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The Working Life: The Promise and Betrayal of Modern Work

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T H E
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The Promise and Betrayal
of Modern Work

Joanne B. Ciulla



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Introduction

Suppose that every tool we had could perform its function, either at our bidding, or itself perceiving the need. . . . Suppose that shuttles in a loom could fly to and fro and a plucker play on a lyre all self-moved, then manufacturers would have no need of workers nor masters of slaves.

—ARISTOTLE

The tools and machines that Aristotle dreamed of are the technology of everyday life in industrialized countries today. Aristotle might have rejoiced at the “lights-out factory” where robots work unceasingly. Many of us don’t. Instead of greeting this era with joy, we cling ever more tightly to our work. Ours is a work-oriented society, one where “all play and no work makes Jack a big jerk.” We live in a paradoxical culture that both celebrates work and continually strives to eliminate it. While we treasure economic efficiency, we seek humanly interesting jobs that offer fulfillment and give meaning to our lives. Perhaps the demand for meaningful work grows because we see the supply shrinking.

This book is about the meaning of work and work’s place in life. In it I argue that work often promises to contribute more to our lives than it can deliver. We have gone beyond the work ethic, which endowed work with moral value, and now dangerously depend on our jobs to be the primary source of our identity, the mainspring of individual self-esteem and happiness. Furthermore, work sometimes substitutes for the fulfillment we used to derive from family, friends, religion, and

community. This substitution is risky because the economy is unpredictable and employers are sometimes feckless. Work can also ruin lives. When companies “downsize” they leave some with too much work and others with none. Both groups face a less certain future. Overwork and unemployment place enormous strains upon individuals and families.

Work determines our status and shapes our social interactions. Some people can hardly talk to a stranger without first knowing what he or she does for a living. One of the first things that Americans ask when they meet someone new is, “What do you do?” Europeans used to consider this a rude question, but they too are changing. To be retired or unemployed in a work-oriented society dooms one to the status of a nonentity. Many people fanatically pursue careers as if a good job were the sole key to happiness—whether that happiness is derived from the status of the job itself or the goods and status that wages buy. They are willing to study the right things in school, wear the right clothes, and belong to the right clubs, even do volunteer work, all in the name of obtaining a position that will eventually give them freedom to choose how to live their lives. But not everyone exercises this freedom upon reaching such a goal, and most people don’t make it. On the one hand are those who argue that they’ll work seventy-hour weeks, make their fortunes, and retire at forty—some do but most don’t. This mind-set may take a social toll in terms of loneliness, divorce, and sometimes even white-collar crime. On the other hand are those who work long hours just to put food on the table or because they are afraid of losing their jobs.

A consequence of this loaded meaning of work is that we put our happiness in the hands of the market and our employers. Earning a decent living is not enough; we want something more. This “something more” has challenged employers to find ways of motivating people who want jobs that satisfy a variety of abstract desires and needs, such as self-development and self-fulfillment. So managers, consultants, and psychologists guess at employees’ needs and develop programs and rhetoric that carry the implicit promise of fulfilling them. This results in a vicious circle: employees desire more, management promises more, and the expectation for finding meaning in work rises. Both sides grope in the dark, searching for a workplace El Dorado.

This is not a self-help book, nor is it a rigorous social scientific study. I borrow from the works of scholars and writers from many dis-

ciplines, and I do my best to stand on their shoulders—and not step on their toes. As a philosopher, I look at questions that fall between the cracks of the social sciences and the humanities. I turn accepted and treasured ideas about work upside down to see how they fare—an unexamined work ethic may not be worth having. While there are many extensive studies on workers' values and worker satisfaction, questions about the meaning of work are also part of the meaning-of-life question, or as Aristotle would put it, what constitutes "the good life." These questions fall on the turf of philosophers and theologians. That is why Aristotle, who thought quite a bit about work, leisure, and life, floats in and out of the discussion.

Academics who write about work often mistakenly assume that everyone wants a job like theirs. Interview a variety of workers and you soon discover that this simply isn't true—not everyone wants to do mental work indoors and behind a desk. Society and institutions provide general frameworks for meaning, but individuals interpret meanings in different ways. There is a wide variance in the kinds of work that people like to do and the things in which they find meaning. I discovered this for myself in 1978 when I began teaching a course on the philosophy of work to adults in evening school. My students—from all walks of life—came to class after their work. They included police officers, nurses, boilermakers, secretaries, telephone company employees, and salespeople. They took the class, often reluctantly, to fulfill their philosophy requirement. Many of the night students needed seven or eight years to finish their degrees. Few students had the luxury of taking the course for fun. For the most part they were the managed who wanted to be managers. Some were at the end of their day shift and came to class still wearing the uniform of their trade. Some showed up with cups of coffee or a snack, since there wasn't time for dinner.

I was pleased to find that philosophy, often dismissed as irrelevant, still had something to say to ordinary people. I remember the first time that I explained Marx's theory of alienation and surplus labor value. The class was not particularly enthusiastic about reading Marx. Most students were business majors, and politically conservative. Marx, after all, was a communist. The students were wage earners who dreamed of being capitalists. After I explained how the more you worked and made profit for the capitalist the less your labor was actually worth, a woman who sat in the back and usually dozed off during class raised her hand and passionately began explaining why Marx was right. It was easy to

see why the logic of communism once seduced so many people all over the world. It wasn't that she had a desire for socialism, but she did have a desire for fairness. Surplus labor value just didn't seem fair. It devalued the student and her work.

When I first read Studs Terkel's popular book *Working*, I wondered whether the people that he interviewed had really said what he reported. I no longer doubt it. During the seven years of teaching the class, and almost twenty years of talking to people about their jobs, I learned how eloquent people can be when they discuss their work. For some, work is "a daily humiliation." Their humiliation doesn't come from the task at hand, but from the disrespect and injustice of coworkers and superiors. My students hated being watched, resented not being trusted, and fumed because they had little power to right wrongs and correct incompetence. I came to admire the profound struggle that people carry on to maintain their dignity, and the many ways they find meaning even under the most difficult working conditions.

When I taught the work course my own experiences were not that different from those of my students. Like many young scholars, I began my career teaching a few classes paid on a per course basis. I sometimes taught four to eight courses a year. It amounted to full-time work for about a quarter of a full-time wage, with no benefits. As unfair as these conditions sound, I wouldn't have traded this opportunity for any other work. I was still working on my Ph.D. at the time, and philosophy jobs were scarce. So, I subsidized the first nine years of my teaching career by waitressing, bartending, and cooking in restaurants.

I enjoyed restaurant work. It was a welcome change from academia, and I always got a good meal out of it. One semester I taught philosophy in the morning, went to graduate seminars in the afternoon, and worked in an upscale hamburger restaurant at night. I thought quite a bit about work and identity. I was treated very differently by others as I went from college professor to graduate student to waitress. At the end of the day, I would often wonder which role was really me. In one job I worked alongside a ballet dancer and a model. We all had great ambitions. The manager took sadistic delight in making fun of our aspirations and verbally abusing us. Nowadays we would probably slap a harassment lawsuit on him. I don't know what happened to the manager, but the dancer eventually went on to become a prima ballerina, the model ended up on the cover of *Italian Vogue*, and I landed a fellowship at the Harvard Business School. This experience helped me

understand the relationship between hope and work. We can endure the worst of jobs, if it is reasonable to hope that the job will get us where we want to go or at least feed us along the way.

After nine years of teaching philosophy and thinking about work from the perspective of the worker, I had an opportunity to think about work from the perspective of management: first as a postdoctoral fellow in business and ethics at the Harvard Business School, where I did research on business ethics, and then at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, where I taught the required M.B.A. course on management and courses on business ethics. After Wharton I went on to help design the Jepson School of Leadership Studies at the University of Richmond in Virginia. There I teach courses on ethics, leadership, and critical thinking. The problems of work have never been far from my mind in any of my academic positions. Since the mid-1980s I have also worked as a consultant, providing seminars on business ethics to large corporations. This has given me an opportunity to hear many stories about how people think about their work and how it affects their lives.

Throughout the years of teaching management, I was struck increasingly by the loaded meaning of work that has been created over the last century of management theory and practice. The social engineer joined up with the time-study man and the mild-mannered therapist. Corporations, which had always *had* cultures, *became* “cultures” that sought to transform employees into one big happy family. Companies tackled the problem of employee alienation with “entertaining” that encroached on workers’ leisure time in the guise of business dinners, corporate beer busts, sports outings, and “networking” events. Managers, charged with the task of “making meaning,” tried new ways of persuading employees to invest more of themselves in their work than the job required. Banal work got dressed up to look meaningful. At the close of the century the manager’s mantra is made up of “quality,” “commitment,” and “teamwork.” All of these approaches to management attempted to change and control the meaning of work in an organization.

Under the old school of scientific management, the alienated worker did what he or she was told, got paid, and went home. The work may have been boring, the wages low, but at least everyone knew where he or she stood. Today the transaction is not as honest. While we still trade our labor, most modern work requires us to give away a slice

of our private lives. Workers of the past were just overworked; today many workers are overworked and overmanaged. The exhaustion that paints the faces of workers at the end of the day may be not physical but emotional, because work demands more of the self than the accurate and efficient performance of the task at hand. I began to wonder if work has really improved since the beginning of the century or if it is just clothed in fancy terms and done in cleaner, better-lighted places.

Work entered an era of mean streets and broken promises in the 1990s, when loyal, longtime employees of some of the biggest and best corporations in America lost their jobs. Massive layoffs signaled the end of the social compact between employers and employees that said, If you do your job well, you can keep it. Employees woke up to the fact that despite all the rhetoric of the caring employer and the improved quality of work life, workers were still commodities that could be replaced with computers, cheap foreign labor, or coworkers willing to do twice as much work for the same pay. When the social compact was broken, so too was the urbane façade of management that had been carefully crafted by social scientists and consultants over the past century. The one good that came from the 1990s was that people began to see their jobs for what they were: first and foremost, economic transactions in a fickle global economy. People began to question the priority of work over other things in their lives. They began to wonder whether the time and energy that they had sacrificed for their jobs was really worth it.

This book is not a lament about some lost golden age of work. It is about choosing how we want to live and work. The first part of the book explores the history of the idea of work, our ambivalence toward work, the values associated with it, and the work ethic. Since the biggest problems with work come not from the work we do for ourselves but from the work we do for others, the second part of the book shows how working for others has always been a struggle for freedom and control. Employers struggle for control over employees, employees struggle for autonomy and control over their work and lives. This part of the book offers a critique of the past one hundred years of management theories and how they have shaped our expectations about work. After this look at where we have been and how we have gotten to where we are now, the third part of the book considers how work and consumption have come to dominate the way we live.

I invite the reader to explore the meaning of work with me. By ex-

amining the historical and cultural presuppositions behind the meaning of work, I hope to give readers a place to stand so that they can examine their own ideas and expectations about work and the choices they have made about work and life. For most people the greatest challenge is not work, but how to make their lives work. While the book is written from an American perspective, the questions it raises are of equal, if not greater, relevance to those in cultures that have in recent years become increasingly work oriented as the result of global competition, the internationalization of American management theories, and escalating consumerism. For Americans and non-Americans alike, meaning in work, leisure, and life is not something that is hand delivered. We must all go out and find it for ourselves. This book is a journey into the meaning of work and life, but the destination is ultimately up to the reader.