

Choruses from The Rock

Work-Life Insights from T.S. Eliot



Though written in 1934, this poem by T.S. Eliot vividly captures the struggling, empty soul of modern work life. We encourage you to read the whole poem, discuss it with some colleagues, and determine to work and live to honor God.

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T.S. Eliot, 1934

The Eagle soars in the summit of Heaven,
The Hunter with his dogs pursues his circuit.

O world of spring and autumn, birth and dying!
The endless cycle of idea and action,
Endless invention, endless experiment,
Brings knowledge of motion, but not of stillness;
Knowledge of speech, but not of silence;
Knowledge of words, and ignorance of the Word.
All our knowledge brings us nearer to death,
But nearness to death no nearer to God.
Where is the Life we have lost in living?
Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?
Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?
The cycles of Heaven in twenty centuries
Brings us farther from God and nearer to the Dust.

The lot of man is ceaseless labor,
Or ceaseless idleness, which is still harder,
Or irregular labour, which is not pleasant.
I have trodden the winepress alone, and I know
That it is hard to be really useful, resigning
The things that men count for happiness, seeking
The good deeds that lead to obscurity, accepting
With equal face those that bring ignominy,
The applause of all or the love of none.
All men are ready to invest their money
But most expect dividends.
I say to you: Make perfect your will.
I say: take no thought of the harvest,
But only of proper sowing.

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The world turns and the world changes,
But one thing does not change.
In all of my years, one thing does not change,
However you disguise it, this thing does not change:
The perpetual struggle of Good and Evil.

You neglect and belittle the desert.
The desert is not remote in southern tropics
The desert is not only around the corner,
The desert is squeezed in the tube-train next to you,
The desert is in the heart of your brother.

Let me show you the work of the humble. Listen.

In the vacant places
We will build with new bricks

Where the bricks are fallen
We will build with new stone
Where the beams are rotten
We will build with new timbers
Where the word is unspoken
We will build with new speech
There is work together
A Church for all
And a job for each
Every man to his work.

What life have you, if you have not life together?
There is not life that is not in community,
And no community not lived in praise of GOD.

And now you live dispersed on ribbon roads,
And no man knows or cares who is his neighbor
Unless his neighbor makes too much disturbance,
But all dash to and fro in motor cars,
Familiar with the roads and settled nowhere.

Much to cast down, much to build, much to restore

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I have given you the power of choice, and you only alternate
Between futile speculation and unconsidered action.

And the wind shall say: "Here were decent godless people:
Their only monument the asphalt road
And a thousand lost golf balls."

When the Stranger says: "What is the meaning of this city ?
Do you huddle close together because you love each other?"
What will you answer? "We all dwell together
To make money from each other"? or "This is a community"?

Oh my soul, be prepared for the coming of the Stranger.
Be prepared for him who knows how to ask questions.

There is one who remembers the way to your door:
Life you may evade, but Death you shall not.
You shall not deny the Stranger.

They constantly try to escape
From the darkness outside and within
By dreaming of systems so perfect that no one will need to be good.
But the man that is shall shadow
The man that pretends to be.

Then it seemed as if men must proceed from light to light, in the light of
the Word,
Through the Passion and Sacrifice saved in spite of their negative being;
Bestial as always before, carnal, self seeking as always before, selfish and
purblind as ever before,
Yet always struggling, always reaffirming, always resuming their march on
the way that was lit by the light;
Often halting, loitering, straying, delaying, returning, yet following no other
way.

But it seems that something has happened that has never happened
before: though we know not just when, or why, or how, or where.
Men have left GOD not for other gods, they say, but for no God; and this has
never happened before
That men both deny gods and worship gods, professing first Reason,
And then Money, and Power, and what they call Life, or Race, or Dialectic.

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What have we to do but stand with empty hands and palms turned upwards in an age which advances progressively backwards?

There came one who spoke of the shame of Jerusalem
And the holy places defiled;
Peter the Hermit, scourging with words.
And among his hearers were a few good men,
Many who were evil,
And most who were neither,
Like all men in all places.

In spite of all the dishonour,
the broken standards, the broken lives,
The broken faith in one place or another,
There was something left that was more than the tales
Of old men on winter evenings.

Our age is an age of moderate virtue
And moderate vice

The soul of Man must quicken to creation.

Out of the meaningless practical shapes of all that is living or
lifeless
Joined with the artist's eye, new life, new form, new colour.
Out of the sea of sound the life of music,
Out of the slimy mud of words, out of the sleet and hail of verbal
imprecisions,
Approximate thoughts and feelings, words that have taken the
place of thoughts and feelings,
There spring the perfect order of speech, and the beauty of incanta-
tion.

The work of creation is never without travail

Light
Light
The visible reminder of Invisible Light.

O Light Invisible, we praise Thee!
Too bright for mortal vision.