

GOOD WORK

By Wendell Berry

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To People,

may they eternally be of benefit to each other.

The Progressive, in the September

issue, both in Matthew Rothschild's "Editor's Note" and in the article by John de Graaf ("Less Work, More Life"), offers "less work" and a 30-hour workweek as needs that are as indisputable as the need to eat.

Though I would support the idea of a 30-hour workweek in some circumstances, I see nothing absolute or indisputable about it. It can be proposed as a universal need only after abandonment of any respect for vocation and the replacement of discourse by slogans.

It is true that the industrialization of virtually all forms of production and service has filled the world with "jobs" that are meaningless, demeaning, and boring—as well as inherently destructive. I don't think there is a good argument for the existence of such work, and I wish for its elimination, but even its reduction calls for economic changes not yet defined, let alone advocated, by the "left" or the "right." Neither side, so far as I know, has

produced a reliable distinction between good work and bad work. To shorten the “official workweek” while consenting to the continuation of bad work is not much of a solution.

The old and honorable idea of “vocation” is simply that we each are called, by God, or by our gifts, or by our preference, to a kind of good work for which we are particularly fitted. Implicit in this idea is the evidently startling possibility that we might work willingly, and that there is no necessary contradiction between work and happiness or satisfaction.

Only in the absence of any viable idea of vocation or good work can one make the distinction implied in such phrases as “less work, more life” or “work-life balance,” as if one commutes daily from life here to work there.

But aren’t we living even when we are most miserably and harmfully at work?

And isn’t that exactly why we object (when we do object) to bad work?

And if you are called to music or farming or carpentry or healing, if you make your living by your calling, if you use your skills well and to a good purpose and therefore are happy or satisfied in your work, why should you necessarily do less of it?

More important, why should you think of your life as distinct from it?

And why should you not be affronted by some official decree that you should do less of it?

A useful discourse on the subject of work would raise a number of questions that Mr. de Graaf has neglected to ask:

What work are we talking about?

Did you choose your work, or are you doing it under compulsion as the way to earn money?

How much of your intelligence, your affection, your skill, and your pride is employed in your work?

Do you respect the product or the service that is the result of your work?

For whom do you work: a manager, a boss, or yourself?

What are the ecological and social costs of your work?

If such questions are not asked, then we have no way of seeing or proceeding beyond the assumptions of Mr. de Graaf and his work-life experts: that all work is bad work; that all workers are unhappily and even helplessly dependent on employers; that work and life are irreconcilable; and that the only solution to bad work is to shorten the workweek and thus divide the badness among more people.

I don't think anybody can honorably object to the proposition, in theory, that it is better "to reduce hours rather than lay off workers." But this raises the likelihood of reduced income and therefore of less "life." As a remedy for this, Mr. de Graaf can offer only "unemployment benefits," one of the industrial economy's more fragile "safety nets."

And what are people going to do with the "more life" that is understood to be the result of "less work"? Mr. de Graaf says that they "will exercise more, sleep more, garden more, spend more time with friends and family, and drive less." This happy vision descends from the proposition, popular not so long ago, that in the spare time gained by the purchase of "labor-saving devices," people would patronize libraries, museums, and symphony orchestras.

But what if the liberated workers drive *more*?

What if they recreate themselves with off-road vehicles, fast motorboats, fast food, computer games, television, electronic "communication," and the various genres of pornography?

Well, that'll be "life," supposedly, and anything beats work.

Mr. de Graaf makes the further doubtful assumption that work is a static quantity, dependably available, and divisible into dependably sufficient portions. This supposes that one of the

purposes of the industrial economy is to provide employment to workers. On the contrary, one of the purposes of this economy has always been to transform independent farmers, shopkeepers, and tradespeople into employees, and then to use the employees as cheaply as possible, and then to replace them as soon as possible with technological substitutes.

So there could be fewer working hours to divide, more workers among whom to divide them, and fewer unemployment benefits to take up the slack.

On the other hand, there is a lot of work needing to be done—ecosystem and watershed restoration, improved transportation networks, healthier and safer food production, soil conservation, etc.—that nobody yet is willing to pay for. Sooner or later, such work will have to be done.

We may end up working longer workdays in order not to “live,” but to survive.

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