



Heigh Ho, Heigh Ho

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“Heigh ho.” From the Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary:
“Function: Interjection. Date: circa 1520. Definition: Used typically to express boredom, weariness, or sadness or sometimes as a cry of encouragement.”¹ Heigh ho.

We know “heigh ho” because this phrase is the title of a song in the 1937 animated Walt Disney classic, *Snow White*. The seven dwarves sing this song as they march off to another day at work. They sing quite cheerily, a song named for an expression of work weariness and sometimes cry of encouragement. The seven dwarves are going to not just any job but a dangerous job, work in a mine. I am sure that NIOSH (National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health) would have some compelling statistics on the risks of and accidents to workers in the mining industry. Why are those dwarves so cheery?

It is a fairy tale, of course, hence the happiness. Most of us try to ignore the complexities of work. They can be hard to accept. It’s easier to just get a job and keep going. But in the midst of a recession, our existential work questions return. Work is intimately tied to status, power, resources, family stability, financial security, time, health, and identity. We will spend more than half of our waking lives working. What does work mean?

In 1972 the journalist Studs Terkel published a landmark 500-page book detailing his interviews with American workers. The book is entitled

¹ <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/heigh%20ho>.

Working: People Talk About What They Do All Day And How They Feel About What They Do and in it Terkel interviews many people, including a steelworker, farmer, dentist, auditor, homemaker, janitor, conglomerate president, fireman, prostitute, supermarket clerk, football coach, bus driver, teacher, factory owner, and waitress. Terkel interviewed a variety of American workers, and their thoughts, feelings, and experiences are shocking. *The New York Times* referred to their experiences as “the extraordinary dreams of ordinary people.” I did not find their dreams so much extraordinary, as their daily work challenging, and too often demeaning and/or humiliating.

Terkel’s introduction begins:

This book, being about work, is, by its very nature, about violence – to the spirit as well as the body. It is about ulcers as well as accidents, about shouting matches as well as fistfights, about nervous breakdowns as well as kicking the dog around. It is, above all (or beneath all), about daily humiliations . . . For many, there is a hardly concealed discontent. The blue-collar blues is no more bitterly sung than the white-collar moan. “I’m a machine,” says the spot-welder. “I’m caged,” says the bank teller, and echoes the hotel clerk. “I’m a mule,” says the steelworker. “A monkey can do what I do,” says the receptionist. “I’m less than a farm implement,” says the migrant worker. “I’m an object,” says the high fashion model. Blue collar and white call upon the identical phrase: “I’m a robot.”²

Violence of the spirit and body and hardly-concealed discontent. That’s quite a statement. And when you read the stories in *Working*, these workers are not just “whining.” As I read I tried to imagine standing in one spot and welding the same thing eight hours a day as the spot-welder does. I thought about the burns the felter gets, and how the water irregularly splashes on her during a shift. I thought about the lawyer at Legal Aid fighting the good fight and being exhausted by the hardships of his clients while knowing his work is meaningful. I thought about the conglomerate president who talks about the isolation, pressure to advance, Friday evening desk-clearing terminations in a place he refers to as “the jungle.” This isn’t whining. This is truth. Work is complex, and for many of us, hard, not least of all because I think Terkel is right, from welder to executive, workers

² Terkel, *Working: People Talk About What They Do All Day and How They Feel About What They Do*, (1971), xi-xii.

search for meaning that is all too often not present, or at the very least, hard to find and control.

For the past few years the television show *the office* has boldly displayed the humiliation and irrelevance of work at Dunder Mifflin, a fictional paper company in Scranton, Pennsylvania. I have two responses to this show – I either laugh so hard I cry, or I have to turn it off because it is too painfully real. The clueless boss, Michael, played by Steve Carell, forces irrelevant training on the employees, a female worker is flashed in the parking lot and Michael wonders why the more “attractive women” weren’t flashed instead. The warehouse workers put up with the office workers who demean them. An office worker gets someone else fired (operating rule of most jobs – “cya”) because he didn’t do spot checks and an obscene watermark appeared on Dunder-Mifflin paper. The indignities and humiliations go on and on with meaning nowhere to be found.

“I’m a machine,” “I’m caged,” “I’m a mule,” “A monkey can do what I do.” Both *the office* and *Working* catalogue the realities of the workplace. It’s not that work is awful or all bad, but there are routine problems that trouble workers: lack of control, respect, and privacy; hard, unpleasant, or dangerous labor; difficult people, and low pay and benefits – violence to the spirit and body. Many work problems have a commonality, people who misuse power.

Other than tasks that are hard, repetitious, and/or dangerous, work problems are often people problems– people such as the rude client or customer, berating boss, or discriminating manager, or the more infuriatingly anonymous, “someone” who made the business decision to pink slip employees on Christmas Eve and randomly enforce Personnel policies. These decisions and behaviors are contrary to our first principle, which respects the inherent worth and dignity of all people. On the other hand, satisfying work is made safe, fair, respectful, and meaningful by people who fairly use power and uplift our first principle. Workers are given autonomy and respect, they are fairly compensated and evaluated, they create something they care about, and the facility is safe.

In my first job out of college there was a recession. Every full-time worker in our small office went down to 32 hours a week, cutting the payroll but maintaining our benefits. As unexpected and hard as this was, no one complained or left because the president and owner, Julie, stopped taking any pay at all, and since her partner was the vice president, we all knew their household had taken a 50% pay cut. Morale and productivity was good throughout the recession because we were a team. The owner used power well, put her employees first, and we all knew it. She made the difference.

Terkel, himself was/is very positive about his own work. He writes

I find some delight in my job as a radio broadcaster. I am able to set my own pace, my own standards, and determine for myself the substance of each program. Some days are more sunny than others, some hours less astonishing than I'd hoped for; my occasional slovenliness infuriates me . . .but it is for better or worse, in my hands. I'd like to believe I am the old time cobbler making the whole shoe. Though my weekends go by soon enough, I look toward Monday without a sigh.³

Note that Terkel equates his work happiness with being able to set his own pace, his own standards, and create his own programs. Choice, power, and autonomy create his job satisfaction. He does not even mention pay or status. That was more common, both in Terkel's book, and in my independent study, than I would have thought. Terkel insists that workers are looking for "daily meaning as well as daily bread." He seems to have found his during his lifetime. Some of the people most satisfied with their job have also found meaning, power, and autonomy at well.

I spoke with a massage therapist who loved setting her own hours and helping people (which she knew she did). Her clients are happy to see her and want to see her. She has choice, autonomy, makes a positive difference, and people are glad to see her.

Four people here wrote to tell me how much they liked their work. One wrote "My work is my mission. It is what keeps me going, gives me hope, gives me purpose. When I left teaching in 1989 to become a full-time therapist specializing in abused children, I took a 50% pay cut. It took me 10 years working as a master's level plus therapist to get back to the pay I was making as a bachelor's level teacher. I never regretted one day of it." Another member wrote me about how much she loves her job in real estate because the tasks are so enjoyable to her, even in the midst of a recession and mortgage crisis.

One member, now a full-time stay at home mother wrote about her job satisfaction "I do need to be busy with things that are important to me and I feel make a difference. However, to work in a traditional setting when so much of your work can be bureaucratic and meaningless – I don't think I could do it again."

³ Ibid., xvi.

Another person wrote me “I feel privileged to do the work I love. I am able to combine my talent for organization and administration with my commitment to helping more young people succeed in higher education . . . for me, work means service, and life also means service. I am happiest when I can be useful and helpful to others.” Service, meaning, job satisfaction.

A few weeks ago I spoke with a woman who works the night shift delivering *The Cincinnati Enquirer* to businesses. She works seven nights a week, 52 weeks a year (because she is self-employed she told me she can not miss a day or her job is done). She has done this for 13 years. Think about that. Her schedule made my mouth fall open. No matter how sick she is, she goes to work. To miss one day, she must find a replacement in advance. She sleeps from 8:30 PM – 11:30 PM at night, goes to work, comes home and sleeps from 7:00 AM to 10:00 AM.

But, and this is big for her, she knows how to do her job and gets it done in 6-7 hours, she is home during the day if one of her 4 children needs her (an enormous priority for her), her husband covers with the children at night, she does not need a lot of sleep, and she has autonomy when out in the field. Although I found her hours and the expectations stressful, she has job satisfaction because her work has autonomy, contributes to the family income, and enables her to meet her first priority, being there for her children. I have enormous respect for this woman. She makes some great personal sacrifices for her primary value, family.

For this woman the puzzle pieces of home and work fit together. For many of us, particularly those of us caring for a young child, or a chronically sick, or elderly family member, it doesn't work. One person wrote to me “All I can say is that since becoming a mother, I don't seem to find a way to balance work with home life at all.” Work might be work, but it is not separate from our whole lives and family needs, and the stress on families who cannot find a financial, geographic, and time balance is enormous.

One of you wrote to me “I try to remember that as a college graduate in the United States I, along with most members of First Unitarian Church in Cincinnati, am a member of a privileged elite. For generations before me, just as for most people throughout the world today, work was not something that was done for love or for fulfillment. Work was and is done for economic survival, and the choice of work was and is still for most of the world's citizens heavily influenced by the work of one's parents.” In the history of work, fulfilling work was and has been a coincidence, the result of good resources, an indomitably upbeat spirit, or a luxury.

When I was sixteen I worked the worst job of my life, in a factory on an assembly line. I had this job because I was trying to raise money to afford a band trip. A father of a fellow band member let several of us take summer jobs at his plant. On the floor my feet ached and sometimes I would go sit in the bathroom to rest my feet. On the assembly line we worked harder and faster to show we were valuable. At the end of the week I received a pink slip because the factory had run out of work. I was never so happy to be let go, and I drove home saying “I will go to college.”

I also drove away with the faces of the other workers before me. They were young adults with bills and children and they looked creased and worn. They would be standing there as long as they could take it, unless they also were pink slipped. They weren't raising money for a band trip. They needed this job. I was embarrassed that I took work away from them. I was privileged. I had the luxury to get pink slipped and spend the rest of the summer reading books on the couch which is exactly what I did.

Carl Sandburg wrote:

What is a man worth?

What can he do?

What is his value?

On the one hand, those who buy labor,

On the other hand those who have nothing to sell but their labor.

And when the buyers of labor tell the sellers, “Nothing doing today, not a chance!” – then what?⁴

Many blue collar workers like their work, and like their white collar counterparts, what they don't like is when they aren't treated well. My observation is that they are also more vulnerable to mistreatment because they have lower education levels, over time more health problems (you pour concrete for a decade and see how your back feels), and less resources. I know of a local factory employing 100 people that just offered its workers, most who make \$12 - \$22 an hour, a new health care plan. Factory employees pay the first \$4,000 of their medical bills, and the first \$8,000 of their prescription costs – people making \$12 - \$22 an hour. What I really want to know, and can't find out, is if this is the same health plan the owner of the company and managerial office staff receives. I doubt it and I find this unethical and contrary to our second principle (justice, equity and

⁴ Carl Sandburg, “Buyers and Sellers” in *Honey and Salt* (1953), 20.

compassion in relationships) particularly considering that the workers on the floor take all the physical labor and risk.

One of our members who works at NIOSH sent me some information on workers. According to an AFL-CIO Fact Sheet, in 2007 more than 4 million workers were injured on the job, 5,488 were killed due to job hazards, and 50,000 died due to occupational diseases.⁵ This member explains

Research has found that low income jobs are overrepresented in occupations such as service and sales workers, handlers/cleaners/helpers/laborers, machine operators/assemblers, and administrative support. Not only do these occupations potentially expose workers to chemical and physical hazards, but the job content may affect worker safety and health, through mechanisms such as low levels of autonomy, moderately high levels of physical demands, low skill levels, and limited interpersonal contacts.

One of my conclusions about work is that many people don't use power well. They are more than willing to dismiss and misuse those who are poor, subordinate, or less educated, which is why work is challenging and *the office* is relevant (and painfully funny).

Some of the most satisfied workers are retired workers, with enough money, who found something enjoyable and easy to do. One of you wrote to me "Now that I am 'retired' and only do occasional consulting, I am a happier but poorer person. I really don't need a lot any more, just enough to pay the basic bills. No office politics, more freedom to do what I want, or nothing if I want, and to just step off the treadmill." Another person wrote

I love being retreaded (not retired). I work when I want to. I am also able to follow my interests more. I have found that working for me is addictive. Once I am at a job and have made a commitment I work more and more and harder and harder and eventually the rest of myself suffers . . . Now I can decide to quit when I'm not able to cut back. But that is ok. Other people need to earn a living too.

For those of us who retire in good health and savings, and have the foresight and flexibility to retread ourselves, retirement work can be a great thing, with strong potential for autonomy and choice. No jungle. Lots of

⁵ AFL-CIO Fact Sheet, *Safety and Health Update February 2009* (on-line).

meaning. I wish more of us had that during our many required working years.

If someone asked me for my advice about working I would say, if possible, choose a career where you will have freedom, power, and meaning. You will be happier and healthier. The realist in me says you need to make enough money to have a modest and comfortable living. Get the education (if you can, when you can) to make that happen. And, with this said, there are no guarantees about employment, compensation, safety, fairness, or the people you will serve and work alongside. Heigh ho.