

DEEP WORK

Spiritual Practice in our Workday World



Jenny Tymms

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For Frank Enoch and Pat Tymms

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Preface

I suspect that we all have a deep obsession that runs like a thread throughout our lives and won't let us go. It may be a question that we wrestle with or a desire that lodges awkwardly in our souls, like sand in an oyster. No matter how often we try to ignore it, it re-emerges as an itch, an irritation, an unsolvable mystery that has captured our hearts and our imaginations.

My life obsession has been born out of the longing for God to become real in the ordinary context of my day-to-day life. In my early years, I turned to writings on prayer and contemplation written within the Catholic tradition, and there were times when I longed to enter the contemplative world of the monastery. But I didn't grow up within this tradition, and I rebelled against the old notion that the 'royal' road to God led away from the world of family and paid employment.

Surely the richness of our monastic spiritual traditions could be woven together with my Protestant, world-facing, actively orientated religious upbringing. Surely it was possible to live a rich, soulful, spirit-filled life right in the very midst of the daily pressures and dilemmas of an ordinary day. I wanted a way of holding together the contemplative and active energies of life – to cultivate depth, purpose and meaning in the hours when I was at work.

In my thirties, I returned to the church of my childhood (which had become the Uniting Church in Australia). I studied the history of Christian spirituality and discovered the many and diverse approaches to Christian faith and practice. I eventually left the practice and teaching of law and studied theology full-time. In 1993 I was ordained as a Minister of the Word of the Uniting Church. But I was not to remain a local congregational minister or become an academic theologian. Instead, I was called to re-enter the workforce in a range of roles that required all the strategic, administrative, and inter-personal skills that I could muster, in what has become an increasingly complex employment environment.

I am grateful for the many conversations with friends, colleagues and fellow workers over the years. They have challenged, nourished and influenced my spiritual life along the way. I would particularly like to mention the support and encouragement I have received while writing this book and working full time. Thank you to my beloved husband Frank, and to Gerda Olafsen, Ian Price, Helen Dick, Craig Hodges and Dorothy Ryan.

Deep Work is a fruit of my persistent longing for a contemplative-active life in the very midst of work. Whether the grains of sand that have irritated this oyster for so long have produced anything resembling pearls – well – I'll leave that for you to decide. For me, the very pursuit of this deep desire has turned into the treasure that I have long sought.

Jenny Tymms
July 2017

Introduction

Jesus said, "I came that you may have life and have it abundantly".
– John 10:10

[T]he great failure is not that of leading a full and vital active life, with all the mistakes and suffering such a life will bring (along with its joys). Instead, the failure is to withdraw fearfully from the place to which one is called, to squander the most precious of all our birthrights – the experience of aliveness itself.
– Parker J. Palmer¹

I'm prepared to contend that the primary location for spiritual formation – for formation-by-resurrection-is in the workplace.
– Eugene H. Peterson²

Who should read this book?

I believe there is a growing thirst in our western contemporary culture for depth, purpose and meaning in our lives. It feels like our world is speeding up. Economic pressures are leading to workloads that are ever-increasing. Our capacity to attend to our inner lives weakens in the face of expanding external demands. We often feel either wound up or worn out. Yet we are aware of our alienation (although sometimes only dimly) even in the midst of our frantic busyness. We do sense our dis-ease.

1 Parker J. Palmer, *The Active Life: Wisdom for Work, Creativity, and Caring* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991) 8.

2 Eugene H. Peterson, *Living the Resurrection: The Risen Christ in Everyday Life* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 2006) 39.

Some of us may attend worship on Sundays and yearn for intimacy with God through the rest of our week, but rarely experience the presence of the Real away from our community of faith, in our workday world.

Others of us may have given up on the Church or have never been part of a faith community. And yet we have somehow been drawn into the orbit of the Divine and sense a kind of holy restlessness in our lives. We're not sure how to orient ourselves towards this Mystery in the mayhem of our jobs. And we doubt our capacity to make any significant difference in our troubled world. The Spirit at work in our own work lives? It doesn't seem possible.

Deep Work: Spiritual Practice in our Workday World has emerged from my life-long desire to discover how God's abundant life can grace our work lives. Four inter-related convictions have grown out of my own work experience and which wend their way through the pages of this book:

- The Holy One is present and active in the whole of our lives: in our paid employment, just as surely as in Sunday worship.
- We are invited into communion with the Real in every aspect of our lives; in our active engagements as well as in dedicated times of prayer and reflection.
- The contemplative and active dimensions of our lives need not be mutually exclusive. Our inner orientation towards God and God's world can connect in profound ways with our actions towards others and with the work that we undertake. Both contemplative and active dimensions of our lives interweave, nourish and inform one another.
- As we respond to the Divine invitation to enter into communion with God, (which for Christians is through the risen Christ) we are drawn by the Spirit into God's own good work. We begin

more consciously to participate in the Creator's deep purposes of reconciliation and renewal that is intended for the whole of creation. God's transforming Presence becomes more active in and through us in all dimensions of our lives – although usually in ways that are imperceptible to us at the time, and always in ways that are beyond our capacity to fully understand.

This book has been written for those who long for a greater depth of aliveness in the hours that they spend in paid employment. It is for those who seek a deeper integration between their inner soul-selves and their outer active work-selves. You may be a Christian wanting to grow more Christ-like in your work hours, or a sceptic who nevertheless seeks greater depth in your spiritual journey and are open to a contemporary Christian's experience. This book is also for ministers and priests whose role is to provide guidance to those members of their faith community who work in paid employment and who also long to make meaningful connections between their Sunday morning faith and their workday world.

How to use this book

Deep Work is framed around the rhythm of a day's work. There are eight chapters beginning with *Waking Up* in the morning and concluding with *Resting and Re-creating* at the end of the day. Each chapter plays with different metaphors and images that relate to different phases of a working day in a shared office or work centre. For example, *Waking Up* is followed by *Heading Out*, *Showing up*, and *Working*. Then we are ready for *Taking Time Out*. The chapter on *Toiling* explores the particularly difficult aspects of our work. As our working hours draw to an end it is time for *Finishing Up and Heading Home*.

Of course, some people don't work in an office, service or business with a fixed place that they commute to and from each day. So, if you work from home or across different sites, or have a job that keeps you on the move, you will need to be adventurous and uncover those themes and images that

apply to your own work rhythm. Some of you may not work from nine to five. If you work night shifts or are on call, you will want to explore themes and metaphors that relate more directly to your own experience.

But, whatever your work context, don't feel you need to read *Deep Work* in a hurry or in the order in which it is presented. Take it slowly. Turn to a chapter that matches the particular part of your day you feel drawn to ponder. The summary at the beginning of each chapter will give you a brief taste of its content. Chew over the words and ideas and think about your own experiences.

Each chapter not only reflects a particular time of day, but has five sub-themes to represent a five-day working week. Each sub-theme explores a different issue in the context of our spiritual lives at work, drawing on a variety of scripture passages, Christian traditions, and contemporary insights. The purpose is to help you reflect deeply on your life by offering fresh ways of understanding the nature of work and the significance of workplace relationships. Take one sub-theme at a time. You may want to explore one each day for a week, or sit with a particular theme for much longer. Feel free to skip over themes and come back to them at another time.

A *practice* is provided at the end of each sub-theme. These Christian disciplines and prayerful practices span both the contemplative and active dimensions of life and invite you to orient yourself more deeply towards God. By offering ways of engaging the 'inner work' of your work I hope you will be helped to recognise those moments of meaning that might otherwise remain hidden within your ordinary day.

A brief comment about the use of the word *practice*. Practice is simply something that we do and keep on doing. We talk about a nursing practice, a legal practice, or an accounting practice, for example. Within the Christian spiritual tradition, it means participating in the life of God. We

live wholeheartedly, making mistakes, seeking and receiving forgiveness, knowing that the rewards usually come in the very living of a committed life itself. Practice has an atmosphere about it. It is the *way* we seek to live. It is not surprising that the early followers of Jesus described their commitment to him and to the God he revealed, as following The Way.

In the context of *Deep Work*, I have also used the word practice in a particular sense. The practices at the end of each theme are intentional disciplines that foster and nourish our desire for spiritual depth. They cultivate within us that open, receptive disposition that enables us to discern the Presence and Ways of God. They shape us into people who joyfully participate in God's compassionate and justice-making work in the world. Indeed, they *become* our experience of meaning and depth.

Speaking of this kind of intention, Eric Maisel, a creativity and writing coach, said that practice is:

a way that you take your existence seriously, one breath at a time, one thought at a time, one moment at a time. It is the daily routine of paying attention where you have intentions. It looks like the silence of deep space filled with the fire of a single star. To put it simply: it is spending a significant amount of time every day focused in one direction.³

Practices need to be enacted to be of benefit. In the spiritual life, reading *about* God is not the same as actively seeking the encounter itself. Yet these practices are not primarily about adding more and more 'things to do' in your life. You are probably already too busy. So, don't try to engage too many of them at once. Nor are they about getting your life together perfectly in order to win your way to God. You have already arrived. Rather, they are suggestions that help to place you in the stream of God's grace.

3 Eric Maisel, *Become a Creativity Coach Now!* (E-book, 2011) location 4424 of 6174.

You will be drawn to some *practices* more than others. Begin with those that awaken your energy. Experiment. Feel free to modify them and make them your own. Later, you can return to those you passed over earlier. It is worth remembering, however, that it is when we explore more challenging possibilities that we are sometimes most profoundly transformed.

At the end of each chapter you will find follow-up resources as well as questions for group sharing and conversation. The Christian spiritual journey is not one that we are expected to take on our own. The Church is the company of fellow travellers, and as Eugene Peterson points out, our spiritual formation takes place in the company of friends and peers:

among men and women like us – puzzled, bewildered, confused, questioning, and even stubbornly doubting friends. And yes, also singing and believing and praying and obeying friends.⁴

So why not start up a small group in your church or with interested friends in your workplace. Reflect on the ‘deep work’ of your work together.

The encouragement throughout *Deep Work* is to continue to engage with the spiritual dimensions of your day-to-day employment even when your work is hard and you wish you were doing something else. But there may come a time when you confront the question of leaving (through your own choice or otherwise). In the postscript at the end of *Deep Work* I offer two *practices* to help you on your way.

4 Eugene H. Peterson, *Living the Resurrection*, 95-96.



Chapter one: Waking up

In the morning, while it was still very dark, Jesus got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed.

– Mark 1: 35

This is where we begin: we wake up one workday morning and recognise the chasm between our desire for a deeper, richer life oriented to God, and the reality of our day-to-day work lives. It is time to face up to who we are and acknowledge our true predicament. Time to wake up to what it means to be loved and to Whom we truly belong. Here we start out anew, learning (and relearning) how to trust the presence of the Divine in our ordinary lives and so encounter the extraordinary wonder of life itself. We rise from sleep and begin our apprenticeship to the One who calls us into a bold, graced, adventurous life characterised by both heart-ache and joy.

1. Waking up to our predicament

You know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep.

– Romans 13:11

Spirituality means waking up. Most people, even though they don't know it, are asleep.

– Anthony de Mello⁵

< Predicament >

impasse, fix, hole, crisis, dilemma, quagmire, mess, corner, plight.

It's Monday morning and the alarm goes off – the beginning of a new working week. How do you feel? I mean *really* feel?

One morning I woke up and realised that I was angry. Angry that my work-life felt too difficult. My job was more pressured and more unsatisfying than I wanted it to be. I woke up to the horrible realisation that I was angry with God whose presence I sometimes felt in the midst of a moving sermon on Sunday, or when I looked out across the hills on the way home from work, but who seemed almost entirely absent during the hours of nine to five.

Of course, there were parts of my work that I enjoyed and I had work colleagues whose company I appreciated. But when I stopped to ask myself what I really felt about my life in general and my job in particular, it dawned on me that I felt deeply ambivalent. It felt good to be out and about in the world doing something useful. But I also felt frustrated with a spiritual life that functioned more like a private hobby than a whole-of-life orientation. I felt ashamed by how easily I abandoned what really mattered as I became swept along by the busy expectations of others. I was tired of longing for a God who rarely seemed to show up. And I was cranky with the work itself.

5 Anthony de Mello, *Awareness* (London: Fount Paperbacks, 1997) 5.

Why didn't it feel more meaningful, more creative, more often?

If 'spirituality' means waking up, then it may come like the sound of an alarm clock – jolting us out of the unconsciousness of sleep and making us uncomfortably aware of our real predicament.

Time to start looking at what is going on in our lives.

And yet it's not all bad news. Waking up is stepping into a transformed way of encountering ourselves and our world. When we wake up we stop sleep-walking through life. We discover that the world beyond our front door is both more enchanting and more heartbreaking than we had previously imagined. We are ushered into the divine dimensions of life where the graced presence of God, and even our sense of God's stark absence, gives us courage to begin the journey of integrating our inner and outer lives. We grow more and more aware that we are being issued with a personal invitation. It is an invitation to embrace the particularity of our own life and to participate willingly in the life-long adventure of loving and mending this precious world, including through our work.

So, what alarm bell is waking you up? Is it the dissonance between how you feel about yourself in the morning and who you pretend to be at work? Is the jangling so loud that it makes everything sound off-key? Or perhaps it is a sense of frustration, or a longing for 'something more' that is no longer satisfied by the usual accumulation of things, or assuaged by pay-rises, promotions or novel experiences? Or maybe your awakening has burst upon you disguised as the unwelcome gift of suffering when your restlessness or boredom or anxiety can no longer be held at bay, and your body is betraying you with unexpected symptoms that sap your energy or signal an injury or illness?

Deep work begins when we pay attention to the wake-up call. It begins when we stop running away, stop covering over, stop pretending to ourselves. In the spiritual life, there is a choice to be made. We can stay asleep and

continue to deny what is really going on. Or we can pluck up the courage to begin to name as best we can, the complexities, the ambiguities, the unresolved tensions, the secrets and the pain of our complex lives. Life is difficult and when we face up to this profound truth and begin to explore this honestly for ourselves, our journey towards real life begins.

In the Christian tradition, the wake-up call is often first experienced as an invitation to confession. 'Confession' means to admit, acknowledge, bring out into the open, affirm, or declare. It is an invitation to recognise where we have gone astray or where our lives are 'missing the mark.' It is also helpful to understand confession in a broader sense. It includes the painful practice of acknowledging to ourselves and before God when we feel empty or cornered or drowning. It is the willingness to name the contexts in which we feel ashamed, captive, overwhelmed, out of control or in too much control. It is acknowledging when we feel anxious, greedy, angry, bored or afraid.

In the New Testament Gospel of Luke, Jesus tells the story of a younger son who demands his share of his inheritance while his father is still alive, travels to a far country, and then proceeds to squander all that he has. When eventually nothing is left, the younger son hires himself out as a labourer. It is a time of drought and sometimes he is so hungry that he feels he could eat the food he is feeding to the pigs. But one day he wakes up to the harsh reality of his situation. He wakes up to himself and his circumstances and decides to turn around and head back home.⁶

This story is just as much about an inner awakening as it is about hitting an economic or social rock bottom. Although our external circumstances will often be the alarm bell that wakes us up, it is only when our inner awareness of our deep predicament catches up with these outer events that we really come to our senses and turn towards our true home. The trouble is that we live such divided lives!

6 Luke 15:11-19.

Parker J Palmer in *A Hidden Wholeness* suggests that this is the heart of our spiritual predicament: we separate our inner lives from our outer lives. Indeed, we live so much of the time as if we had no inner lives that we become separated from God. We become alienated from the truth source or the Spirit within.⁷ In this way we are like the younger son in the story of Luke. We think we are gaining all the freedom in the world when we take off with our inheritance to make our own way in life. It is only much later, when we become conscious of what is really happening to us, that we realise that we have been squandering the spiritual riches we have been given. We have separated ourselves from our true selves and from our true home in God, and now find ourselves running on empty.

One of the most helpful foundational spiritual practices that I have used over the past twenty years is a form of journaling or writing practice that relies on non-stop free-hand writing for a fixed number of pages or for a set period of time. Such a practice invites us to become friends with our inner life. It helps us to become familiar with the ways we think and feel, with the mixed motives that shape our behaviours and the deep dilemmas we face. We begin to see the little subterfuges we play on ourselves.

I've discovered that through this form of unedited writing the soulful self will sometimes come out of hiding, expressing herself through unexpected metaphors and images, emerging in the midst of messiness rather than through clearly constructed logical thought. Images and tricks of the tongue (or pen), like our dreams, arise as if from nowhere, opening up rich, fresh insights about ourselves.

Over the years, I have experimented with a number of different ways of approaching this practice. Sometimes I begin with a trigger sentence like: "I'm feeling ...". Sometimes in the middle of writing when I catch myself floating too safely along the surface, I prompt myself by writing: "What I really want to say is....". Sometimes I address my writing directly to God.

⁷ Parker J. Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward An Undivided Life* (San Francisco: Josse-Bass, 2004) Chapter 1.

Sometimes I don't.

The key to this practice is to just keep writing. The last page or the last five minutes will often turn out to be the most insightful, so it is important not to stop before the end, even if it feels like there is nothing left to say.

We can destroy pages we don't want anyone else to see. Knowing that we have this freedom helps us to name our most difficult feelings and explore experiences that are hard to face. Writing in this way becomes a form of confession.

Practice: free-writing

Set aside twenty minutes, or allocate a fixed number of pages to complete on a regular basis and just write. I've found that the best time is first thing in the morning, but you should explore what works for you.

Don't expect anything dramatic to emerge or for new insights to leap out every time. This is waking up to your life, warts and all, boredom and excitement, resentments and aspirations. Becoming acquainted with yourself is like the flowering of an awkward friendship. Staying present with an attitude of friendly, forgiving curiosity is what you will be seeking to cultivate. If you are angry, say so. If you grow tearful as you write, cry. You will be surprised at how some dimensions of your life's predicaments deepen or sharpen, while others come and go.

Don't assume you must act on anything that emerges. You may find yourself naming your emptiness and wanting to fill it with additional work as your day unfolds. Instead, try simply sitting with the desire. The next morning you may find yourself writing about the ways you ran away from your sense of emptiness during the previous day by filling it with busyness! Most important of all, be kind to yourself. Self-hatred is one of the biggest barriers to confession.