

## Introduction



I REMEMBER every part of that fateful day. I was playing with our daughters in the living room when my husband came through the front door. I looked up, surprised to see him in the middle of the day. He didn't beat around the bush but quickly delivered the bad news, "I lost my job today." At that moment, the bottom dropped out of my world. We had two kids and a new mortgage. My husband had worked in the tech industry for many years, and we were spoiled by the computer boom in Seattle. But the recession had recently arrived and jobs were disappearing regularly. Now it was our turn to face job loss.

Over our many years of marriage, we had learned that we have classically divergent responses to crises. My husband underreacts, and I overreact. By that I mean he retreats into silence, and I go into a panicked tirade. Each of us tries to draw the other into our own style of response, but we are both hardwired to react in our set ways. This time was no different. I immediately wanted details, reasons, and answers for the job loss. What happened? What could we do? Would we be okay? My husband had no answers to my frightened questions. Looking back, I can feel compassion for the fact that he must have been hurting badly. But in that moment, all I could focus on was my own shock and despair.

In the computer-technology industry and many other organizations, once you lose your job, you are quickly shown to the door. Companies don't want you to have any time to leave with too much information. Therefore, there's no time for goodbyes or even desk-cleaning. Being ushered out the door without a minute to speak to longtime colleagues feels especially unfair.

When my husband arrived home that fateful day, he was already done working. No two-week notice or layoff notice. No escaping or slowly adjusting for either of us. After spewing questions for a while, I went for a walk or maybe a drive. I honestly don't remember which, so I hope it was a walk. I do remember that my predominant feeling was terror. What would we do? How would we maintain our lifestyle and pay for all the necessities and fun stuff? I knew my husband to be excellent at his job, being a math guy and all. But his job-finding skills were definitely subpar. I worked part-time and had committed to being with our young daughters as much as possible. So much to fear and to lose. I could barely breathe, so terrified was I about providing for our girls and sacrificing our livelihood.

Most of us who call ourselves “people of faith” want to believe that faith will be the answer during every hardship. However, losing a job and the economic security that goes with employment quickly demonstrates the fragility of our faith connection. My dependence on God's abundance seemed a very distant second to my reliance on the comfort and security of a regular paycheck, safe pension plan, and predictable life. Suddenly life thrust us into the unknown, and this proved a very shaky place to be. I looked around enviously at others who weren't walking this precarious path. Why couldn't I relax in the same blissful ignorance and sense of security they felt? Christ was supposed to be my sure foundation. I sang it in church and preached those words as a pastor. But faced with job loss, those words felt hollow and not at all capable of saving us from economic ruin.

How do we learn to trust God? We learn to trust God by recognizing that we learn to trust when we must and remembering that faith practices “work,” whether or not we can work.

Determined to worship the God of the Bible, rather than the god of Wall Street, I threw myself into prayer. I uttered desperate prayers for calm during my initial walks. “Please, please, please make this right,” I begged God.

We also prayed with our kids. This was so very important to me—to show them that on the day Dad lost his job, we prayed. I wanted our

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girls to have this model of prayer from their childhood to remember later when they grew up and faced their own crises. I trusted that prayer would give us enough stopgap peace to get us to the next step. God delivered on my trust. Now I share the story and lessons with you.

Our family's experience of job loss, and a larger societal picture of job loss, reveals several key issues that we will explore in this book:

- Job loss forces us to feel a wide range of emotions.
- Job loss invites us to understand the nature of work.
- Job loss leads us to find spiritual resources.
- Job loss challenges us to carve out a path from joblessness to employment.

### **Job Loss Forces Us into a Wide Range of Emotions**

Under stress, we regress.

Hospital chaplains witness a basic phenomenon every day as patients and families face various crises. The phenomenon can be summarized in four words: "Under stress, we regress." The same truth can apply to people experiencing crises beyond the hospital setting, such as job loss. Unfortunately, the majority of people who find themselves suddenly jobless don't have a chaplain to help them with all the regressing that stress like job loss triggers (although some large companies do, in fact, hire chaplains for their employees). Therefore, people who lose their jobs often suffer alone at home, reverting to unhealthy, reactive modes.

When "under stress we regress," our loved ones also pay the price for whatever type of regression we tend toward. As I mentioned earlier, when faced with the shock and stress of job loss, my husband and I definitely regressed into our old patterns, ingrained during many years of marriage. My husband, as expected, snapped into shutdown mode. I knew he was hiding deep inside himself somewhere, nursing his wounds. But I had no idea how to reach him. And besides, I wasn't even focused on comforting him. I felt too busy seeking relief from the overwrought feelings and fears inside of me and looking for someone to blame.

In a perfect world, someone who seems uber calm like my husband would naturally balance someone like me, who responds immediately and dramatically to hard news. But the last time I checked, this was certainly not a perfect world. Spouses/partners know that better than most. So rather than balancing or helping each other, we got stuck in our own ways of facing problems. Fortunately, we could later look back and notice how we gradually moved from taking job loss out on each other to trying to support each other.

When each of us acknowledges that “under stress we each regress ... differently,” some critical wisdom and forgiveness can surface. Our different reactions can ultimately lead to a larger palette of skills that are essential to working one’s way through crises such as unemployment.

We need all the skills we can muster, because when we lose our jobs a multitude of feelings come rushing in and engulf us! For example, there’s the powerful sense of grief that seems to completely knock us over when we first lose our job. As much as we complain about the grind of daily work, when our work routines are yanked away from us, we feel quite disoriented. There’s no “there” there, the place to go to work—in our cars and on our subways and even down the hall to the spare bedroom. No purposeful place to stimulate our minds and help us delineate work from the rest of our lives.

One of the first griefs in job loss, therefore, feels very physical. Our bodies can no longer rely on the movement of commuting from home place to work place. As a result, our minds get confused and ask, “Why don’t I have anywhere I have to go?” Minds that are stressed from the job loss become even more rattled when there’s not a physical outlet to help ease the worries and to-do’s.

Depending on how we felt about our work, we might also experience a major loss of purpose. Perhaps we were teachers or social workers whose work involved a daily commitment to improving others’ lives. We miss both our students and the joy of seeing the light go on in their eyes when they master new skills.

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When our stream of purpose and community suddenly begins to dry up, our identity seems to become shallower and less predictable. We may do our best to control that process, futilely attempting to counteract whatever circumstances stole our work and stopped us in our progress, frantically trying to gather up our dissipating self-respect and confidence.

Meanwhile, our feelings about job loss multiply even further. We miss our colleagues from work and feel so many emotions toward them, including envy, estrangement, and shame. We miss silly little things that we had no idea were giving our lives daily meaning and structure. The friendly bus driver. Our penchant for unsticking the copy machine. Asking our coworkers about their weekend. Unemployment represents a giant, scary question mark with no sentence written following it.

It's no wonder we feel lost amidst job loss. We can't begin to see the future, and we must endure the pain of the unknown in the present. Never mind whether we felt fulfilled in our work or always got along with our coworkers. Never mind that we thought numerous times about finding work with more depth, fewer miles on the road, better childcare. The choice to leave should have been our decision to make, not our boss's or the administration's. The doubts and blame eat at us.

Just reading about all these job-loss-related feelings might possibly plunge us deeper into despair. Just so you know, that's definitely not our purpose here! Which is why this book is called *Jobs Lost, Faith Found*. This book provides a reminder that we can rely on the good news poured out through our holy text and spiritual leaders. As followers of the One always willing to listen and guide us, we receive lifesaving portions of God's grace. God delivers this grace through many means, including Bible stories and prayers. We explore those Bible stories in this book, and garner the lessons found there to help us abide and learn from our feelings.

- What feelings have you experienced during job loss?
- What did you do with those feelings?
- How do your responses to stress differ from your spouse's or friends'?
- How does it help to know that others are going through similar feelings?
- What Bible stories and spiritual readings help you name and understand your feelings?

In chapter 1, “Dealing with Our Feelings about Job Loss,” we will expand on these ideas and questions.

## Job Loss Invites Us to Understand the Nature of Work

When we lose a job, we lose so much more than a job. That’s because work is so essential to our being. Work shapes our lives with purpose, structure, creativity, teamwork, the common good, legacy, beginnings–middles–ends, labor, sacrifice, and God–given gifts. No wonder losing work cuts us to the quick. St. Benedict, the fifth-century patron saint of Europe, wrote guidelines for monks called the Rule of St. Benedict. The role of work occupied a central place in Benedict’s guidelines, as demonstrated in his words, “To work is to pray; to pray is to work.” Our humanity, our faith, and our work entwine so tightly that when we look at one strand in this three-part configuration, we find the other strands as well.

Work includes countless aspects essential to our very being. Therefore, we can look at work from one angle after another. For example, as I relive the story of our family’s job loss, I’m struck by the way that the theme of time runs through the experience. When my husband lost his job, I instantly worried about the long-term effects of the change, having just signed a thirty-year mortgage. Meanwhile, my husband had no time to achieve a sense of closure or say goodbye to his colleagues. Time got turned upside down on layoff day. The beating metronome of steady lives slid off the piano and crashed onto the floor. This phenomenon of “ordinary” time being upended occurs in many crises. That’s why we need to find a new normal that can stabilize and return some sense of regular time and rhythm to our lives.

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In job loss, the sting of time turned upside down can be particularly unnerving. Deadlines remain for bills to be paid and kids to be fed, yet we can't make employers offer us jobs any more quickly. Meanwhile we are struggling to re-create the structure for our time that work provided. We may never have realized how jobs ordered our lives, even though we complained about our work as "the grind."

To work is to pray; to pray is to work. St. Benedict reminded us that as spiritual beings, we find work as basic a human need as communicating with God. Our work is interconnected with our sense of being alive, connected, and useful, so we can reflect on work through a spiritual lens. Here's an example of God's followers doing just that. At the Center for Work and Faith in New York City, people of faith explore the roots of work as an embodiment of faith:

Faith and work. We might see them as estranged. But, in truth, they share a crucial aim: to see the unseen. Nothing new has been made without faith. Nothing unseen has been seen without work. When the force of what we do hits why we do it, we wither or we flourish. We don't want to just examine that collision. We want to live in the intersection where it occurs. To celebrate what flies. And to rethink what falls. To map. To explore. To create. To risk and to fail better. Not just for a nicer 9-to-5. But to serve the city we belong to and love. It comes down to one key truth: work matters. So do it well. (<https://faithandwork.com>)

From a spiritual perspective, work occupies a powerful place in our lives that goes way beyond paying the bills. As Christians, we don't just say we hold down a job; we say we fulfill a vocation. We dare to believe that God calls us to our work and service, and empowers us to make a difference for others no matter what our jobs. Given that undergirding faith, the gut-punch of job loss can be especially confusing and disappointing from a faith perspective. We come up with newly relevant questions for God about how to complete our calling when employment slams the door on our God-given dreams.

- What has job loss taught you about what work means to you?
- How does St. Benedict’s Rule, “To work is to pray; to pray is to work?,” resonate with your work?
- In what ways has time felt different when you are not working?
- Who do you know who talks about a job as a call?

In chapter 2, “Thinking about Why We Work,” we will expand on these ideas and questions.

Finding our way back to work not only relieves financial fears; it aligns us with God’s creativity and sense of purpose.

## Job Loss Leads Us to Find Spiritual Resources

We named this book *Jobs Lost, Faith Found* because during encounters with joblessness (as well as a number of other challenges), we discover a wealth of spiritual resources within and beyond ourselves. In other words, the nature of joblessness shows us:

- What we are made of
- What God is made of

When we endure unemployment and are pared down to our innermost selves, our lives become quickly devoid of the trappings that we assumed were saving us. In this raw moment, we can consciously or unconsciously take stock of what remains. As surely as anything, this moment calls upon the faith we have been given—and hopefully have nurtured. Marc Kolden (1930–2017), longtime professor of systematic theology at Luther Seminary, Saint Paul, Minnesota, often offered this definition of “faith” in his lectures and personal conversations with students and others: not knowing what will happen and how we will come through can be just the moment we reinforce what we do know—that we are lost without a relationship with God, a relationship characterized by trust, openness, and joy—that allows us to face the future with peace.

When life reduces itself to its very core during a crisis such as job loss, we find out what God is made of. God is made of comfort. God offers us solace to focus on what we have, rather than what

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we don't have. In gratitude we notice the smallest things. "Thank you, God," we pray, "for the food in the freezer, the neighbors who greet us as they normally do, our families whom we can count on, the soft pillow where we can rest our head and forget our cares for a few hours. Thank you for your blessings that have always sustained us, even when we assumed it was all up to us and our employment."

What we are made of also becomes starkly evident as we regroup via rituals and relationships during our search for employment. And as we realize our own vulnerability and grit, we also get additional glimpses of what God is made of. Perhaps God's language of silence seems deafening as we overnight-deliver our prayers for survival and quick fixes. But somehow God leads us to put one foot in front of another. Life shocked us, yet we are still standing and the universe keeps spinning. Creativity and surprises arrive. Small parcels of blessings arrive at our door. God attends to us, and maybe wonders whether we will interpret the mysteries as divine provision. Whether we will witness to another about the balm in Gilead. This is the time to learn just how durable, ingenious, and other-than-us is this God of whom we have spoken and whom we now get to know.

My husband's and my prayers seemed like all we had to share with our children in the time of job loss. We never guessed that we were sharing more riches with them in that moment than we had when that regular paycheck was arriving every two weeks. If we had not gone through that hard time, when would we have felt compelled to demonstrate to our daughters that God is the bedrock of our lives? All the learning they completed in Sunday school and all the worship services they attended surely shaped our daughters' lives. But in a moment of crisis, our faith lessons became especially real. Our hopes for our children's faith and endurance were exactly what bolstered our faith and endurance.

Job loss is a particular crisis flavor, but sooner or later most of us taste the truth that life includes events we never would have chosen. When crises such as job loss are thrust upon us unexpectedly, we can turn to God through various spiritual practices, practices named

“an alphabet of spiritual tools” in this book. Through these spiritual practices, God invites us to be creative and think differently. God wants to “keep the faith” for each of us. So God enlightens us by showing us that what we *don't have* is exactly what we *do* have. What we don't have is a job. This certainly feels like terrible news. But wait! What we do have is a situation that forces and invites us to partner with God and craft creative solutions. The necessity of learning and providing propels us into territory and faith we may not have sought while we lived in our comfort zone. Creativity is born of limits and tight places, like joblessness. Undoubtedly you have developed your own cadre of creative solutions over the course of your life.

The writers of a late-night talk show faced a daily deadline of coming up with a stand-up comedy routine for the show's host. An interviewer asked the writers if they sat around all day telling jokes. The writers replied that thankfully they only had an hour each morning to write. That short preparation time provided exactly the limit they needed to focus on creativity.

Joblessness offers similar built-in limits—on our time, money, and control—that can inspire creativity. Looking at limits as gifts rather than deficits is actually a spiritual way to live. That's because God always invites us to see things differently and offers to show us a new picture through limits of living in obedience, justice, and truth.

## Job Loss Challenges Us to Carve Out a Path from Joblessness to Employment

In addition to its initial chapters on the feelings of job loss, the meaning of work, and the spiritual tools that help us grow from job loss, this book includes a chapter on navigating the process of finding new work. We call this chapter “Ten Questions to Help You Get from Here (No Job) to There (Job).”

Given the decades that we participate in the work world, it makes sense that most of us face periods of economic change and even

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- How does unemployment fit into a larger picture of our relationship to and dependence on God?
- When have we counted ourselves worthy in God’s eyes because of work?
- How can work be enhanced by worship and celebrating God’s work around and within us?

In chapter 3, “An Alphabet of Spiritual Tools to Cope with Job Loss and Job Search,” we will expand on these ideas and questions.

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job loss. The truth is that markets rise and fall, and economies wax and wane. Even though we feel shocked and alone when we become the victims of financial sea change, we are not actually alone. We share the good company of others over the centuries who have endured this hard process. This can be comforting to remember from the start of our joblessness. Because we humans in general are natural controllers, our feelings and questions rush in immediately: What did I do? How did I fail? Recognizing that the systems beyond our control can affect us gives us a bit of necessary perspective from the start.

Joblessness can feel like driving along and encountering a major traffic jam. Suddenly we join a line of barely moving cars and have no idea what happened up ahead. Eventually we again begin to inch along, although not very patiently or hopefully. Our endurance skills somehow sustain us until we realize that the situation is righting itself, albeit slowly. We console ourselves by remembering that if there weren’t *some* movement up ahead, we would be even farther back. Miles back. So we wait, and trust, and try not to get too frustrated during the process until finally we’re cruising (and working) again.

From the beginning of our encounter with job loss, our family’s story mirrored countless others’ situations. Plenty of families felt the sting of a high-tech bust. And while our experiences were painful, our stories undoubtedly paled in comparison to the stories of those whose unemployment was chronic, or who lived in families where multiple generations of people were unemployed or underemployed. With newfound compassion, we suddenly realized connections

between ourselves and others that we never wanted to think about before. For instance, we too worried about making ends meet at the grocery store and considered asking for a scholarship for a school field trip. Losing a job also left us to wonder, What must life be like when the uncertainty goes on and on? How painful is the poverty of purpose for young people struggling to find hope? One of the greatest legacies of job loss can be staying motivated to advocate for others to find well-paid, purposeful employment.

The question of how tight the social safety net is becomes a much more personal topic during job loss, as does the viability of family support systems. We suddenly find out what services our cities may offer and whether we have cultivated the kinds of friendships and communities that endure when the going gets rough.

When we face a crisis such as unemployment, these support systems become evident and essential. We quickly realize who's available, from babysitters to those willing to lend an ear. Just like in many other arenas of our lives, we don't know what we need until we need it. Our support systems can be rusty or nonexistent. Cultivating relationships when we are feeling vulnerable ourselves can be hard, but that's often exactly how life happens. Our humility can open the door to others' understanding and willingness to help.

Faith communities, ideally, can provide natural support systems. That's because people of faith are taught to love our neighbors and live out Christ's mission in tangible acts of service. Faith communities can be places where spiritual leaders know how to tap volunteer skills and organize teams. Undoubtedly someone at church would be more than willing to drive us to the work counselor when we don't have transportation. We just need to connect with that volunteer. It's probably someone we see in the pews on Sunday morning.

Churches can also provide natural places where those suffering joblessness can go to find a listening ear and support groups. Faith leaders are trained to listen to the story of our short-term and long-

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term employment journeys and to help us figure out the next steps. Others who have faced, or who currently face, similar situations can become valuable resources, for they respond with actual experience and without judgment.

During the weeks of joblessness when we are sorting out our feelings, tapping our resources, and growing in faith, we are also forming a vision of how to get from unemployment back to employment. The vision includes simply getting through each day and making ends meet, as well as adopting a broader perspective than we had before the crisis. Naming new goals and figuring out the steps to achieve them is part of the process. Finding out that we have visions and can realize them is one of the true epiphanies in the midst of loss and change.

But how do we translate visions into action plans? There's a process to follow and this book names the process! Get organized, write a resumé, search job sites, discover your network of friends and neighbors, craft cover letters, prepare for interviews, meet with potential employers, thank everyone who helps you, and learn to wait. Several sources could help you figure out how to do these things. In this book we've added a spiritual dimension, such as praying for others and collaborating with church support groups.

When my husband lost his job, our family learned firsthand how job loss can hit hard and knock us over. This book begins with that reality and offers ways to deal with joblessness. Specifically, these ways include attending to our feelings and relationships, understanding the broader meaning of work, relying on spiritual strategies, and learning how to take the necessary steps to find get back in the workforce. By offering these reflections and ideas, we want to provide you with hope. This book is part of a series of books called Living with Hope. By using what we've discerned through hard times to help others, each of us is called to pass on hope. That's part of our spiritual work, whether or not we have a "day job."

- Why are churches well equipped to help members dealing with job loss?
- What concrete help do you need to navigate the job search process?
- When have you taken advantage of a support group to help you through a tough time?
- Who could you turn to in your faith community to just talk?

In chapter 4, “Ten Questions to Help You Get from Here (No Job) to There (Job),” we will expand on these ideas and questions.

May the ideas you find here combine with your God-given wisdom and knowledge to lead you to live out the work to which God calls you.

## Resources

The Center for Faith and Work, New York City. [faithandwork.com](http://faithandwork.com).

- Explores the intersection of our employment and our belief systems through workshops, newsletters, and conferences.

The Rule of St. Benedict. <https://tinyurl.com/msndn49>.

- Written in the sixth century, this continues to serve as a guideline for monastic Christians in the Order of St. Benedict.