



Work and Play With Gusto

8.24.08 by Charles Johnson

Article:

All human enterprise proceeds from the creative hand of God. The work of our hands and heads and hearts is but a reflection of the work of God in creation.

God places us on the planet for a short season in order "to be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth," as the [Genesis record](#) reports. Such fruitful multiplying and replenishing always celebrates first the creativity of our Maker, and then, second, our own creativity. Our human work here and now, rightly understood, recapitulates the work God first demonstrated at the dawn of creation.

Because God created, we can too. [Gerard Manley Hopkins](#) says it right: "Glory be to God for . . . for landscape, plotted and pieced, and all trades, their gear and tackle and trim." Indeed, in all of our respective vocational doing, we are cocreators with God.

But there is one basic difference between the work of God and our work: God's work is perfect while ours is only approximate. God's excellence is necessary, while ours is only possible. Because God is holy—whole, complete, perfect—God's production always has the quality of perfection.

Clearly, ours does not. The accountant's most careful auditing will miss a calculation somewhere. Even the best farmer plows a crooked furrow now and then. No master teacher exhausts a subject. No musician hits every last note. No manager meets every goal under budget.

This confusion of excellence with perfection is the source of much neurotic frustration in our work culture today. Complex psychological forces drive us. Obsessive vocational behavior is more depleting than replenishing. We often feel ever compelled toward greater and greater pursuits, more and more advancement, bigger and bigger accomplishment. Not content with the merely good, we want the great. We refer to this as "climbing the ladder," but it's a peculiar idiom: the reach never seems to produce a grasp.

So, we find ourselves lonely in our work, weary in our well-doing, competitive in our relationships, stuck in a never satisfied longing for more recognition and remuneration. We are unable to hear those most gratifying words, "Well done, good and faithful servant."

In short, we have defined excellence in terms of grandiosity rather than adequacy. Result? Misery.

I see this firsthand in my seminary teaching. My students are remarkably capable and often brilliant, but they mistakenly conclude that anything less than an A+ misses the mark. To grasp the material on an average or above average level is seen as failure to grasp the material at all. Theirs is a mentality of grades rather than grace. Is it any wonder such drivenness has infected even the church?

The "[most excellent way](#)" St. Paul so insightfully speaks of is not found by those who "understand all mysteries and all knowledge," but rather by the one who "bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." This is the only way that never fails.

The story is told of a little boy who was a minor character in the school play. His was not a scene-stealer role, but rather a bit part with one line. Still, the lad tackled his theatrical assignment with gusto. He practiced and rehearsed and went over and over and over his one line. Finally, the big day of the premier arrived, the play began, and the little boy entered the stage at his appointed time. He said his line and he said it well. Not too soon, not too late. Not too fast, not too slow. Not too loud, not too soft. He said his line, and he said it well.

We are on the planet as the boy was on the stage—for a brief moment. Chances are we aren't going to find the cure for cancer, or solve the Middle East crisis, or end world hunger, or usher in the Kingdom.

Let's just say our line. And say it well.