

Working When You're Not

The business of life between losing and finding a job

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Deep breath

Have you just lost a job? Have you been looking for several weeks (or months) for a new one?

Wherever you are in this process, let me ask you to pause for a moment and take a deep breath. I'll wait.

Now, take another couple of deep breaths. In, out. In, out.

OK.

Breathing is important because it (1) calms us; and (2) proves that we're still alive. There's a third gift connected with breathing, available to those whose lives lean toward God: it reminds us of the Spirit, who is described as not only wind, but also breath. God breathes, we can recall when we draw air into our lungs, and when God breathes, all sorts of good happens.

When a job ends, we can panic, or clench up—and if that happens, we stop breathing, or draw only small sips of air. Exactly what we need in such times—oxygen so that our brains function, so that our blood moves—we cut off. We tighten, get small, hunker down.

So breathe.

And as you breathe, remember that while some things have changed, others haven't. For instance, God hasn't left the building. There are still some people who love you.

Breathe.

Because here, in this place that can or will look desolate, there is work to do. You may not receive an income for it; it may not advance your career in any predictable way—but it is work all the same, as you reflect on what occurred, figure out how to navigate the days ahead, and prepare for what's next. And to do this work, you need to

breathe.

Twenty years from today

When you look back on this episode in your life, how will you remember it?

Were you courageous? Fearful?

Were you overwhelmed by the past or the future? Did you notice what was happening around you in the moment?

Did you discover a new interest? Make a new friend?

Were you kind to yourself? Were you hard on yourself?

Looking back, would you go through it again if you had the choice?

A lot of the story about this time is yours to write.

The elephant in the foyer

When you do get an interview, or an opportunity to talk with someone who might be able to move the chains a bit, it's possible that you will give vent to what's bubbling inside you—that the wrongs you've been done, the ways you've been sidelined, the hopes you've been pinning, the queues in which you've been standing, the insecurity you've been feeling, the boredom of endless days without meaningful activity, the anger at all sorts of stuff—all that will boil over in the course of this conversation.

Don't let that happen.

Keep that elephant in the foyer; don't let it walk into the room with you and your prospective boss. In that place, with that person, it is a new day, and you are interacting with someone who does not know—and does not need to know—the anguish you carry because of what happened somewhere else.

Start fresh. Maybe, start over. But don't dig into the past and pull out that bag of peanuts. Because once you open it, the mess just gets bigger.

Thunder Mountain

When you are looking, hoping, waiting, some days crawl slower than a tortoise. You're watching the clock, checking email every few minutes for some change, calculating how long before lunch.

Other days hurtle along like they're shot out of a gun and you can hardly keep up with the requests for information, the filling out of applications, the breathless calls from friends who just heard about something that would be perfect for you.

Which of these is more common? Which more accurately reflects life as you know it? Which do you prefer?

And what if it's not a matter of either/or, but both/and? Meaning, that slow and fast, anticipation and activity, rattling around and falling headlong out of control are all part of the reality in this in-between time. It's like you're living in an amusement park, stuck on the roller coaster. One moment you're climbing, slowly, oh so slowly. The next, you're dropped off a cliff, arms up, screaming, all smiles.

Bear in mind that people pay money, wait hours for, and gladly choose this sort of experience.

The gallery

Are you hearing voices?

You know what I mean: words, phrases, accusations laid against you by people who knew or know you. Those who feel a need to speak into your life, but who bring words that erode confidence and gnaw at your soul. *Those* voices.

Me, too.

Some speak from the distant past. I hail from a line of nonsense Swiss and Germans (pictures of ancestors collected and catalogued by my brother show not a jester among them) who labored diligently and, according to stories passed down, wanted the same from those around them. If we had a family crest, *Work Hard* would be the motto.

Others are more recent. In my early years of church work, for instance, a few parishioners added criticism and downright meanness to the *Do more!* I inherited. It was *The Muppets'* Statler and Waldorf without the comedy, and these hecklers gave me a playlist that blares out more often than I'd like.

Thankfully, there have been other voices, too. Friends, mentors, acquaintances, and even a number of relatives have offered kind words and humor often and at key moments.

Who speaks to/yells at you? To whom do you listen? What voices matter?

We have something to say about who sits in the balcony of our hearts and minds. We can reserve seats for cantankerous Muppets, and maybe figure out some way of dealing with their taunts and jeers. But what if instead we assemble a crowd like the one at the end of *Rudy*, when young Sam-

wise Gamgee breaks through the offensive line to sack the QB? Schmaltzy, sure—but if you're surrounded by peeps like his, get ready for a pretty good run.

The way you tell it

I lost my job...

or

During this time between jobs, I've been thinking carefully about my strengths, interests, and objectives. I'm honing a skill that hasn't yet received the time it deserved. I'm recovering from a season of significant stress. I'm checking possibilities, following leads, interacting with a wide and generous network. I'm praying for peace, clarity, and patience—and remembering the amazing ways God has come through. And while I stumble over this one occasionally, I'm trying to see each day as a gift.

Both descriptions are true. Each leads to a different place.

Where are you going?