

St. Benedict's
Guide to Improving
Your Work Life

Twenty-Third
Publications
Sample

St. Benedict's Guide to Improving Your Work Life

WORKPLACE AS **WORTH**PLACE

Michael Rock



NOVALIS

DEDICATION

UIOGD

[*Ut In Omnibus Glorificetur Dei*]

“So that in all things God may be glorified”

*

Over the centuries since the time of Benedict, education has been a primary apostolate of monastics. In fact, it has been said, with only moderate exaggeration, that the monks and nuns taught Europe how to read and write. Where Benedictines have been successful in education, it has been due, not only to their competence, but especially to their ability to provide an atmosphere of respect and concern for students as individuals. And this is communicated as much by example as by precept. Hearing about respect and sensitivity is never enough; it must also be experienced.

—Demetrius Dumm, O.S.B.¹

CONTENTS

Acknowledgements.....	7
Preface.....	8
Introduction: The <i>Worth</i> place Context	11
I: The Core Vision	
1. Work as a Calling: Maturity and Stability – Vision ‘for work’	21
2. Working Together: Work and Community – Vision ‘at work’	28
3. The Golden Rule for the Workplace: The Dignity of Our Colleagues – Practice ‘at work’	36
II: Practice at Work	
4. Enlightened Leadership and Decision Making – The employer	43
5. The Art of Listening: The New Obedience – The employee	51
III: Responding to Symptoms of Disengagement	
6. Openness to Creativity: The Spirit of Curiosity	58
7. The Pursuit of Excellence: Building Worth.....	65
8. Being Present vs. Presenteeism: Attending to vs. Putting in Time ...	72
9. Being True to Self and the Roles We Play: Doing Who We Are	79
10. The Big Picture: Employee Engagement and Company Excellence	89
Reflections on Our Work Life.....	97
Study Guide.....	100
Notes	110
Index	119

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PREFACE

... for some time now we too have reached
that turning point. ...

This time, however, the barbarians are not waiting
beyond the frontiers,
they have already been governing us
for quite some time.

And it is our lack of consciousness of this
that constitutes part of our predicament.

We are not waiting for Godot, but for another –
and doubtless very different – St. Benedict.

—Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*¹

While Alasdair MacIntyre was referring in the above quotation to the “barbarians” in the time of St. Benedict of Nursia (480–547), he also implied that “our predicament” today is just as barbaric and needs the infusion of insight from a *new kind* of St. Benedict. This book is an effort to address that need. My particular approach, as a retired professor of human relations, emotional intelligence and organizational behaviour for over 35 years, is to address the critical importance of personal awareness at work and in life. The challenge is to develop a *worthplace* – a workplace with values, personal dignity and ethical conduct.

The massive problem of workplace disengagement is at the heart of this challenge. Awareness and knowledge of the science of emotional intelligence are critical when it comes to addressing the challenge. The *Rule of Benedict*, written in the sixth century, offers an enlightening way to focus on this challenge and places it into a life-giving context.

This book gathers insights from my teaching, counselling experiences and personal life journey. I argue that we become that which we love, but we also become that which we hate. We *do* who we are. It is possible to build a new and “very different St. Benedict” today, but it will take confronting the barbarian – what Dr. Carl Jung called the Primitive Person – that lies within each of us so we can minimize its projection of blame that we do unto others for its existence.

The comic strip character Pogo put it correctly: “I have met the enemy and it is I.” This book is about the grace and courage and humility we need to realize that the ‘enemy’ – MacIntyre’s “barbarian” – first comes alive inside each one of us. The *Rule of Benedict* becomes a 1,500-year-old guide to being honest with ourselves and with others.

To facilitate this understanding, I have introduced concepts from my work in the theory and practice of emotional intelligence, specifically the scientific research of my friend and colleague Dr. Reuven Bar-On. With the help of the *Rule of Benedict* and insights from teaching and workshop experiences with Dr. Bar-On’s Emotional Intelligence-*Inventory*[™] (or EQ-I[™]), we are better able to address the challenges of employee disengagement: the role of emotions, which is at the heart of this problem, illustrates Benedict’s own awareness of human relations.

My approach follows a conviction I have always held and taught: that *all change begins from the inside out*. To provide an overview, I begin, in the Introduction, by examining the global crisis of workplace disengagement today. I then follow up with key principles and ideas from the *Rule of Benedict*. There we find an interplay and discourse between the ‘individual’ and ‘work.’ When we go to our workplace each day, we do so as individuals. We *do* who we are. The first step is therefore to be conscious of who we are. To be engaged in our work is first of all a challenge to our inner selves – an emotional challenge, but also, as we will see, a spiritual one. Self-actualization is a major part of the journey to consciousness, but its innate tilt is to self-transcendence, the ‘something more’ that beckons us into a future worth going to.

A NOTE ABOUT THE TRANSLATIONS USED

I have used the following translations for any quotes from the *Rule of Benedict*: Timothy Fry, O.S.B. (Ed.), *RB 1980: The Rule of St. Benedict in Latin and English with Notes* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1982); Terrence G. Kardong (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1981); Timothy Fry, O.S.B. (Ed.), *RB 1980: The Rule of St. Benedict in English* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1982).

References to the *Rule of Benedict* are indicated within the text: for example, “P45” stands for Prologue, verse 45, and “RB 3.1” stands for *Rule of Benedict*, chapter 3, verse 1.

INTRODUCTION

THE *WORTHPLACE* CONTEXT

Your work is to discover your work
and then with all your heart to give yourself to it.

—Buddha

Lack of employee engagement in the workplace is an enormous global challenge.¹ At its core, disengagement is an emotional challenge, but it is also a spiritual one. *Spiritual is understood here as the process of living life according to what one sees as ultimately important and meaningful.*²

TODAY'S DISENGAGEMENT CRISIS

Lily Tomlin is credited with saying that “the trouble with the rat race is that even if you win, you’re still a rat.” This prescient insight speaks to the chasing of the almighty dollar and of power and control. It’s just not possible to feel authentically engaged in work or in life if money and power and control are your guides. Such an image of success is toxic to the workplace. Nigel Marsh cynically says that success is working long, hard hours at jobs we hate in order to earn money to buy things we don’t need, in order to impress people we don’t like.³

Employees experience disengagement when their workplaces are lifeless, dry as a desert, empty and barren. The prophet Ezekiel referred to such a condition as “dry bones” (37:1-14). T.S. Eliot said it was like “rat’s feet over broken glass.”⁴ Take Ryan, a toxic senior manager who kept two fish tanks in his office. When someone ‘messed up,’ they had

to take their favourite goldfish from one tank and put it into the other tank, which contained a piranha!⁵

How bad is workplace disengagement? When Gallup uses the term “engaged,” it means employees who work with passion, have a “profound connection” to their organization, and hence drive forward productivity and innovation. Gallup’s 2013 research with 142 countries showed that only 13 percent of employees worldwide were truly engaged in their jobs. In Canada, 76 percent of the workforce is more or less *disengaged* from their work; in the U.S., the figure is 75 percent. The worst is Japan, where 97 percent of workers are disengaged. Such extremes create havoc in the workplace and in people’s personal lives. At best, employees get the work done somehow, but with minimal passion and commitment.

How can you recognize disengagement? Symptoms include *absenteeism* / *presenteeism*. Absenteeism is the physical absence of an employee; presenteeism means the person is present, but in body only, not in mind. Another symptom is *depression*. In 2003, the province of Ontario, Canada, spent \$34 billion on workplace depression-related issues. A fourth symptom is *business ineffectiveness*. A 2013 Gallup State of the American Workplace survey found that actively disengaged employees were costing the U.S. \$450 billion to \$550 billion in lost productivity every year. Such ineffectiveness contributes both to a lack of creativity and to an absence of collegial thinking that can produce new ideas.

The 1927 silent movie *Metropolis*, about a Hades-like workplace, had this intertitle: “The link between the head and the hands is the heart.” Employers have usually taken into account only intellectual factors in their hiring practices (e.g., IQ, academic scores) and are much slower to recognize the significance of emotions. Yet studies tell us it is precisely this oversight that is at the heart of the current disengagement gap. The Corporate Leadership Council report put it bluntly: “engagement ... is driven dominantly by emotional factors.”

Emotion is not a new reality. As early as 1872, Charles Darwin published his conclusion that *emotional awareness and emotional expression play a major role in survival and adaptation*.⁶ In the 20th

century, general intelligence came to be understood as “the capacity of the individual to act purposefully.”⁷ Dr. Reuven Bar-On realized that it is more accurate to refer to this wider construct as *emotional-social intelligence (ESI)*. Daniel Goleman, who has written widely on emotional intelligence, calls ESI “a new yardstick” and a “different way of being smart.”⁸ Most descriptions of EI or ESI include the ability to recognize and understand emotions, express feelings, understand how others feel and relate with them, manage and control emotions and strong feelings, manage change and resolve problems of a personal and interpersonal nature, generate positive affect and be self-motivated. EI has found a widespread application to many diverse situations – not only in personal life, but also in the workplace. Stunning research studies show that ESI fosters people, pride and profits.⁹

EI is also a bridge to the spiritual. St. Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) wrote that “grace builds on nature.” One needs a healthy nature to grow as a person, to experience self-transcendence, to move from being ‘ego-centric’ to being ‘ex-centric’ because we are built for greatness, for ‘something more.’¹⁰ Psychologist Abraham Maslow, at the end of his career, recognized that his widely accepted Hierarchy of Needs model – physiological, safety, love/belonging, esteem, and self-actualization – was incomplete.¹¹ He recognized a still higher motivation: self-transcendence. A ‘something more,’ in other words, was an intrinsic motivator in each of us. Perhaps it can be said that since EI deals with self-awareness and with what is meaningful, it offers a glimpse into the transcendence of the human person. In this way we can understand EI’s place as a bridge to such spiritual phenomena as the inner journey, meaning and significance, wholeness and connectedness, and a sense of purposeful living. Of the many tools that can help us build this bridge to the spiritual, perhaps none can compare with the wisdom of the age-old *Rule of Benedict*.

REVALUING WORK: THE *RULE OF BENEDICT*

Our world today is not unlike the turbulent situation facing Benedict of Nursia (480–547 CE). His wisdom embraces work, life and human emotions; his spirituality provides insight into managing

our own affairs. A missing ingredient when it comes to employee engagement is acknowledging the person doing the work. The prevailing tendency is to emphasize the work itself, thereby neglecting the one who does it. Pope John Paul II wrote that “the basis for determining the value of human work is not primarily the kind of work being done, but the fact that the one who is doing it is a person.” In other words, *who workers are is work's subjective dimension; what they do is its objective aspect.*¹²

One of St. Benedict's enduring values is that he saw both sides: the value of the work, but above all the value of the worker. His contribution is all the more remarkable since his was an era of anarchy – in some ways, not unlike our own: the decline of Roman civilization, the onset of the Dark Ages, a time of conflict for the Church. In the midst of this chaotic situation, Benedict emerged as a true genius – a leader and a beacon of hope who was both deeply spiritual and profoundly human. His background was organizational; his early education was most likely intended to prepare him to become a government employee. However, he gave up his studies because he wanted to move away from the decadence he saw around him. After living for a while in strict solitude in a cave in the valley of Subiaco, Italy, he moved to Monte Cassino, where he built his first monastery. It was there that he wrote his *Rule*: a little gem of organizational genius and a healthy dose of common sense on how to approach and live life's realities.

Benedict fashioned his *Rule* “to establish a school for the Lord's service” (P45). But there is no reason we can't borrow his principles to provide guidance for the modern workplace. His monastery, being a school, was in essence an ongoing workshop with its living, progressive and experiential learning design. Work included prayer, sacred reading and physical work. This image of a school or workshop could be a paradigm for us today. The term “learning organization” is already popular in the business world. Expanding on this image can open up the shift to workplace as worthplace, because such a shift requires true relearning.

The *Rule* begins with one key word and three central principles. The key word is “*Obsculta*”: to listen with the ear of your heart. Being

a realist, Benedict had little time for listening only to make a response; that was arrogance. Listening, whose goal was learning and growing, required something very different: humility as reflected in being oneself, authentic, down to earth. Wholeness was found in the ordinariness of living with awareness and acceptance of human limitations as a form of truth, and thus a necessary springboard to growth.

A first principle was stability (*stabilitas*), best understood as rootedness, or, in the words of the modern saying, “Bloom where you are planted.” Stability means attending to the present moment – as the Benedictine Joan Chittister would say, to live and work *here*, not someplace else. While such a posture could be used to defend the status quo, this was far from Benedict’s thought. Stability asks us to stay *here* and not *there*, to focus on what needs doing *here*, not *there*, but also as the foundation for growth and change.

A second principle deals specifically with change. It is called conversion of life (*conversatio morum*). The idea is not at all static, but requires thoughtful openness and adjusting to the unpredictability of the “letting go/letting come” of daily living, as Goethe succinctly described the process.¹³ For Benedict, that meant allowing one’s behaviour to be shaped continuously by the monastic life, similar to a new employee’s daily ongoing adaptation to the culture and social character of the work environment.

A third principle accompanying rootedness (*stabilitas*) and openness (*conversatio morum*) is obedience (*obœdientia*) – what we could call “deep listening.” Many people today might react when they hear the word ‘obedience’ and think of subservience. This has little to do with the Benedictine concept. Benedict applied it to promptness in listening intently to the moment and to the signs of the times, to what we would call openness to feedback (e.g., 360°) personally and in the workplace. Obedience was a further implication of the *Rule*’s opening word, “*Obsculata*,” to create a sense of openness to getting at the truth about who you really are ‘down *deep*.’

Central also to the *Rule* is its sense of balance, moderation and flexibility. Balance permeates the *Rule*. Obedience is offset by the right of appeal, and seniority by the recognition of the rights of the young.

Hospitality is tempered by provisions that guests should not upset monastic life. Stability has an equal emphasis on openness to change. The constant need to listen is balanced by the recognition of a time to speak (RB 7.56). The context is community, but also recognizing individuals as different. Flexibility is needed to account for different cultures, climates and conflicting interests.

Benedict was similarly farsighted in recognizing the importance of interpersonal relationships. Genuine spirituality embraced the inner dimension, but extended to life's relationships. In community, a monk's mettle was tested, for he came face to face with himself, his relationships, and his own strengths and weaknesses. What today psychologists call 'projection,' or seeing in the other a part of what is also in oneself – whether positive or negative – surfaces very quickly in community life. Benedict's approach was to respect humanity and personal dignity, setting down "nothing harsh, or oppressive" (P46). Patience requires not only caring for oneself, but also caring for the good of others, often their weaknesses, whether in body (sickness) or in behaviour (RB 72.5). Ultimately, however, if implicitly, Benedict's spirituality of community rested on a still higher principle – the notion of respect for the divine presence in each individual and the connectedness to others, to creation and to God that this entailed.

Benedict was adamant that a community have humane leadership. The abbot was not only the leader of the community, but an exemplar for it (RB 2.12). He must learn to manage his own emotions, such as restlessness, feeling troubled, going to extremes, being headstrong, jealous or overtly suspicious. As leader, the abbot had to respect the diversity of individuals, accommodating and adapting himself to each person's character and intelligence, bringing out the best in each individual – a model not unlike that of the servant leader that is often advocated for today's workplace. A leader could never be a one-size-fits-all problem solver. Benedict constantly promoted the spirit of discernment, the ability to recognize the essential in a person or a situation with its implicit sense of contextuality: what is a good decision in one context may not be so in another. Benedict knew that order brought peace, but he recognized that change was a part of life. It was

vital to recognize which of these should have priority. Very critically, Benedict recognized that leadership comes not from omniscience but from a human being who, like everyone else, is wounded.

Consequently, the *Rule of Benedict* is distinguished by being both sensitively personal and shrewdly organizational in its scope. It focuses on how monks should live, their duties and responsibilities, the hierarchy among them and the orderly administration of the monastery.

Benedict was straightforward in crafting leadership and self-management principles for the monks to follow, under the overall leadership of the abbot. But even here, Benedict obviously understands and recognizes the human and emotional dimension of what he is proposing. His flexibility is founded on the principle of subsidiarity: that in an organization, a problem ought to be tackled by the level closest to it, usually the lowest level possible. Much of the responsibility of senior monks would involve facilitation and the channelling of resources, but always with a certain hands-off approach. That allowed every individual to participate in the management of the community, and none is reduced to the status of just being a resource.

Benedict's *Rule* is pervaded by practicality. While an element of asceticism is always present, Benedict's spirituality focuses not on some mystical experience, but on the lived realities of each day. He divided the day into various portions, which is another of his legacies: sufficient hours for sleep; time for prayer; time for reading the Scriptures and spiritual writings; five hours of manual work – whether domestic, craft work, or work in the garden or fields. He offers a balance of prayer, work, and study and rest. The monks were to have clothes suited to the climate; those who were sick or elderly were to have sufficient food and drink. His is a spirituality that, although communitarian, is also eminently personal. There is a sense that life should bring personal well-being. He encourages his monks not to run away because of difficulties, for in following his counsels they will experience an “unspeakable sweetness of love” (P49).

Those familiar with the Benedictine tradition know that its emphasis on hospitality is legendary. Hospitality and worth are integrally linked realities. Every guest, especially one who was poor, was to be

received as Christ (RB 53.15). Benedict writes that when guests show up, monks “should hurry” (*occurratur*) to greet them. Benedictine hospitality clearly reflects personal recognition and human dignity and sees worthiness in the stranger, even when the rest of the culture does not. For the great spiritual writer Henri Nouwen (1932–1996), hospitality meant “primarily the creation of a free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy.”¹⁴ This “free space” is essential to learning and to respecting the learner.

The *Rule* can also be more directly related to today’s workplace. It has established both personal and organizational principles that have endured for centuries. Chapter 48 is simply called “Daily Manual Labour” and begins with the now famous words “Idleness is the enemy of the soul.” Idleness may mean ‘loafing,’ but it has more to do with the notion of availability and with rejecting an “I-don’t-care” attitude – a very real sense of disengagement. In Benedict’s day, work was more than a remedy for idleness. It was an important part of life and one’s calling, as well as being utilitarian and purposeful. Benedict’s approach to work had several key characteristics:

Work has its own value. The instrumentalist attitude of many contemporaries – “I only work for such-and-such an objective” – has no part in Benedict’s thought. Benedict believed in excellence, doing whatever the work was and doing it well. Work has value in and of itself; it gives meaning to the worker. The effort to do a good job, respecting people, places and things – an ethic of diligence, care and respect – is a virtue in itself. Benedict saw work as a vocation, a calling, a part of life. He makes this abundantly clear: “they are then truly monks when they live by the labor of their hands, as did our fathers and the apostles” (RB 48.8).

Work is service. Inherent in work is a deep sense of social responsibility. Monks work to be economically independent and not a burden to others in society. Work has a God- and other-centred purpose; it not only benefits the self but also focuses on acts of charity for the neighbour, welcoming and attending to guests and strangers, not turning them away, and giving alms to those in need (RB 4.25-26). It includes the necessary labour of taking care of the sick and provid-

ing for monks who can no longer work. For Joan Chittister, “In the monastic tradition, work is for giving, not just for gaining [because] other people have a claim on what we do. Work is not a private enterprise. Work is not to enable me to get ahead; the purpose of work is to enable me to get more human and to make my world more just.”¹⁵ Such a vision expresses the humanism, the respect for the individual and the social responsibility that are essential to Benedict. Perhaps nothing today could be so countercultural. To be lazy and irresponsible are signs of “injustice and thievery,” taking “from the people of the earth.”¹⁶ In a Benedictine vision, ecology acknowledges that the earth and its peoples are not here to care for us; we are here to care for them. Work develops us and makes time worthwhile.

Work is community. Benedict teaches us that work is our gift to the world, our social fruitfulness, done in community. Herbert Applebaum, an historian of work, has observed: “The Benedictine system demonstrated how efficiently daily work could be done when it was collectively planned and ordered, when there was cooperation rather than coercion, and when the whole [person] was employed.”¹⁷ Work allows us to focus on something other than ourselves, and in that way draws us away from self-centredness.

Work builds the person. Norvene Vest, a Benedictine oblate and spiritual writer, writes that work is the friend of the soul.¹⁸ She says that the Benedictines remind us with their spirituality that we are missing something; the *Rule* can teach us that within the work itself is something life-giving and necessary to living life well. Work builds a sense of personal worth. Dutch professor Wil Derkse, who writes about Benedictine spirituality, goes so far as to say that the “quality of my work and the condition of my soul are intimately connected. My work expresses how my soul is faring.”¹⁹

Work is prayer. While this phrase is not found in the *Rule*, the Benedictine motto is “Prayer and Work,” with the two activities always conjoined. Benedict wants his monks, in their work, to keep God’s presence – hence, a vision of self-transcendence – always before them. There is always a higher value at work, literally and spiritually.

Work is prophetic. For Benedict, work was the great equalizer, with physical labour acting as an equal obligation for each individual. In its simplicity and its classlessness, Benedict's notion of work offers an ongoing challenge to any society that adores the gods of consumerism, egoism, individualism, efficiency and profit for profit's sake.

It is doubtful that any other approach to work integrates work into the whole of human life as does Benedict's *Rule*, which treats work in such a holistic manner. And within Benedict's context, of course, work being integral to life makes work integral to the spiritual journey. Of its nature, to work well is to be spiritually healthy. This elevates work and endows it with a character of ultimacy, making work purposeful because it is directed toward an ultimate end. This transcendent character reinforces its connectedness. Work is a community effort, but much more than this, since in the end, work involves a responsibility not only to one's immediate neighbour, but to the entire universe – literally, to all that exists. While other approaches to the workplace certainly contain some of these elements, they usually fall far short of Benedict's, which sees work in terms of such genuine majesty.

I: THE CORE VISION

1

WORK AS A CALLING: MATURITY AND STABILITY

[People's unhappiness] arises from one single fact, that they cannot stay quietly in their own chamber.

—Blaise Pascal, *Thoughts in Solitude*

h, how restless we are! Benedict noticed this even in his own day: a person's proclivity to keep moving around. He mentions how "detestable" were the monks called "sarabaites," because without a clear rule they were aimless, "soft as lead" (RB 1.6). We would say today that they 'bent with the wind.' In the 1960s there was a sign that read: "Just don't do something; stand there!" This quasi-Buddhist slogan meant to convey the idea that constant movement did not bring inner peace. Stability did.

Benedict had tremendous insights into human nature. He knew that restlessness decentered a human being. In Jesus' parable of the sower, the seeds that didn't take root didn't have a chance to grow and bear fruit. Today's business lexicon is proud of an employee's ability to "multitask," despite studies showing that this approach negatively affects memory and energy. Benedict would not have known the word, but he was concerned about his monks constantly being on the go, whether mentally, physically, psychologically or spiritually. He had little patience for such dehumanizing effects on life and work. "No focus, no growth," he might have written. At the heart of his *Rule's*

emphasis on stability is his emotional and spiritual insight of rootedness as a basic human need.

The workplace today seems to put emphasis on 'employee flexibility' – often understood by employees as fearing for their jobs unless they agree to be moved or downsized. Still, one Benedictine commentator highlights the shadow side of flexibility – insecurity and the lack of roots. He points out that psychologically, this creates depression, which he describes as “the soul’s protest against this flexibility.”¹ For some people, time – a key factor in stability – has lost meaning. Time is monitored instead by emails and cell phones, by the ticker tape in the lobby of one company where employees knew that the stock market numbers had to be higher at the end of each day. People no longer come to work from an interior zone of rootedness, of being and living who they truly are.

Benedict clearly saw work, like life itself, as a calling. Perhaps to put it even better, he saw life as a calling to which work was integral. At Carl Jung’s hermitage in Böllingen, where he took quiet time for himself, a sign read: “*Vocatus atque non vocatus, Deus aderit.*” That is, “Called or not called, God is present.” Benedict would heartily agree, but he also recognized the other side of the same coin: “Whether you know it or not, you have been called.” He would maintain that every human being has a calling, whether or not it is recognized. Stability gives us both the grounding and the context for living out our call.

When life and work are experienced as calling, something different happens. Being truly connected with ordinariness, the “here and now” or the depths of daily living, has not only an external dimension but an interior one. The inner reassurance that comes from rootedness creates not only this zone of interiority but also the external calm needed to be engaged. Interiority allows a person to put that wonderful sense of gracefulness, both emotionally and spiritually, into all they do. While we would never claim that it provides for total calmness, it does provide a perspective to embrace more easily the ups and downs of ordinary living and working. In the workplace, the intense distractions that affect today’s employees destabilize them, thereby disordering them. If there is anything Benedict wanted, it was order: a time and a

place for everything. Such order allowed for human growth and the maturation process. Short of such order, people would get caught up in the busyness of daily life and its demands rather than first developing an interior listening. The Canadian Catholic philosopher Jean Vanier calls this busyness “feverish activity.”²

Stability is wedded to maturity. It is by having a fixed point of growth (stability) that one is able to mature, since our inner self must keep informing our conscious self in order to stay balanced. A commitment to stability helps us acknowledge on an ongoing basis that all personal change happens inside out (what Benedict called *conversatio morum*). Immaturity can thus be seen as the lack of any inner ordering principle – a person at the mercy of the wind! To forget or disavow the intuition and thus the embrace of an inner life is to begin a hollowing-out process rather than a process of maturation. Irshad Manji, a Canadian journalist and Muslim, quotes a Koran warning that says, “God changes not what is in a people until they change what is in themselves.”³ Understanding work as a spiritual call can come only from such interiority. Our vision must embrace the notion of wholeness. Stability commits us to that connectedness that ties and links us to self, to others and to the wider world around us. For Benedict, engagement and interiority were seen as in a mutual embrace.

Without this interiority, this inner connectedness, work cannot be experienced as *calling*. The process involved is a maturing one, for sure, and is “ex-centric,” a process going beyond a person’s ego concerns to the ‘other.’ If this does not happen, a person stays locked into their own set of preoccupations without concern for what is beyond their immediate circumstances. Individualism then becomes the dominant factor, a world-view of me, myself and I. But true growth and maturity is not all about me. It’s about Benedict’s notion of working “from an attitude of humility,”⁴ his idea of being realistic, down to earth, what today we would call being real, not phony or plastic, or in T.S. Eliot’s word, “hollow.”⁵ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, a French philosopher and Jesuit priest (1881–1955), says it all so well when he writes: “There is an almost sensual longing for communion with others who have a larger vision. The immense fulfillment of the friendship between

those engaged in furthering the evolution of consciousness has a quality impossible to describe.”⁶ This larger consciousness is what the wisdom of Benedict’s *Rule* proposes to us.

Work today is a developmental progression from what Benedict saw as a visible commitment and demonstration of one’s spirituality. Work stemmed from deep-rooted (think *stabilitas*) links to the community, visibly manifesting a dedication to God, honouring God-given talents, serving God and the neighbour to whom they were tied by bonds of love. This awareness of work’s original integrity and purpose is very important to understanding work today as a spiritual calling. The word ‘integrity’ is very deliberately chosen, because in its etymological roots is the mathematical notion of integer, or ‘one,’ suggesting the notions of oneness and wholeness. Thus, to keep work’s integrity for today’s employees is to reaffirm this vision of unity of personhood rooted (*stabilitas*) in their very need to be and become all they were called to be.

Distractions, as we have seen, are the idols that seduce us away from a trusted path in life and affect employees and workplaces globally. Former Benedictine Abbot Christopher Jamison of Worth Abbey in England says that distractions of the mind are also noises inside one’s heart.⁷ Such noises can be constant and deadening to a person. I view these noises and idols as the four Ps: *Persona* (seducing us to believe that image is everything); *Profit* (seducing us to believe that quantity outperforms everything); *Power* (seducing us to believe that control is ultimate); and *Prestige* (seducing us to believe that fame equals significance).⁸ Especially in combination, but even individually, these idols create the context, or social character, so prevalent in today’s *disconnect*: that is, the disengagement of *work* from *worth*.

While the *Rule* contains numerous clues that can help us view work as a calling, the three main anchors that Benedict establishes as grounds for the monastic experience (which I mentioned in the Introduction) are fundamental: *stabilitas* (rootedness), *conversatio morum* (ongoing engagement and openness to change), and *obœdientia* (obedience, understood as the deep and inner art of listening). These three values, of course, are vital not only to the workplace, but

also to families and society at large. Benedict's is a spirituality for life that has stood the test of time because it is founded on the essence of being human. Everything doesn't have to be done at once, but there must be an openness to such energy, to such a spirit, to the possibility of developing hearts of "flesh" rather than of "stone" (Jer. 32:39).

In the same context, it is essential to recognize that Benedict never considered his *Rule* as a set of regulations that one simply adheres to. If that happens, it then loses its "salt" (Matt. 5:13), its flavour, becoming legal rather than holistic. Life today, as Sister Joan Chittister remarks, "is no longer a matter of either accepting destiny or simply following patterns set for us by generations long past. It is now the basis of the spiritual quest, the wholeness of the soul. Now we take ourselves seriously, as well."⁹ In other words, we must have the courage and honesty to "unmask the self to the self."¹⁰ Peter Sellers, who played many comic movie parts, once said: "There used to be a me behind the mask, but I had it surgically removed."¹¹ But he was wrong. There is an enduring 'me' inside each of us! Benedict wanted this 'me' to unfold organically in community for working and for living and wanted people to spend their lifetime making that happen.

A good metaphor to get an image of this inner journey is to think of the time you may have started lessons to play a musical instrument. I remember my grandson at the age of two simply hitting one note continuously. After a while, one's hearing was, to put it mildly, challenged. But as he got older, his parents gave him piano lessons, and music by Chopin started to emerge. What delight! Analogously, in developing a sensitivity and a practice – because it does take practice – to paying attention to one's interiority, there comes the incredible dimension of joy about one's inner world. With time and practice, attentiveness in these ordinary details of daily living becomes a habit.¹² A remarkable quote that is so pertinent to the need for an inner life comes from Warren Buffet, the investment guru and philanthropist: "I insist on a lot of time being spent, almost every day, to just sit and think. That is very uncommon in American business. I read and think. So I do more reading and thinking, and make less impulse decisions than most people in business. I do it because I like this kind of life."¹³ Mahatma Gandhi saw the end results of interiority in even broader terms:

Your beliefs become your thoughts,
 Your thoughts become your words,
 Your words become your actions,
 Your actions become your habits,
 Your habits become your values,
 Your values become your destiny.¹⁴

Developing such interiority is a great challenge. Jung's maxim still bears repeating: "Called or not, God will be there." Even if one is not consciously open to the spiritual, the task for self-development – a spiritual task – will still be there. For those who choose to open themselves to work's spiritual calling, no more poignant intuition could be spoken than that by Paul Valéry, the French poet, essayist and philosopher: "A great silence listens and I hear hope." Benedict's *Rule* opens up the grandeur and joy of a maturational process. Because we have chosen commitment to the process, to the call, work becomes transformed. So does life itself.

In short, practising *stabilitas* or being rooted in inner values will foster alertness to the everyday around us; we will begin to notice what's happening. For Benedict, listening – paying attention and noticing – are fundamental conditions that provide the necessary context for the three values described above to flourish. Little by little, what we notice and value becomes what is of worth to us. What is true generally is true of employees in their workplaces.

Benedict opens his chapter on work with this famous line: "Idleness is the enemy of the soul" (RB 48.1). With his sense of calling, work – even what might be regarded as the lowliest kind of work – and a spiritual life were tied together. The Benedictine saying "*Ora et Labora*," or "Prayer and Work," included three dimensions for the monastic life: (1) prayer, (2) *lectio divina* (reflective reading), and (3) physical work. Transposing the same conditions to a more general setting translates into a similar model: (1) focusing one's attention first on what is most fundamental, (2) pondering the factors going on in life, and (3) doing actual work in a clear and focused manner. Work, given these three dimensions, contains its own "asceticism," or ascetical dimension. It becomes part of a "life in the spirit."

The way forward to experiencing work as a spiritual call starts with true listening. Listening is this deepening experience to our inner selves. When we do begin to listen, we become conscious of those deeper intuitions that life is bringing to us. When it comes to work, we begin to see the outlines and then the more meaningful contents of what life opens us to within the workplace. We learn how important faithfulness is to our intuitions. We start being rooted, and we learn, little by little (*conversatio morum*), to both shape our commitments and allow them to shape us and our vision. Little by little, we also become whole, because we become more of who we are. That's the purpose of the human journey in the first place.

In more concrete terms, as both Blaise Pascal and Warren Buffett remind us, that journey begins in the quiet of our own rooms.

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