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Alienated Labor, Bullshit Jobs, & the Dream of a 15-Hour Work Week

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Among anthropologists, there's a classic story about a western missionary meeting an indigenous inhabitant of an island off the East coast of Australia. It was a bright, sunny day, and the missionary happened upon a man relaxing on the beach:

MISSIONARY: Look at you! You're just wasting your life way, lying around like that.

MAN: Why? What do you think I should be doing?

MISSIONARY: Well, there are plenty of coconuts all around here. Why not dry some of the coconut kernels, extract the oil, and sell it?

MAN: And why would I want to do that?

MISSIONARY: You could make a lot of money. And with the money you make, you could get a drying machine, dry the kernels faster, and make even more money.

MAN: Okay. And why would I want to do that?

MISSIONARY: Well, you'd be rich. You could buy land, plant more trees, expand operations. At that point, you wouldn't even have to do the physical work anymore. You could just hire a bunch of other people to do it for you.

MAN: Okay. And why would I want to do that?

MISSIONARY: Well, eventually, with all that coconut oil, land, machines, employees, with all that money—you could retire a very rich man. And

then you wouldn't have to do anything. You could just lie on the beach all day. (Graeber 2014: 399-400)

This time, the man didn't bother to reply. He simply lay back on the sand, enjoying that glorious, sunny day. And the missionary continued on his way.

Now, don't get me wrong. I'm not saying that we should all spend every day lying on the beach. But this parable does challenge us to question what work is for, and why we spend our days in the various ways that we do. Do you actually enjoy manufacturing coconut oil—or whatever the equivalent is for you? Or are you only working for the weekends, for your chance to lie on the beach—or do whatever you enjoy doing in your free time?

Historically, only few people spent their lives “working for the weekend.” On farms and later in factories, many more people found themselves working 12 hours a day for six days a week. But “in the early nineteenth century, and continuing for over a hundred years, working hours in the United States were gradually reduced,” culminating in the early twentieth century with a new standard of a 40-hour week as full-time employment (Honnicutti viii). This achievement resulted in one of the Labor Movement's most famous slogans: **“The people who brought you the weekend.”**

But the story of labor's many contributions to improved working conditions doesn't end there—or at least, it doesn't have to. Economists used to extrapolate based on the successes of the Labor Movement and the rise of automation, that by the end of the twentieth-century, citizens of technologically advanced nations would work **no more than 15 hours/week**. In retrospect, the opposite has happened for many of us: technology has connected us to work almost constantly (Graeber 2018: xvi-xvii).

But this shift is not to say that automation hasn't made a difference. Over the course of the twentieth century,

the number of workers employed as domestic servants, in industry, and in the farm sector collapsed dramatically. At the same time, professional, managerial, clerical, sales, and service workers tripled, growing from one-quarter to three-quarters of total employment.... Rather than allowing a massive reduction of working hours to free the world's population to pursue their own projects, pleasures, visions, and ideas, we have seen

the ballooning not even so much of the “service sector” as the administrative sector.... (xviii - xviii)

And I invite you to consider if this widespread creation of new types of administrative jobs is at least in some part related to our opening story of the puritanical missionary who felt compelled to try and persuade a stranger lying on the beach that he should instead become a corporate titan. Then he might one day enjoy the beach in retirement —assuming that he didn’t die in the meantime from a heart attack due to all the stress of running a coconut oil business! Some of you may know H. L. Mencken’s definition of Puritanism: “the haunting fear that someone, somewhere may be happy” (257). And that’s part of the point of our opening story: you don’t have to delay happiness until some distant date.

The reason I chose this topic for today is that tomorrow is Labor Day, a federal holiday that is much more than a three-day weekend marking the end of summer vacation season. Labor Day was created to celebrate the labor movement’s role in securing workers’ rights. And in addition to being grateful for all the Labor Movement has secured in the past, we can also allow those successes to inspire us to further achievements.

I’m also aware that today is my first Sunday back to officially laboring after a three-month sabbatical. But here’s the thing: other than two trips, my life was not wildly different during sabbatical. It’s more that the time away allowed me to do many of the things I would normally do—read, spend time with people, exercise—but without the pressure of those activities leading to a deadline—a sermon or the many other things necessary to keep this congregation running. I am grateful that there’s a high alignment between what I enjoy doing and what I get paid to do. I rarely feel like I’m “working for the weekend.” Although it’s a vocational hazard that I’m usually working *on* the weekend, I’m actually having a good time most of that time.

I know, however, that is not the case for everyone. Many workers experience what Marx called “**alienated labor**”: **work you only do because someone is paying you—and wouldn’t do otherwise**. And the experience of alienated labor makes those statistics concerning that we heard earlier about the job shifts that happened over the course of the twentieth century. While I’m not saying that those new service and

administrative jobs are all unnecessary, I am inviting us to consider if we put far too much emphasis on the standard of the 40-hour work week.

For people who don't love their job, it's worth considering if we wouldn't be better off as a society if we worked toward that too-often-forgotten vision of the Labor Movement of moving from the achievement of a 40 hour work week to a 35 hour week, to 30, down eventually perhaps to people only needing to do 15-20 hours of alienated labor a week. The goal is to free increasing numbers of people from alienated labor in order "to pursue their own projects, pleasures, visions, and ideas." This is not to say that anyone would be restricted to part-time work. I routinely work more than 40 hours a week, but I love my job.

To say a little more about how people feel about their jobs, it turns out that, "Since the seventies, surveys have regularly revealed that 74 percent to 80 percent of workers claim that, **if they won the lottery or came into some similar fortune, they would continue working**" (Graeber 2018: 300). Indeed, many people who have won multi-million dollar lotteries have either not quit their job, or express regret in quitting their job (82). Work helps structure our lives and give us meaning. But notice however that only 74 to 80 percent of workers say they would continue working. Part of the reason is that a certain percentage of the population does not feel that their work is worthwhile.

On that point, one of the most interesting contemporary commentators on our working lives is anthropology professor and activist David Graeber. He teaches at the London School of Economics, and I first became aware of him through his doorstep of a book Debt: The First 5,000 Years, which is actually quite interesting. He's also known for helping plan the Occupy Wall Street protests, including coining the slogan "We are the 99%." But more recently, he made headlines with a brief article he published online titled, "On the Phenomenon of Bullshit Jobs" (xv) that he has recently expanded into a book.

For Dr. Graeber, some jobs may be tedious (or *crappy*, shall we say), but they need to be done. They are distinct from b.s. jobs that are arguably not a great use of 40 hours/week of people's time. And he is on to something. "The essay went viral almost immediately. Within weeks, it had been translated into at least a dozen languages. The

original page received more than a million hits” (xxii). Inspired by the piece, an anonymous person placed several hundred posters with four quotes from that article on top of ads in London Underground cars:

- Huge swathes of people spend their days performing tasks they secretly believe do not really need to be performed.
- It’s as if someone were out there making up pointless jobs for the sake of keeping us all working.
- The moral spiritual damage that comes from this situation is profound. It is a scar across our collective soul. Yet virtually no one talks about it.
- **How can one even begin to speak of dignity in labor when one secretly feels one’s job should not exist?** (xxiii)

Along those lines, the comedian Bill Hicks tells the story of a supervisor castigating an employee for not working. The worker says truthfully, “There’s nothing to do.” To which the supervisor says, “Well you’re supposed to pretend like you’re working.” The worker replies, “Hey, I got a better idea. Why don’t *you* pretend like I’m working? You get paid more than me.” (84-85).

I hasten to add that by no means am I trying to make anyone feel guilty for what you do or don’t do at work. If you love what you do for work, wonderful! My point is related to our opening parable in which that puritanical missionary implied that you should only give yourself permission to rest, relax, and do what you enjoy if you’ve worked enough to earn it. Even with the rise of automation, robots, and artificial intelligence, there may always be some level of work that has to be done. But if you are only doing 15-20 hours of alienated labor, you would be more likely to return home with energy for hobbies and other ventures you enjoy. In contrast, if you spend 40 or more hours doing alienated labor, you are more likely to return home too exhausted to do much except eat, crash in front of the television, and go to bed in time to get up and do it all over again.

Working toward a society in which 35 hours, 30 hours, or even 15-20 hours/week of labor is considered full-time employment worthy of full benefits and a living wage may seem like a unrealistic goal, but Labor Day is a reminder that at one time, achieving a 40-hour work week was considered unrealistic. If you are grateful for the

weekend, thank a labor organizer. If you want to create further support for worker's rights, support the labor movement.

As some of you have heard me say before, **"It's not the immigrants who are really coming for your job, it's the robots."** Change is coming, and our invitation is to collectively create a society in which there is both more dignity in labor and more free time for individuals to do what they feel called to do.

For now, I'll move toward my conclusion with the final paragraph of Dr. Graeber's book on *Bullshit Jobs*:

Most of us like to talk about freedom in the abstract, even claim that it's the most important thing for anyone to fight or die for, but we don't think a lot about what being free or practicing freedom might actually mean. The main point of this book is...to start us thinking about and arguing about what a genuinely free society might actually be like. (285)

In that spirit, in a few moments, we will be invited to sing "Solidarity Forever," perhaps the labor movement's most famous anthem. The original lyrics were written in 1915 and set to the tune of **"John Brown's Body,"** a marching song written decades earlier by Union soldiers during the Civil War, about the radical abolitionist John Brown. Some of you may recall that, of the [Secret Six](#) who helped fund and supply John Brown's 1859 raid on the federal armory at Harpers' Ferry, *five* were Unitarians, two were Unitarian *ministers*. Among those five Unitarians was Samuel Howe, the husband of another of our Unitarian ancestors, Julia Ward Howe, who awoke in the middle of the night after visiting Civil War camps and hospitals, inspired to write new lyrics to the tune of "John Brown's Body"—verses that became the **"Battle Hymn of the Republic"**

When the Civil War began, it was far from clear in the North whether the fight was only to preserve the union or also to end slavery. Julia's "Battle Hymn of the Republic" was written in November 1861, more than a year *before* Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863. **Julia's lyrics helped catalyze popular support for using the Civil War as an opportunity to end slavery once and for all** ([167](#)).

As we prepare to sing this labor anthem, I invite you to remember the historic echoes in “John Brown’s Body” and “The Battle Hymn of the Republic.” (And note that verse four centers on the “Women of the union.” If you identify as female, you are invited to sing on that verse.) As we sing, open the imagination of your mind and the compassion of your heart to what might become possible when we all join together in solidarity with ever-increasing circles of inclusion.