

WORKING DISCIPLESHIP

The Inter-connectness of existence

Read **Interbeing** [Text below.]

Note: This is a meditation by Dr George Bebawi, an Egyptian-born half-Jewish Christian theologian, currently teaching in the USA.

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(You may wish to place a piece of paper on a table in the centre of the group, as a focus for the meditation)

If you are a poet, you will see clearly that there is a cloud floating in this sheet of paper. Without a cloud, there will be no rain; without rain, the trees cannot grow; and without trees, we cannot make paper. The cloud is essential for the paper to exist. If the cloud is not here, the sheet of paper cannot be here either. So we can say that the cloud and the paper inter-are. 'Interbeing' is a word that is not in the dictionary yet, but if we combine the prefix 'inter-' with the verb 'to be', we have a new verb, inter-be. Without the cloud, we cannot have paper, so we can say that the cloud and the sheet of paper inter-are.

If we look into this sheet of paper even more deeply we can see the sunshine in it. If the sunshine is not there, the forest cannot grow. In fact, nothing can grow. Even we cannot grow without sunshine. And so, we know that the sunshine is also in this sheet of paper. The paper and the sunshine inter-are. And if we continue to look, we can see the logger who cut the tree and brought it to the mill to be transformed into paper. And we see the wheat. We know that the logger cannot exist without his daily bread, and therefore the wheat that became his bread is also in this sheet of paper. And the logger's father and mother are in it too. When we look in this way, we see that without all of these things, this sheet of paper cannot exist.

Looking even more deeply, we can see we are in it too. This is not difficult to see, because when we look at a sheet of paper, the sheet of paper is part of our perception. Your mind is in here and mine is also. So we can say that everything is in here with this sheet of paper. You cannot point out one thing that is not here—time, space, the earth, the rain, the minerals in the soil, the sunshine, the cloud, the river, the heat. Everything co-exists with this sheet of paper. This is why I think the word inter-be should be in the dictionary. 'To be' is to inter-be. You cannot just be by yourself alone. You have to inter-be with every other thing. This sheet of paper is, because everything else is.

Suppose we try to return one of the elements to its source. Suppose we return the sunshine to the sun. Do you think that this sheet of paper will be possible? No, without sunshine nothing can be. And if we return the logger to his mother, then we have no sheet of paper either. The fact is that this sheet of paper is made up only of 'non-paper elements'. And if we return these non-paper elements to their sources, then there can be no paper at all. Without 'non-paper elements', like mind, logger, sunshine and so on, there will be no paper. As thin as this sheet of paper is, it contains everything in the universe in it.

For discussion:

Is its message too idealistic or is it – actually - true?

If it is true what are its implications for how we work and live together?

Consider the two poems below by D.H. Lawrence [1888-1933],

'Work' and 'What is he?'

Are they fair in their comments about absorption in work and the meaning of work in our sense of identity?

WORK (D.H.Lawrence)

There is no point in work
unless it absorbs you
like an absorbing game.
If it doesn't absorb you
if it's never any fun,
don't do it.

When a man goes out into his work
he is alive like a tree in spring,
he is living, not merely working.

When the Hindus weave thin wool into long, long lengths
of stuff with their thin dark hands and their wide dark eyes and
their still souls absorbed
they are like slender trees putting forth leaves, a long
white web of living leaf, the tissue they weave,
and they clothe themselves in white as a tree clothes
itself in its own foliage.

As with cloth, so with house, ships, shoes, wagons or
cups or loaves, men might put them forth as a snail its shell, as a bird that
leans its breast against its nest, to make it round,
as the turnip models his round root, as the bush makes
flowers and gooseberries,
putting them forth, not manufacturing them,
and cities might be as once they were, bowers grown out
from the busy bodies of people.

And so it will be again, men will smash the machines.

And last, for the sake of clothing himself in his own
leaf-like cloth

tissued from his life,

and dwelling in his own bowery house, like a beaver's
nibbled mansion

and drinking from cups that came off his fingers like
flowers off their five-fold stem,

he will cancel the machines we have got.

For discussion

Is the message of this poem backward looking and otherworldly or does it have a real point?

What might any supposed 'real point' here contribute to a Christian understanding of daily work?

[This concerns the delicate area of work and fulfilment. Relate, perhaps, to the blessing and curse themes of work in Genesis 1-3, (see Additional study resources) and to creativity and purpose today and the possible role of the church in giving meaning and shape to work, non-work or tedium in today's world.]

WHAT IS HE? (D. H. Lawrence)

What is he?

- A man, of course.

Yes, but what does he do?

- He lives and is a man.

Oh quite! But he must work. He must have a job of some sort.

-Why?

Because obviously he's not one of the leisured classes.

- I don't know. He has lots of leisure. And he makes quite beautiful chairs. -

There you are then! He's a cabinet maker.

- No no!

Anyhow a carpenter and joiner.

- Not at all.

But you said so.

- What did I say?

That he made chairs, and was a joiner and carpenter.

- I said he made chairs, but I did not say he was a carpenter.

All right then, he's just an amateur.

- Perhaps! Would you say a thrush was a professional flautist, or just an amateur? -

I'd say it was just a bird.

- And I say he is just a man.

All right! You always did quibble.

For Discussion

Are we merely what we do?

[The aim here is to examine how much our sense of self and of self-worth depends on our occupation (if we have one) and the possible reasons for this. 'Who do you think you are? What do you think you are? etc.]