean.

I would do my two hours of work checking in trucks and people. Then, I would listen to talk radio for a couple of hours. Then I would take my nightly walk. The other guard would watch the gate as I entered into the refinery and checked out the Cantina. I would get food from some of the machines sometimes or talk with some of the plant workers.

Sometimes, when I was daring, I would walk all the way through the plant to another gate and talk with the other guards for a while. I would have a big lunch or dinner, whatever you would call it since it was the middle of the night, after I got back. I would listen to the radio a bit, talk with the other guard or lookout while he slept, and then take a little nap myself. I would be wide awake by the time the morning shift change happened. We would check the trucks out again and then I would go home to bed.

Joe would go home and stay up most of the day. Most of his salary was going to pay off debts. He knew this job was temporary, so during the day he scheduled job interviews. Most of the night after checking in trucks he would go to sleep. He would only be awake when one of the shift sergeants made gate checks.

He finally found a job working with the city that would pay him a living wage and give him health benefits. He had also paid off his debts, which was great for him. This would give him a whole new start. He had given notice to the security guard agency and was supposed to start his new job after one more night. I had been assigned to patrol as a roving guard by then, so I wasn't with him.

During his last night, he was asleep when the sergeant came to check the gate. The other guard reached over to shake him awake. He rolled over and fell onto the floor - dead. He had had a heart attack in his sleep, and the other guard hadn't even noticed. This was a major tragedy. Just when things were going to so well, he dropped dead from job stress and all of the long hours. Working from 6 to 6 was grueling, believe me. Without getting sleep during the day it was just about impossible. I ended up working

those hours from November of 1989 to May of 1990. I didn't get sick or drop dead, but the memory of what happened to him still remains with me.

As you read about our job did you notice any difference between my approach to the work and his? Just think about it for a moment. What was the major difference? I made sure that I had fun on the job. I found ways to have a good time. I created a schedule at the job that made the job part of my life, instead of an added burden that I had to endure for twelve hours. I didn't come to the job exhausted and I didn't hate the job as much as he did. I made a life for myself at the job. I even got promoted because of my attitude.

I can't say for sure, but I think that a big part of his death had to do with his being exhausted, and with his attitude. I think that I lived, because of my attitude. Not that I was special. Several people lived through the experience, but I had a lot of fun while doing so, and took less days off than anyone that I can think of.

I was promoted to sergeant and became one of the people driving around checking on other guards because another guy who had an attitude similar to Joe's, another sergeant, ended up falling asleep at the wheel, crashing, and cursing out the supervisor. I'm only telling you this story because I think it's important for you to examine your attitude. How are you at work? Are you angry and snippy to customers or subordinates, because you hate being there. Or angry at your spouse or children when you get home, because you're carrying the attitude that you picked up having to endure being at work? This is a question only you can answer truthfully. If the answer is yes, you have to change something about your attitude or your work, right now. Now is the moment, not tomorrow.

Having a job that you don't like can be one of the worse things in the world. As long as you're making money you don't want to leave because you may not be able to find anything better. You work all the time, so you don't have the strength to go looking for a job, or you can't find one that pays the same. The anger and dread of performing the duties of that job don't only stay at the job, they go home with you and hang over your head like a dark cloud. A lot of vacation time or time off is spent dreading having to go back to the job. Sometimes the horror of the job leads to sleepless nights. The hatred for the job is exacerbated by having to go to work in a state of exhaustion.

I had a job once that I hated. Sometimes I would dream that I was doing it every night, and then I would wake up in the morning and have to do it again. I needed to get rid of my hatred for the job. One way to counter this hatred, which I didn't know back then, is

to take an active stance at discovering where this deep hatred is coming from, and how you can change it.

Joe's hatred came from a memory. He had worked at a factory that paid good wages and benefits. He had worked there for decades and had hoped to retire from that job. Here he was now working at a temporary job, twelve hours a day, and probably not making as much as he was making on regular time before.

He was comparing his present job to his previous job. As long as he focused on how good the previous job had been, he couldn't find any good in the present one. Living in the past made him hate the new job and try to avoid it by sleeping most of the time.

If you have a job that you can't stand, one way to understand why you can't stand it is by looking back to the past for reference. Are you comparing it to something that happened in your past? Once you find out why you hate it and what it reminds you of, you can work through the past and begin to live totally in the present. This will help you expand yourself and your mind so that you can fit in the job that you have now better.

Part of the job dissatisfaction may be connected with identity issues—ideas about who you are. This was the case with Joe. It could be the same with you.

Identity Formation

When we are born our brains are alive with activity. We are at an all time high, when it comes to being able to learn. We don't have that many old patterns of behavior stored up. The synaptic regions of our brains, the parts where our thinking is transmitted, are all on fire with activity all over the cerebral cortex and we are able to take in all kinds of new information and process it. When we are young, we are more creative than anytime in our lives. We learn by seeing, imitating, practicing and by several other complex ways.

As we age patterns and paths begin to develop in our brains. As we think the same thoughts repeatedly, we create comfortable paths like the ones that we create in a field or in a park when we walk over the same places. Our mind can think in other ways, but it's easier to stay in the paths, just like it is easier to walk through the woods in a path. As we get older these paths become more developed and we lose more and more access to the pathways that we don't use. Sometimes the unused pathways grow as thick as a forest, and it takes great effort to hack through them..

As we become the person that we would like to be, many of the pathways close down. We allow them to because we aren't interested in them anymore. Our identities

and personalities have developed at the cost of other abilities associated with those paths. By choosing to hold onto certain characteristics and abilities and choosing to let go of others, we create the part of ourselves that we call the ego.

“The ego is primarily engaged in its own defense and furtherance of its own ambitions. Everything that does not fit in with it must be repressed. The [repressed] elements [are] the shadow.”⁵

This is basically how we become who we are. Very simple, right? What we do, believe, and focus on creates who we are. Some call it Karma, some call it the Cognitive Social Learning perspective of psychology. Whatever it is called, it works the same. We create a central core called the ego. The ego monitors what we accept and don't accept as ourselves to make it in the world. The unaccepted characteristics are pushed down and suppressed, because the ego fears the loss of self if those things are ever allowed to flood back into our psyche. This whole process is all a part of identity formation.

During the time when the ego is selecting and suppressing, on the psychological level we are choosing our personalities and attitudes. We are creating what Carl Jung speaks of as a *shadow* in our subconscious. As we choose certain behaviors and personality traits, we are pushing down contrasting ones into the subconscious. The behaviors we are pushing down can be any type of behaviors—even the desire to learn new things or develop certain skills or traits.

When we are asked to perform a task or adopt an attitude associated with the behaviors and attitudes that we have suppressed, we feel very uncomfortable. We may even become violent. This might even happen if we need to develop a new skill that is only similar to the ones we rejected. In order to rise to such occasions, guess what we need to do? We have to reach back into those deep recesses and draw on what we have been pushing down for years during our identity formation. We don't want that, because it threatens the identity that we worked so hard to create. We don't want those parts of ourselves to be in our personality. We want them dead. We use a lot of time and mental energy throughout our lifetimes to make sure they don't come back.

If we are not aware of the discomfort that comes from having to develop new skills, or where the discomfort comes from, we can feel threatened by a situation and then project our discomfort onto someone or something else. It is important to be aware of

these feelings and why they often plague us. Not knowing makes the effects more damaging and longer lasting.

To really have true control of ourselves as human beings, we need to be aware of that shadow and the thoughts and feelings in it that are controlling us on the subconscious level. When we do, we can choose to behave in the same old patterns or we can decide to work to be expansive, creative individuals, who constantly create new patterns and live more fully and completely. We can reawaken as self-actualized individuals. What would you like to be, a repressed person who is bored about her existence, or a man who wakes up full of excitement because he has the opportunity to take on a new, brighter day?

The man full of excitement sounds better and more daring to me. How about you? It seems quite logical to assume that many of our jobs may be horrible because we're offended by having to develop the traits that we have cast out into the subconscious. We might even hate those traits. This, in turn, makes us hate the job. One cure for this hatred and discomfort is to become aware of what is happening inside. The only way to become aware is by doing the *inner work*.⁶

The inner work means reclaiming our power to choose our paths and to create and recreate our identity. It means reclaiming the parts of ourselves that we've learned to reject so we could fit in and prosper.

As we do the inner work we get rid of the negative messages about us and our abilities. We also gain the power and the awareness to tell the people who try to keep us feeling bad whenever we begin to break free of our conditioning to kiss off.

We start by confronting the negative tapes that were given us when we were very young without defenses. They are the more devastating ones. We picked them up as we were learning to live in a frightening new world, so they are experienced as survival instincts. Some are only feelings and emotions with no verbiage. These tapes are always telling us that we are bad, or that we'll never be good enough or safe enough. They're making us afraid to try anything new because we might fail, which in our society implies weakness, which is understood as being bad. No one wants to be bad.

When we get rid of those tapes, or at least begin to recognize when what they are saying is affecting us, we will begin to become more playful and relaxed. As we let go of other people's ideas about the way we should be and the way the world is, and explore how we really are and how the world really is to us, we learn to stop being afraid of making mistakes. Mistakes become part of our creativity. With creativity and innovation

there are always mistakes. Having a mistake-free life is like living in a big rut. If you do the same thing repeatedly for 80 years of course you're not going to make a mistake.

The inner work sets us free from *brain games*, conditioning and manipulation, and gives us a chance to experience the beauty of the world and ourselves. The Shaolin monks used to describe this process of getting rid of all the negative garbage and coming to our true selves, as looking for gold or jade. They would say that one must work diligently while searching for gold, or jade. One doesn't do it haphazardly, one pans through the water slowly and diligently by carefully shaking off the stones, shaking off the sand and the dirt slowly and diligently, until the gold or jade appears right before our eyes. Where was the gold? Where was the jade? It was always there.

Even so, as we shake off false beliefs and prejudices, maladaptive ways of acting and believing and fears that have no base in reality, the gold and jade that lie at the center of our being will appear right before our eyes. The gold and jade is the true self. Isn't that fascinating? Basically, I'm saying that you can use your job, whether it is enjoyable or horrible, to enter into one of the greatest adventures ever—the discovery of yourself. It can be the abrasive element that you need to wash things away.

As we strip away the identity given us by society or chosen by us in order to fit in easier, we will realize whom we truly are. No one can take that away. You become what is referred to by Maslow as the actualized individual—one who is a choice maker, instead of one driven by the tides around you. You will find then, that you are the love and beauty that you have been seeking all of your life.

You may ask what all this has to do with your job flipping burgers, cleaning carpets, or working in the welfare office? Your job can be the tool that can help you see the parts that you have pressed down, the shadow side. It can help you reclaim those parts of yourself: the ones that you need to survive and prosper in the sometimes hostile world of your job. Your job, the one that makes you sick, literally sometimes, can be like the river or the stream that the Shaolin talk about that helps you wash away that which is common, or ugly and sick, so that you can see the jade and gold. You can actually become the jade and gold that resides within. The growing dislike for the job can be the shaking process, if you do it right.