WITHOUT A JOB, WHO AM I?

Rebuilding Your Self When You've Lost Your Job, Home, or Life Savings

Abraham J. Twerski, M.D.

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Some stories in this book have been passed down through oral tradition, and the original sources are unknown to the author.

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To my loving wife, Gail,

without whose inspiration and encouragement this book would not have been possible

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I THANK the thousands of people who have shared their lives with me over the past fifty years.

INTRODUCTION

Why I Wrote This Book

IT SEEMED TO COME OUT OF NOWHERE. True, a few economists had been issuing dire warnings for some time, but hardly anyone heeded them. Then, in the fall of 2008, the economic tidal wave struck, suddenly and furiously. Millions of jobs were lost, trillions of dollars of savings were wiped out, and mighty financial institutions crumbled. Homes were foreclosed and families were rendered destitute. People who had felt secure in their lives found themselves floundering without support. It was indeed an economic tsunami, and the backwash has devastated many of us.

A friend called me, suggesting I write something that might provide some moral support to victims of this disaster. Not wishing to be redundant, I visited a major bookstore to see what had already been published on the subject. I was surprised to find that although there were a number of books by economic pundits explaining the sources of the crisis and

financial gurus with advice about money, there was nothing in the way of moral support for sufferers.

As a psychiatrist, I have been taught how to treat depression, and as a rabbi, I have tried to offer solace to people in grief. But neither of these skills appeared relevant to the mass upheaval resulting from the economic meltdown. Perhaps, I thought, the reason there are no books on the subject is that there is nothing one can say.

But that idea gave me no peace. When I entered medical school, I was told that the role of a physician is "to cure sometimes, but to relieve always." The heads of nations may confer on how to cure our economy's ills, but so far their efforts have not produced dramatic results. Some Band-Aid measures have been offered, but the wounds are too deep to be treated with mere Band-Aids. And even though the economy will no doubt turn around eventually, millions of people who have lost their jobs and savings will be feeling the effects of this crisis for some time to come.

Perhaps, I thought, I might find something in my fifty-plus years as a psychiatrist and a rabbi that might provide a modicum of comfort to the victims of the worst economic disaster in recent memory.

But what can one do for someone who is unemployed or is otherwise facing financial ruin? There is no way we can find a person a job when there are no jobs to be had. There's no way to restore the value of a 401(k) that is nearly worthless. The depression resulting from such devastating blows is not going to be relieved by Prozac, at least not for the long run.

As both a physician and cleric, I have felt the utter frustration of wanting to help someone who is suffering, but finding that I am powerless. What could I say to relieve some of their agony? I have been with parents who have lost a child

and with patients who were told that there was no effective treatment for their cancer. But strangely, people do get some comfort, minuscule as it may be, from someone simply being *there* with them. There are few words of wisdom that can relieve the pain of these tragedies, and yet, by being completely silent, it may seem that we are indifferent, and that may make it worse.

Especially in the United States, people are motivated by and identify with the "American Dream" of success. The forms of such success are many, but they almost always include both financial comfort and career accomplishments. In fact, upon meeting a new person, we Americans are most likely to introduce ourselves in terms of *what we do for a living*. Usually, we assign a certain level of status and comfort to various occupations. This means we see ourselves, and other people, as having worth primarily in terms of the career we have (or once had, if we have now retired). But if a person is only what one does and what one earns, then what happens when that is taken away? One is left with nothing.

But there can be more, and indeed there *is* more to life, than what we do (or did) and what we earn.

As I pondered these questions, strangely enough, I was inspired by a comic strip in the newspaper—a cartoon that posed the question that is the title of this book and that suggested at least one answer. Beginning with that, I tried to find additional answers for people who ask or think the question, "Without a job, who am I?"

If reading this book brings any relief to these people, I will feel richly rewarded.

CHAPTER 1

Am I My Job?

For Better or For Worse © 1995 Lynn Johnston Prod. Reprinted by permission of Universal Press Syndicate.

PERHAPS YOU'RE FAMILIAR with the comic strip *For Better or For Worse* by artist Lynn Johnston, who has been documenting American middle-class life for three decades. In the strip above, the main character, Elly, has lost her job. She feels that her family may not be able to afford things they want, but husband John reassures her they can survive. Still, the furniture is not Elly's central problem. In exasperation, she cries out, "Without a job, who am I?" Daughter April knows better. Her mind has not been distorted by society's warped values. April

embraces Elly, which says to her better than a thousand words could, "You're my mother, job or no job!"

Like Elly and John, we've been hit hard by the recent economic collapse. There's no minimizing the enormity of the problem of losing a job, having a home foreclosed, or seeing one's life's savings wiped out. But that should not destroy one's sense of self, one's feeling of worthiness. A job is a way of earning a livelihood, which is certainly of great importance. Nevertheless, no job or house, no stock portfolio or retirement fund should be our entire identity.

Unfortunately, this identification prevails in our culture. When we first introduce ourselves to someone, we're likely to begin with, "I am a lawyer," or "I am a plumber," or "I'm a salesman." People say what they *do* rather than who they *are*. We may refer to ourselves as human *beings*, but many of us really function as human *doings*. Consequently, if the *doing* is lost, one feels one is nothing.

Why?

Our culture has brainwashed us. Money and material things are indeed important, but they have taken on disproportionate significance.

Don't get me wrong. I know that losing one's job (or home or savings) is among the most devastating things that can happen to a person, but if you have true self-esteem, it shouldn't destroy you—and if it does, then you may have too much of your identity in your job or your money.

There are people who devote many hours to work so they can give their family things they want, but their involvement in work is so complete that they cannot give themselves to their family and to their friends and significant others. The fact is that if you believed more in your self-worth, you would realize that as important as it may be to provide your loved

ones with material things, it is even more essential that you provide them with yourself.

You are a unique person with intelligence and sensitivity. *You* have the ability to love, to be considerate of and help others, to be happy and share in other people's joy, and to commiserate with them in their grief. *You* have the ability to choose between right and wrong, to act morally and ethically, sometimes in defiance of strong temptations. *You* have the ability to think about a purpose and goal in life, and you have the ability to work on making yourself a better person. *You* have the ability to control your anger, to forgive someone who offended or hurt you, and to apologize if you offended someone. These are the features that define you as a human being and distinguish you from other living creatures. These traits give you value as a human being, and these traits are not lost if you lose your job.

Too often, we tend to form an opinion of ourselves based on what others think of us and how they act toward us. These opinions and actions get tied up in how much we invest in our work roles. If a highly regarded college professor suffers a stroke and is unable to speak and teach and gather accolades as a teacher anymore, does that mean she isn't a worthwhile human being? It boils down to our belief in our intrinsic worth as people, untethered from our changing public roles and reputations.

Because we invest so much of our ego in what we do and what we can earn and what we own, we may feel that we have lost the respect of others when we are unable to earn and spend money. I heard of a person who had fallen on hard times and had prayed regularly at the same synagogue for twenty years who said, "I can no longer go there. I used to donate a hundred dollars regularly, but now I can barely afford

to give ten." What a terrible mistake that someone could feel less worthy to the congregation where he worships because of changed material circumstances beyond his control.

So before we go any further in exploring this question—"Without a job, who am I?"—consider these simple actions you can take right away to show that you are indeed more than your work or your wealth.

Finding Your True Worth

First, nothing makes us feel better than helping somebody else who's in trouble. You probably know someone who has lost his job or retirement savings. Invite that person over for dinner or to spend an evening together. Show that you value the friendship. Not only will you be doing something nice for someone, you will be gaining something valuable, too: when you show respect and positive feelings for another person, you acquire them for yourself.

Next, if you have kids, make time to spend with them. Play a game, take interest in their homework and hobbies, and eat meals as a family. Let them know you care about them, and give them opportunities to show their concern and caring for you. No matter how big your problems may seem, sharing the load helps everybody. If you don't have kids, reach out to other family members and friends—not only to get help, but also to get outside yourself by showing an interest in others. You'll soon experience your value beyond what you earn and own.

In a 1996 study, researchers sought to identify why adolescents in some families had more problems than others. Hundreds of families were interviewed and tons of data analyzed. The result? The most significant factor wasn't how many things the family owned, or the parents' social standing or ca-

reer success; it was simply that in the healthier families, *the family shared meals more often*. Another study by researchers at the University of Minnesota found that "the more frequently children ate with their parents the less likely they were to smoke, drink, use marijuana, or show signs of depression."[1] We can forget that a pleasant meal together can be a time to bond, to experience and share concern and support with the people we care about.

When times are tough, family members should draw closer to one another and show support, affection, and appreciation, like little April in the cartoon strip. If the stress of the economic crisis prompts family members to draw closer to one another, it may be a silver lining in this very dark cloud.

There's a simple exercise you can do that not only awakens gratitude for what you have but also helps you uncover some of the basic qualities that make you a unique person of value. When it seems that there's little to be grateful for, keeping a "gratitude journal" devoted specifically to paying attention to those things in our lives that we really can be thankful for can be a good antidote to one-sided negative thinking. While you're at it, you can record the daily incidents that demonstrate some of the positive qualities that make you unique as a human *being*. Your journal might contain simple entries such as these:

- I was looking for a parking space at the supermarket, and I saw someone getting ready to pull out. I waited and signaled, but another driver, who saw me waiting for that space, pulled in and grabbed it. I felt a surge of anger and was going to tell him off, but I decided it wasn't worth it.

- I was shoveling the snow off my sidewalk when I remembered that my neighbor had returned from the hospital a few days ago, so I shoveled his walk, too.
- Jane left the meat loaf in the oven too long and felt terrible about it. I kissed her and told her that her many delicious meat loaves more than made up for this one.
- The checkout clerk gave me an extra dollar in change, and I gave it back to her.
- I apologized to someone I had reamed out last week.
- I took the kids to visit my mother. She enjoyed them.
- I helped someone who was stranded at the side of the road with a flat tire.
- Jimmy was upset because he felt his teacher was unfair to him. I spent time listening to him, and he felt much better about it.

It's uplifting to pay attention to incidents like these. We remind ourselves that by acting on values such as compassion, honesty, and forgiveness, we realize our *real* worth—the worth that is deeper than that associated with job, career, or material success. We may also want to record some things that we could have done better, resolving how to handle a similar situation differently next time. Seeing how we improve our behavior and finding the motivation to do so is uplifting, too.

There's tremendous satisfaction in recognizing your uniqueness as a human being and finding the good in yourself that goes deeper than material success. Every person really is one-of-a-kind—there are no two sets of identical voice or fingerprints!—and you have the power to nurture and develop your unique identity.

When we don't pay enough attention to our uniqueness, when we have buried or forgotten our true identity, we may

fabricate one that is hardly edifying. This point is illustrated by this tale about one of the "wise men" of Chelm, an old city in Poland that is the setting of many entertaining and instructive Jewish tales about our human foibles. Many of the villagers are remarkably stupid in a quaint sort of way, as the story shows.

One day, a citizen of Chelm was at the public bathhouse. It suddenly dawned upon him that without clothes, most people look alike. He became quite anxious with the thought, "When it comes time to go home, how will I know which one is me?" After pondering this a bit, he came up with a brilliant solution. He found a piece of red string and tied it around his great toe. He was now distinctly identifiable.

Unfortunately, as he sudsed and showered, the red string fell off his toe, and when another bather stepped on it, it stuck to his foot. When it was time to leave, the first bather looked at his foot, and seeing nothing on it, he was perplexed. Then he noticed the other man with the red string on his foot. He approached him and said, "I know who you are, but can you tell me, who am I?"

Some people seek an identity by having the equivalent of a red string. Their identity is the successful sales manager, the busy entrepreneur, the super-accomplished career woman and homemaker. Or it's the luxury automobile in the driveway or the impressive façade on the mansion. But this is hardly the lasting identity that comes from within. What happens if one sells the car or, worse, it is repossessed? Does one's identity go along with it?

A person can use a time of trouble to recover a genuine identity, one rooted in esteem not for what one does or has, but for what one *is*.

CHAPTER 2

Reacting to Crisis

EVEN IN TIMES OF WIDESPREAD LAYOFFS, reactions to economic adversity can vary across a wide spectrum, from mild to extreme. The variability can be due to many factors. First, situations differ—the stakes of a job loss may vary depending on one's age, family, finances, location, career path, and so on. Second, the type of support a person has varies; some people are deeply networked while others are all alone. And third, the types of experiences, fears, and expectations one brings to a loss vary dramatically as well.

Put simply, every person is different. Each of us reacts to the reality we perceive, but we must understand that "reality" is not objective. Two people may be exposed to the same situation but perceive it very differently. Consider two people with the same amount of savings, the same career, and the same family supports around them. Both lose their jobs on the same day. One person experiences the loss as a crisis; he feels

Millions of people confuse who they are with what they do. When faced with the loss of their job, home, or life savings, many struggle not only to keep their head above water financially, but also to maintain a healthy, positive view of themselves and their value in the world.

Whether you are out of work or money, or are afraid of ending up there, ***Without a Job, Who Am I?*** offers a system of support to help you stay motivated and persevere, as well as develop and sustain lasting values and a solid sense of identity no matter what your material circumstances happen to be.

With more than forty years of experience as a psychological, medical, and spiritual counselor, renowned psychiatrist and author Abraham J. Twerski, M.D., offers time-tested principles and practices for successfully coping with grief, hardship, and trauma to help us rise personally from professional or financial loss. Twerski gives us the tools to stay centered on what really matters by helping us identify what positive self-esteem really is and define the personal values needed to sustain it, deal with the depression and grief that often follow economic loss, examine what worry does for and to us, manage the stress caused by negative emotions, and find familial and spiritual suppport.

Focused on the central question "Who am I?" Twerski uses actionable advice complemented by inspirational stories to guide us in rediscovering our self-worth when shaken by economic upheaval.

Abraham J. Twerski, M.D., is the author of numerous acclaimed books on self-esteem, healing, spirituality, and recovery. After serving as a pulpit rabbi, Twerski served as medical director of psychiatry at Pittsburgh's St. Francis Hospital for a number of years and later founded the Gateway Rehabilitation Center.

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