



My Work is My Life

“**M**y work was my life.” These were the words of a physician and friend of mine whose long career was ending for a well-deserved retirement. He was hard-working, intelligent, and driven to help his patients at all costs.

He told me on my last visit he was retiring soon. There was hardly a retirement more deserved than for this public servant.

A couple of years later I ran into him and asked excitedly how his retirement was going. His reply both shocked and saddened me. He said “**I hate it!**” When asked why, he replied, “**My work was my life, and now that my work is over my life is over!**”

I’ve always wondered why I’ve seen through the years what appeared to be a lot of people retiring so they can go back work. It’s clearer to me now, at least one of the reasons is their entire identity was wrapped up in their profession, title, and love for what they did. So when their career was no more they felt a sense of loss and were without purpose.

I sense it happens frequently when it has been a family business handed down through generations, or a career which was very long enjoyed and successful, or perhaps a role that was highly acknowledged by co-workers and the community.



When Work Becomes Our Identity

When work becomes our total value and worth of who we are there is a danger. Whether you are a rock star who can no longer perform, a grieving parent who is finally sending their graduating adult-child to college, or a highly degreed individual that crafted a career which helped thousands, if this was the only passion or investment in your life that defined you, and you are not able to directly function in that role like you have for years, what are you going to do when they or it is gone?

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Psychologists Dr. John Townsend and Dr. Henry Cloud have been writing on boundaries in the workplace and home for forty years. In his book, “The One-Life Solution: Reclaim Your Personal Life While Achieving Greater Professional Success,” Dr. Cloud writes: “Be careful when you say, ‘Oh but my work is my life, I love it.’ It is good that you love your work, but if it is literally your life, then you have either defined your life in a very limited way or do not know what you are missing. Ultimately, your work cannot be your whole life. It will break down at some point and leave you empty or unfulfilled. Also, it is important to consider what happens when you retire. Gaining a well-rounded life now, will prepare you for better retirement when you need a life, after the work is gone.”

Gaining and maintaining a well-rounded life seems to be what a lot of professionals desire, but all too frequently they experience the tension between life at work and outside of work. It seems like if we consistently put too much emphasis on one over the other, the tight cable that we walk begins to split, fray, and unravel.

I once jokingly said to my wife at the kitchen counter while she was cooking, “In retirement I’m going to follow you around the kitchen.” She stopped stirring her pot of stew and pointed the long wooden spoon

at me and said, “In retirement you WON’T follow me around the kitchen because I will stab you.” I started laughing. Then she emphatically said, “Since you won’t be following me around the kitchen, start looking for a hobby, sport, or take a class now!”

This is not a newsletter on retirement, but I will say that in my research about preparing for retirement the constant theme seems to be that “when you retire be sure you have something to retire to.”

Some good questions to ask if “your work is your life” would be:

- Do you have a life outside of your work?
- Is your life diversified or is it only about one passion?
- Can I remain loyal to my family and friends as well as the organization with my current responsibilities?
- Is my out of balance schedule only seasonal or a lifestyle?
- Can you envision yourself retired successfully apart from your life’s work?
- Do you have a plan B if your work-life had to end?

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By the way, years later I ran into my physician friend, then in his 80s, at a coffee shop. He didn't seem like the same discouraged retired physician who "hated his life now that his work was over." He seemed vibrant, and was smiling and enthusiastic when I asked how he was.

He told me life was much better now as he was mentoring younger professionals in the field of his former practice. He was able to rebuild his identity now that he discovered a different expression of what he loved for so many years. His life didn't seem over but rather it had the air of a new beginning now that he discovered new work to do!



A Powerful Ending

A group of fifty people over the age of 90 were interviewed by a sociologist as it was related to their life's perspective looking back. He asked, **"If you could live your life over again, what would you have done differently?"**

There were three common denominator answers that seemed to be the theme of their reflections...

1. They would have spent more time with their families and close friends.
2. They would have taken more risk to invest in a different interest or dream.
3. They would have given more time investing in the lives of others sharing information, life lessons, and practical tips from their expertise that would live on long after they were gone.

For more information on a pertinent training of the above subject see **Track #5** at teamworks-works.com or go to our YouTube channel, [Straight talk with Bill Gallagher - Training Bites for the Workplace](#)

Training modules can be "Live" or on Zoom.

220011



Bill Gallagher has been counseling and working with professionals since 1980. His emphasis in the workplace is to help develop both relational skills and professional standards among administration and staff. He has worked in multiple organizational settings and of recent has spent most of his time addressing workplace issues in healthcare and city government.

Bill formed TeamWorks in 2001 to help organizations achieve their goals for establishing high morale and client satisfaction. TeamWorks currently specializes in offering one-on-one surveys and evaluations for management and staff to assess the current culture's needs and recommended trainings going forward.

In addition to conducting a variety of workshops and in-services on workplace issues, Bill mediates conflict among partnerships and staff relationships, speaks at conventions, facilitates management retreats, and offers personal consultation and counseling for staff.

Bill's strengths are in public speaking, mediation, and understanding the complexities of relational dynamics in the workplace. He lives in Medford, Oregon, with his wife Jenny, and enjoys spending time with their five children and five granddaughters.