



From Laundry to Social Justice to Counseling **Redefining Work as Synonymous to Life**

Caitlin Farren

University of Massachusetts Boston

caitlinfarren@yahoo.com

Abstract: In our culture, we are increasingly obsessed with paid work but seem to have lost sight of “life’s work.” In the U.S. what we refer to as “work” plays an instrumental role in the way we define ourselves. The importance of work need not be lessened, but the definition must be greatly expanded. “What do you do?” is one of our most common queries. The answer helps shape our perception of other people and ourselves, but in the wrong way. We do not need to stop asking. Instead we need to use the question to inquire about a fellow human being on a far more expansive level. In this article, I explore and question the concept of work in terms of a work utopia which can be seen as synonymous with life utopia. I will take a stab at DEconstructing and REconstructing the concept of work.

Work and life are inseparable and arguably one and the same thing. They are so much a part of one another that they cannot be considered independently. In the film *Tuesdays With Morrie*, a main character, Mitch Albom, is having a phone conversation with his boss and makes a remark about the disconnection of work and personal life. “It has nothing to do with work,” he exclaims. “It is personal” (film). As will be discussed, if we apply a definition of work which includes all its forms, it would be impossible to separate “work” with something “personal” as Mitch tried to do in his phone conversation.

Walking my dog this morning, preparing breakfast, going to the gym, a dentist appointment, a college class, making a

phone call to check on a friend, having relatives over for a family dinner tonight—my day is full of work. Previously I would have described such a time as a “day off,” in other words, a day where I did not have to go to “work.” Actually, when we apply the expanded, inclusive definition of work, we can see that the day is entirely filled with work.

Upon meeting one another, the first thing strangers may usually ask is not “what are your spiritual beliefs,” “how do you treat others,” or some other such question. A typical question after the exchanging of names is usually “what do you do?” When making this inquiry people are actually asking one another in which type of *paid* work they are involved. Various kinds

Caitlin Farren is a senior undergraduate student at UMass Boston, majoring in Sociology. She wrote this article while enrolled in the course “Sociology of Work,” instructed by Anna Beckwith (Lecturer of Sociology at UMass Boston), during the Spring 2005 semester.

of salaried, or wage, work is what typically comes to mind when one thinks of the term.

Phyllis Moen and Patricia Roehling write about the myth of the American Dream in *The Career Mystique* (2005):

The career mystique incorporates both an endurance ethic and a work ethic, both crucial to the American values of individual and free enterprise. Sacrifice by working hard, the myth goes, and you'll reap wealth, security status, health insurance, pensions, respect, love, admiration, and happiness. (Moen and Roehling, 9)

Moen and Roehling are describing a warped way of viewing work that is unfortunately hard, if not impossible to escape in American society. Everywhere we look there are messages about the connection between better and more material goods and a more fulfilling life in general. **Commodification**, characterized by the drawing of people into wage labor and consumerism is a stark reality of our culture.

The desire to look deeper, past this forced idea and into the true essence of life is central to the expansion and analysis of the totality of work. While we cannot deny the influence of consumerism, it is not an excuse for inaction or a reason to apply the saying "if you can't beat 'em, join 'em." Instead, such uncritical acceptance of the reality of our consumer culture calls for the need to reexamine our personal feelings about work and the way we *work* to live as examples of our social ideals.

The realm of work extends far beyond a paid job in the labor force. **Work** can mean anything that is consciously, intentionally done to satisfy a need. When I began the study of the sociology of work I thought of work in a narrow, limited manner, often ignoring many of the types of work that exist outside the sphere of paid labor. In fact, I see now that the majority of work, especial-

ly the types which I find the most meaningful, are located somewhere on the large spectrum of unpaid work.

It is probable that at some point in our lives we have made a comment such as "I'll bet he's never done a day of work in his whole life," when referring to a seemingly lazy individual. Based on the formerly noted definition of work, it is fair to say that we have been wrong in this accusation 100% of the time. Whether we are part of the paid labor force, or we do other types of work, there is virtually no way to exist as an individual without performing some type of work. It actually comes quite naturally to human beings; we are doing work much of the time and often do not even realize it or identify the activity as work. Upon studying the sociology of work, our definition of work expands to include countless aspects of our lives including, but not limited to, our survival, the reproduction of ourselves, and the functioning of society as a whole.

As a product of a **capitalist** society, characterized by the fact that paid labor is seen as "real" work, I have been socially trained to envision work as something that involves payment. A person works with the hope that he or she can survive and create a life that not only meets basic needs, but ideally fulfills wishes as well. The ideology of the "American Dream" involves working to obtain currency and using the money to fund a life that will produce a good feeling. In this society we are taught that money *can*, in fact, buy happiness. And unless we happen to pick the right numbers on a lottery ticket, the means to this end is work.

There are many types of work and so often a given "job" falls into more than one category of work. For example, I recently had an interview for a summer job at a pool. First of all, the interview, and the actions that surrounded it were work in and of themselves. I dressed nicely, planned my schedule accordingly, arrived at a designated time, found my way to the location, and

obtained the necessary certifications.

As the interviewer described the duties of the job, I took note of the ways in which the job overlapped different types of work. I would be paid an hourly wage, meaning that the job would fall under the category of **wage work**. I would be working for others and making money for the time spent. This part of the job would fall into the **formal sector** of work, because I would fill out tax information and the state would be aware of the work I was doing.

Within the job, however, there were opportunities for **enterprising work**. According to my own initiative, there would be an opportunity to sell my services “under the table.” In other words, I would have a chance to make special deals with residents to work after hours and be paid according to the deal we make. This part of the job would be connected to the **informal sector** of work. It would be the type of work that some people refer to as “underground” because the state is unaware of it, thus it is not formally regulated. It would be an informal arrangement between me and another human being and the rules, conditions and pay would be arranged between us.

The interview reminded me that the **gender ideology** plays a strong role in my life when it comes to paid work. I dressed becomingly, and attempted to use my looks and mannerisms to help me get the job. According to the authors of *Global Women*, females are taught gender roles from the perspective of middle class culture (Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2002). The ideology of gender has taught me to think of myself in terms of my body, although it is often done with such nonchalance that I would not have even recognized the behavior had it not been for my study of work.

It is no coincidence that almost every interview I can recall, including the most recent, was with a white, male prospective employer. Though it has improved in recent years, women and people of color in our society are often thought of as low-

skilled, related to nature and primitive, while white men are seen as cultured, complex and civilized. Unfortunately these ideologies of **sexism** and racism often go unrecognized or unchallenged in today's world, yet they are still very much prevalent. In the hotel wherein I will work this summer, this **division of labor** was all too clear. The people who work doing cleaning or maintenance are almost all women and people of color while the management are white males, nearly across the board.

Social location plays a significant role in the shaping of my interpretation of work, as well as my personal identity, and my ability to use social forces to my advantage with respect to work. Living in the global economic zone known as the **core** is something that many Americans, including myself often take for granted. The core, also referred to as the North, is characterized by strong states and relatively high wages.

Being born and raised in this economic region of the world already starts me off at a different playing field than much of the world. The economic advantages of life in the core far outweigh the opportunities for those living in the **semi-periphery**, the economic zone that falls in the middle-range, or the periphery, also called the South. The countries in the **periphery** are economically poor, characterized by weak states and low wages.

Many other advantages come into play in the formation of my work opportunities and therefore my vision of a **work utopia**. I am white, and the racism that people of color deal with on a daily basis is not a part of my world. **Racism**, the systematic oppression of people of color, despite having been put on a back burner in our country's agenda as of late, is a major issue which has a huge effect on the types of jobs for which people are hired, not to mention the treatment they receive on the job and in daily life.

Born into a middle-class, two-parent household, wherein both parents were col-

lege educated is a central force in my social location and opportunities for work. Furthermore, my physical and mental abilities, free from the disabilities and challenges with which many workers struggle is another social force that I do not wish to minimize. One's social location plays a significant role. There is clear danger in living in a society in which a widely accepted ideology is that of "pull yourself up by your bootstraps." Surely it is not a disabled person of color, with no family, born into poverty in the periphery that is making this falsified comment. It is imperative to humbly view ourselves in our entirety when formulating an understanding of ourselves in relation to work and our work utopia.

Life experiences help to shape visions of work utopia. One of the central social forces is that of schooling. Schooling plays an important role in the development of our work utopia, for it is one of the first environments in which we learn to labor. The clarity and drive I feel about working with others, in partnerships which foster respect and whose goal is the good of humanity, are clearly influenced by my experiences with school environments. I want to work living and loving the moment. I want to exist in environments in which I feel as though people are treated as complex individuals rather than machines designed for production.

The way we are socialized, the processes through which we learn to labor in school are reflective of the ways our society views work and production. Oftentimes learning takes the form of working towards an end. In high school the future goal may be graduation, vocational school, a job, college, or something else, depending on the circumstances of the individual student. Due to my social location, in other words, due to my class privileges, I was allowed an opportunity to attend schools that appreciated individuality and creativity, learning environments which helped nurture my potential to become whomever I wanted,

rather than simply a "cog in the machinery."

The interconnection of many types of work becomes apparent when one applies the inclusive definition of work. I can see this connection clearly illustrated, particularly, in the case of personal experiences within my home life. When my father and brother were terminally ill, a network of workers from several sectors including paid work, sharing, and subsistence came together to help our family continue to function.

In the case of my father, paid workers, home health aids and nurses, came to our house to help with various tasks. Their livelihood depended on their work with our family and other clients. Due to their contributions I was able to continue school and my mother was able to continue her job. Our **household**, the unit that helps its members survive and reproduce by pooling income, resources and tasks, would have been unable to fulfill all the needs after my father took ill had we not had outside support.

After school I would share in the household responsibilities of doing **chores**, helping with work around the house, and caring for my dying father. The work was unpaid of course; for the most part it was done with a feeling of love and responsibility. It was a form of **subsistence** work because it helped my family survive and reproduce. I helped to ensure that my father was cared for so that my mother could work.

A similar form of helping, in the case of family friends, was characterized as **sharing**. Done for our benefit by members of a different household, the work was incredibly beneficial especially in a time of high need. The cooking of meals, the prayer groups, friends who would sit with my dad, and other similar contributions played a key role in our household maintenance during this crucial time. The sharing work was both imperative for our daily function-

ing as well as an immeasurable gift to our emotional well being.

My mother was able to juggle both paid work and subsistence work during this time. In many job fields, **low-skilled hourly workers** for example, would not be allowed the opportunity to create flexible schedules and take time off in the way my mother was able to do. As a **white collar** worker, in her case characterized by work in an office rather than physical labor, she was granted some flexibility, both in her schedule and her ability to take on tasks.

In *The Career Mystique*, Moen and Roehling write that workers “commonly experience conflict when the tasks and responsibilities of one role intrude upon the other” (86). Due to the nature of her work, my mother did not experience this type of **role conflict**. Her roles as worker in a paid job and wife of a dying husband, making her head of household, were not at odds.

There are changes in work, particularly work in the paid sphere, that have significant impact on countless members of society. In response to the hugely devastating shifts during past years, working class households have made some necessary changes in an attempt to stay afloat. One major shift is that of **marginalization**; people have been removed from wage work and forced to rely on other types of work.

Enterprising, subsistence, and sharing work become more central because wage work does not come close to providing the necessities of survival for many Americans. Family size has declined while household size has increased. In other words, people may have fewer children because they are unable to financially support them. At the same time, many people rely on larger households, an increased number of people on whom they rely to support their existence.

While it is easy to make a distinction between issues faced by members of the working class and those faced by members of the middle class, the overlap of problems

is undeniable. As Andrew Ross, the author of *Low pay, High Profile: The Push for Fair Labor* points out, “...It is impossible to separate the home front from what happens in offshore locations...White collar workers are now in the same boat, as skilled service sector jobs are increasingly transferred overseas” (2004, 8). It is difficult for me to think of any one career that is unaffected by the **outsourcing** of jobs, the transferring of jobs to overseas locations, the **redistribution** of work to other parts of the world, and/or the reorganization of work.

As in the case of counseling, the particular career field which I plan on entering, there is less danger than many fields of the jobs being redistributed and outsourced. There is a clear and present danger in counseling work being reorganized, however. The **reorganization** of work, the change in structure from full-time to temporary or part-time work, has serious repercussions for workers. In the example of counseling, it is presently the case that many people are laid off from full-time, benefited positions and others are hired for per diem or part-time work. This way companies do not have to pay benefits and the workers are forced to rely on other types of work to survive.

When a person uses the phrase “my **life’s work**” they are not referring to a paid job whose sole purpose is to pay the bills. Thankfully, my family, parents in particular, worked jobs that represented their respective attempts to contribute to life in some manner. At the heart of my life’s work lies my spiritual beliefs and practices. My spiritual beliefs center around turning my life over to the care of a Higher Power. My primary purpose is to try and live as an instrument of God’s peace. Freedom from the bondage of self, doing service for other people are my daily practices, albeit with obvious imperfection. This practice is the foundation of my life’s work.

The idea of meeting my basic financial and material needs by doing the type of

work about which I am passionate is the center of my work dream, my work utopia which is also my life dream. Learning to practice viewing work as synonymous with life allows me the opportunity to connect my work utopia with my life utopia. My work is me and I am my work, however hokey that may sound.

I am in complete agreement with an idea that is touched upon in an essay by David Titus entitled, *Loving Your Job. Finding Your Passion* (2005). He references an idea of Joseph Allegretti when he writes:

...finding meaning in your current job is usually less a matter of what you do than how you do it. By developing awareness of how your work is interconnected to the greater world and of how your work provides an opportunity both to serve you and to let you serve others, you can transform even a routine job into a source of meaning. (Titus, 131)

This is a profound ideal which I am attempting to keep in my mind as I live my daily life. Rather than saying I am “only” a student or “only” a stay-at-home parent, or otherwise minimizing our work, we can take pride in our roles within the world. In the jobs she worked for her book *Nickel and Dimed* (2001), Barbara Ehrenreich did just that. Living her “real life” as a member of the middle class, Ehrenreich wanted to prove that it is impossible to survive on minimum wage.

Through her field work, she hoped to illustrate, (and did so with great success) the difference between minimum wage and living wage. While **minimum wage** is characterized by the lowest hourly wage companies are allowed, by law, to pay employees, **living wage** is the amount of money it would take to actually survive given the cost of living. While working various jobs, Ehrenreich proved that it is possible to take

pride in work, even though a job may be less than prestigious.

As a server in a restaurant, Ehrenreich would treat customers with utmost respect, calling older children sir or m’am and attempting to help create an experience that the customers could feel good about. As an employee at Wal-Mart she took pride in the cleanliness of her floor area. Although Ehrenreich focuses on many hardships she faced during her adventures, she simultaneously embodies a worker with pride and self-esteem regardless of her job title.

In developing a clear picture of our personal work utopia it is imperative to work on our understanding of our inner selves, including spiritual beliefs, ideals, morals and values, and rules for living. On this idea, Morrie Schwartz, the main character in the movie *Tuesdays With Morrie*, remarks, “I was never gonna do work that used people...I was never gonna make money off the sweat and tears of others” (*Tuesdays with Morrie*). There is so much more to a career goal than a paycheck or a benefit package. Although it is necessary to have money to survive, I have a deep understanding of my responsibility to society, other creatures, the planet, the incredible, limitless system of which I am thankfully a small part.

Examining work in its entirety within the context of my work utopia has given me the opportunity to reflect on myself and those things I find to be of greatest importance. Whatever work I am doing at a given moment, I want to feel connected to my life, myself, the world around me. I want to feel proud and comfortable with the type of work I am doing, the attitude with which I am doing it, and thus the kind of human being I am trying to be.

In his essay in *HarperBusiness*, author Bill Jensen reports that “recent research suggests that 75% of all American workers are disengaged from what they do everyday...they have lost sight...of what really matters” (Jensen, 240). I want to work at be-

ing mindful of resisting that alienation that Jensen discusses. **Alienation**, the disconnection from one's work is exemplified in the film *Modern Times*. I do not wish to be like Charlie Chaplain's character in that he is doing work from which his soul and spirit are completely separated. Instead, my work utopia is a life in which I instead live with the ideals exemplified by Morrie Schwartz. I want to love what I do, my work and who I am, which are, as I have illustrated, entirely inseparable.

EPILOGUE: AUGUST 3, 2006, 8:10 A.M.

I want to let you know some sad news. Last night my dog, Zoey, was hit by a car outside our house. We took her to Angel Memorial Hospital and her injuries were severe—bleeding in her head and broken back. We put her to sleep. I sat in the back of the car with her on the way to the hospital. She was breathing and her eye was open. I just held her sweet little head and talked to her, and sobbed. My sister and brother-in-law met Mom and me at the animal hospital. The staff was incredibly professional and kind. My family was able to go into a quiet room, and be with her for a few minutes, then they put her to sleep. It was peaceful—the four of us laid our hands on her and they gave her a lethal injection of painkillers.

For those of you who didn't get a chance to know her, believe me, she brought SO much joy to our family and our neighborhood. She was a special, wonderfully loving creature. She would have turned 14 in October. We got her in upstate New York as a little tiny puppy. She was brought into our family before my brother, Gabe was diagnosed with cancer in 1994—so she knew our family before that life-changing blow. Zoey knew Gabriel and my dad and provided love while we went through their illnesses and subsequent deaths. I am grateful for the complete faith

with which Dad and Gabe will have welcomed her home last night as she crossed over.

One other thing: as I was holding her head in the car, feeling her labored breathing, imagining her pain, something struck me. Zoey is an animal—a beloved pet, but an animal. The fact that people all over the world find themselves in situations where they are holding the head of a dying loved one pains me to the core. Accidents happen. Disease happens. Life happens, I know and accept that. But violence? To look in the *Globe* today and see the faces of war, Mid-Eastern fighting, riots, MURDER—it affects me on a little bit of a different level than usual.

LIFE is such a gift. And we can cherish our creatures, our brothers and sisters, and take gentle care of one another, remembering that this life can end anytime. Why not fill it completely with love?

Peace and blessings,

Caitlin

"Love is the only Solution" (Morrie Schwartz)

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