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ST. STEPHEN'S COLLEGE

A THEOLOGICAL EXAMINATION OF STORIES OF INDIVIDUALS WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED JOB LOSS

by

Terry A. L. Harrison

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Abstract

This phenomenological research study looks at the experience of job loss and considers it through a theological lens as interpreted by the researcher. Specifically it examines the job loss experience of three individuals in British Columbia in the first decade of the 2000s. I interviewed two men and one women for this project – middle-aged knowledge workers, working in white collar, professional settings. The interviews were taped and notes were taken, the results of which I summarized in narrative form.

These three individuals described their experiences and discussed how various aspects of the experience made them feel and what questions it raised for them. They also talked about how they made sense of their feelings and the things they learned through the process. All the participants were changed by the loss, and while it was a negative experience for each of them, to varying degrees, they all sought to make sense of the changes in positive ways as they reconciled themselves to their new realities. None of the participants explicitly discussed religious beliefs or affiliations as part of their process – nor were they prompted to do so.

I used two sets of analytics – workplace analytics and theological analytics – to interpret the stories. The workplace data demonstrated that the rate of job loss for knowledge workers in Canada, such as those interviewed, is on the rise, and it confirmed that the experience of job loss is typically a painful one. The theological analysis provided a means for understanding job loss as a spiritual crisis.

Recommendations focused on ways in which liberal, mainstream churches in Canada might better respond to the spiritual needs of people who have encountered the painful and increasingly common experience of losing a job.

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INTRODUCTION

> *The final test of religious faith is whether it will enable [humanity] to endure insecurity without complacency or despair, whether it can so interpret the ancient verities that they will not become mere escape hatches from responsibilities but instruments of insights into what civilization means.* – Reinhold Niebuhr

I. Research Question and Organization of Thesis

The Question:

Have you ever lain in bed at night, worrying about your job, your future? The scenarios are many: the organization you work for is re-organizing itself or there has been a downturn in the market and more layoffs are inevitable; conflicting ideals and personalities in your workplace have left you feeling like an outsider; a job that once held such promise and gave you such purpose now feels empty and meaningless; or perhaps a change in leadership has left you uncertain about your future, feeling unappreciated with no way up and no way out.

What is it about our jobs – the work we do for financial remuneration to ensure our survival and meet a variety of our social, familial and personal needs – that keeps us up at night? These concerns are not always immediately or directly life-threatening, but they can feel so. Why is what we do for a living so critical to us, and the loss of it such a threat?

The most obvious answer is the economic one. Work is how we feed, shelter and clothe ourselves and our loved ones so if something threatens the way we make our

living, our very survival feels threatened as the spectre of poverty and powerlessness looms large. Yet, even when one's basic needs are not immediately in jeopardy one can still feel at risk. This is often the case for professionals with savings, unemployment insurance and pensions, who are also well-educated with significant professional experience and transferable skills. Even when there is enough money in the bank to avert a financial crisis, the sense of personal jeopardy one can encounter when one loses a job is immense. This could be explained in part by understanding how work pays for the emotional and material *extras* in our lives – our cars, our vacations, our lifestyles – those things which lend us status and prestige, the loss of which (for better or worse) can be traumatic.

So, for many people there is more at play than providing for a family's basic needs and there is more at stake than material wealth and social standing. What more is there? Well, at its best, our job provides us with a sense of purpose and meaning, as well as a profound sense of belonging. For many of us, finding the right fit, professionally speaking, depends on a series of complex, hard to articulate – and sometimes rather random – variables. Doing what we're meant to be doing, as some might describe it, brings with it a deep sense of satisfaction and validation – and it's extremely important to who we are. Even in circumstances when the fit is less than perfect, what we do is still very tightly entwined with who we are, so much so that when our jobs come to an end – or even when we face the prospect of such a thing – we might well find ourselves asking, "who am I without my job"?

Such profound and personal change as ushered in by a job loss and workplace insecurity can leave us feeling humiliated, disoriented, alienated and afraid. For some

people losing a job can be as devastating as losing a loved one – only there are no time-honoured rituals or communal rites to deal with the loss. Instead, people are often left to their own devices to make sense of the loss. It is from this place of loss that the ontological, who-am-I or what-is-my-purpose type questions emerge, questions that can help give meaning to the experience of loss, can broaden one's self understanding and open up new possibilities.

This is what I'm listening for as I listen to people's experience of job loss; did they derive meaning from their experience of job loss and if so did it help them through the experience?

In this study I'm looking specifically at the contemporary experience of job loss among educated and skilled white-collar workers in an effort to understand if meaning, attributed to painful and unexpected circumstance, can be the basis for growth and renewal. Specifically, I'm looking at job loss as it was experienced by three individuals, along with my own experience. I examine these observable events by listening to the stories of three experienced professionals, each of whom had a recent, sustained and difficult experience that involved losing or leaving their job.

The purpose of my research, in a broad sense, is to learn about the essential meaning of the experience of job loss for these individuals; to see if it contains circumstances, conditions, perceptions, attitudes and beliefs (religious or otherwise) that help them broaden their self understanding and stay open to the hope of new possibilities. Subsequent to the interviews, I examine their stories from my own theological perspective to determine whether or not Christian precepts or principles were present – explicitly or implicitly – in any meaning they ascribed to their experience. I am

approaching my theological examination in this way because I want to see if people's efforts to discuss meaning can be understood in theological terms – whether or not they were presented as such. I think it is possible for me, as a theologian, to identify religious concepts in a person's worldview even when such concepts are not consciously understood or expressed as such. Thus, I began my research project by defining this specific research question: what is it like to experience job loss; can one derive meaning from the experience and if so does it help one through the experience?

Organization:

In Chapter 1 I will describe the methodology I've used to undertake this research project. Mine is a critical qualitative study using a phenomenological approach, wherein I take the expressed and conscious experience of an observable event, or phenomenon, as a starting point and then try to extract from it the essential features and essence of that experience. I chose a phenomenological study because "phenomenological study describes the meaning of the lived experience for several individuals about a concept or **the phenomenon.** Phenomenologists explore the structures of consciousness in human experience" (Creswell 1998, 51). I wanted to learn from the stories of three individuals who have encountered significant career disruptions in their lives – the phenomenon – and any meaning they ascribed to the experience, then interpret this learning through the literature review and my own theological framework. I use this method of inquiry because it is the experience of job loss that interests me, not merely the facts of it. In the manner of postmodern feminist epistemologies, I will begin from a place of assuming that it is the people who experience job loss, themselves, who are the ones that can best

draw meaning from the phenomenon, and that each person responds to the experience in their own unique way. In other words, I'm not testing a hypothesis; rather, I'm seeking to learn from what they learned, without assessing or judging it according to some external measurement or objective norm. "Unlike quantitative studies, which identify sets of variables and seek to determine their relationship, qualitative studies are best at contributing to a greater understanding of perceptions, attitudes, and processes" (Glesne 1999, 24). My role is to observe the phenomenon – as the people who experienced it describe it to me – then interpret what they've shared with me and offer some useful insights specific to my purpose – to learn if deriving meaning from the experience helped them through it.

In Chapter 2 I posit that the very nature of work, our understanding of it, and our relationship to it has changed through history – and continues to change. We are in a particularly intense period of transition thanks primarily to technological advancements. The concept of job security, which our parents and grandparents came to depend on, is fading away as we enter an age where every occupational field is affected and even those in the most secure vocations are now experiencing job loss at an increasingly alarming rate. Several generations of unsuspecting white collar workers – from clerical staff to managers and executives – are now feeling the crush of a rapidly changing workworld wherein they are losing their jobs – not because of issues of competency or compliance – but because of the way technology and demographics are changing the marketplace and labour force. There is plenty of research that provides evidence that the workplace is changing, and I will present statistics and discuss some of the management theories that are attempting to explain how those changes – and the loss of job security they create –

are having an impact on skilled knowledge workers, and how those providing organizational leadership are trying to respond to these rapid and real changes.

I introduce you to my partners in research in Chapter 3. Using pseudo-names to ensure their anonymity, I will summarize the stories shared with me by June, John and Peter – three adults who have all worked in professional office settings at managerial and supervisory levels. All three are Caucasian, between the ages of 40 and 60, two men and one woman, all married, with extensive education or professional experience. All three had a profound experience of job loss within the last several years, the stories of which they shared with me.

My own experience of job loss caused what I would come to understand and describe as a spiritual crisis. While doing my literature review, I found that organizational and human resource professionals did not typically look at job loss as a spiritual crisis. I attempt to do just that in Chapter 4, taking care to distinguish between the spiritual nature of the crisis and its emotional or psychological aspects. Drawing on religious, theological and spiritual literature I consider what vocation means – what it means to be "called" – and ask if being called to something, then losing it, could cause a spiritual crisis. I also use the existential categories of "being" and "non-being" as lenses to look at the experiences of my co-researchers, in an attempt to develop a broader and deeper understanding of the destabilizing impacts of job loss that could contribute to a spiritual crisis. I identify and develop three theological themes to help me examine and analyze the experiences of my co-researchers from a theological perspective (whether or not the interview subjects expressed any overt religious or spiritual beliefs).

In Chapter 5 I look at both the structure and content of their stories, examining particulars, identifying themes and drawing conclusions using two sets of analytics: workplace analytics and the afore-mentioned theological analytics. The workplace analytics, from those schools of thought represented in organizational management and/or behavioural psychology, provide one way of analyzing and understanding the phenomenon. The theological analytics, on the other hand, provide a means for finding "ultimate meaning", a phrase given to mythical modes of thought that give meaning and significance to life (Armstrong 2005, 31). These mythical modes of thought can also be described as theological or religious modes of thought. Paul Tillich, in his work entitled *Dynamics of Faith* (originally published in 1957), famously uses the phrase "ultimate concern" to describe matters of religious faith – those things that deal with our *existence* and surpass all profane and ordinary realities. "Man,[sic] like every living being, is concerned about many things, above all about those which condition his very existence...". It's these matters of ultimate *concern* that lead us to seek out ultimate *meaning*, and it is religion – the stories, symbols and images of faith – that provides the means to help one explore, as Tillich puts it, "the hidden power of faith within [oneself] and […] the infinite significance of that to which faith is related". The theological analytics I developed will help me identify and examine any matters of *ultimate concern* that emerge from the experience of job loss.

Informed by both sets of analytics, I will seek to gain a deeper understanding of if and how the research participants made sense of their experiences and derived meaning from them – and how that was useful to them.

I close by considering the event of job loss – in the experiences of June, John and Peter – through my own experiential and theological lens as part of a personal, theological reflection. I chose to begin and end this paper from a personal perspective, because this research project has been a deeply personal process for me. This approach also made sense from my perspective as a researcher. As Corrine Glesne puts it in the introduction of her book on qualitative research, "[S]ince qualitative researchers seek to make sense of personal stories and the ways in which they intersect, I begin with a personal narrative of my connections to the research. If you know something about my story, you may more fully understand and interpret my perspective" (Glesne 1998, xi). The paper ends with a theological reflection, an expression of how I, personally, benefitted by this process overall and, in particular, from listening to and learning from my research partners.

Also, in an effort to contribute something new and useful to the discourse of those in leadership positions within the church, I will include some recommendations in the concluding section about the role of organized religion and church participation in light of the question I set out to answer regarding the experience of job loss. I will suggest ways that the theological learning gleaned from this study might be used to benefit church leaders as they develop their programs and services.

II. My Story

Not surprisingly, it is my own story of job loss that led me to this particular line of inquiry – and it's my own experiences, perceptions, and beliefs that will give this research project its particular shape. Let me begin by telling you who I am.

I am a middle-aged, middle-class, white, Canadian female. I am married to a woman who works full time in an executive capacity within the provincial public service, where she has worked for almost 20 years. Together we parent her three wonderful teenage children. I am an educated, white-collar, knowledge worker currently employed as a project manager by a national, well-established, liberal-progressive religious institution – The United Church of Canada – which has been undergoing its own corporate upheaval and identity crisis due to changing demographics and increased secularization in Canadian society today. I have worked for the BC Conference of The United Church of Canada since 2007. I'm currently employed full time, and consider myself to be well paid and the recipient of a generous benefits package. The work I do is emotionally intense and challenging, but I find it to be extremely meaningful and I am generally held in high regard. I have certainly experienced some significant ups-and-downs over the course of the past several years, but for the most part I feel good about what I do, and believe I do it well. I do not, however, feel as if I have any real job security. For one, my employment is dependent on organizational priorities, and – in a state of such ongoing flux – those priorities can change as quickly as the world and church is changing.

This isn't the first time I've experienced a lack of job security. Over the course of the last two decades my life has been repeatedly affected and frequently destabilized by both the possibility, and the actual experience, of job loss – the possibility being, at times,

as destabilizing as the actuality. Sometimes the actual job loss was voluntary, such as when I decided it was necessary to leave my job because I was under some duress. Still, in these situations I was able to leave on terms that I was able to set, to some degree, for myself. This type of job loss can be characterized as a risky, self-initiated career transition. Sometimes the job loss was involuntary, such as when I lost my job as a result of factors that were beyond my control. These two categories of job loss are as defined by Ebberwein, et. al (2004, 294-295). I have never lost a job for "cause"; it was always a result of organizational restructuring or departmental priorities that no longer included me. That's not to say it was never personal, because to find you no longer "belong" – whatever the specifics of the situation – always feels personal.

As Ebberwein discusses, the act of *losing* a job is differentiated from *leaving* a job not by the specifics of the event, but in the subjective experience and meaning constructed by the person to whom this situation happens. In the stories I'll be sharing, whether the departure was voluntary or involuntary, if it involved the experience of loss then I have considered it to be data for research into job loss.

The stress and uncertainty of an ever-changing workworld caused me a great deal of anxiety, contributing to a diagnosis of clinical depression and generalized anxiety disorder. It was from this place of near despair that life-changing questions began to emerge for me. Initially these were questions about job security, but they grew into questions about the deeper nature of security – a matter of *ultimate concern*, as defined by Tillich, leading to questions of ultimate meaning for which I turned to theology, religion and faith to help me answer. These existential questions eventually led me to this research topic, and to questions about success and failure, power and authority, the

nature and impact of change (personal and organizational), identity and feelings of self-worth, faith and acceptance. These were my big questions, and this is the story of my dogged pursuit of the answers.

But it's not just about me. My story is one that resonates with many other people of my socio-economic standing, and I offer it in the light of the individual experiences of other people whose professional identities have been threatened and whose livelihoods have been jeopardized by major changes in their workplace. I present these stories as part of a formalized research project, using a phenomenological approach. Throughout my research, in the course of my literature review, I've drawn on the theories and ideas of people who have documented their stories in writing, but it's the spoken word of the personal stories of three individuals who directly participated in this research that were most critical to my exploration.

CHAPTER 1 - Methodology

"To know a rose by its Latin name and yet miss the fragrance is to miss much of the rose's meaning" – Elliot Eisner

I. The Philosophy of My Research Method

It's commonly understood in day-to-day life that the questions one asks determine the answers one gets – that's what makes the questions so important. In academic research, the way a question is framed and presented is directly related to the method of inquiry. Forms of research that ask about and draw upon distinct, observable, and measurable facts – quantitative research – are designed to produce "explanations and predictions that will generalize to other persons and places" (Glesne 1999, 24). This form of inquiry is typically written up in very scientific terms (numbers and other facts that can be measured). It depends greatly on the precision and assumed objectivity of the researcher. Qualitative research, on the other hand, seeks to explore socially constructed realities, experiences and perceptions which are complex and ever changing. This approach attempts to reflect the variety of perspectives brought forward by the different research participants. This subject matter is not necessarily quantifiable or measurable; the analysis of it is highly subjective – this approach actually expects the researcher to be *part* of the story. The open, emergent nature of qualitative research "allows the researcher to approach the inherent complexity of social interaction and to honor the complexity, to respect it in its own right ." (Glesne 1999, 6).

These diverse research paradigms are needed to explore different kinds of subjects, and both are invaluable. Yet, establishing the credibility of qualitative research techniques has taken much time and effort. “Even as aspects of feminist, social constructionist, and postmodernist thinking converge in a strong counterforce, the majority of academic research psychologists view new developments with skepticism, if not disdain…” (Franklin 1997, 99). The duel that once existed between proponents of modern and post-modern research techniques is important to note as it provides valuable insight into a *still* changing context. Objective accuracy is no longer the highest or only value of academic research – but it hasn’t always been this way – and that’s worth remembering.

In particular, I chose a phenomenological approach because it allows the researcher to incorporate the creative self-processes and self-discoveries into the research process. The self of the researcher is present throughout the research process. This approach provides a credible and valuable methodology because it recognizes that learning can be gained by seeking to understand a person’s subjective reality (not to mention that an act of compassion is inherent in such an approach, which has value above and beyond academic rigor). I used a phenomenological approach over grounded theory because I began with a theoretical framework in mind, and applied it to the phenomenon I was studying – I assumed that job loss was often a difficult or painful experience (which made it ripe with meaning), and set out to study the meaning of the experience. (Grounded theory, on the other hand, eschews this a priori theoretical orientation, looking for theories to emerge from the process, “‘grounded’ in data from the field” (Creswell 1998, 56).

The methodology that I have employed in this paper does not attempt to provide objective accuracy as it relates to the information collected through the interviews. I have not set out to prove or disprove the facts of the stories being shared with me, rather I take what I'm told by the individuals I've interviewed – my co-researchers – at face-value, and I do so fully aware that there are other factors in play beyond the bounds of their individual experience. I know their truth isn't necessarily "the" truth, as a 19th century scientific worldview might have defined it. Furthermore, phenomenology aims to discover the essential nature and meaning of the phenomena, overall, not just the participants' individual experience, as they understand it. In other words, I listened to what each individual told me about their individual experience and what the experience meant to them – then, from an analysis of each individual description, I derived a generalized meaning mediated by my research and experience; what Creswell describes as the "essences of the structures of the experience" (Creswell, citing Moustakas, 1998, 54). "[T]his means that all experiences have an underlying 'structure' (grief is the same whether the loved on is a puppy, a parakeet, or a child)" (Creswell 1998, 55).

Another reason for using this style of inquiry and analytical methodology is that it demonstrates the power of "voice" – the power of telling stories as distinct from just reporting facts. Franklin defines a story, in research terms, as "the representation of interview material in narrative form" (Franklin 1997, 106). And I would suggest that this style of prose makes the description of data more readable and engaging, which is why I used it. Furthermore, according to Glesne, a well written description can also augment the trustworthiness of the research. "Rich, thick description – writing that allows the reader to enter the research context" can serve as a "verification procedure often used in

qualitative research" (Glesne 1999, 32). I undertook this research project, in part, because I have a story to tell about job loss. As it turns out, other people have their own versions of this story and some of them have graciously agreed to let me tell their stories. This is a job for a qualitative researcher, not a quantitative one, because representing the research in narrative form is the best way to share it.

In terms of interview method, I sought out a model that was conversational and allowed thoughts to emerge in the course of the discussion. I designed a conversation framework (and provided it in advance to the research participants) to guide the interview and ensure consistency across the interviews. The interviewees are not just "research subjects" – they are participants in my process. They are people who shared their personal stories with me, stories of risk and pain and loss, as well as success and accomplishment. I did not lead the interview; I set the course and then followed their stream of thought, engaging it in particular ways at particular times in genuine and authentic ways. This style of interview is what Franklin refers to as a "discourse model", which is characterized by the fact that the interviewee and interviewer are both active participants and the dynamic between them shapes and informs the content of the conversation:

> The interviewer contributes, intentionally or unintentionally, to the spirit and perhaps the substance of the dialogue and so may shape it significantly. Assumptions that the interviewer can (or should be) "objective" and "distanced" […] or can bracket presuppositions […], are called into question. Interviewers, like interviewees, necessarily see

> situations from a point of view infused with personal experience (Franklin 1997, 104).

This style of interview is particularly useful when the plan is to represent research in narrative form because of the way in which it enables the researcher to listen to the participant's stories in various ways. There is the story the participant is telling me – her or his accounting of events and experiences (his or her own narrative representation). And there is another story being told: the story that exists between the lines, so to speak. This second story is the underlying narrative and it refers to unspoken beliefs, opinions and feelings that inform and influence the speaker's narrative telling (Franklin 1997, 106). In other words, the stories that we tell ourselves – consciously or unconsciously – have an effect on the stories we share out loud, and vice-versa. An approach to interviewing that allows half-submerged or partly-formed ideas, opinions and feelings to surface – rather than one that relies solely on a formulaic or regulated telling of events – will reveal things about the story and story-teller that might not otherwise emerge. "The openness sets the stage for discovery as well as for ambiguity…" (Glesne 1999, 109). It is the researcher's job to make sense of that ambiguity as they retell the participant's stories.

As a qualitative researcher, I'm not just retelling other people's stories – I'm also telling my own story. In doing this, it is important to keep my voice separate and discrete from the voices of the research participants, while acknowledging the ways in which my personal experience influences my understanding and interpretation of their stories. There is a dynamic at play as our voices interact, but each participant has a unique story

to tell and their voice cannot be subsumed by the whole (Franklin). To this end, the three people I interviewed all reviewed and approved the version of their story that I wrote and included in this paper, verifying its clarity and veracity.

To ensure clarity and continuity, I developed a straightforward research question, *What were these people's experiences of job loss*, with two sub-questions, *did they derive meaning from their experience and if so did it help them through the experience?* While listening to June, John and Peter's stories of job loss, I sought to learn what helped them through the uncertainty and insecurity of their job loss experience; how they made sense of the experience and if making sense of it helped lead them forward out of the pain, into the hope of new beginnings.

I've created another level of analysis to this project in attempting to examine something that transcends the particulars of the participants stories. This is a theological examination, and so in the analysis of the participants' stories (and other research materials) I have examined the phenomenon of job loss from a Christian theological perspective. I endeavored to analyze the meaning the participants ascribed to their experiences, through my theological lens, in an attempt to demonstrate that God, by whatever name, is present in experiences where people seek meaning and purpose, particularly during difficult and uncertain times. It was not how, or even if, God was named in the discourse that mattered – rather it was the participants' subjective perceptions about what gives life meaning that I was listening for. For this reason, I was very intentional about not asking my research partners about their religious beliefs or affiliations. They all knew I was doing this research project in pursuit of a theology degree, but theology was not the focal point of our conversation, and we did not talk

about God or religion unless they themselves brought it up (and, except for a few casual references, they did not). I did not want the focus to be on God or religion, I wanted it to be on *meaning* – including the meaning the co-researchers, themselves, ascribed to their experience whether or not they used religious language, symbols or images. I understand the meaning-making role of religion, and how the beliefs and practices of religion can imbue people's lives with meaning and value – but not everyone does. In fact, some people reject this notion outright. Given the secularized nature of our contemporary western society, many people seek meaning outside the confines of organized religion, and I did not want a lack of religious affiliation or familiarity to limit my selection of co-researchers. I did not want being religious (or *not* being religious) to detract from or circumscribe the conversation. Furthermore, I wanted to talk to people who did not overtly or explicitly define themselves as religious because I felt they had something unique to say about meaning and purpose in the light of the increasingly secular world we live in.

This, however, created a challenge. If no one was talking about God or faith or religion, I was going to need to find another way to ground my theological examination, so I developed a theological matrix (described in Chapter 3) to help me circumscribe and describe what is by its very nature a rather limitless and ethereal subject.

II. The Mechanics of My Research Method

I began by writing a Thesis Proposal, which was vetted and approved by the St. Stephen's College Ethics Review Committee. As per my research plan, I used two "data-gathering techniques [that] dominate in qualitative inquiry", as described by Glesne

(1999, 31): interviewing and document collection. “The use of multiple data-collection methods contributes to the trustworthiness of the data” (Glesne 1999, 32), because it allows the researcher to compare and contrast findings, thus identifying threats to the validity of the data.

I undertook a wide-ranging literature review, from multiple sources, in fields as diverse as theology, change management, psychology, organizational development, spirituality, and business, including a look at societal trends in the Canadian workforce. Then, using my professional network, I found and interviewed three individuals, each of whom had had a recent and significant experience specific to losing their jobs. I provided each of the participants with a Consent Form (Appendix A) and a Conversation Framework, including a sample of interview questions (Appendix B), in advance of the engagement. I had a casual acquaintance with two of the participants (Peter and June), prior to involving them in my research. I met the third person (John), who was introduced to me by a work associate, for the first time when we met for our conversation. Each conversation lasted approximately 2 hours, and I made an audio recording of each. I took notes during the conversation, and logged the interviews to assist me in summarizing and narrativizing the stories that had been shared with me. In so doing, I listened carefully for how people were affected by their own experience of job joss, and how they derived meaning from their circumstances as a means of moving on from this experience. I had each of the co-researchers vet the narrative I had crafted based on my interview with them, making any changes they requested, as a means of validating my data ensuring the trustworthiness of what I had written.

CHAPTER 2 - Employment Trends: Job Insecurity and Workplace Instability

> *From the beginning, civilization – as well as people's daily lives – has been structured in large part around the concept of work. But now, for the first time in history, human labor is being systematically eliminated from the economic process. In the [21st] century employment, as we have come to know it, is likely to be phased out in most of the industrialized nations of the world.* – Jeremy Rifkin

How we define work, and changes in the patterns of work have been happening, one might say, forever. From the Stone Age to the Industrial Age, we've seen changes wrought by wars and weather, influenced by forces as diverse as migration patterns and the ability to plant seeds or smelt metal. By the seventeenth-century the recognition of human productive power, and the value ascribed to it, were celebrated as the basis of civilization and came to form the foundation of what economists call the labour value theory. "For the most famous proponent of that theory, Karl Marx, as for many other nineteenth-century theorists, work was the defining feature of the human race. It was the purposive effort of men and women to ensure their survival and to meet their ever growing needs" (Thomas 1999, xv).

By the close of the twentieth-century, the influence of capitalism and a free-labour market had shaped our understanding of work into something quite practical, wherein an employee trades his or her labour for payment. Thankfully, in countries like Canada, this was done in line with labour laws. In general, people provided their labour according to predefined terms where productivity was rewarded and rights were protected. In this emergence of labour laws and the establishment of acceptable

management practices, categories such as hours of work, work days and place of work were defined, which contributed to a delineation between work and leisure that frames our contemporary experience.

Just as this isn't how it's always been – it's not how it's always going to be. In fact, another wave of change is already washing over us – washing over a workworld that is a part of the new and emerging global, knowledge-based economy.

> Advanced economies are constantly evolving. There is a general sense that the pace of change has accelerated in recent years, and that we are moving in new directions. This evolution is captured in phrases such as "the knowledge-based economy" or "the learning organization". Central to these notions is the role of technology, particularly information technology. The implementation of these technologies is thought to have substantial impact on both firms and their workers. Likely related to these technological and environmental changes, many firms have undertaken significant organizational changes and have implemented new human resource practices. Globalization and increasing international competition also contribute to the sense of change (Stats Canada 2003, 3).

In the 1950s, amid the post-war growth of the middle class, my father's generation entered the workforce with the assumption, and in some ways the assurance, of a lifetime career. Work hard for the same organization all your life, and you will work your way up, be rewarded along the way, and retire at the age of 65 with a full pension.

Some 30 years later, career-focused individuals, like me, expected this snapshot would be in colour and far more inclusive of women and ethnic minorities, but we – the young men and women with whom I graduated high school – expected a similar trajectory in our working life. We were led to believe that if we got a good start and worked hard we could count on a course of upward mobility, one that – like our fathers' and some of our mothers' – would lead us up the ladder of success towards seniority, security and material gain, before retiring with some comfort and stability (Mirvis & Hall 1994, 365). Early in my journey, I came to realize that women had to overcome very real gender-specific barriers. But even the cliché description of breaking through the glass-ceiling implied a course of upward motion, albeit hard won, for women of my age and socio-economic class. But that was not the reality.

I felt betrayed to learn that this ideal of steady job advancement and security was no longer a reality. "A decade-and-a-half of corporate downsizing and broad-based de-industrialization had had employers reducing staff, shutting down facilities, and making more use of consultants and the contingent workforce. As a result, notions of cradle-to-grave job security have been shattered" (Mirvis & Hall 1994, 365-366).

Still, these were the expectations that existed in the early eighties for the middle-class of the western world, whose careers paths were being forged in a knowledge-based economy, populated by knowledge workers. "Knowledge worker" is a term coined in the late 1950s by management consultant Peter Drucker in his 1959 book 'The Landmarks of Tomorrow'. It describes the phenomenon in the labour force where an unprecedented number of people were using their brains more than their backs – they were *knowledge* workers rather than *manual* workers. Statistics Canada researchers describe it in drier

terms. Knowledge workers are those that rely on "information and communication technologies that are often seen as the engine of change leading to the knowledge based economy and as the main factor explaining labour market employment transformations" (Stats Canada 1998, 4). While typically associated with the high-tech industry, this research shows an emergence of "knowledge intensity" in most all sectors, among professionals, program and policy experts, administrators and executives.

Much about the changing work world and the emerging global, knowledge-based economy is exciting. Knowledge work is an occupational category that suits creative, self-motivated individuals who like to work with ideas and concepts, usually as part of a high-functioning team. For women, in particular, this is highly preferable to the more menial work that was typically afforded working women in the mid 20th century. Knowledge work does have the potential to be an equal-opportunity occupational category. A 2007 Stats Canada report found that the proportion of female knowledge workers in the federal public service "has been increasing continuously from 1995 to 2006. In fact, there has been a flip in gender representation, and since 1999, women have outnumbered men within the [core public administration]. In contrast, men still dominate the Canadian workforce in general" (Stats Can 2007, 9).

I agree that there will be both losses and gains as the work world of the 21st Century continues to emerge. Such is the nature of change. Most frequently, however, it is the loss in that equation that makes itself known first – and so change is first experienced as a threat. This is largely an emotional or psychological response, which the research bears out: "Probably the most controversial aspect of the potential changes that are taking place in firms, including cost-cutting, the introduction of technology and

changing staffing practices, is the impact that they have on employment levels and stability" (Stats Can 1996, 15).

This lack of stability, and the absence of job security for even mature workers, forces "economic and organizational change that sometimes [leaves] careers in turmoil" (Ebberwein, et.al. 2004, 293). The people interviewed in Ebberwein's study describe this experience using words like "scared", "angry", "betrayed", "aggravating and depressing", "unhappy, stressed and suspicious", "mistreated", "panicked". Ebberwein goes on to say, "given the perspectives offered by the participants in this study, the difficult challenges and choices individuals face when confronted with job loss are clear."

There is much about the changing work world that is yet unknown – and could be quite positive – but at this point these broad-based changes are shattering the much cherished (and perhaps illusory) concept of job security, leaving workers feeling uncertain and anxious. There is no question losing one's job is likely to be an emotionally and psychologically challenging experience. Given how traumatic this experience can be, one might even describe it as a spiritual crisis, a concept I explore in a later chapter.

CHAPTER 3 - Narratives: Listening To & Learning From Stories of Job Loss.

Truth received begins – it does not end – a journey - Daniel Maguire

At the centre of my research are the stories of three individuals whose careers have been marked by a profound experience of job loss. Each participant shared their story openly, discussed how their experience of job loss affected their relationships and affected their sense of self. In each case, the job loss was not a simple or singular event, but rather a process of stops and starts, of detours and adaptations, of letting go and beginning again; all of which forced them to re-orient themselves, sometimes again and again, to the emergence of new realities. In evidence in these stories is the fact that they each derived meaning from their experiences of job loss, which helped them move past the loss. At the time of the interviews (undertaken during the last half of 2011) each of the interview participants lived on the west coast of British Columbia (in the Lower Mainland or on Vancouver Island).

June

June is a very smart, capable, 50-something, Caucasian woman who spent her entire career working as a public servant for the Province of British Columbia. In 2010, June took an early retirement after 28 years of service. Her husband had retired a year or so before her, and their plan had been to retire and enjoy their golden years together. But she was dragging her heels, "not quite ready to call it quits", as she put it. "Retirement, as I defined it, sounded so antiquated and doddery [like] you've shut down a part of your

life, you're not creative any more – I don't see myself there at all. I still have lots of things to do." In fact, she decided not to retire, as planned, and took a year-long leave of absence instead. She took this time off as a leave – even though she was already entitled to retire – largely because she felt she needed the time *away* from work to decide whether or not she was really, in her words, "done working".

June was on leave from her position of Executive Director in one of the largest Ministries in the Government. She had a job to which she could return. She had even received an offer of a new position during this interim period, which she found very compelling. This wasn't a case of being let go. June could have stayed gainfully and meaningfully employed as a respected and valued administrator within the Public Service for another decade or more. When her leave ended, however, she made what for her had been a very difficult and drawn out decision – she chose to officially retire, which effectively ended her career.

June's story is one of a voluntary job loss, i.e., a risky, self-initiated career transition. The sense of loss she experienced arose not from her lack of options, but from having to abandon her professional identity, and the sense of purpose, focus and authority it gave her. Why was this decision marked by a sense of loss, rather than a sense of completion? Why wasn't this a straightforward choice, and cause for celebration?

June had begun her career, almost 30 years earlier, as a "secretary" (a word she used disparagingly; and one that is so undervalued, it is no longer used in professional office administrative circles). Being a secretary was one of the few entry-level career options available to an uneducated women in the business world at the time, and it's how

many women, who went on to become successful leaders and managers, began their careers. June worked her way up the ranks, gaining respect and knowledge along the way, but also encountering prejudice and sexism. Her contributions were often dismissed because she was a woman and a secretary, who didn't have a degree in public administration or a related field. Still, her career path was on an upward trajectory, and her positions grew in terms of rank and responsibility, with June working in various executive offices within the public service. Yet, despite her obvious success, deep in the back of her mind she always thought of herself as an "uneducated secretary". These were thoughts that, for the most part, she could block out in light of her professional success. Not that the path to professional success was a simple, straight-line forward. It seldom is. There were the inevitable hills and valleys, but the regard and respect she earned over the course of her career helped her shape a very solid and positive professional identity. It's not surprising, then, that the prospect of giving up her professional identity was emotionally overwhelming, and that the decision to conclude her career was an extraordinarily difficult one, stalled by what she called "survivor's defiance".

A successful, professional administrator is not the only thing that June was. She was, and continues to be a wife, a mother, a daughter, a sister, and a good friend. And it was the nature of these relationships that ultimately helped her shift her priorities in a way that helped her decide to retire.

The role of relationship is critical here. Even as an administrator, relationships were always very important to June, and her success depended not on positional authority, but on proximal influence, on her ability to inform, influence and persuade, abilities that are utterly dependent on relationship. "I always had that position where I

worked for very powerful people… So if I saddled up to a really great [boss]… it was a blast. If I had someone I was not simpatico with, it was torture." She was most fulfilled in her career when her professional relationships were solid. "When I look back, where I've really been successful is being lucky enough to meet people that I wanted to give a [big] commitment to." The more solid things were on the work front, however, the more compromised they were on the home front. Or at least, that's what she discovered in retrospect. Her career success was hard won, in a hard-scrabble kind of way. It took dedication and commitment – and in the often paranoid and highly politicized context of the Public Service – it meant being always attentive and essentially on stand-by every hour of every day. This left her little time to be in relationship with her family or herself.

Relationships take time. They must be nurtured and cared for. Throughout her career, June nurtured her professional relationships, and this contributed to her success. As she considered retirement, she spent a lot of time thinking about her other relationships. She had always been a good mother and wife – but she was, without a doubt, a working mom, and both she and her husband were very career-focused. Retirement offered her the opportunity to reconnect with him, and with their now grown children, without the constant demands and distractions of her job. This is an opportunity that many people can only dream of – and June knew how blessed she was to be in this position. "I didn't have to work… [my husband and I] were really lucky in the sense that we'd done a lot of [retirement] planning and our goals materialized… so I had choices at this time, and I'd never had that before." Still, before June could say yes to retirement, she said she needed to let go of something that was profoundly important to her sense of self. To let go of it, she needed to name it, make peace with it and replace it with

something equally as important, albeit qualitatively different. June's experience of being involved in important, worldly decisions, and being needed by important, powerful people created a heightened sense of urgency and importance, which was very compelling for her. She described how, when you hit your stride in that kind of environment, you are filled by an extraordinarily strong sense of accomplishment and reward. As June put it, "you find yourself congratulated for your success, so much so that, in the moment, you actually start to believe the hype – all the great things everybody is saying about you, about how invaluable you are to them". June's reflections led her to conclude that the urgency and importance was largely illusory, "the truth is you're only as good as your last accomplishment". Illusory, but necessary because the false sense of urgency and inflated sense of importance creates a vortex of stress and pressure in the workplace that sucks people into working an ungodly number of hours, at an untenable pace. Such an intense and demanding workplace leads to burn out, of course, but June was able to manage the stress fairly well, throughout her career. And the high-stress environment brought out the best in June on many fronts. She was able to put her skills and abilities to use in ways that were constructive, contributed to the success of the team, and were held in regard by people she respected. Still, it seemed there was a part of her that engaged in the madness because it also quieted the voice inside that told her she was "just an uneducated secretary". June's experience of professional achievement and the purpose her career gave to her life walked alongside her self-doubt and shame, no doubt complicating her decision to retire and contributing to her feelings of a real and profound loss at the end of her career.

I’ve heard it said that tension surfaces in our lives when the job is done, when the children are raised, or the project is complete. It’s why the period following a big event, like a wedding or Christmas, carries about it a sense of dread, for when the busyness subsides we are available to ask ourselves “what’s next?”, and that can be a scary question. If we can maintain a sense of busyness and urgency in our current context we can more easily perpetuate a false sense of purpose and self-importance, without necessarily having to do anything purposeful or particularly important.

During the year that June took off, she took time to re-evaluate her priorities and re-assess her values. She shifted her attention to her friends and family, attending to relationships that she had given short shrift in the past. She put time and energy into quieter, less chaotic pursuits. She found herself sleeping better, playing the piano again, reading, and enjoying her garden and home more. When the time came for her to finally decide, she was very clear about what she wanted to do and felt really good about her decision: “To leave my work when I did and feeling so positive and so genuinely happy, I mean, that was a thrill.” Why was this time of evaluation so critical to her process? What voices, what beliefs, what thoughts influenced her most? These are questions I explore in the next chapter.

Peter

Peter is a university-educated Caucasian man, in his late 30’s. An engineer by training, his life journey has taken him down a different vocational path than many of his contemporaries. Peter loved being an engineer, it was what he always wanted to be growing up. “I was bred to be a lawyer, doctor or engineer – and I chose engineering”.

He is a very soft spoken person, but it's obvious he is smart and driven, very precise in how he communicates, and attentive to detail, all qualities that would lend themselves well to the engineering profession. He entered this profession in the late nineties, advancing through the ranks and working in his chosen field, for over 10 years, for well-established and respected industrial firms. Things started very well. His first full-time position as engineer turned out to be what he described as his "dream job", based in Vancouver. Then, only a couple of years later, in 2000, Peter left that job to move to Toronto so that he could support his wife who was studying toward an advanced degree in her field. Any sense of loss he experienced in leaving the dream job seemed to be greatly mitigated by the fact that he was able to re-establish his engineering career in Ontario, where he worked until 2008. Peter and his wife were, by any number of measures, a successful two-career-couple who – with the birth of their first child in 2007 – needed to figure out how to be an equally successful two-career family. But they soon came to the conclusion that the demands of two professional careers was too much. That was not the kind of family they wanted to be. A time of discernment and decision-making ensued, as they tried to figure out how to realign their individual careers in ways that would reflect their family priorities. A pinch point came in the summer of 2008 when they moved to London, Ontario so that Peter's wife could complete her internship. She felt her best choice was to do her internship in London. They explored their options relative to commuter strategies and day-care alternatives, but in the end they decided that Peter would leave his position to become a stay-at-home dad for their baby girl.

Peter, like June, didn't lose his job – not in the usual sense. He left it. It was a risky, self-initiated career transition, complicated by a profound sense of loss that

extended itself into practical matters – financial implications for example, as he was faced with a loss of income, with living costs to cover and debts to pay: “that was another issue too, we had about $50,000 in student loans between the two of us when we came out of school and a car loan that we had to pay off…”. Being a engineer, as well paying as it is, helped pay those debts – that kind of income is hard to walk away from. But the loss of financial gain and security was mitigated by the potential of his wife’s professional options. What gets lost in a voluntary job loss can’t typically be quantified by just money. Leaving his chosen vocation, Peter walked away from a workplace where he excelled and was respected by his colleagues. Over the course of a decade, he was becoming a successful engineer where his expertise was valued and nurtured. His work at the engineering firm gave him the opportunity to get better and better at something that mattered to him. The loss of his professional identity, and the elimination of the self-actualizing experience of being good and getting better, had a very detrimental impact on Peter’s sense of self: “So I decided I was going to be a stay at home dad for a year… We’re talking about identity and what you do [for a living]… that was – excuse my language –one of the biggest mind-f**ks. It was really, really hard.”

Peter also encountered a significant loss in terms of social status. His friends and even some family members couldn’t understand why he would turn his back on such a promising and prestigious career. The prevailing values of an individualistic, consumer-driven, capitalistic society made his decision difficult to defend, but his own clearly articulated value system – his “family first framework”, as he put it – made it easier to explain, and for people to accept. The fact, however, that he’d left his job to stay at home and raise his daughter was simply incomprehensible to most people. His masculinity was

questioned. “I was born and bred to be the bread winner… for a guy who all of a sudden was a stay at home dad… it was such a twist.” Peter and his wife made choices that challenged our society’s acceptable, socially-constructed gender roles: men don’t give up successful professions to follow their wives, and they certainly don’t become stay-at-home dads in the process.

The other profound loss that Peter experienced came as more of a surprise to him. It was the loss of intellectual stimulation. He talked about how, as a stay at home parent he was not even around adults very much, whereas “as a professional you’re always working your mind all the time, with people, it’s like a muscle that atrophies cause you’re not using it”. While Peter was intentional about making social connections in his new context – joining parenting groups and participating in many and various mother-and-tot events and activities (and yes, they were exclusively moms) – it did not provide the degree or kind of stimulation that he was accustomed to. This is not a gendered issue. Many mothers of young children will tell how isolating and mind-numbing raising a baby can be. And it’s not a measure of how much a parent loves their child. The demands of parenting a baby are many and significant – but they are not qualitatively the same as the kind of demands one encounters in a professional workplace. The loss of intellectual stimulation was not something Peter was able to come to terms with over the course of the year that he was a stay-at-home dad. While staying at home with his baby girl was very important to him, and extremely rewarding in a myriad of ways, he came to realize he needed something more. In 2009, Peter and his wife discerned that they needed to move back to British Columbia, where they could rely on the support of their extended family so that they could both participate in the workforce.

Peter's return to the work world did not mean, as it turned out, a return to the world of engineering. Not only were secure engineering jobs harder to come by (thanks, in part, to the fact that the industry was increasingly outsourcing the kind of work Peter specialized in), but Peter's extended family – a lynch-pin in their decision to return – lived on Vancouver Island, and Peter's specialized field of engineering existed in Vancouver. Close, but not close enough. He would need to start over. Peter now put his analytical skills to work on his own behalf. He did his research, applied his personal set of analytics, and determined that a career as a Financial Advisor would draw on his particular set of skills, interests and abilities. It would also allow him the kind of autonomy and independence he needed as a father and a husband, and would provide him with meaningful and gainful employment. An area of interest for Peter is ethical funds. His approach in the financial realm, as in the engineering realm, was to search out aspects of those vocations that held particular meaning for him, consistent with his personal values.

Peter's career up and downs, twists and turns, stops and starts were largely the result of his desire to live a values-driven life. This isn't easy to do. Achieving professional success under these terms requires a tremendous amount of confidence and no small amount of faith. It requires risk-taking, which walks hand-in-hand with effort and failure. Is the price worth it? What is professional success? How do we measure it, if not by how prestigious or lucrative our position? These are questions I revisit in the next chapter.

John

John began working in the health services field almost 45 years ago. He held many different positions within this field over the years, but in general his career trajectory followed a path of increased responsibility and remuneration. John began working as a nursing orderly in the late sixties, then about midway through his career he began shifting away from direct patient care into hospital services. As satisfying as working with patients had been, John was particularly proficient as a coordinator of services, and over the next decade he worked his way up through the organization into supervisory and then management positions. By 2005, he was fully ensconced as the manager of a large team in the laundry and housekeeping service department of a big city hospital. Still, the steady and mostly forward progress of his career was impeded on several occasions. There were some lateral moves, a few strategic missteps causing undue stress, and even a demotion in 1986, as a result of government restructuring – but he'd always persevered, earning valuable seniority along away. Then, at the age of 62 after a lifetime working in the health services industry, losing his job "hit him like a train", to use his words.

In 2010, in the midst of a long-running, highly publicized (and polarized) government cost-cutting exercise – the Health Authority gave notice of job cuts at the hospital where John worked. John knew his department would be directly affected – and he knew, in his heart, that his own position would be eliminated. He'd had some time to ready himself for this circumstance – after all he and other hospital employees had been living and working for many months in this climate of uncertainty and instability – so when the call came he was ready. As ready as he could be.

John's position was to be eliminated, along with 3 other positions in his department. He was forced to leave his employment, an involuntary job loss. He knew it was coming but, in his own words, he still felt "crushed". He was offered a standard management severance package, with an option to keep working until the end of the year. He took this option, and stayed on for a few more months. It was a time of profound fermentation and frustration.

Because John was nearing retirement age, there was an assumption by senior management that he would want to leave under that mantle. John, on the other hand, had had no intention of retiring – and no desire to frame his departure as such. His job was being eliminated, plain and simple, and that was the only reason he was leaving. So when a staff memo was distributed, congratulating John on his retirement and lauding his years of service – he was furious: "I carried that anger for a long time… it was ripping me apart. I was mad. It just sapped so much goodness out of me". Whatever the intention of the Executive who released that memo – and John will forever question that Executive's motives – it was salt in John's wound. This was not a true telling of his story, and the injustice of that contributed significantly to his feelings of disempowerment. The fact of losing his job was something he had no control over; it was "like a switch being turned off". To have that experience described in a way that John felt was misleading and untrue was too much. "People would ask me [and I'd say] no I'm not retiring, my job is going and I'm losing three staff as well and we'll all walk out together… I was fine with that. [I didn't want people to think I] was taking the easy way out by retiring. No, that was bullshit… Then all of a sudden this memo came out announcing '[John's] retiring' and I saw it and… I… yes I am a angry person when really

pushed… It was signed by the [Chief Operating Officer], and I thought, you son of a b*tch. ” John went over his boss's head to complain. The congratulatory message was retracted, and a new announcement – drafted by John, himself, and the Chief Executive Officer – was released instead. Being able to tell his story directly to the CEO, and working with him on a new memo brought John some comfort – he described the CEO as "a very respectful man" – but the confusion around how his departure had originally been communicated, combined with the utter sense of powerlessness he felt, forced John to a breaking point. The indignity and humiliation of losing his life's work welled up in him. Feelings of bitterness grew in the places where he was trying to nurture a sense of acceptance. He was resentful and angry, and felt like the whole ordeal was "sapping the goodness" out of him. He had given his life to his work, and was overwhelmed with the sense of injustice of having it taken away from him this way. His emotions and thoughts continued to buffet him. On one hand, he was able to rationalize why his job had been eliminated, and not take it personally. He understood the vagaries of the health industry, and how inherently insecure jobs in this sector were. In fact, he talked quite extensively about how, while he had always had a job, he had never really enjoyed the feeling of job security. He shared a story of how, on his first day of work, over 40 years ago, he came into a room where the hospital orderlies were talking about the possibility of lay-offs. It had always been a stressful and unstable existence. On the other hand, the cold, hard reality of actually losing his job and the circumstances around the loss continued to torment him. And, with a vengeance, he blamed the man who had led that flawed process.

John's job ended at the end of 2010. In the months following his departure, he grew increasingly depressed. Like many men of his age and era, John's personal identity was deeply entwined with his professional identity. Losing his job meant he had lost his identity. The unanswerable questions – who am I going to be, what am I going to do? – loomed large. John was simply not ready to stop working – and he was not yet willing to make the adjustment into retired life. He had certainly anticipated retirement, and accepted it would be part of his future. He had hobbies and interests that would serve him well when the time came to retire but, as far as he was concerned, that time had not yet come. Between severance and savings, John and his wife were not looking at financial ruin, so income was not their overriding concern. His deepest, most abiding concerns could not be measured using money. His work had always given him a sense of purpose, and that sense of purpose was gone: "I gave my life [to this career], and it just feels so unjust [to lose it like this]."

After being unemployed for more than a year, John and his wife (who had retired from the health services field) took a contract to consult on the restructuring of a suburban health-care facility. Their role was to help the organization transition into a new and improved support services system (laundry, housekeeping and kitchen services). This was a perfect match with John's experience, skills and abilities. It was a short-term project, lasting nine weeks, but during that brief reprieve John got his bearings again. This temporary return to the work world felt like "a breath of fresh air". He had the chance once again to do what he was good at, and his sense of purpose returned. The social connections and collegiality, in particular, filled him with vigor.

I interviewed John shortly after this contract had come to an end, and it was obvious to me, meeting him for the first time, that it had been a very positive experience for him. It had also been a tremendous amount of work jammed into a short period of time, and he was glad it was done so he could catch his breath. He was also anticipating the future. There were a couple of other similar contracts on the horizon, but nothing firm yet and he contemplated how, once again, his life was entering into a state of anxious insecurity. Would he find an outlet for his considerable skills, or would he be thrust back into the isolation and purposelessness that characterized his life after losing his job the year before?

One thing he realized about his work-life – thanks in part to this brief interlude of temporary employment – was how much he enjoyed social interaction with his staff and co-workers in the course of a regular workday. He said he was happiest when he was surrounded by the conversation and noise of people. He reflected on how useful he felt when people came to him for support, advice or direction. "Most people just need a listening ear, someone who is genuinely listening to you", and John considered being there for the staff as one of his most important professional roles. His desire to continue doing that – coupled by his deep disappointment that his own boss had not been that for him, in the final weeks and months of his career – continue to leave their mark.

Whether John's future is in consulting or whether he's able to bridge into retirement, is a story that continues to unfold. Will what he's learned about himself along the way help him direct his future? Will it help him find the strength to adapt to circumstances even as they continue to change around him? We will explore these questions further in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 4 - Job Loss as Spiritual Crisis

> *The debilitating aspects of contemporary work are a challenge, a summons to deepen involvement and commitment – on the part of women and men – to the work of reorganizing, repatterning the structures of work.* – Madonna Kolbenschlag

There is so vast a body of literature on the subject of spiritual crisis, that it was difficult to set perimeters for this study. Different religious traditions have *endless* views on the topic – the experience of a religious person questioning God or losing faith in God has always been understood as a central tenant of spiritual crisis. Even so spirituality (and crises thereof) is no longer the exclusive domain of religion, as there are increasing numbers of people who describe themselves as spiritual not religious – whose belief systems may not name God – but who recognize the emotional, mental, physical and *spiritual* aspects of self as being equally important. So despite the concept of a spiritual crisis having deep religious roots, religious and non-religious worldviews now intermingle in interesting and complex ways. Take, for example, the phrase *Dark Night of the Soul,* from the 16th century Spanish poem of that name, which provides a widely appreciated metaphor for spiritual crisis. While the poem, along with its deeply religious and theological commentary, was written several hundred years ago by the Carmelite priest, Saint John of the Cross, it has been popularized well beyond the "Christian spiritual tradition in which it was born" (Dura` -Vila` & Dein 2008, 544).

Academic philosophers having been exploring the topic just as long as the priests and theologians , and their influences can be found in modern day fields like applied philosophy. Other helping professions (e.g., social work, nursing, psychology) in the

secular world are beginning to recognize spiritual wellness (and its inverse) as a factor in one's overall health and wellness. So, in addition to a plethora of religious writing on this subject, past and present, there is a growing amount of secular literature looking at the cognitive, emotional and psychological aspects of spiritual care. It is abundantly clear that a spiritual crisis doesn't just happen to religious followers or leaders – it can happen to anyone in distress.

Despite the abundance of writing on the subject, in general, there is not a lot of literature on the phenomenon of job loss, in particular, as an antecedent of a spiritual crisis. Ironically, there is both an *overwhelming* amount of information available on the topic of spiritual crisis, but *not enough*. A further complication is that the term spiritual crisis can mean practically anything. "The word spiritual and its association with religion and culture are ambiguous. In the literature, spiritual crisis has generally been used as a 'catch-phrase', which could encompass many different phenomena" (Agrimson & Taft 2008, 455). Contemporary thinking about spiritual crisis is so vast and varied that it can mean practically anything (and therefore, almost nothing) – but the experience is so universal that it most certainly means *something*.

In order for me to see the forest for the trees, I first had to clarify my *own* understanding of what a spiritual crisis was and what it meant to me relative to my belief in God. This understanding grew over years, emerging from what I'd read, observed, heard, and experienced. Ultimately, I concretized this understanding, specific to this research project, in the form of three *theological themes.* Then, in turn, I used these themes to help me examine and analyze the personal stories of job loss of the three individuals who participated in this research project. It was an iterative process, wherein

I revisited the writing and the transcripts many times, sometimes to define (or refine) the themes, sometimes to test or apply them. Ultimately, I used these themes to set clear perimeters around my examination of spiritual crisis:

- *Spiritual Crisis: as something that separates us from our essential self*,
- *Spiritual Crisis: as something that damages our relationships with others*, and
- *Spiritual Crisis: as something that strips us of our sense of purpose*.

While these themes emerged from my own observations and experience, they were informed by my the research of others, and when compared and contrasted to other theories, I found them to be consistent and convincing. For example, I tested them, after the fact, against a Concept Analysis of spiritual crisis written by Laurie Agrimson and Lois Taft. They defined spiritual crisis "as a unique form of grieving or loss, marked by a profound questioning of or lack of meaning in life, in which an individual or community reaches a turning point, leading to a significant alteration in the way life is viewed. Possible antecedents include sudden acute illness and loss of important relationships. Potential consequences may include physical and emotional responses" (Agrimson & Taft 2008, 454). In coming to their definition, Agrimson & Taft analyzed the concept of spiritual crisis and identified three attributes of spiritual crisis that validated the themes I had developed. Spiritual crisis 1) "involves profound questioning about the meaning of one's life", 2) "grief or a deep feeling of loss, often as a result of disruption in a person's attachment or connection to themselves, others or a higher power (God)", and 3) "it presents as a critical moment, turning point or juncture in which a person is changed by the crisis". They concluded by suggesting that "being spiritual is part of what makes us human, and it should not be defined by boundaries of religion or

cultural background; a more open approach is needed in order to apply this concept more universally".

As it happens, I had developed terms for understanding spiritual crisis that allowed me to undertake a credible and reasonably open approach to my examination of the experience of job loss as something that can cause one to have a spiritual crisis. Here is how I came to the conclusions.

In the early 90's, a decade into my career in television broadcasting, I had my first encounter with job loss. Changes were being made at an executive level that didn't include me. I was given a significant severance package and asked to move along. My first response was one of relief. I had been through a tremendous amount of personal change in the years preceding, which had been difficult but had brought with them growth and healing. From this new perspective I had begun questioning if television was the career for me. Then I had what I can only describe as an epiphany while attending a workshop about the "power of television advertising". At one point in his presentation the keynote speaker had enthusiastically announced that the greatest thing about television advertising is that "it could convince people to buy things they didn't even need". I was horrified by this pronouncement. I could no longer rationalize or deny that I was a part of an industry so manipulative and self-serving in its promotion of rampant and conspicuous consumerism. This was a life-changing moment for me, and I immediately began planning my departure. Still, the day (some months later) that I was called into the CEO's office and told that my services were no longer needed came as a horrible shock. On one hand, I wanted to leave so this was like being handed a gift (in the very tangible form of financial compensation); on the other hand I felt like I'd been

kicked in the teeth. As Armand Larive says, in *After Sunday: A Theology of Work,* "losing a job brings not only a severe spiritual crisis of having a big part of one's raison d'être jerked away but also a feeling of being torn from ordinary human transactions, of not being needed, of deflated self-worth" (Larive 2004,1).

This was the first of what was to be several diversions and detours on my career journey. In fact, diversions became the norm. Questions of capacity and competency were never the issue – I always got good references – and so I kept-on-keeping-on, often even excelling and thriving because of the changes – but I know now that I was scarred by it all, by the broken promise that said if you work hard, you'll succeed. And I realized at some point that the insecurity and anxiety I felt were never going to go away and that I had to figure out how to learn to live with them. So began my exploration of faith through theology. I chose theology as an academic framework to better understand the impact that change has on individuals and society in general, and the uncertainty and anxiety that it generates. I had been raised a Christian within a very socially conscious and liberal progressive denomination, but had had little involvement after I graduated high school. Now**,** as a middle-aged adult**,** I picked up where I left off when I was 18 years old, and began to see if I could ground my life and work in Christian stories and experience.

In *The Reinvention of Work*, Matthew Fox, an author, theologian, priest and spiritualist, says "[w]ork comes from inside out; work is the expression of our soul, our inner being. It is unique to the individual; it is creative. Work is an expression of the Spirit at work in the world through us. Work is that which puts us in touch with others, not so much at the level of personal interaction, but at the level of service in the

community" (Fox 2004, 5). Such a profoundly intimate and important view of work helps explain why job loss – involuntary or voluntary – can bring about a spiritual crisis.

I would suggest that we can learn something valuable about job loss as a spiritual crisis by looking carefully at the concept of vocation. The word "vocation" comes from Latin *vocātiō* a calling, from *vocāre* to call, suggesting that something bigger than ourselves, or someone – like "God" – calls us to our daily work. This may be an easy concept to accept, if your calling is to be a priest or even something grand like a brain surgeon. It's harder to take this idea of divine calling at face-value if one's work is at the local Starbucks. But the difference is not in the occupation itself, it is in the way we vest the occupation with purpose and meaning. Armand Larive suggests "the question of *what there is to be* should be addressed before asking *what there is to do*" (Larive 2004, 28). What there is to be operates at a deeper level – at the level of purpose and meaning – and it can be applied to whatever position, occupation or job one is in. The call is to be "not just a truck driver, but a reliable truck driver; not just a homemaker but a caring, nurturing homemaker; not just a grade school teacher but a creative and inspiring teacher" (Larive 2004, 28). Discerning who we are to be, in relation to what we are to do, engenders a depth of purpose that forces us to reject the notion of a divided life, wherein who we are at work is different than who we are at home or at play. If vocation is a call *to be* – then it is a divine calling and not just an invitation to a particular occupation. And so it follows that we would be compelled to bring our best and highest self to our every endeavour, whatever our endeavour. "[Our] integrity requires that [our] life be of one piece" (Larive 2004, 30).

Larive's emphasis on seeking out what we are meant to be, draws directly upon Paul Tillich's 1952 classic, *The Courage to Be*, which is arguably one of the most significant books of its time on religion and Christian theology. Tillich used the states of "being" and "non-being" to describe the difference between living a life that is meaningful and fruitful, a life that meets with our own approval in the face of a base inclination; and one that is devoid of meaning, fruitless and full of self-condemnation. Our ability to rise above ourselves, Tillich teaches, requires the "courage to be", which is "the ethical act in which [man] affirms [his] own being in spite of those elements of [his] existence which conflict with [his] essential self-affirmation." (Tillich 1952, 3). In other words, it takes courage to affirm our essential goodness in the ongoing presence of our animalistic fears and innate tendency towards self-loathing. A sustained inability to affirm ourselves results in a profound experience of existential anxiety – a spiritual crisis.

> These tensions between the various forms of being and non-being create anxiety, according to Tillich, an anxiety that is a normal and abiding state of life. In itself, this anxiety is not necessarily bad, because it can promote creative and healthy ways of coping; but – if one is not careful – it can also lead to despair and destruction. Coping with the tensions between being and non-being is what constitutes the spiritual issue, and it always manifests itself religiously; that is to say, this sort of coping is always basically spiritual and *must necessarily* require a religious answer (Larive 2004, 35).

To define religion, Larive turns to Robert Bellah, whom he quotes, saying "a set of symbolic forms and acts which relate humanity to ultimate conditions of human existence" (Larive 2004, 35). Larive goes on to say that this definition doesn't require a "formal belief in God" or an affiliation with a religious tradition or institution. "It does, however, require a commitment to a meaning that is 'ultimate' in the sense of being self-transcendent, that is, a projection – either real or imagined – that seeks a meaning for living that goes beyond one's own self and circumstances at any given moment in order to provide a rationale and support for existence" (Larive 2004, 35). In this way, a traumatic experience of job loss can be understood as a spiritual crisis, even if we don't talk about it in strictly religious or theological terms.

That job loss separates us not only from ourselves, but also from others – our colleagues, our family and friends – is an idea worth pursuing. The role that our work plays in terms of social standing in relation to our family, community and society as a whole is well established. It also situates us within a particular social network of co-workers and colleagues. I think this is important from a theological point of view because of how it speaks to the sacred sense of belonging, of being in a secure relationship, which religion so intentionally seeks to provide. Derived from the Latin word *religiō*, the origins of the word religious are obscure, but there is some contemporary thinking that points to the derivation of the word *ligare* 'bind, connect', probably from a prefixed *re-ligare*, i.e. *re* (again) + *ligare* or 'to reconnect' (Harpur 2004, 146). To "bind and connect" fits well with what we are coming to know about relationships and the nature of God. God as both transcendent and imminent is a broadly accepted Christian theology – in which the divine exists concurrently and immediately

within the material world and outside of it. This relational concept is being further refined into a theology that one might describe as more integrated. Simply put, "according to the new view, all of reality is active and interactive, a vast web of mutual relationships" (Palmer 1990, 53). In this is the very real sense that God *is* the relationship – that God, by whatever name, is ultimate reality and a relational reality. It's a theological relationship in which each of us plays an integral part. We belong to God as we belong to each other. "We are a part, and only a part, of the great community of creation. If we can act in ways that embrace this fact, ways that honor the gifts we receive through our membership in this community, we can move beyond the despair that comes when we believe that our act is the only act in town" (Palmer 1990,53). This too speaks to the spiritual crisis created by job loss. When we lose our jobs we are separated in profound ways from the world around us; our sense of belonging is ripped asunder. We lose our daily connection with coworkers, our grief and humiliation often alienates us from our friends and family, the loss of social status can even separate us from acquaintances and from those whose paths we cross in the wider community. Nobody wants your business card when you're unemployed.

Finally, a word about purpose. Daniel Pink, author of *Drive: The Surprising Truth about What Motivates Us* (2009), theorizes that the secret of success lies not in what he considers outdated notions of external rewards, but in the deeply human need to direct our own lives, to learn and create. In other words, if what we do gives us purpose, we will feel successful. He approaches the question of purpose from a psychological perspective, not an overtly spiritual one, but his ideas of internal and external reward resonate with me. External rewards are, of course, things like money and prestige,

internal rewards are, in his view, “the freedom, challenge, and purpose of the undertaking itself” (Pink 2009,76). Purpose in our work lives may take the form of service to others – as it does for those in the helping professions – but, as discussed earlier, if what we do, whatever we do, can be expressed consistent with our personal values (as an expression of who we are called to be) then it can imbue us with a sense of purpose and meaning, which, Pink suggests, is also tremendously motivating. “Think about yourself. Does what energizes you – what gets you up in the morning and propels you through the day – come from the inside or the outside?” (Pink 2009, 76). The simple assertion is this: when the work someone does gives them a sense of purpose, it is rewarding and invigorating. To lose such work, then, is a grief-filled and demoralizing experience – a spiritual crisis. Parker Palmer puts it this way, “vitality depends on being in places [where one] can play [their] roles. Put them in places where their competencies are not required, and they find themselves on the thin-edge of non-being” (Parker 1990,41).

Through this examination, I have concluded that the trauma of job loss can create a spiritual crisis, and it can be described and understood according to three themes: 1) as something that separates us from our essential self, 2) as something that damages our relationships with others, and 3) as something that strips us of our sense of purpose, which I’ll use to examine and analyze, from a theological perspective, the personal stories of job loss of the three individuals who participated in this research project.

CHAPTER 5 – Analysis, Synthesis and Conclusions

> *"It's perhaps easier now than ever before to make a good living; it's perhaps harder than ever before to stay calm, to be free of career anxiety."* - Alain de Botton

The specific question driving my research project is, "What were these people's experience of job loss; did they derive meaning from their experience and if so did it help them through the experience?" As planned, I analyzed the structure and content of the narratives the co-researchers shared with me, and used two sets of analytics – workplace analytics and theological analytics – to develop an understanding of the phenomenon of "job loss" as it was experienced by these three individuals. The workplace analytics rely on management theory and/or behavioural psychology, whereas the theological analytics (which I developed in Chapter 3) provide a means for understanding job loss as a spiritual crisis.

Before presenting my conclusions as per the data analysis, I'd like to take a few steps back to the data collection stage. As described in Chapter 1, rather than following a typical interview style using a set of preformulated questions, I developed a conversation framework that would allow a more open expression and exchange of ideas between the research participants and me. This approach allowed me to engage in the conversation rather than conduct it; where I could care about, not just passively listen to and record the stories the participants were telling me. I chose this methodology because it helps equalize the relationship between researcher and subject, and allows for enough ease and openness wherein

streams of thought can emerge more naturally than in a traditional interview mode. As Franklin (1997, 101) put it when describing her use of the discourse model in a non-traditional interview, “The spontaneity of our exchange enabled [the person I was interviewing] to articulate half formed thoughts in a way that she – as well as I – found illuminating”.

In addition to encouraging a more authentic exchange, I found that this model of discourse created what I would describe as an intimate experience. It was an honour for me to listen to their recollections of what, for each of them in different ways, was a life-changing experience. This conversational process was far more effective than I expected it to be. It was in itself – quite apart from what I've gleaned from the analysis and synthesis – a powerful learning experience. I observed that this process was a sort of invitation to the participants, one that made space for them to explore and talk openly about their experience of losing their job, which, in itself, appeared to help them to derive meaning from the experience. For example, I ran into Peter many months after my conversation with him and he told me, once again, how much he appreciated it; how, much to his surprise, the conversation itself had been personally beneficial to him, helping him make sense of the whole experience. June and John offered similar accounts. This strongly suggests that their subjective understanding of their job loss experience was actually altered by the very act of sharing or describing it, a finding that is echoed in research done by other researchers, using similar approaches: “ What I did not foresee was the importance of weaving the narratives, that is to say, the benefit of the process itself. [My research

participants] told me that they made sense of their experiences through our discussions [… and] had been able to focus on the experiences themselves, express them, and to consider what they meant" (Young 2003, 100).

The power of conversation is not a new concept to me, and while I did not expect to see its benefits manifest so boldly in this research project, I was very pleased that it did, which is why I emphasize it here. I place a high value on clear communication and the art of conversation; these abilities are ones I rely on in the project management and congregational development work that I do.

> In her book *Fierce Conversations*, Susan Scott discusses the importance of the conversation. Scott believes that there is a genuine hunger today for serious conversations – conversations which build our world of meaning, conversations during which we speak honestly in our own voices; conversations during which we connect with one another in meaningful ways. She suggests that careers and companies (and we can add congregations) succeed or fail one conversation at a time. The most valuable currency today is not money. Nor is it intelligence, attractiveness, or fluency in three-letter acronyms like CEO, CFO, and CIO. It is relationship. The conversation is the relationship (The United Church of Canada 2008, 239).

For these reasons – and based on the feedback I got from John, June and Peter – I feel confident saying that this research project has been of value simply

because of the conversations that took place within it. As noted earlier, my co-researchers said their participation in this project was meaningful for them, as it was for me. Perhaps because our conversations dealt with matters of ultimate concern – with existential questions of meaning and purpose – they were themselves a spiritual experience – conversation as a spiritual event. At very least, by sharing their experiences with me Peter, June and John shed light on how ascribing meaning to their experience helped them come to terms with their loss.

I. Workplace Analytics

Established thinking in the late twentieth-century identified a well-worn path for career advancement that included five "developmental markers" over the lifespan of a traditional career: Growth, Exploration, Establishment, Maintenance, and Disengagement (Ebberwein et.al 2004, 293). Growth and exploration focused on the learning and training phase of life, which shifted to establishment once a student transitions into a career position, then moves into maintenance mode before gliding into disengagement. I have shown in the preceding chapters that while this model held true for my parents' generation, it is increasingly out of step with workers' realities today. It became "less applicable as more and more adults faced economic and organizational change that sometimes left their careers in turmoil" (Ebberwein et. al. 2004, 293). This experience of turmoil was certainly the case for John, who (at 62) felt he "should have been preparing himself for retirement not too far down the road" and found himself laid off instead. This abrupt and ungracious dismissal robbed him of a well earned, well timed retirement. Furthermore, the fact that his departure was originally described by the Human Resource

department as a retirement – added insult to his injury. We hear his rage at having his departure misrepresented, when he describes how he responded to being congratulated on his retirement by his CEO: "[Andy], for ****'s sake, my job's been deleted – I am *not* retiring"! And so it was that John – who had worked for some 40 years in the same field – never got to retire. The injustice of this was not lost on John.

In the vacuum left behind by the demise of the traditional school-to-work-retirement trajectory, the construct of Career Adaptability emerged. Defined as "readiness to cope with changing work and work conditions" by researchers Mirvis and Hall (1994, 372), career adaptability speaks to the need for employers and employees to re-imagine the course of career development. Mirvis and Hall predicted that, as the twenty-first-century rolls out, the path will be "more cyclical – involving periodic cycles of re-skilling" (1994, 368). In addition it will be marked by more lateral, rather than upward, movement and culminate in a phased retirement". This trend toward lateral movement (or, as the case may be, downward movement) is epitomized by Peter's experience. Peter left his engineering position to be a stay-at-home father for a year – a decision he felt was necessary because it was the right choice for his family. It was a tremendously difficult change, for which he could find no resources or supports, even though it was clearly one of the most difficult transitions he'd ever encountered. As Peter put it, "talking about identity as it relates to what you do [for a living], that was – pardon my language – one of the biggest mind-****'s that could possibly happen… that was really, really hard".

Recognizing the challenges of such a radical departure, human resource managers and organizational development experts began to develop techniques and tools to help workers manage the transition. Ebberwein, et. al (2004, 297-301) identified three

categories to frame their consideration of career adaptability: *adaptive responses*, *contextual challenges*, and *insights into transition*. *Adaptive responses* dealt primarily with the attitudes needed to manage career changes – things like anticipating change and readying oneself through planning and goal-setting. *Contextual challenges* recognized that practicalities like lost income, family expectations, and the fact that how an employer communicates about the job loss can have a hugely negative impact on a person's ability to make the transition (the point about the employer's communication role is something that was clearly demonstrated in John's experience, wherein he was so traumatized when his job loss was misrepresented to his co-workers). *Insights into transition* touched on some of the harder to classify aspects of job loss, the *who-am-I-* and *how-do-I-fit-in-the-bigger-picture-* type questions that come up for people when they lose their jobs. But I emphasize, Ebberwein, et al. only touched on it.

Even those research projects that purport to focus on "empowering employees" seem to miss the importance of those qualities that are at the root of authentic empowerment. The stated goal of a Stats Canada Workplace and Employee Survey (WES) was to identify, from the employee's perspective, what previous researchers had missed:

> Thanks to earlier surveys, researchers have a good understanding of workers' outcomes regarding wages and wage inequality, job stability and layoffs, training, job creation, and unemployment. What is missing on the employees' side is the ability to link these changes to events taking place in firms. Such a connection is necessary if we hope to understand the

> association between labour market changes and pressures stemming from global competition, technological change, and the drive to improve human capital. Thus, one primary goal of WES is to establish a link between events occurring in workplaces and the outcomes for workers (Stats Canada 2003, 4).

Unfortunately, the outcomes they measured were "earnings, training, tenure and technology" (Stats Canada 2003, 5), which are not what employees care most about at all. These "external rewards", which I described earlier, are the kind of material benefits that – beyond a baseline of necessity – are not intrinsically motivating.

Furthermore, and by its own admission, market research of this type "concentrates on the coping responses or behaviours necessary for one to handle the career change tasks at hand" (Ebberwein, et al. 2004, 293), and not on meaning or beliefs. Embedded here is the assumption that we can handle or control our circumstances through will and effort. In fact, the organizational management and psychological success model promotes the idea that taking control over one's future is better than living with the uncertainty of the situation (Ebberwein, et al. 2004, 293), which is starkly at odds with the worldview that underlines my theology. Yes, we are the authors of our own stories – and we must engage in life with intention and integrity – but in many ways the outcomes are beyond our control, subject to randomness and dictates (and potential abuse of power) of others. While I can agree that pragmatic activities like planning ahead, setting goals, and developing a savings strategy are useful and necessary steps to take in anticipation of a job loss, they don't go far enough. June, for example, took

considerable steps to anticipate and prepare herself for upcoming changes. "I'm a planner… [financial planning] gives you freedom to make other choices, so we were really lucky in the sense that we had done a lot of planning and our goals materialized." Still, her adjustment to becoming someone who no longer "worked" took a long time, and was emotionally very difficult. Planning for the future can make a positive difference, but all the planning in the world doesn't bring healing to a feeling of being "disposed of", which is how June described herself at one point in her up and down, distinctly non-linear job loss experience.

I would posit that job loss is only partially described by behavioural theory – understanding that loss also as a spiritual crisis can help one live with a sense of peace amid uncertainty. Put another way, learning to live with uncertainty in an ever-changing world is a practical approach to life, as well as a spiritual one.

II. Theological Analytics

As per the research methodology I have previously outlined, I reviewed and distilled information from each participant's stories, listening to the specific and unique details of what they had each gone through, and identifying various statements, explicit and implicit, regarding how it made them feel. I listened for a unified meaning of the experience that I could reasonably characterize as a spiritual crisis, based on the theological themes I developed in Chapter 3: Job loss as *something that separates us from our essential self*, *damages our relationships with others*, and *strips us of our sense of purpose*.

1) *Job loss as something that separates us from our essential self.*

In as much as vocation is a calling to "what there is to be", and not just an invitation to an occupation, each of the research participants were living out their calling. None of them were dismissive or disparaging of their jobs, each of them took what they did as a measure – at least, in part – of who they are. It wasn't just about the jobs they did, it was about how they did their jobs. Not surprisingly then, each of the participants shared stories of pain associated with the loss of their jobs. What seemed clear across the board is the notion that what we do (for a living) is tangled up (for better or worse) with who we are. John, for example, had been expecting the news of lay-offs for months, and even described hearing the news of his lay-off with calm steadiness – but then later that same day, upon arriving home, he said "The realization hit. I mean, I was devastated, I was just so crushed. So I phoned [my wife] and said I got my pink slip today… I was just a basket case, I just lost it sort of thing…". So, while it was clear that he'd spent time trying to prepare himself for the possibility that he would be laid off, that didn't mean he was prepared for how immensely personal the loss would feel. John saw himself not just as the Manager of Housekeeping and Laundry Services, but as a loyal and reliable manager, who fixed problems and cared about the people with whom he worked. It seems that when he lost the job, his perception was that he'd lost those qualities – reliability, trustworthiness, caring friend, critical thinker. As he put it, "I'd lost my identity". It was as if he associated those qualities more with his job than with himself. This perception, this experience of being separated from one's essential self, is a defining feature of a spiritual crisis.

Peter, on the other hand, had a fairly integrated sense of himself and his identity as engineer. In his late 30's, his role as father and husband were an articulated part of his identity. Peter understood himself as a smart, capable, caring, interested, nurturing person who was also an engineer, father, husband, and more. Still, he'd underestimated the value he and society placed upon his professional position. "You really become what you do. You know, like for me I became an engineer. That's what I did, that was my identity. I was introduced as an engineer, people made jokes about me thinking like an engineer...". Intelligence and technical acumen are qualities that were very much associated with his professional identity as an engineer, and so one of those most disorienting aspects of no longer being an engineer was that he no longer felt "smart" – there was a period in his life where he no longer saw his intellectual self as an active component of his whole self, his essential self. For someone like Peter, the loss of his engineering job – which was a place where his intelligence was challenged and nurtured daily – had to be replaced by something equally as intellectually stimulating. When it wasn't, he encountered something of a spiritual crisis. "It's not like taking care of a child is hard, it's not. It's pretty easy – you figure it out pretty quick." What made the transition so "brutally hard" for Peter was the absence of high calibre adult engagement. "As a professional, you're always working with your mind, all the time, with people. It's like that muscle that atrophies when you're not using it…". Adult relationships allow us to express our caring, support, interest and acceptance of one another in a mutually beneficial way. When we are estranged from others, we can quickly become estranged from ourselves and at risk of having a spiritual crisis.

June too exhibited this state of being separated from her essential self. “I hadn't really had any dreams over the last 2 or 3 years of my working life. I stopped dreaming and I thought that was weird, cause I'm a pretty active dreamer. Now, because you sleep differently when you actually have time for your own mental health, [I've started dreaming again]. The cost of a working life… work was very good to me, and I appreciated it and I was thankful, but at the end of it I'd had enough.” For June, the spiritual crisis manifested as a divided life. The demands and distractions of her job divided her from herself. Not that her job didn't give her a tremendous sense of purpose, it did, but in many ways it was all-consuming, leaving her little room or space for the *rest* of her. She didn't have enough time for the personal pursuits that brought her joy, like playing piano, gardening and reading, and she didn't spend enough time with the people she loved most. I would suggest that living a divided life is another way of describing an experience of being separated from our essential self and it can lead to burn-out, restlessness, trouble sleeping, anxiety and other expressions of a spiritual crisis. In a Parker Palmer podcast (Palmer 2009), he draws on Thomas Merton, when saying “every time I acted, or spoke, lived my external life in a way that contradicted my true self, I got into trouble”. He goes on to talk about how a divided life can be brought back into alignment – as it was in June's case. She was staying in her job long after it had ceased to be rewarding or fun, and had to ask herself why. She concluded that her compulsion to stay on was some sort of ego need – not a healthy, balanced desire – which prompted her to take stock, “So what you have to do is you have to enter a whole renegotiation with your partner, and with yourself, about what are the things that you love… what are the things that make you happy.” So it is that even if something has happened that has

separated us from our essential self, we can still be brought to wholeness again. This inward journey is inherently a religious act, a sacred act, because we are seeking meaning beyond ourselves, using whatever symbols and images are at our disposal. June's story, as it's told in Chapter 4, ends with her decision to retire – which she presented and I understood as a step towards wholeness. Of course, her life story continues to unfold. In the period following the original interview I was in contact with June – getting her approval on the narrative that I'd developed on her behalf – and she shared the following with me.

> There is definitely a postscript; by retiring/exiting/escaping when I did, I spent a considerable amount of time with both my mother and father - visiting, day trips, enjoyable conversations and tea times (as opposed to the twitchiness of blackberry watching and distraction of unsolved work problems). Sadly, my father passed away just before Christmas. All is not lost. There is no doubt that my decision to exit/retire and spend time with my father was truly a gift of time. The dragging of heels I endured was bound up in the fear of never attaining the kind of success I had if I had to start again. In fact, I have started again but in a wholesome new approach to living my life. It's a blessing to regain one's self and one's freedom.

In acknowledging the blessing it was to have regained her "self", June implies that she had lost her "self". I see this as a very clear expression of a spiritual crisis caused by having been separated from one's essential self;

something that I've demonstrated was evident, in varying degrees, in the experience of all three co-researchers.

2) *Job loss as something that damages our relationships with others.*

We are social beings, and so it's our interactions with others that shape our sense of self. The workplace is, for many of us, a place of intense and important social connection. "Few people want to be marginal to society, and the way one moves toward the centre is to have work that brings income or prestige" (Palmer 1990, 19). These ideas about relationship aren't just sociological or even spiritual thinking – they are starting to enter the world of science. The relatively new field of quantum physics, for example, offers a perspective very different from the mechanistic, Newtonian-influenced scientific worldview forged in the seventeenth-century. It provides insight into relational ways of being and the way the world is woven together in a web of interconnectedness. "Quantum physics challenges our thinking about observation and perception, participation and relationships, and the influences and connections that work across large and complex systems" (Wheatley 2006, xiii). Wheatley also supposes that the emerging worldview in science and many other disciplines, points to " a new (and ancient) awareness that we participate in a world of exquisite interconnectedness. We are learning to see systems rather than isolated parts and players" (Wheatley 2006, 158). When we treat workers and the workplace like a mechanical problem, we are badly out of step with ourselves. Oddly enough, Peter the engineer didn't approach his career as an engineering problem. For him his familial role and relationship was paramount, but this position separated him from many of his friends and former colleagues who didn't understand his choice to become a stay-at-home dad, to put his family first, above his career. His sense

of isolation was apparent when Peter told me how much he needed to connect and feel heard, "I needed to tell my story to someone". This bears out the theory that the act of talking, of telling our stories, is powerful. As noted above, the research process itself powerfully demonstrated to me how real sharing and authentic conversation can create connection, and lead to a deeper understanding of the experience being shared, for both the speaker and the listener.

The issue of relationship was relevant to June's experience as well. Her work, and the collegial relationships that June developed throughout her career mattered a great deal to her. And a long career in the public service brings with it many opportunities to connect – or not. In other words, she had many high-functioning, rewarding relationships, as well as some frustrating and failed ones. On the upside, she describes how the bonds of loyalty were established in the stress of the day to day requirements of the workplace: "You've been challenged, you've performed, you receive the loyalty and you create the next step in that relationship with that person." The more stressful the situation, the stronger the bonds, as when working on extremely difficult and high profile situations: "at the end of that day, you'd sit with the [boss] and you'd just be wrecked […] you'd just sit there and then you'd become reflective in that moment, and then you'd feel this trust and integrity because you'd come through something together and it couldn't be shared with anyone else." On the other hand, the pain and humiliation is profound when a connection is severed or fails to thrive, like the time June came to work to find all her personal effects stacked in a box outside her office, for everyone to see – she was being ignominiously transferred to another position, an experience she described as "simply heart wrenching". She had worked hard for a manager who rewarded her by

tossing her way. "What did we learn?", June asked rhetorically, "you don't invest in people that you don't like, who don't like you, you're never going to please them."

Establishing and maintaining healthy professional relationships takes time and commitment – it's very demanding. Having worked at creating a large network of healthy collegial relationships over the course of her entire career, it was extremely hard for June to leave them behind when she retired, but when she finally did she experienced a sense of relief. "I think for me, I'm going the other way. I'm thinking more reclusive behaviour, and I think it is just all part of the process of being allowed to do what I want to do. Because when you're actually on the treadmill for as long as I was… the mental exhaustion of it […] I'm very cognizant of the fact that I do have time now right now, and the last thing I want to do is give away this gift of clarity."

Obviously, maintaining a range and diversity of meaningful connections is critical to our personal well-being – and so our ability to achieve an appropriate life-work balance is critical. This isn't a balance that June was always able to maintain. While some of her feelings of guilt might be attributed to the overly-high expectations society has of mothers – June expressed regret that she simply wasn't there enough for her husband, or her kids as they grew up. "It takes a toll. Talk to my kids… yeah, I always made every volleyball game but I looked [like hell]. Your mind is going, your blackberry is going you're not really in the moment, you're trying to do everything."

In my interview with John, it was apparent that his relationship with his wife is very important to him, but his emphasis was clearly on his collegial relationships. "I don't think I could ever work alone" he said, "I need to be amongst people, I couldn't do a solo thing." He took a tremendous amount of satisfaction being in a workplace where

he could mentor and support the people he worked alongside. As a manager responsible for supervising staff he took a great deal of pride in his accessibility and his caring. For example, he characterized himself as someone who was quick to drop what he was doing to go and help someone else. When he lost his job, he knew he would keenly feel the loss of these relationships, "When I realized, ya know, [that my job would soon be over], when it really started sinking in – I [started thinking] I'm not going to be with these people everyday – I'm just going to be at home… and the realization of that was, well, I was just totally lost. Sure, when I was working I enjoyed my days off, but that started changing in those last few months… coz one of these Sunday nights, I won't have to go to work the next morning, and that really bothered me." It was, however, the failure of one relationship, in particular, that caused John the most pain. Given the nature of power and the implications of authority, the relationship a subordinate has with his/her supervisor is one of the most important and complex professional relationships he/she will ever have. This is never more so than when a job is being terminated. The Executive Director who laid John off was the same one he had been reporting to daily, in the workplace chain of command. From John's perspective, they had a productive professional relationship. But when John's job was terminated, so, too, was this relationship. John simply could not get over how his director had handled the whole affair. The director assumed that John would want to frame his departure as a voluntary retirement. John, on the other hand, was in no way ready to retire. In fact, he was outraged by the very idea because he believed that retirement should be a choice and he'd had no choice in the matter. At the time of the termination, the director seemed to be motivated by something other than John's expressed needs – and this felt like a bitter

betrayal to John. John despised his director for it – and it ended their relationship. We can only speculate on what exactly the director's motives were – perhaps it was to provide John with an opportunity to "save face", or perhaps it was about making himself feel better. Whether it was a matter of callous intention (the director didn't care about John) or a question of capacity (the director wasn't very good at doing this very difficult thing), it points to the importance of the employer's role in the process of letting an employee go. Ebberwein's (2004) research shows in its understated way that "whether [or not] a company was straightforward and clear about the terminations […] influenced the degree of animosity participants felt in relation to their previous employer" (2004, 302). It goes without saying that things like poor communication, a lack of sensitivity, and self-serving attitudes on the part of the employer, can contribute negatively to what is already a very negative experience. For John, how the layoff was carried out irreparably damaged his relationship with his director and sent him down a path of blame and recrimination: "I was mad, I was angry. It drained me, for one thing, it just sapped so much goodness out of me because I was very, very bitter." John told me he took steps to let go of his anger and bitterness – for example, he did a lot of journaling at the time. Still, I saw remnants of his bitter disappointment on the day I talked to him, almost a year after he had left his post. During our conversation, John mentioned how helpful it was for him to talk about it with me, and reports back from John after the interview are that he is making his peace with how it all went down, but there is no doubt that a more careful, sensitive handling by John's director might have helped preserve the professional relationship in ways that would have made a big difference in John's ability to manage his loss.

3) ***Job loss as something that strips us of our sense of purpose*****.**

Few among us have the perfect job. Still, many among us find aspects of our job that are a perfect fit for us – and part of that fit comes from the sense of purpose we draw from the job we do. June was clear how powerful the draw the feeling of purposefulness was for her: "Ya know, you get into these [collegial] relationships and they're like marriages – right? – because you spend more time with them than you do with your family… and you give of yourself and you know if you're appreciated or not…. [for me] the question was, *are you useful*… If I felt I was useful, God, you had me hook, line and sinker.

Daniel Pink identifies *autonomy* and *mastery*, along with *purpose* as the triad of factors that motivate today's workers. They are all closely interrelated, but the element of purpose is particularly relevant to my analysis. "Autonomous people working toward mastery perform at very high levels. But those who do so in the service of some greater objective can achieve even more. The most deeply motivated people – not to mention those who are the most productive and satisfied – hitch their desires to a cause larger than themselves" (Pink 2009, 131). Pink's research goes on to describe how people are willing to take big career risks (like leaving a *secure* position to go to a new, sometimes lower ranked or lesser paid job), to find this sense of purpose. They are "redefining success [and] are willing to accept a radically 'remixed' set of rewards" (Sylvia Hewlett quoted in Pink 2009,133). I agree, but would also add that the theory is perhaps a little ahead of the practice. I would suggest that most people in the workforce today would still be overwhelmed by the prospect of taking on these kinds of risks. Purpose, nonetheless,

seems to be playing an increasingly important role in terms of job satisfaction. Take John for example.

John's sense of purpose appeared to be almost exclusively located within his workplace. He was part of a team, the highest purpose of the service he offered, at least indirectly, was to help people recover from illness. He didn't just do his job, he did it with care and integrity. When his job was taken away from him in what felt like a flash, he felt useless to such a degree that it created a spiritual crisis by stripping him of his sense of purpose. The overwhelming sense of uselessness that he described wasn't just about filling time, he was questioning his purpose, "I have my train collection and other hobbies that I can use to occupy my time, but they don't mean much anymore". How was he going to be useful, how was he going to be able to contribute to something useful, if he didn't have his job to go to.

The sense of purpose one can derive from having a place to go every weekday morning is, in itself, a factor worth exploring. No longer having an office, a shop or some form of physical workspace to attend each day can create social isolation and can contribute to feelings of purposelessness. For a person who has spent their adult life in a particular kind of workplace, the workplace becomes their performance arena. Take them out of their arena – their place of work – and they seem to lose their ability to perform. Without the place they feel they have no purpose. They want to find a new place to work, but finding a new arena in which to perform is difficult for a number of practical and emotionally complex reasons. Finding a new job is hard, particularly as we get older. John was 62 years old. Furthermore, the traditional workplace is constricting and there are fewer regularized jobs available – John was laid-off as a consequence of a

corporate cost- and job-cutting exercise. This need to find a *place* of work – a place to perform, a place to contribute skills and abilities, a place to be purposeful – creates a tremendous obstacle for those with twentieth-century expectations. The fact is, the workplace is changing – it's not so much a "place" anymore, and it is critical for those seeking employment in the modern world to come to terms with this. Organizations and industries, researchers, universities and training institutes are in the process of developing new employment models, which we can expect will look very different from the twentieth-century model. The optimistic among us hope that the new models will offer freedom, flexibility, creativity and other qualities that will *make work better*. But for now we make do with the uncertainty of short-term contracts, ad hoc consulting assignments, entrepreneurial ventures, and part-time work. For those transitioning out of regularized employment, this patchwork approach to work often falls short of providing the baseline requirements of income and benefits, let alone offering the motivational qualities that fall under Daniel Pink's rubric of autonomy, mastery and purpose. Still, with all this against him, John found a way forward. It came in the form of a short-term consulting assignment. A mere nine weeks of work did nothing to replace John's loss of job security, but it made a world of difference in terms of John's sense of purpose. He gained some insight through this consulting experience that his purpose was not inexorably linked to his former workplace. He had the opportunity to observe himself in the light of the loss he had so recently experienced. He was able to watch and consider what aspects of his work gave him his greatest sense of purpose – which for John was about being a team leader, providing caring support and strategic direction to others on the team in their collective pursuit of shared objectives – and this opportunity gave him a

glimpse into how he might be able to live out that purpose, finding various new places and ways to show off his abilities.

> What an interesting definition of work Aquinas offers us 'to display a good activity'. Work is part of our display, part of the parading of our beauty. It is the way we return our beauty to the community, and this is important for both the individual and to the community. Why? Because all beauty yearns to be conspicuous. Beauty and display go together; so, therefore, do beauty and work. Our work is meant to be beautiful, to increase the beauty of the world, of one another, of the worker (Fox 1995, 2).

In terms of her career, June always found purpose in being a public servant, and took seriously her call to public service. Still, I think it's safe to say that there were times when her service got caught in the complex space where politics and public service interface, and her sense of purpose flagged. Looking back over her career, it's obvious that June had experienced a tremendous sense of satisfaction and purpose in her public service career – which, ironically, is why the prospect of giving it up through early retirement filled her with tremendous ambivalence and contributed to what I've described as a spiritual crisis. "When I took a year's leave of absence [to help decide whether or not to retire] I felt so much genuine good will and affection. […] It was a dream sequence for me to just say, okay – and we're clear!" Not that it was easy… "I was so back-and-forth I had, in my own ego, prepared to go and defend my not coming back. I

was expecting a bit of an operation to get me back into the swing of it. And when nothing happened, that was the ultimate sign for me to say, okay…done! Was it a let down, oh yah it was a let down." Fortunately, June came to the conclusion that her sense of purpose was not located in her office or limited to her professional self. It took a year for her to finally let go, but "the flipside had been that all the space that I had allowed my family and my parents, and my sisters and stuff, [during that year], there was definitely a life outside of work that was quite satisfying, more than I'd realized."

Peter's sense of purpose was not located in a singular work place either. Or, perhaps its more accurate to say that at one time it *was* – in his dream job – but he was able to let go of this much earlier in this career. His decision to become a stay-at-home father at the height of his career is an unusual one. It demonstrated that he was driven by a need to direct his own life, flouting social norms, when necessary, that he was engaged in his life both at home and work, and that he was committed to being a part of creating something bigger than himself for his own betterment, the betterment of his family and the world around him. This seems to illustrates a very clear sense of purpose. Why then, did this decision cause him to have what I would call a spiritual crisis? I think the answer lies in self-awareness and an understanding of how important it is to recognize our own gifts. I think it is possible that Peter underestimated his natural gifts as they related to his profession. There is no doubt in my mind that someone can be both a loving, dedicated father and a talented, capable engineer. It's not an either-or proposition, but for a variety of reasons, Peter's circumstances forced him to make an either/or decision, and so he gave up his profession. This job loss, for a short period of time, at least, stripped him of his sense of self-respect, causing him to feel separated from himself . This was apparent

when he spoke of going back to school and getting some additional credentials in his new professional field: "The main thing for me is that you get a bit more of that respect back, and that's one thing that I lost in all of this".

> Every human being is born with some sort of gift, an inclination or an instinct that can become a full-blown mastery. We may not see our gift for what it is. Having seen it we may choose not to accept the gift and its consequences for our lives. Or, having claimed our gift, we may not be willing to do the hard work necessary to nurture it. But none of these evasions can alter the fact that the gift is ours. Each of us is a master at something, and part of becoming fully alive is to discover and develop our birthright competence. (Palmer 1990, 66)

In the words of the poet Theodore Roethke, we learn by going where we have to go. I think Peter learned some very important lessons from his year as a stay-at-home dad. He obviously would have learned a lot about his little girl and how much he loved her, but he also learned something hitherto unknown about himself – "the most subtle barrier to the discernment of our native gifts is in the gifts themselves. They are so central to us, so integral to who we are, that we take them for granted and are often utterly unaware of the mastery they give us." (Palmer 1990, 66). Peter's need for intellectual stimulation and collegial connection instilled in him a sense of purpose in *addition* to the purpose he drew from his roles as husband and father. As he moves forward with his life – he has created a sort of small-business venture for himself – he is,

by his own account, endeavouring to find a life-work balance. I trust it will free him to experience the sense of purpose that comes from identifying ourselves with our natural gifts.

III. Final Analysis

In summary, I have considered the job loss experiences of three individuals from a spiritual perspective and through the lens of workplace theory. Through my conversations with them – which I listened to carefully and repeatedly – and in the process of writing and rewriting, analyzing and synthesizing, I have come away with a greater understanding about their unique experiences, and how they made sense of and derived meaning from their experiences, which helped them cope with their circumstances . They made sense of their circumstances by reflecting on them and talking about them with their families. John, in particular, talked about spending a lot of time journaling about his loss. Their participation in the research project itself was an opportunity for them to examine their experiences, consider their identities vis-à-vis their jobs, consider what about their jobs gave them a sense of purpose and meaning, and ask themselves what was hardest about losing their job. They shared stories with me of how they untangled the complexity of feelings and emotions related to their loss, and I heard them untangle complexities as we went along. As John put it to me, "I never thought of it that way before, but now that you bring it up, it seems to me that…".

The findings contained within this research are based on partial, situated knowledge about three individuals, from the west coast of British Columbia, who lost their jobs in the first decade of the third millennium. We cannot assume that the

understandings that we’ve gathered can be applied to all women and men, in all situations. But perhaps we can learn something from the experiences of these particular people, and their particular circumstances, that we can use to help make sense of our own lives. I know I did. I will weave my own personal experience with their experiences as part of my concluding reflection. I will conclude this chapter with the suggestion that it is critically important for people who have been through a difficult experience of job loss to have the opportunity, resources and supports to process their experience. It is important for people to talk about traumatic experiences like this – whether that is done as part of a formal, counseling engagement, or as informal conversations with people they trust. The experience of losing a long-held position can be as profound as losing a loved one, but there is seldom the same level of empathy available, nor are there the kinds of supports, rites and rituals in place. Simply put, if you are someone who has been through this kind of experience, find someone to talk to. If you know someone who has been through this kind of experience, be someone they can talk to.

IV. Limitations and Considerations

The scope of this study is necessarily restricted by the parameters of my research method – and the small number of people interviewed. In addition, there are several particular limitations to this study that I wish to note. My examination is limited to a particular socio-economic strata (middle-class, white collar working people) in Canadian society. Furthermore, while I recognize the inevitable and important correlation between work and income – even amongst this class – I limited my analysis to situations where undue financial stress was not a primary factor. Nor did I emphasize gender- or ethnic-barriers to career advancement, although I know these barriers to be significant; and my

interview participants were all Canadian born, Caucasian and heterosexual (although I, myself, am a lesbian), which means the research does not represent the diversity of Canadian society. I listened to the stories my research participants shared, taking them at face value. I didn't challenge their perceptions or seek to balance or corroborate what they told me by talking to other players in their stories, as that was not a goal of my research. The issue of justice (or lack thereof) as it relates to the experience of job loss is an important one, but an exploration of injustice as a spiritual crisis is, in itself, too expansive a topic to be contained within the scope of this paper. I would recommend it as its own topic of research. On a final note, I did not ask my participants if they identified themselves as belonging to any faith tradition or denomination – as formal religious affiliation was not germane to my research.

A THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

> *Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. …Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these.*
>
> - Matthew 6: 25, 28-29

I have set out to use critical reasoning and qualitative research techniques to learn something about the often harrowing experience of losing a job. In particular, I sought to learn something about meaning and purpose from these three people's experience of job loss as part of this theological examination. Theology – from the Greek *theos* (God)and *logos* (word)– can arguably be defined as God talk. My research partners did not talk about God, and there are probably several reasons for that. One is that I did not ask them to. I didn't discourage or disallow it, but I didn't ask them directly about God or religion. I didn't because I didn't want religious affiliation or religious belief (or lack thereof) to be *the* subject. I am confident that I created an interview environment comfortable enough that if God was important to them, God would have been named. Had any or all of them named God, that would have been perfectly fine, but for me to make God a talking point would have changed the tenor of the interaction.

In a news interview (CBC News Online 2013), Judy Graves, who held the position of Advocate for the Homeless with the City of Vancouver for 22 years, was asked "Can you even talk about your faith as a bureaucrat, or is that off the table for you?", she answered: "It's always been off the table in the City of Vancouver – we speak with a secular voice. I think it's been a wonderful gift to have that discipline because if

you have to do your faith instead of talking about it, you can't kid yourself. If you talk about your faith, you can actually convince yourself that you're a whole lot better than you are." It is this kind of thinking that motivated my decision not to overtly ask my co-researchers about religion. I wanted to intentionally shift away from *talking* about faith, so the focus could be on the *expressions* of faith. I also felt this was an inclusive approach, for it could be applied equally to people of all faiths – or no faith; whether they had a religious vocabulary or not. The conversation was not meant to be about membership or affiliation, it was meant to be about experience and meaning.

Another reason we did not talk about God might have been that in this day and age the topic of "God" makes for very uncomfortable conversation. "We bring so much baggage to the concept of 'God' that we can hardly move, let alone undertake a journey. Whether we 'believe in God' or not – most of us are already loaded down with presumptions about divinity" (Keller 2008, x). I wanted to avoid that distraction. A third reason might be the very nature of God, and the inherent challenge of theology, itself. Speaking of God is an impossibility. Some truths are so powerful that we need to approach them indirectly, using metaphors and abstractions, poems, songs, and parables. In Catherine Keller's book, *On The Mystery: Discerning God in Process*, she explores the idea that theology can only be spoken "in the spirit of mystery: in attunement to that which exceeds our knowing. […] Theology as the language of faith partakes of historical analysis and critical reason, as do the other *–ologies*. But it is older. And it has always pushed beyond academic boundaries into the language of communities of faith and into inquiries of individuals alienated from any church, temple, synagogue or mosque" (Keller 2008, xi). By embracing this notion of theology as the pursuit of the limits of our

knowledge, I have attempted to do more than analyze data. I've tried to listen for God's wisdom in everything I read, and in what my research partners personally shared with me.

What my research partners revealed to me about their personal beliefs was not cloaked in religious language, but I got a glimpse into their belief systems nonetheless. I witnessed, even in the brief time I had with them, a belief in justice, goodness and their own efficacy – that good things can result from good actions, and so one must take responsibility for one's own actions. I certainly witnessed moments of despair in their stories, but no-one had given up or descended into nihilism. That is as far as I can go about what they believed or didn't believe. I see it as my job, not theirs, to talk about belief, and God, as part of this theological examination. And in order to do that I'm going to try to talk about what kind of God I believe in, or at least what theological beliefs I hold that underpin my concept of and response to job loss as a spiritual crisis.

This approach is in the manner of practical theology, because it is a practical, real-world outworking of one's own theology. Practical theology can be understood as "the mutually critical correlation of the interpreted theory and praxis of the Christian faith and the interpreted theory and praxis of the contemporary situation" (David Tracy as quoted by Steyn & Masango 2011, 4). Practical theology *is* practical because it is meant to help people in the face of their everyday concerns and problems – like losing a job. It is faith in action, in a very practical way. Rhetorically speaking, what good is believing in God if it doesn't motivate one to *act* in the world? Or, in more academic terms:

> The interpretive interests of hermeneutics are not ends in themselves but processes of understanding and self-interpretation toward the goal of

> orienting individuals and communities toward action. Practical theology, to be practical, must attempt to describe and interpret both contemporary situations and classic Christian resources. (Steyn & Masango 2011, 3).

Practical theology is not only meant to be applied in real-world situations, it is also shaped by real life experiences. My theology – as a practical theology – both informs and is informed by my actions in the world. A sacred synchronicity. In this loop we simply cannot ignore that *what* one believes about God will determine *how* one acts. If one believes in a strictly vengeful God, then one is likely to be vengeful. For me, a belief in God is only useful – or *practical* – if it motivates me to act with humility and compassion and seek justice in relation to myself and others. And so it becomes necessary, I think, that practical theology must be accompanied by an ongoing examination of *what* we believe, and we *why* believe as we do. For this reason, it is useful to rely on other forms of theology – process theology, liberation theology, feminist theology, classical liberal theology, and so on. These teachings form a foundation on which we can credibly explore, examine and test our beliefs (and, thus, our actions). Christian Theology, no matter how practical and active we want it to be, or how fluid and flexible our interpretations might be – is not something that one can simply make up. As Tony Robinson puts it, “A nonnegotiable core of revealed truth defines Christian faith and belief” (Robinson 2006 37). Further to that point, Robinson tells us:

> Christianity is […] a revealed religion. Christianity affirms that God has revealed the divine self and way to us in particular events, people, and books, particularly including God’s work in creation, in the story of the people of Israel, and in the life, teaching, death,

> and resurrection of Jesus Christ. *Revelation* means 'disclosure' and 'unveiling'. Rightly characterized as a revealed religion, Christian faith asserts that God's will and way have been disclosed to us, unveiled before us, in these particular events and people. (Robinson 2006, 37).

What, then, do I believe about God as revealed through scripture and practice? Despite considerable effort and a sincere to desire to learn about God, I still struggle to answer that question. When it comes to God I can tell you more about what I don't believe, than what I do. I certainly don't believe in a bearded guy in the sky, all-powerful and good, who rewards those who believe and visits trials on those who don't. I know that this confronts thousands of years of accepted theology and Deuteronomist thinking – that God is all-powerful, the master of all things, a universal choreographer, and a harsh judge and benevolent dictator. I'm not trying to be provocative. This way of understanding God – which is both traditional and still widely popular in some circles – holds little or no relevance for me. At this point in my life the best I can do is tell you that God is an intimation that I believe in; a concept around which I orient my being and form my attitudes. In the quiet moments I spend with this God, I find a clarity and strength, which powers my actions in the world. Scripture, particularly the gospels, present Jesus Christ as being empowered by God in much the same way. Does that make me a Christian? I'm not sure; it depends on how you judge these things. As Henri Nouwen puts it in his 1972 work, *The Wounded Healer* , "when the imitation of Christ does not mean to live a life like Christ, but to live your life as authentically as Christ lived his , then there are many ways and forms in which a man [sic] can be a Christian."

My personal theology could well be described as practical theology, but that adjective is just one of many – and I'm not sure how useful this specializing and parsing out of theology really is. In this, my thinking coincides with New Testament scholar, Luke Timothy Johnson, who coined the phrase "adjectival theology" to critique this growing need for religious scholars to "describe theology preceded by one adjective or another" (as quoted by Robinson 2006, 19). So, while I am influenced by many *theologies*, I will continue to describe my personal theology, as just that – personal.

My personal theology, to borrow a phrase from Keller (who borrowed it from Karl Barth), is fundamentally a theology of becoming: *Theologia viatorum*, theology on the way. This is theology as a process, "a process whose ends are many and open, a way no less purposeful than that which moves toward some fixed goal" (Keller 2008, 10).

And, thus, I turn back to my consideration of what I've learned about the belief systems that help people respond constructively to job loss? I've learned that we (those who have lost jobs) are not alone in our confusion and anxiety, and that we can take comfort in that realization. When we talk to each other, it can make us feel better. The research that I've read and, in particular, the stories I've heard about other people's experience of job loss resonate deeply with me. The doubt, the fear, the humiliation… the list goes on. My partners in research talked, in varying degrees, about feeling these dark emotions, and I, too, feel them every day of my life. Even from my current vantage point – recently promoted into a new position that feels very purposeful, suits my skills and abilities extraordinarily well, and accords me respect and new levels of autonomy – I am still deeply traumatized by my experiences of job loss, so much so that the circumstances associated with my recent promotion left me feeling strangely insecure –

when there was really no reason to feel anything but appreciated and valued. There is an odd sense of rightness that I am finishing my research on job loss at a time when I feel more secure and stable in my position than I have in more than a decade. At the same time, I know now, more than ever, how impermanent this feeling of security is. All I have – all any of us have – is what is here and now. Life brings with it pain and pleasure, gain and loss, recognition and humiliation – and everything in between. Life in its totality is imperfect and incomplete – everything and everyone we know and love will pass away. Literally. Because our world is subject to impermanence, we are never able to keep permanently what we strive for. All is changing, always. It is therefore necessary, if I am to function in the midst of such instability and apparent futility, that I come to be at peace with myself. I need a central core to my life, beyond the merely rational, that imbues my living with ultimate meaning.

There is something translucent in this kind of thinking, but it's not as ethereal as it sounds. To paraphrase a presentation I heard by Rabbi Harold Kushner, you can learn to live in this undependable and unpredictable world of ours by *coming to believe you have the resources within you, friends around you and a God beyond you to help you cope with whatever comes your way*. Kushner's folksy summation provides an antidote for the spiritual crisis that job loss can create. It's the kind of advice one needs in the event of a job loss, or any loss, for that matter, that separates us from our essential self (find the resources within you), damages our relationship with others (gather friends around you) and leaves us feeling our lives are purposeless (reach out beyond your immediate reality to God). Not to quibble with the Rabbi, but to my way of thinking God is not someone beyond me that I reach out to. God is present, God is presence. God exists in the

insights, perceptions and numinous experiences that can happen every day and are out of the realm of the ordinary. These kinds of mystical experiences are the "infinite abundance of the present" (Mitchell 1991, 12). Being present isn't about *the* present – in a chronological sense. It is about the alignment of the past, present and future; a way of seeing all this, at once, without attachment or entanglement with any one aspect of time and place. This is how I'm learning to live my life: understanding myself and my life as part of God's mystery. Not a subject in it, but a party to it. This God, and this faith enables me to act with integrity as I contribute intentionally all the inputs I have in my power – and then it allows me to let go of the outcomes and be at peace with the consequences. Don't worry, I tell myself, consider the lilies of the field…

To be frank, church, *per se*, hasn't been source of inspiration or learning for me – certainly not the Sunday morning variety. But a diverse and varied course of Christian theological study – both formal and informal – has. There is much in the stories and symbols of the Christian tradition that enable my faith, but it does require me to do some sorting through what the Indigo Girls' lyricist Amy Ray calls the "weather strewn church" in order to separate that which is worth saving from that which is inauthentic.

> When Jesus talked about the kingdom of God, he was not prophesying about some easy, danger-free perfection that will someday appear. He was talking about a state of being, a way of living at ease among the joys and sorrows of our world. It is possible, he said, to be as simple and beautiful as the birds of the sky and the lilies of the field, who are always within the eternal Now. This state of being [in the presence of God]is not

> something alien or mystical. We don't need to earn it. It is already ours. Most of us lose it as we grow up and become self-conscious, but it doesn't disappear forever; it is always there to be reclaimed, though we have to search hard in order to find it (Mitchell 1991, 11).

I have returned to my Christian roots with caution and some trepidation – but I find my church to be alive with possibility, in as much as it is preparing for a resurrection. Amid the dirt and detritus of an ecclesiastical history full of corruption, my church is finding its way, seeking ways to renew itself so it can continue to be relevant in the current age. I also find much richness in the enduring wisdom of other religious and spiritual traditions, not that they all teach the same thing, but I find I can often translate the meaning into my context or find a parallel in the Christian story. Perhaps it is in the similarities that transcend religious boundaries that the church's future lies. I mention this by way of a recommendation. Regular people like John, Peter and June lose their jobs every day – yet none of these three talked in any detail about seeking support or solace in a church. The world is filled with these kinds of people – people who are simply trying to find ways to live meaningful lives within the changing social structures of the day and among other everyday people – isn't the church's job to help them? It should be.

All three of my co-researchers told me that it helped them to talk to me about their experience. This was a rather surprising to me, given the fact that I didn't *know* these people. How is it possible that two strangers, brought together for a couple of hours, could relate to one another on such a deep and genuine level? It leads me to emphasize the importance of fierce conversations. Perhaps churches should be more intentional about developing a culture that encourages people to have real conversations about meaningful and sometimes difficult things in their lives (rather than the current

church culture, as I've observed it, that is characterized by coffee talk and other comfortable social exchanges). The answer might lie in the fact that the present day social context of church community is that church members are usually people who have been part of the community for a very long time – they've known each other for years. This in fact, seems to be the goal – to create a familial setting that stays together for a lifetime. I wonder, instead, is it possible for church to be a place where people don't need to know each other well in order to have a relationship with one another? What changes can be made so that brief but meaningful interactions are possible – where connections have depth, but not necessarily breadth.

Churches want to be welcoming – it is a core value of essentially all Christian communities – but judging by decreasing memberships and waning attendance, current practices don't seem to be working. Obviously, churches need to take a hard look at who they are *not* serving and why. Going back to my research and thinking about why religious terms and concepts were not a naturally emerging part of my conversational experience with my co-researchers, I came to a rather simple, but far-reaching conclusion: churches need to overhaul how they communicate about what they believe. Maybe the reason people who are grappling to ascribe meaning to painful or challenging (or even joyous) life events don't use religious language is because its meaningless to them. It doesn't fit. It doesn't work. It has lost its power to illuminate and persuade. Why are the ancient stories, symbols and images of Christianity – which have been so very effective in helping people deal with matters of ultimate concern in the past – no longer effective? In response to this challenging question, I would suggest that ministerial leaders need to take their role as theologians more seriously than many do – more seriously, perhaps, than their pastoral role. They need to begin resurrecting ideas, values, rituals, practices and disciplines that are distinctively Christian (based on Christian teaching), and translate them in ways that appeal to people who are not

Christian. I name discipline in the list above because it is an unpopular, but essential quality of a life that thrives in response to matters of ultimate concern. And Christian theology, in particular, teaches that it is central to living a life based on Christian tenets – to be a *disciple* of Christ requires discipline. Admittedly, this raises the degree of difficulty in terms of increasing church participation – such an emphasis might discourage rather than encourage participation – but in a counter-intuitive way, it might actually attract people who, at some, perhaps unarticulated level, want to live a realized life that wrestles honestly with matters of ultimate concern.

Another reason that people aren't coming to church – despite the exclamation of welcome posted in the narthex– is that church-going Christians automatically expect newcomers to become like them – to join up and *become* Christian. Not everyone looking for spiritual guidance is interested in forging a Christian identity – they might not want to join your "club". Even if they are interested in learning what Christianity has to say about something – they aren't looking to become members of the church, nor do they want to conform to a whole set of new beliefs. I think the idea of becoming a Christian is anathema to most independently minded people these days. And people seeking spiritual guidance certainly aren't looking for salvation, not in a doctrinal sense. No – they come looking for ways and means of making sense of the world and their individual place in it. If the church is to help people cope with everyday things like job loss and workplace insecurity as part of its regular offering (beyond pastoral counseling, for example) it must offer insights, rituals, symbols, images and teachings that are in touch with the needs of these everyday people, and are accessible to them. Teachings that are distinctively Christian, yes, but that are offered in a way that doesn't require one to take on a Christian identity or membership in order to learn and benefit from them. Some alternative methods of sharing, discussing and teaching theology and "being" church might emerge. Theologians might have to re-imagine the sacrament of baptism,

for example, as something completely unrelated to church membership; and Church administrators might have to rethink the relationship between membership and givings, and come up with different ways to financially sustain the church.

This is a little heretical, perhaps. Extremely difficult, for sure. Renewing the church in the 21st Century is no mean task, but I think this starts by letting go of theological insights, language and practices that add little to a non-religious person's understanding of the world and their place in it. I guess I'm suggesting that churches need to become less church-like; less like they are at present. I'm not speaking against developing a Christian understanding of the world, but our Christian understanding needs to be expressed in ways that still make sense and can be useful to people who aren't Christians, have no wish to become Christians, who come from other faith traditions, or have no faith tradition at all, even people who may have intentionally rejected Christianity in their past. As Dorothee Soelle puts it in her classic work, *Suffering*:

> But surely the insight that we need to operate without Christian presuppositions doesn't make it necessary to give up all theological language. We cannot give up a language that transcends all that exists or is derivable only from what exists. The need is not to give up theological language but rather to embark on a search for new theological language (Soelle 1975, 7).

I have yet to find a church where that new theological language has been established – although, to be fair, I am aware of several where a new language and the subsequent understandings, rituals and practices are beginning to take shape. It's difficult enough to develop a following when you have a clear message; it's exponentially more difficult

when you are relying on a half formed lexicon of word and deeds. Furthermore, churches must figure out how to draw new people into an old setting – among *old timers (*long time members of a certain age*)*.

Thankfully, the challenge of making a 2000-year-old institution relevant and meaningful in the present day is beyond the remit of this paper. What I did learn within the scope of this research project is that religion did not seem to be relevant to my research partners. It was not an expressed part of their meaning-seeking efforts. Two of them mentioned they attended church or had a church affiliation, but only briefly in passing. None of them used explicitly religious or theological language, nor did they describe relying on religious faith or seeking out support or insights from religious institutions to derive meaning from their experience of job loss. God, religion, spirituality, theology – none of these were an articulated part of their experience – even though this was a deeply personal and emotionally complex experience for each of them. This does not surprise me. Without a current membership in a faith tradition (or even despite it) or at least prior experience and familiarity with religious life, religion is not what most people in the secular west today turn to during the day-to-day stresses of our lives.

The hard truth is that the religious practices of our parents' and grandparents' (and, even, great grandparents') generation aren't speaking to the world today. The trappings of Canada's 20th Century religious life seem to hold little or no value for those who have come or are coming of age in the 21st Century. It leads me to conclude – to paraphrase Paul Tillich – that when a system is emptied of ideas and value it has lost its power to express the human situation and answer existential human questions (Tillich 1952, 50).

If religion is going to continue having a role in helping people express meaning and develop a faith that fills life with love, vitality, awe and wonder – then it must offer

something from which people can draw sustenance to help them through the pain of everyday living, including the increasingly common experience of losing a job.

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Appendix A: Consent Form

<Date>

Dear <name>,

< email address >

Thank you for your interest in my research project. As discussed previously, I am writing a Masters Thesis towards the completion and attainment of a Masters degree in Theological Studies (MTS) from St. Stephen's College, www.ualberta.ca/ST.STEPHENS .

As you know, the focus of my research is on knowledge workers, like yourself, who have been impacted by change in their contemporary "white collar" work places – where career paths are often less linear than in generations past, where issues like work/life balance are increasingly important, and where concepts like job security are becoming anachronistic.   In short, I want to learn more about how career-identified people are navigating change in their work lives and, in particular, how they are responding to the turmoil and instability wrought by this change. This letter is to provide you with an overview of my research process, and to summarize the purpose and nature of my research to ensure you that it will be carried out as stated, in a spirit of openness, transparency and accessibility.

Using qualitative research methodology (specifically a phenomenological approach) I wish to interview you about your experience of changes taking place in your workplace and/or work life. I'm interested in twists and turns in your career path – how and why they came about and the ways in which you've responded to them. Interviews will be done one-on-one and will typically take place in one session, lasting anywhere from one to two hours. I will take notes as we talk as well as make an audio recording of our conversation, for accuracy. Should a follow-up session be required, I will endeavour to use phone or email to keep your time commitment to a minimum. I'll provide you with a

list of questions prior to the scheduled interview. If you have any concerns about the line of questioning, we can discuss them prior to the interview.

After the interview, I will write a brief synopsis of the session, capturing the highlights that I plan to feature in my paper. I will provide you with a copy of this synopsis, asking for your feedback. Did I accurately capture and reflect your answers? Is there anything I missed, anything you'd like to add? I welcome your input. At any point, before or immediately after the interview, you have **the** right to withdraw from this process. If you decide you want to opt out before the paper is written, any information that you have already provided will not be used.

You can be assured of confidentiality throughout this process. Any personal data I have will be kept in a secure environment, and will not be distributed in any form or shared with anyone other than my Research Supervisor, the Rev. Dr. Harold Munn. Furthermore, no personal or identifiable information about you will be used in the written report. As we've discussed, you will only be described in general and demographic terms. To ensure that I have your informed consent, please fill out the attached questionnaire.

Kind regards,
Terry Harrison

Consent Questionnaire – before the interview begins, please read and confirm your agreement with the following statements:

Q1	I am 18 years of age or older.	YES ___
Q2	I consent to an interview with Terry Harrison, the audio of which will be recorded, and I allow my answers to her questions to be included as data for her research report	YES ___
Q3	I understand that the research report will be published as a Masters Thesis and will be made public. I also understand that the researcher and author, may write about and discuss her research report in public venues &/or publish articles or essays based on her research report.	YES ___
Q4	I'm aware that none of my personal contact information including my name, address, phone or email address, will be published or otherwise made available to anyone other than the researcher (&/or her supervisor). I also understand that I will not be individually recognizable in the research report or any discussion thereof.	YES ___
Q5	I am aware that I am free to withdraw from this process at any time, and that if I withdraw before the paper is written any information that I may have already provided will not be used.	YES ___
Q6	I feel that I have been adequately informed about the study, including the method of inquiry being used and my participation and consent.	YES ___
Q7	I have read the introduction of this Consent Form and understand the nature of my involvement and agree with the ALL of the above statements	YES ___

Name of Research Participant: ____

Signature: ____

Date: __________________ Place:__________________________________

Appendix B: Conversational Framework (Interview Questions)

Conversational Framework

Some questions to get started:

1. How do you answer the popular social question, "what do you do?"
   - How does this question make you feel?
   - How is what you "do" related to "who" you are?

2. Give me an overview of your career journey thus far (including schooling/training)?
   - When you began down your career path, what were your expectations regarding job security and advancement? How have they changed since?

3. Tell me about a time in your career that was a particularly satisfying or meaningful to you.
   - Did it make you rethink your vocation, or reshape your expectations regarding job satisfaction or job security?
   - Was remuneration an important part of this experience? (If you had got paid less do you think you would you have valued it as much?

Focusing on the impact of losing *or* leaving *a job:*

4. Let's talk about situations wherein you lost or had to leave a job – or, at least, encountered, over a sustained period of time, the very real possibility of losing or leaving a job). (I.E., changes in your work environment that *did* or *could have* resulted in a layoff, dismissal, demotion, early retirement, resignation, leave without pay, transfer, secondment, etc.).

   - What happened? What were the circumstances surrounding your situation?
   - How did it make you feel?

- How much control did you have (or feel you had) in the situation? What, if any, difference did that make?
- What were the practical implications of this situation (and how did it change your prospects for the future?)
- What were the emotional/social implications?
- How did going through this situation affect the people in your life who are important to you?
- Where did you turn for support, advice, perspective-taking, reassurance?
- What did you learn from this experience? Does it have any particular meaning?
- Has it changed your outlook on life?
- Has it changed how you've approached the rest of your career, the rest of your life?

In closing:

5. Do you have a sense of resolve or completion regarding this situation? If yes, what brought that about for you? If no, what do you think will?

6. Looking back, is there anything you would have done differently – or will do differently, if you find yourself in a similar circumstance in the future?

7. Do you have anything to add, or any questions of your own?

Demographic Information:

- Age:_______
- Education:__________
- Children (number and ages):_______________________
- Sole support or joint wage-earner: ___________________________
- Work experience: (attach Resume)