



When Working Is Over or, When Working Takes on a Unique Transformation

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“When Working Is Over” is the title that was tentatively suggested to me, but I am offering as an alternative, “When Working Takes on a Unique Transformation.” First of all I want to acknowledge a debt of gratitude to my country and my church (the Lutheran Church in America) for making financially possible the life which my wife and I have been “enjoying” now for almost eleven years, since my retirement from seminary teaching at the age of seventy. Social Security plus the church’s pension and the frugal management of my “faithful and believing spouse” are making possible a comfortable living. We have the best of two worlds, the challenge of a small college town in the winter and the peace and quiet of the country in the summer—all in the incomparable Green Mountains of Vermont. (Those detractors of our country and of the “management bureaucracy” of the church might reconsider as they look forward to their own retirement.)

I. THE DOCTRINE OF VOCATION

The question has been raised whether the so-called doctrine of vocation still applies after retirement and, if not, how it needs to be revised. That depends entirely on how that doctrine is conceived. On my understanding of Luther’s view, I think it needs only proper interpretation and application to our day. The key to Luther’s view, as I understand it, is what he called the *Standort*, the “standing place” in life where a person happens to be by a combination of destiny and freedom (one of the inevitable polarities of all human life: Paul Tillich). Our true “calling” (vocation) is by God’s grace through faith “out of darkness into light,” from not being God’s people to being his chosen people to form the “royal priesthood” of believers (1 Peter 2:9). We are freed then by God’s Word

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of forgiveness and regeneration from all our self-centered “religiosity” and fruitless efforts to achieve our own salvation to put all our energies into the work of the world and the loving service of the neighbor, serving him or her with the gospel and whatever gifts we possess. How we serve our neighbor is then not determined—as it is possible to interpret Luther—within fixed stratifications of society into classes nor by some fantastic call from the sky to some particular profession, but it is determined by the actual situation in which we find ourselves at any given time, our particular gifts of destiny and our application of them, the opportunities as well as

energies that a given situation opens up to us and urges upon us. Then there are indeed certain God-given structures within which one must operate (e.g., sex, the family, the sphere of education, the economic order which must produce and distribute the goods necessary for a human life, the spheres of government, the arts, entertainment, etc.). The various situations of life are then as different as we, the unique individuals, that occupy them, and no two “vocations” are alike, nor are they “once and for all” (like the primary calling, baptism). Thus the “vocations” differ between parent-child, husband-wife, teacher-pupil, ruler-ruled, employer-employee, etc. through all the legitimate (?) occupations of life, in all their ramifications, which contribute to human welfare. This means constant conflicts of obligations and opportunities, and it necessitates daily, thoughtfully and prayerfully considered decisions. For a Christian it means the recognition that our lives as sinners need at all times be covered by forgiveness, since we are and remain sinners and do not just on occasion commit sins, while at other times we can boast of one-hundred percent righteous (?) acts. “Only a good tree brings forth good fruits.”

Now if that is the understanding of “the calling,” then “retirement” simply offers a novel situation in which to live out one’s “calling out of darkness into light” in all the relationships in which, as a retired person, one happens to be. Then there is no pre-fixed pattern which the retiree is called to fall into. The given situation will determine for each individual the pattern of life in retirement as it did so prior to retirement. And then, far from it being a time “when working is over,” it may mean that working will take on a unique and marvelous transformation, although it is by no means excluded that for some it will mean an end of the “working” years and a genuine *Ruhestand*—as the Germans say—a station in life in which they may rest from their labors in peace and tranquility.

II. THE STATUS OF THE RETIRED “ORDAINED” PERSON

Since there has been concern of late on the part of some who want to beef up the status of the “ordained,” a word needs to be said about the status of retired pastors in relation to their ordination. If ordination confers an “indelible character,” however defined, then of course there is no problem in retirement. You can’t eradicate the ineradicable. Once a “priest” always a “priest,” particularly if this means the sole prerogative of offering the sacrifice of the mass and bringing about the transformation of the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ, thus localizing the presence of Christ at a place and time.

However, if ordination is thought of as admitting to the holy office of the public proclamation of the Word and administration of the Sacraments, at the call of the church, then there are said to be difficulties. Nevertheless the resolution seems simple enough. Although I do not presently possess a formal call from the church, the fact remains that I was once ordained to the office of Word and Sacrament. The hands of other holders of the office were laid upon me in bestowal of the gifts of the Spirit necessary for the exercise of the office received in faith, and I became a member in continuity with that group on whom similar hands have been laid. This remains a fact whether I continue to exercise that office or not. The church may at any time, therefore, call upon me to perform the functions of the office without the usual formal call procedures. If I choose not to exercise the office for which I have been found qualified and have been ordained, that is my prerogative. In any case I am still obligated to exercise my priesthood

as one of the priesthood of all believers. Then I remind myself that there is no higher “calling” than that of being a baptized child of God. Since—on Luther’s view at least—all the authority, power and efficacy are in the Word of God, neither the unordained “priest” nor the ordained one can arrogate any authority, power, or efficacy to his or her person. For “we have this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God” (2 Cor 4:7).

The conclusion then is that on this view any ordained person, who has not previously demitted the ordained ministry voluntarily or has not been dismissed from it by the church for cause, may continue to exercise the office to which he or she was ordained, always only at the call of the church, whenever he or she is asked to function publicly. To what degree any given retired person will exercise the functions of the office will, of course, be determined by the given circumstances, the person’s ability and willingness to carry on, as well as the opportunities and needs in the church.

III. GREATER FREEDOM OF CHOICE

It is precisely the greater freedom to choose his or her activities that should characterize the life not only of the retired clergy but of all retired persons. This presupposes, of course, the necessary health, sufficient income and plentiful opportunity for creative work. And that should and could be the case in a world as richly endowed by the Creator as this one.

As a matter of fact, the opportunities and possibilities are even now boundless. “The world is so full of a number of things, I’m sure we should all be as happy as kings” (Robert Louis Stevenson)—on the supposition, of course, that kings can always do as they please and that “happiness” consists in “being busy.” Nevertheless, the point to be made is clear enough. There are a million things to do in a world in which, in spite of the phenomenal advances of the space age and the advancing computer age, the knowledge we have of our universe is only a scratching of the surface. It simply is not true that there are no more worlds left to conquer in a world as disease-ridden as ours, with new and unheard of diseases popping up out of the Pandora’s box. And what of the challenge of the disadvantaged of the world, the unjustly treated and abused, the

hungry, the poor, the naked, the unjustly imprisoned, tortured, the victims of violence, war, etc.? There is no possible “theodicy” that can “justify” God and make this world into the best of all possible worlds. The only theodicy is in the cross of Christ, the suffering, dying, and risen Lord. It is an evil and a demon-ridden world. Therefore, “Choose you this day whom you will serve” (Josh 24:15). This decision must still be made each day also by the retired.

So there is no legitimate reason why anyone, anywhere in this world should be “bored,” fed up with life, or searching for identity, etc.—or even lonely—though “loneliness” is said to be the most common curse of retirement and old age. To be bored would be in violation of one’s vocation, one’s “royal priesthood” as one of the redeemed “people of God.”

IV. A FEW PERSONAL OBSERVATIONS

I shall illustrate from my own life what possibilities and opportunities there can be. The reader will no doubt take this to be proud boasting, and so it is. It is rooted in that “inordinate” love of self which, according to Luther, seeks itself in everything—even in God. Nevertheless, it also may be part of a proper “eucharist,” that is, a grateful song of thanksgiving to the Creator-

Redeemer-Sanctifier God, which is what every life at any age is to be.

First of all, I feel that I am continuing to function as an ordained Lutheran pastor. My wife and I minister together to the Lutheran students at Middlebury College, our “rice Christians,” whom we seduce with home cooking and a leisurely, family environment by way of a change from the hectic, gulped-down cafeteria meals. We have thus formed life-time friendships. They keep us young, and we serve as foster grandparents. Two of our Lutheran college men have entered the ministry of the Lutheran Church in America, and one woman is presently an honor student at the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago. Since there is no Lutheran church in Middlebury, we have periodic services in our home, a small study group during Lent, and whenever we meet we never fail to end up in serious discussion. In the second semester of the 1983-84 school year I shall serve as chaplain for all the students in place of the regular chaplain who will be on a leave of absence.

We attend our own Lutheran church in South Burlington once a month at which time I also teach an adult class. The other Sundays we go “slumming” (as one of the United Church of Christ pastors berated me) in the local churches (UCC, Methodist, Baptist, Episcopalian, Roman Catholic; so far we have not ventured into the fringe sects, of which there is an overabundance). We have learned in so doing to appreciate the truth that the church is “where the Gospel is rightly proclaimed and the Sacraments administered according to the Gospel,” even though rites and ceremonies of human institution differ (Augsburg Confession, Art. VII). We have an active “Addison County Ministerial Association” whose monthly breakfast meetings I attend, where we not only discuss and cooperate in our common social concerns but also engage in biblical-theological discussions. This is the ecumenical church in action at the grass roots. Besides these local involvements, I do occasional supply preaching,

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lecture at conferences, act as consultant, write self-aggrandizing articles and challenge others, review books, answer correspondence, etc.

For my participation in local community affairs, I serve on the advisory boards of “The Addison County Mental Health Association,” the “Elderly Services,” and the “Retired Senior Volunteer Program,” my volunteer work being to serve as a “guardian *ad litem*” in the juvenile court, where the judge comes in the back door in his flannel shirt and dungarees, parks his shotgun in the corner, tells his Golden Retriever to lie down, slings on his black robe, and walks into the courtroom where everyone kowtows to “Your Honor.”

Then both my wife and I have our “hobbies.” We now have retired from tennis to the Lutheran version of “platform tennis”: “Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise.” We skate-dance in the winter and take hikes (on snowshoes if necessary). Besides these things, my phys-ed-teacher wife has us doing calisthenics every morning. We attend some of the cultural events and most of the athletic events at the college where our younger son is the head football and tennis coach. We watch our grandchildren in their high school activities and athletic competition in dramatics, football, field hockey, and basketball. Then there are letters to write, phone calls and visits to make to our older son and his family in Chicago, where he manages a publisher’s representative business throughout the Midwest. In addition, my wife weaves and I do pottery (with my own shop, wheel, and kiln). My offer, which I once made to the Boston LCA Convention (1976), still holds. I will make a delicate lavabo for the high-church persons, a sturdy spittoon for the chancel

for the low-church folk and—for the really dedicated clowns out where the plumbing may leave something to be desired—I will make a serviceable vessel, with only one stipulation: You will have to personally sit for size. So far only one woman said she was considering it, and after due consideration on my part I assured her that I could make a fair estimate.

With all this activity there is time also for contemplation, reminiscing (it's not a sign of senility; it's called "life review"), reading, catching up with some of the classics never read, re-reading favorites by way of contrast with the current best-sellers with their mandatory sex scenes in which they compete with each other for frequency, length, and exquisiteness of orgasm, to say nothing of novelty of position and partner from incest to bestiality. One issue of the *New York Times Book Review* should convince even the most broad-minded that we are a sick culture, still able, however, in its sickness to reach great heights of cultural achievement.

Now a few incidental observations, addressed chiefly to pastors contemplating retirement, but perhaps helpful also to laity facing similar problems.

V. GIVE WAY GRACIOUSLY!

Be ready to give way graciously to the next generation, but not without also giving them the benefit of your years of experience. This is sometimes very hard to do, especially when, in their wide-eyed, cock-sure enthusiasm, you see them making the same mistakes you made when you were their age. All we were waiting for was a few first class funerals to get the old fogies out of our hair, and

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we would bring in the kingdom of God on our flying shirttails. Well, we had quite a few of those first class funerals, and they didn't much help.

I certainly encourage each new generation's enthusiasm when they first discover the wonder and power of the gospel to transform the world, to put an end to the world's gross injustices and bring about the day of universal peace and brotherhood, to unite all the churches into one, unified inclusive structure (i.e., all, except those written off in the first place, the "Jesus People," the weirdo-sects, the "Prots" generally, or whatever). I cringe when I see how blithely some of them distort and dismiss the past—e.g., the way in which the neo-orthodox revival has been misunderstood and dismissed as "pessimistic" and "without hope," only to capitulate to "philosophic" orientations which are basically incompatible with that "strange, new world within the Bible" (cf. 1 Cor 2-3). It seems to me that a little more humility is in order, a deeper appreciation of the heritage of the past in its address to its situation. This means also a greater appreciation of the perennial human situation as described so devastatingly by the now despised "existentialists" with all their *Angst* (anguish). It seems to me that this present lost generation needs to be shocked again into the realization of our "being-unto-death" and our "finite freedom," and so be prepared for that added dimension when we are transformed by the Holy Spirit to "know" that the "wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life, through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom 6:23). Without the hope in "the resurrection of the body and the establishment of the new heaven and the new earth," our more frequent celebrations of the "eucharist" may turn out to be self-centered, sentimental celebrations of a theology of glory rather than of the cross.

It is devastating to me when in retrospect I realize how blind my generation was to the

blatant evils of that day: racism, sexism, ageism, jingoistic patriotism, war-mongering, etc. Now I wonder just what the blind spots are which this present generation has. It presents a problem if your opposition to some blatant evils (such as nuclear war) blinds you to other greater evils, rooted in the fallen human heart.

The older I grow, the more I realize how simple—and for that very reason how “tremendous” (causing you to tremble)—the gospel in its dialectical relation to the law of God really is; how it comes to grips with the “human situation” in its “smallness and greatness” (Pascal-Kierkegaard-Luther-St. Augustine: “Man is a great deep, O Lord; the very hairs of his head are more easily numbered than the thoughts and intents of his heart”); how we are forced back in upon ourselves (the individual before God—Kierkegaard) in the God-human relationship before we get all excited about what happened “beelions and beelions” of years ago and will happen “beelions and beelions” of years from now (shades of Carl Sagan!). The older I get the less sure I get of more and more, and the more firmly I cling to God’s sure word of promise, guaranteed by nothing but a sufferer on the cross who “died for our sins and was raised for our justification.” At the same time, I realize how important it is to be alert to what’s going on in a changing world, to know the world’s “religions,” philosophies, science, poetry, art, and the kinds of lives people live in the various places where they are. It is not enough to “love the Lord Jesus” and be ignorant of the great things the human mind, created in God’s image, has pondered and pro-

duced. It is a “fearful” responsibility and a blessed privilege to be a “called and ordained minister of the church” in any day, and so also today, with the knowledge explosion unable to keep pace with the explosions of the power of the “prince of this world.” And “retirement” does not get you off the hook. You cannot take refuge in the so-called “timeless truths” of which the biblical witness knows nothing. You must strive to hear “the living voice of the gospel” by which alone the church is created and nurtured. As in every profession, you must keep up with the times, or you deserve to be discarded on the junk heap of those who have outlived their usefulness. At the same time, every retired person must be reconciled to the fact that the active leadership in all fields has been turned over to another generation, and that the retired person must now without regret or compunctions play a different but no less important and worthwhile role.

VI. “THE PLIGHT OF THE AGED”

A word now about the so-called “plight of the aged” in a culture accused of “ageism” and lack of respect and concern for its aged. During the time when I worked with the LCA “Advisory Commission on Aging” (which I called a “goosing” commission, whose task was to arouse the church to its responsibilities as well as the aged to theirs), I discovered among others, two things:

1. The overwhelming percentage of the aged are doing very well indeed, thank you! They are living in their own homes and are finding enough to do to keep them “happy.” And, moreover, the so-called generation gap is not between the young and the aged but besets the in-betweens who are too young to be old and too old to be young and are scared spitless. When I take my grandchildren to the ball game there is no generation gap, just as long as I keep feeding them all that “junk” food. But then I get into trouble with their “mom.”

2. I discovered that this must not distract one whit from the 6 to 7 million aged who are

the victims of neglect and the most shameless schemes of exploitation and who need ombudsmen to plead their cause. With the deinstitutionalization of the mentally retarded, without adequate reception into the communities, the plight of the aged, especially, is a national scandal in the richest nation in the world that can't get its priorities straight.

For all that may be said about the majority who are handling their old age and retirement satisfactorily, there remain those who suffer the disabilities of old age, who are lonely because of neglect, loss of spouse, etc. There are the terminally ill, those afflicted with a painful, long-drawn-out process of dying. They need the ministrations which the church alone can give, the ordained clergy as well as the priesthood of all believers. They need the solace of the enfleshed gospel and not the pseudo-comforts of the world's "religiosity."

VII. A FINAL WORD

Now a final word: It is said that the last words most often recorded by pilots when they are shot down in combat or by accident are, "Ah! Shit!" Not a bad commentary on the sudden intrusion of that last and bitter foe who is bound to

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get us all in the end. I frankly confess I do not want to die. I go along with Hemingway who has one of his characters say, "Death is such a dirty trick!" and with Dylan Thomas's "Do not go gentle into that good night, ... Rage, rage against the dying of the light." Why should I want to leave this wonderful earth with all its sensuous delights, my wife and companion of 55 years, my children and children's children, my friends, my unfinished work? I frankly confess also that I by no means am certain that I shall live again once the breath of this life leaves me. I confess that I do not know whether I believe, but I do know to whom to go when I am "offended," to hear again the sure word of promise of the risen Christ, "Because I live, you too shall live" (John 14:19). And when I pray, "Deliver us from evil," I remember Luther's words, "We ask in this inclusive prayer that our heavenly Father would save us from every evil of body and soul, and at our last hour would mercifully take us from this troubled world to himself in heaven" (Small Catechism).

Søren Kierkegaard suffered from indescribable melancholy, as some people are afflicted with cancer. Nevertheless, he sang more sweetly than others not so afflicted about the joy of being a Christian: "He who desires a God-relation and to live always in his presence, has only one task, always to be joyful."

When I think of all the unhappy, disconsolate, suffering people of the world, who am I that I should sing my glad song? But that's how, by God's grace, it is. "O Lord, open thou my lips, and my mouth shall show forth thy praise!"