



All Who Labor



by Becky De Oliveira—

“The best way to appreciate your job is to imagine yourself without one.”

—Oscar Wilde

Work is central to human identity; it is something to organize around. It gives structure and purpose to days, weeks, months, decades. Back when I used to teach English Composition II, a class that was traditionally “themed,” my theme was always work. My logic was that it’s a topic that is theoretically of interest to everyone (though I always had a least one student take issue with that assumption). One semester, I visited every one of my students at their job, if they had one. “You get to watch me work,” I reasoned. “I want to watch you work.” The most memorable of these experiences was arriving at the dairy at three in the morning and helping a student milk cows. Once home, I



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took off my clothes and shoes in the garage and deposited them all into a dumpster; the student, not a rookie, had worn a rubber smock and hip boots.

We spend the first 18-30 years of our lives training for work and the next 35-50 years working. When people ask us what we “do,” they aren’t asking about avocations. They want to know how we make money. Many of us take pride in our work. Some of us would be lost without it.

Before I was an adult, I worked as a minder of children, a retirement home dining room server, a waterer of newly sown lawns and well-established gardens, a cleaner of bathrooms, a cash register operator at a fast-food restaurant, and a photocopier of documents. As young adult, I sent audio tapes to Italy and Guam, produced newsletters, hosted a radio show, supervised children during lunch, unpacked clothes in a warehouse, designed pharmaceutical advertising materials, and wrote summaries of proceedings for medical conferences. Then I taught college classes and wrote, edited, and produced magazines. Now I write, manage, and conduct research, produce magazines, and generate other forms of communication. I also attend Zoom meetings.

I’ve enjoyed all of it, although in some cases I’ve had to stretch to amuse myself. At Wendy’s, I practiced calculating the precise sales tax in my head and guessing what the final amount of a customer’s order might be and also guessing what they were going to order before they spoke. I became accomplished at both of these skills. I also met dozens of people who finished one eight-hour shift at Wendy’s only to get in their car and drive to a hotel or another restaurant, where they completed another shift. I was working for spending money; they were paying the rent.

But during all this time, I’ve never consciously celebrated any of it, not even on Labor Day, the holiday set aside particularly for this purpose.

The first Labor Day was celebrated on a Tuesday—September 5, 1882, in New York City, organized by the Central Labor Union, a consortium of several labor unions who lobbied for better working conditions. It became a nationwide holiday through an act of Congress on June 28, 1894, and it has been celebrated on the first Monday of September ever since. On that first Labor Day, the police were well organized, expecting a riot. Instead, the celebrations consisted mostly of parading—“men on horseback, men wearing regalia, men with society aprons, and men with flags, musical instruments, badges, and all the other paraphernalia of a procession” (U. S. Department of Labor). Somewhere between ten and twenty thousand individuals marched. Later, some people returned to their jobs while others attended a post-parade party with speeches and a picnic.

The picnic seems the only remnant of the original celebration left for most of us. Now the holiday seems to mark the



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official “end of summer,” making it one last chance to do something fun before the serious work of autumn and winter begins. If that is you, why not try to consciously celebrate your work this year in some way? I’ll be celebrating my work by working—that might be you this year too.

People sometimes express pride in “working hard,” which is fine so long as it isn’t accompanied by disdain for those who are thought to “not work hard.” After all, every good thing we have comes from God. The Bible gives this instruction: “If anyone is poor among your fellow Israelites in any of the towns of the land the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward them.... Give generously to them and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to” (Deuteronomy 15:7, 10, NIV).

This week, I had to tell an employee we hired less than a year ago that there is no longer a job for her. So many things have changed, come apart, become unstable. If you find yourself fortunate—employed—this year on Labor Day, one way to celebrate and give thanks to God might be to donate to an organization for people who are less fortunate or directly to someone you know personally who could use the help.

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