

Re-inventing Work: An Interview with Matthew Fox by Leslee Goodman

An Episcopalian priest and theologian, Matthew Fox began his career as a member of the Dominican Order of the Catholic Church but was expelled in 1993 by Cardinal Ratzinger, who later became Pope Benedict XVI. Among Fox's teachings the Catholic hierarchy found most objectionable was his belief in "original blessing," which became the title of one of his most popular books. The concept was in direct contravention of the Roman Catholic doctrine that people are born into "original sin." Fox was also criticized for his embrace of the divine feminine and his acceptance of homosexuality.

An early and influential proponent of "Creation Spirituality," which recognizes the Divine in all creation and all creation in the Divine, Fox draws inspiration from the Catholic mystics such as Hildegard of Bingen, Thomas Aquinas, Saint Francis of Assisi, and especially Meister Eckhart, about whom he has written three books, including his most recent, *Meister Eckhart: A Mystic-Warrior for our Times*. Creation Spirituality also embraces other spiritual traditions, including Buddhism, Judaism, Sufism, and Native American spirituality. In addition to drawing inspiration from the mystics—whom he calls "ecstatic lovers"—Fox is also a champion of the prophetic tradition. Prophets, he says, are the spiritual warriors, calling attention to cries for justice. It is his outspoken activism on behalf of justice that has earned Fox the label "radical," a term that doesn't bother him, since it comes from the Latin word for "root," the same as "radish." He fully admits to a desire to "go deep" and to call people to return to the roots of their spiritual traditions—which are love, kindness, joy, reverence, and awe, Fox believes.

Fox is the author of more than thirty books, including *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ*, *Original Blessing*, *Creation Spirituality*, *The Hidden Spirituality of Men*, *Occupy Spirituality*, and most relevant to this month's theme, *The Reinvention of Work*. He spoke with *The MOON* at length by phone. — Leslee Goodman

The MOON: What is the difference between "a job" and "work"?

Fox: Work is your calling; your purpose; what you've come here to do in this lifetime. A job is something we do to pay our bills. The ideal job combines the two—enabling you to get paid to fulfill your calling. Sometimes, though, you have to settle for a job to pay your rent—at least temporarily—and fulfill your purpose in your off-work hours.

It's important to know the difference because I think that a lot of people's dissatisfaction with their jobs eats away at their real work if they don't realize they can do both. Joy is the sign of real work: the joy that you derive from doing it and the joy that others derive from the result. If the joy is missing, it's not your work; it's a job. We have a right to joy in our work. In writing *The Reinvention of Work* I researched all of the world's great spiritual traditions to see what they said about work. They have a lot to say about it and they agree on this and many other principles of work—that joy is integral to it.

The Buddhists also say “Do no harm,” so we also have to ask ourselves that question: Is our work doing any harm to ourselves, to others, to the environment, or to future generations? If it is, what can we do to mitigate it? There’s often a shadow side to the work that we do, and as with all shadows, it’s important that we acknowledge and confront that shadow.

The MOON: You’ve called the job crisis a spiritual crisis. Why?

Fox: Because people who don’t have work feel very bad about themselves. They can’t give back to the community. They feel useless; they can’t take care of their families; they don’t have a way to participate in the life of their society. We all want to give back to the community and feel good about ourselves, which is why whenever there are periods of high unemployment, we also find high incidences of drug abuse, alcoholism, depression and anger, which gets expressed as domestic violence and divorce. Kids get beaten and end up on the streets, so we have homelessness and crime. Joblessness can even result in suicide. Human beings need work for their spiritual benefit and to be able to give back to the community.

The MOON: You’ve also said that employment can create a spiritual crisis. Why?

Fox: Because people often get wounded at work. The great British economist E.F. Schumacher noted that we have insurance for people who get physically damaged at work, but not for those who get spiritually damaged. When a work situation is difficult for us, when we have to deny some aspect of ourselves to perform it, we often come home and numb ourselves with television, alcohol, or fall for other addictions to cover up the pain and emptiness in our hearts from a work situation that does not return joy.

The MOON: How did we get to this situation, where there aren’t enough jobs to employ everyone and the jobs that are available are demoralizing or debilitating for those who have them?

Fox: It’s obvious that the shenanigans on Wall Street brought about the collapse of the economic system seven years ago and put a lot of people out of work and wiped out their savings accounts, pensions, and financial security. Of course it was Main Street that bailed out Wall Street; taxpayers paid for these enormous loans to the banks and their insurers. Although a few laws have been put in place to curb the speculation of Wall Street, by and large nothing substantial has really changed. Wall Street is doing its thing, while Main Street remains struggling. There are a lot of people who have ceased even to look for employment, because unemployment was so overwhelming. And that’s just in the United States. Worldwide, the unemployment—or under-employment—situation is even more volatile, leaving entire generations hopeless and sparking unrest, such as that which touched off the Arab Spring.

Here in the U.S., a lot of young people have left the economic system as we know it and taken lessons from this debacle that there is no security in the jobs that being offered by corporate America. They’re adopting new values: living more simply by living in a community with others, which is much cheaper. They’re only taking jobs that they believe in, that match their values, or else they’re just taking part-time work so that they have time for activities that feed their spirit. They’re also postponing marriage and having children. They’re learning to take time for conviviality and shared meals, growing a garden, political organizing or community activities, spiritual practices, and artistic pursuits. This is all quite unrecorded—it’s taking place below the awareness of the

media—but I find that a lot of young adults are letting the current economic system go without them.

Of course, other people, like David Korten, are working on the real solution—an economic system that will benefit everyone in the world—not just the two-leggeds, but the animals, the forests, the oceans, and the land itself. That's really the only long-term solution, a new economics.

The MOON: And what would that economic system look like?

Fox: It would take into account not just something called Gross National Product (GNP), or profits and loss; it would also take into account ecology and community and the generations who come after us—what are the costs and benefits to these? We can't just "externalize" these costs and say they don't matter. Economists and corporate planners might not count them, but in the real world, they matter. Will future generations have a flourishing planet, or not? Will we have clean water to drink, and air to breathe, or not? Our present system has blinders. It's completely anthropocentric—it's only about humans, the stock market and how much money I have in the bank. Even with this narrow focus, only some humans matter. The signs are all around us that this system is not sustainable; it's bound to fail. It failed seven years ago and it's on a course for failure again.

It's interesting that the Pope has spoken out on these things in very forceful language. He's called our present economic system "savage capitalism" and a "new idolatry of money" that ignores the plight of the unemployed billions in the world.

The MOON: I agree with what you're saying, and yet I don't see steps being taken to create a new kind of economy on any kind of national, or global, scale.

Fox: Well, as I say, what I see is young people just doing it, without asking for any official support, or daddy's permission. They can't afford to live alone; they don't want to go back and live with their parents; so they're finding or creating opportunities where they can to live in communities. Of course where we should be seeing support is in the media. Why aren't thinkers like David Korten on talk shows more often? Instead, we see the same tired old men we've been watching for twenty years or more, and whose ideas, by and large, are the reason we're in our current situation. Their ideas are of the past. It's ridiculous that the media are so ignorant, or purposefully ignorant, and unwilling to bring new thinkers in front of the television camera.

And why isn't President Obama bringing people like David Korten to advise the Treasury Department, the Federal Reserve, and so forth? It seems to me that they've been doing nothing but trying to put a Band-Aid on Wall Street for eight years, and an awful lot of people are suffering in the meantime. There are other thinkers in other countries, too. For example, Serge Latouche, a French emeritus professor in economics at the University of Paris, is a proponent of what they call the "degrowth movement," which is catching on as a grassroots movement in France, Italy, Spain, Belgium, and elsewhere. Again, it's a movement about simplifying lifestyle. Proponents don't associate degrowth with sacrifice or a decrease in well-being; quite the contrary. Reducing consumption enables people to work less, consume less, and maximize their happiness through non-consumptive means—such as art, music, family, culture and community. You see, we've reduced economics to consumerism, but a new style every year doesn't necessarily make people happy. Or at least, not for long, because you can never get enough of that which doesn't satisfy.

The MOON: We're still being told that growth is the solution to our economic crisis. "A rising tide will lift all boats," and so on. And indeed, growth is essential if our economy is based on debt. Economic growth is what supplies the surplus that enables us to pay the debt. But we live on a finite planet.

Fox: Exactly. And that's exactly Latouche's argument: the planet is finite. The question is not about infinite amounts of growth, but how to live within the resources of a finite planet. David Korten also speaks to this. When you consider that 70 percent of the American economy runs on consumerism—on consumers buying goods and services—I always thought that the crash of 2008 was an opportunity to move beyond consumerism to the more basic questions about meeting human needs. If we could cut back the percentage of the American economy based on consumerism to, say, 35 percent, it would free up nearly 40 percent to devote to human needs. That would be a far more sustainable situation and create far less division between haves and have-nots, along with far less depression and anger as a result of unemployment.

Another aspect of the problem is that many people are over-employed, in the sense that they're addicted to their work; they're workaholics. They're not present for other aspects of their lives. So there's an opportunity to find middle ground here. We could assist one another to lead happier, more balanced lives if those who were overworked, worked less, and those who are under-worked, worked more.

The MOON: You point out that we had an opportunity to rethink our economy seven years ago and we didn't do it. If anything, the conversation has gotten even more rancorous between haves and have-nots. So what do you think it will take to start recognizing the limits of our finite planet and how we are sharing—or not sharing—its resources?

Fox: Certainly global climate change is staring people in the face and it's getting far more difficult to live in denial of its impact. The people and countries of Europe are far ahead of us in terms of taking the reality of climate change seriously. It's interesting that in Beijing, the capital of the most populous country in the world, the air pollution is so bad that all residents—including the elite—have to wear masks when they venture outside on bad air quality days. So China is waking up to the reality of limits to the environment's capacity to serve as a sink for our effluents, and they're waking up because they've been bitten by environmental degradation. The word is that they're leap-frogging ahead of the U.S. in terms of solar and other renewable forms of energy. Often it's crisis, disaster, despair—as well as necessity—that motivates humans to change. I think that's part of what's stirring the pot at this time—the disasters that we face. The increase in hurricanes and tornadoes; the droughts; the wildfires. Denial is a very strong force, and we can try to create a box and lock ourselves in, but it gets pretty hard to do that when a hurricane blows across your state, or the rising seas enter your neighborhood. The water has risen in southern Miami to the extent that in some neighborhoods people now walk around in water, where a few years ago there were dry sidewalks. The world is changing, no matter how much denial our political parties engage in. Disaster itself is an evolutionary force.

Father Bede Griffiths, a very able monk, used to say that despair is a yoga. Many people do not experience Spirit, or God, until they go through despair or brokenness and collapse. So the very darkness of our time can be a sign of hope. There's potential for movement, for change; we change when we have to.

I live in California, where we have only enough water for the next two years. We don't know what we're going to do the third year unless there's a deluge. The drought in California is unprecedented in historic terms—and California is the most populous state in

the union. I say this not to advocate despair: we're capable as a species of reinventing our economics. That's why I wrote a book on it! We're capable of displacing fossil fuels with clean energy. We're capable of designing cars that run on air. We're capable of building solar panels into our roadways. We're capable of cleaning up the oceans and distributing the world's food to everyone. So again, we don't want to wallow in despair. Our imaginations, our creativity, are certainly capable of transformation, but unfortunately, we usually wait until we're forced into it.

The media really need to step up here and play a major role in reporting both the bad news and the good news. They need to start interviewing those who are proposing new solutions, instead of being so invested in the status quo that they either say nothing about the new, or they mock it. We have to take a hard look at who owns the media and what their ideology is, because otherwise we wallow in ignorance, and ignorance never solved anything.

Speaking theologically, Meister Eckhart said that "God is the denial of denial." That's a very powerful statement. Until we put aside denial, Spirit does not flow, and that includes the spirit of creativity and imagination and caring for one another. All of it gets bottled up when we live in a box of denial. Denial is a very heavy thing: it's a decision to remain ignorant. Thomas Aquinas in the 13th century said that "Willful ignorance about something important is a mortal sin," meaning it's deadly to the human soul.

The MOON: More and more jobs are being replaced by machines—from robots on assembly lines, to automated customer service centers, to self-serve, camera-enforced bridge toll-takers. On the one hand, automation increases so-called productivity for the individual company, but on the other hand, it creates legions of unemployed for the society overall. How are we to create an economy that includes everyone?

Fox: Exactly. That's part of the capitalist system in this time in history: it's asking only, "How can we do this more cheaply?" without considering "How many people are we throwing out of work by doing it this cheaper way?" In the bigger picture, it's not really cheaper because you're going to need a bigger safety net, more prisons, more mental hospitals, and so on. A lot of prophetic people in business have been saying this for a long time. For example, the late Anita Roddick, who was the founder of The Body Shop, started an MBA program at the University of Bath in England in a new kind of economics that tested for a triple bottom line: profit, ecology, and community. Yes, we're capable of creating an economy based on robots that don't need a salary, or health insurance, or coffee breaks, or a day off. That may be more efficient—but more efficient at what? Certainly not more efficient at creating a society that includes everyone. It's only more efficient if you have a very narrow definition of the term "business."

The ecologist Garrett Hardin called this the "tragedy of the commons." Businesses are allowed to transfer to the public "common" all of the "externalities" like the increase in unemployed, the need for a bigger safety net and more prisons, the water and air pollution. Thus, businesses don't have to bear these costs; taxpayers do. We also end up with more costs for damaged souls and damaged lives.

Look at what is happening with education. So many young people are graduating from college with debts of \$50,000, \$75,000, even \$100,000 before they even get their first job. That effectively makes them indentured servants for an entire generation. That's causing young people to ask the question: is education really worth it?

Of course, with the Internet you can educate yourself a lot online, without going to school

and incurring such heavy debt, but is it an education that an employer will accept? Again, in Europe, governments contribute much more to a person's formal education, but in the U.S., it's "sink or swim" for so many people that a higher education is becoming an elitist accomplishment. But this crisis could also spawn new educational paradigms: more online education; more schools stepping out of the "accredited" box and offering learning for learning's sake at much more reasonable cost; perhaps more learn-by-doing programs. A crisis often elicits imagination and opportunity.

The MOON: About 30 years ago you anticipated that because the Cold War had ended we could repurpose our military to peacetime uses and transform our economy to one that is more sustainable. Instead, we've ramped up our military machine. Can you comment?

Fox: It's pretty sad. Again, how sustainable is it for us as a species? Worldwide, we're spending over \$39,000 a second on weapons, and the U.S. is spending over half of that, about \$20,000 a second. This should be announced; people should have parties where they brainstorm what else we could do with \$20,000 a second. We should enlist mothers and grandmothers to express their outrage, because these are decisions made mostly by men, with no regard for the bigger picture. We're spending \$39,000 a second on war. There is no future in that kind of planning. We need to create alternative budgets for an alternative economy that takes the life of the planet seriously and makes life healthy and beautiful for our great, great grandchildren instead of carrying on these endless wars. We have to tame the reptilian brain, essentially. The Iraq war was a pure act of reptilian brain-thinking on the part of Dick Cheney and the Bush administration. To go to war in Iraq, when it had nothing to do with 9/11, for starters, is pretty reprehensible, but it's an example of what the reptilian brain will do when it has no checks and balances. This is what meditation provides: it quiets the reptilian brain so that the mammalian brain, which isn't as old but is about kinship and compassion, friendship and family, can assert itself. So we have to make these shifts, and meditation is one tool for accomplishing it.

The MOON: How has the Industrial Revolution—and going back even farther, to Newtonian physics and the metaphor of the universe as a machine—changed our notion of work, our psyches, and the planet? What is a better metaphor?

Fox: There are essentially two kinds of work: inner and outer. The inner work refers to the world within ourselves, our souls, which is truly the work that we are here to do. The outer work is how we keep the body—and perhaps our families—alive while we do the inner work. Ideally, the outer work also expresses the inner work for the benefit of the outer world. A poet expresses her inner work through the poetry she creates as a gift to the world, for example.

The Industrial Revolution was initially an outer revolution, but it has had profound consequences for our inner work as well. I would say that it has shrunk our souls. Engines and machines are inanimate objects; they don't require relationship the way living beings do. When human beings are asked to play a part in a machine, they're asked to perform like an inanimate object. When you're stuck in a mine, for example, or a factory, or any job where the worker's soul is not given a big canvas on which to express itself, it is very debilitating to the human psyche, to the soul, the imagination, to one's sense of hope and beauty. Installing the same part day after day after day on an assembly line, or working in a mine, in a dark, cramped tunnel, where your body becomes beat down and your lungs filled with dust, these are jobs that are debilitating to the body, which means they are also bad for the soul. If the body is not healthy, the soul will be dragged down with it. Our bodies and souls are in this together. It's hard to be joyful in work in which you are oppressed and your body is growing old very rapidly, and you come

home beat-up every day. Your children and spouse will feel that negativity, and the joylessness will spread to the whole community.

This also applies to Wall Street workers who are at the other end of the financial spectrum, but their work isn't healthy either, because it's based on greed, or avarice, and no spiritual tradition says that avarice is good for the soul. Just because you make millions in a day doesn't mean you're happy, nor healthy. There are a lot of millionaires who are powerful people, but not at all healthy or happy in their lives. It's not a question of which end of the financial spectrum you're at. Predatory capitalism makes people unhappy—even those who are “successful” at it—because it's soulless; it's destructive; it's ruining the Earth and it's ruining our society.

Many years ago one of the Ford sons was asked in an interview when he would have enough money, and he said when he had more. He was already a multimillionaire, but he was confessing that he didn't have enough. He could never be content. So it's obvious that the answer isn't more wealth or consumerism. The answer is figuring out what is important to you in life and focusing on that. Even the middle class and the poor can be sucked into the greed of the consumer culture we've developed. They, too, have become hooked on the myth that you need to constantly buy more things to be happy. Yet even if you achieve the object of your desire, your satisfaction is short-lived because a few months later they'll come out with another, “better” model. You'll never have the best car, the best watch, the best refrigerator, or whatever, because there will always be a newer one.

Back to your question, the industrial era fed our sense of outer directedness. As a result, if a factory closes, or moves off shore, and domestic workers are laid off, people are devastated instead of looking within ourselves and asking, “What are the work needs of my community now?” Because there is a tremendous amount of work that needs doing—and the heart of it lies in paying attention to the work the industrial model practically ignores: our inner work. As British economist E.F. Schumacher wrote in the epilogue to his book, *Small is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered*, “Everywhere people ask, ‘What can I actually do?’ We can each of us work to put our own inner house in order.”

Putting our own inner houses in order will prove the key to reinventing work for the human species. For the sake of the future, we must dismantle the war economy and redirect our energy toward sound and life-sustaining enterprises. If the government were to truly support this effort, losing one's job would not seem like the end of the world, for there is so much new work that needs doing. For example, we need not lament the loss of the United States' competitive edge in car manufacturing to Japan and elsewhere. We could instead ask, “What work might we do and be trained in that is more useful at this time for our people?” After all, the world hardly needs more automobiles. The loss of dominance in certain industries might be a blessing in disguise, freeing us for the more pressing and important work of our times.

The MOON: I remember someone telling a story about how his father was a rag-picker, but this humble occupation brought him no shame because he didn't define himself in terms of it. It was just what he did to provide for his family. He counted his other roles in the community—husband, father, cantor in the temple, etc.—as who he was. How did it happen that our jobs got to be so tied up with our self-esteem—that being unemployed is like being the worst kind of outcast because the economy—the society—has no place for you?

Fox: I do think there's a great danger, particularly for men, of our jobs and our egos becoming enmeshed so that if we don't have a job, we feel as if we don't have a self; we're nothing. That's a displacement of proper authority. That's why we need a sense of our own spirituality, which asks who are we really? Why are we really here? The father in the story knew who he was; he didn't need his employer, or his job, to confirm it for him. He found his deeper self-expression in his spiritual life and his family life. If we settle for letting our employer determine our sense of self, our worth, our very souls, we're setting ourselves up for unhappiness. We're selling ourselves too cheap. I love this example. You can be a rag-picker, a garbage man, a juggler, an ordinary worker doing an ordinary job, but still find deeper meaning to your life—and even to your work. That's why I talk about asking whether your work brings joy to others. If it doesn't, it's dangerous.

The most important work we might turn our attention to, I believe, is work on the human being itself—on the inner work of being human. Scientist Peter Russell wrote, several decades ago, that we need a project to explore human consciousness comparable to the Manhattan Project of seventy years ago. Why is this work so pressing? Because we are the problem. Human beings are the ones destroying our own habitat and the habitats of countless other creatures by our blindness, greed, and violence. We need a massive investment of talent and discipline in our inner lives. When we do this, we will find some solutions for the overwhelming issues of violence and self-destruction; of internalized oppression and external acts of oppression; of racism and sexism; homophobia and fear that seems to overwhelm our species and play out in intergenerational cycles of abuse—physical, sexual, emotional, and religious.

When enough of us have tended to our inner work, then the process of converting jobs to work and inventing new work can begin to be fruitful. We convert jobs to work by understanding the service aspect of even the humblest occupation, such as washing windows, sweeping floors, or even changing diapers. This understanding comes with spiritual practice. As Wendell Berry points out, all work contains drudgery; the issue is whether it holds meaning or not. Those who love a child don't resent changing her diaper. Those who believe in an enterprise don't mind taking out its garbage or sweeping its floors.

We invent new work in response to the needs of our times—such as helping people transition to a less consumeristic, more sustainable way of living; re-educating people in traditional simple living skills; developing new technologies to convert waste into usable materials; retooling our economy to run on renewable energy sources; repairing and healing our polluted oceans, rivers, and lakes; reforesting our denuded hillsides; paying our artists and musicians and caregivers, and so on.

One of the important images I've seen in years occurred in the last few months and was posted to the Internet. It was taken by a satellite that left the solar system and looked back, taking a picture of the Earth, its home. The Earth is visible as just a speck among many lighted specks, but an arrow identifies it. I think that photo needs to become as iconic an image as the photograph of the Earth from the moon taken by astronauts 45 years ago. When you realize that from space the Earth looks like a speck, indistinguishable from countless other specks, it hits you just how unique and special our speck is. There may be millions of other specks out there, but not one that we know of possesses the conditions suitable for human habitation. A relative few may possess the potential for life, perhaps, but so far as we know there's nothing quite like Earth—with its beauty and diversity of life—anywhere else in the universe. The perspective you can get from an iconic image like that has the potential to slow our reptilian brains down a bit and enable us to feel the awe and gratitude our situation really requires...and then, of course,

to treat our precious speck—and the other beings we share it with—with the kind of reverence they deserve.

The industrial era work metaphor is running out of steam, even in the so-called First World. The basics of human living, including work, healthcare, politics, and education are increasingly beyond the grasp of most people. A new era is upon us, whether we're ready for it, or not. The wounded Earth, the billion unemployed, the billions of despairing young people who see few prospects for either work or jobs, and the needs of other species who are going extinct at an unprecedented rate, are calling upon us to create a new economics and a new way of defining work.

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