

Priority Five: Maximization of Resources

Utilizing What You Have

Your Education, Opportunities and Lifework

Hollow Men, Stuffed Men

T.S. Elliot's poem "Hollow Men" is a graphic reminder that it is possible to wind up at the end of our lives as hollow men and women. Listen to a portion of his lament on the difficulty of finishing life full of meaning and purpose.

*We are hollow men
We are the stuffed men
Leaning together
Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!...*

*Those who have crossed
With direct eyes, to death's other kingdom
Remember us-if at all-not as lost
Violent souls, but only
As the hollow men
The stuffed men. ...*

*Between the idea
And the reality
Between the motion
And the act
Falls the Shadow ...*

Life is very long ...

*This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
Not with a bang but a whimper.*

If we are going to live lives of meaning and purpose, if we are going to live lives that reach their full potential, lives that are fully enjoyed, lives that make a difference, then we need to deal seriously with the gap "between the idea and the reality." If we do not carefully steward our lives, investing our lives in the right sorts of things, we will end up hollow men, stuffed men, with very little satisfaction in life. Rather than going out with a bang-in a way that will make a significant impact in the lives of others for generations to come-our lives will end...with a whimper.

Revisiting the Wisdom Tradition

[Excerpted from 7th Priority Life Development Portfolio Unit Five, LearnCorp, Ames, IA 1996]

The wisdom tradition, which we have been drawing upon in this series, has much to say about the area of work, education and finances. We will look at a few of the core concepts that help us think of a framework of development.

Wisdom's Focus in Childhood and Adolescence: Developing a Good Work Ethic and Being a Responsible Steward

The emphasis for the young is on a good work ethic, personal discipline, and learning to be a good steward of resources-possessions, money, etc.

"The LORD does not let the righteous go hungry but he thwarts the craving of the wicked." "Lazy hands make a man poor, but diligent hands bring wealth." (Proverbs 10:3,4, NIV)

"I went past the field of the sluggard, past the vineyard of the man who lacks judgment; thorns had come up everywhere, the ground was covered with weeds, and the stone wall was in ruins. I applied my heart to what I observed and learned a lesson from what I saw: A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest— and poverty will come on you like a bandit and scarcity like an armed man." (Proverbs 24:30-34, NIV)

At an early age it is important that we learn how to do diligent work, even when we do not feel like it in order to establish good discipline habits and a strong work ethic. Our children must learn to work hard in season, and work hard at the everyday things that keep property and possessions working well and looking sharp. This is all part of the wisdom tradition. Today, though, our children are entertained through their childhood and adolescence, rather than taught to do helpful and meaningful work. We cannot expect our children to suddenly birth a good work ethic when they turn 18. Wisdom's exhortation: it must be modeled for them and built into them.

Wisdom's Focus in Early Adulthood: Working Hard and Building Financial Foundations

There are several proverbs that have particular relevance to young adults.

"An inheritance quickly gained at the beginning will not be blessed at the end." (Proverbs 20:21, NIV)

"He who works his land will have abundant food, but the one who chases fantasies will have his fill of poverty." (Proverbs 28:19, NIV)

"All hard work brings a profit, but mere talk leads only to poverty." (Proverbs 14:23, NIV)

"Food gained by fraud tastes sweet to a man, but he ends up with a mouth full of gravel." (Proverbs 20:17, NIV)

"Finish your outdoor work and get your fields ready; after that, build your house." (Proverbs 24:27, NIV)

"One man gives freely, yet gains even more; another withholds unduly, but comes to poverty. A generous man will prosper; he who refreshes others will himself be refreshed." (Proverbs 11:24,25, NIV)

It is crucial at this stage in life to lay good foundations based upon hard work, and the earlier the better. It is easy to go after too much talk—things of great interest but which do not help lay these foundations—and put too much emphasis on a comfortable lifestyle. What we need early on, are good financial foundations. We must avoid trying to accumulate wealth in a hurry, creating a comfortable home too quickly, and spending too much time learning and talking about our future work rather than doing it. In our modern western culture, with our preoccupation with formal education, we often do not get to any significant work until well into our early adulthood stage, and then often with considerable debt. A good work ethic should land us on the other side of any formal schooling, with very little, if any, debt. In light of the four-year half life of knowledge, our formal schooling should be put into perspective. The ability to learn anywhere ought to be far more carefully wed to our actual work, and our plan for regular lifelong learning given more serious attention. Except in a few professions, college education offers far less security than it used to, and in many cases, far less than someone who has a passion for his work, and a passion to learn. Very early in our lives, we must also develop a generous spirit, and a habit of giving to others—to our community of faith and to good causes. We can never expect to prosper without that kind of spirit.

Wisdom's Focus in Middle Adulthood: Prospering in Work and Deepening Financial Foundations

There are several proverbs that have particular relevance to middle adults.

"By wisdom a house is built, and through understanding it is established; through knowledge its rooms are filled with rare and beautiful treasures." (Proverbs 24:3,4, NIV)

"Do you see a man skilled in his work? He will serve before kings; he will not serve before obscure men." (Proverbs 22:29, NIV)

"The plans of the diligent lead to profit as surely as haste leads to poverty." (Proverbs 21:5, NIV)

In this stage, we begin to work more wisely. We have had enough experience to know where our abilities lie, and enough experience in work and life to focus on areas where we are most likely to make the greatest impact. The more skill

that we develop in our significant areas of work, the more likely we will stand before people who want our skills, and who will be in a position to move us into areas where we can have a greater impact, and consequently enjoy greater prosperity. The house that is prosperous, though, is not just one that is lucky. According to the wisdom model, we must be developing wisdom, and using that wisdom to build a successful plan—one that will give us the advantage that we need. In these job shift days, we need to be very wise. Their employers lay off so often people at this stage, although they have a vast amount of experience. They have not made themselves irreplaceable. First, they demand much more money than those who are just starting out. Maybe they have not kept up with technology, nor kept learning in general. They have not looked for ways to reengineer themselves within the company, or others ways to market their skills and abilities. Those who are following the wisdom tradition will recognize that to prosper at this stage they will have to become very skillful in their work, and very wise in their choices, if their households are going to prosper.

Wisdom's Focus in Later Adulthood: Mentoring, Writing and Enabling Others

There are several proverbs that have particular relevance to later adults.

"The righteous man leads a blameless life; blessed are his children after him." (Proverbs 20:7, NIV)

"Gray hair is a crown of splendor; it is attained by a righteous life." (Proverbs 16:31, NIV)

"The glory of young men is their strength, gray hair the splendor of the old." (Proverbs 20:29, NIV)

"A good man leaves an inheritance for his children's children, but a sinner's wealth is stored up for the righteous." (Proverbs 13:22, NIV)

In the wisdom model, those in later adulthood have the greatest opportunity to use their lifework and its fruit to its fullest advantage. In younger days, glory is in working hard, in strength. In later adulthood, glory is in great wisdom—skill in using our lifework and its resultant prosperity to enable and empower others to invest their lives in purposeful and prosperous ways. The Hebrew concept of gray hair is great strength of mind, of perspective, as opposed to the great physical strength of young men.

In this changing world of work, we must be motivated to build our contemporary education and lifework strategy firmly upon the foundation of the wisdom tradition.

Preparation for next week:

Guidelines for Working through the Issues

Using a separate sheet of paper work through the following questions. They are intended to guide you through the process of envisioning your future while keeping the wisdom-based framework constantly in mind.

- *Work Ethic, Stewardship:* Examine your work ethic. Have you learned how to work hard? Are you disciplined? Are you a good steward of your time and resources? Do you give freely? List evidences of your work ethic—good and bad and with the bad an intent to grow in that area.
- *Lifework Models:* These are people whom you consider have ordered their lives according to this wisdom-based framework. What do you admire about them and why? What are the evidences of prosperity in their lives—not just financial? How has their commitment to wisdom principles led to a sense of blessing in their lives? If you have observed them through more than one stage, such as a grandparent, trace their development.
- *Successful Work:* What work have you been involved in which you would consider successful? What made it successful? Did you work hard? Were you disciplined? From the wisdom vantage point, what did you learn from each experience? How do these work experiences reinforce wisdom truths?
- *Educational Experiences:* Record all significant educational experiences. What one seemed to have the most effect on you? Why? Which experiences seemed irrelevant and which ones made a big impact? What do they tell you about how you learn best? In the wisdom model learning is directly related to doing. Were the most effective educational experiences related to your lifework in some way? Remember, educational experiences can be formal (schooling), nonformal (a seminar, camp, Boy Scout program, etc.), or informal (talking in the car on vacation, dinner table conversations, TV, reading, working with dad, etc.)
- *Ideal Future Lifework:* List how you envision your lifework unfolding in each remaining stage of your life. Think ideally. Think creatively. Think with vision. Think with passion. What could you really do with vision and passion? What kind of work situation could you really get excited about?
- *Educational Needs:* If your vision is going to become a reality, what additional education do you need? Do you need more training that is formal? Do you need a certain kind of experience? Do you need the guidance of a mentor, possibly a well-connected mentor? Broadly structure your future education on your chart.
- *Financial Needs:* In order to accomplish all of your goals— educationally, those envisioned for your children, your future, and your ministry—how much money will you need to make in each phase of your life? Envision how you will do this from being a good steward of what you have now.
- *Stewardship Issues:* Are you a good steward of what you have now? Of your money? Of your possessions? Of your investments? Do you need to set any stewardship goals? Are you a giver? Are you willing to share your money or your possessions with others in need? To your community of faith? To give toward good causes? Envision your giving—to others, to your community of faith, and to good causes—throughout all the stages of your life.