

(from) *Working to Live, Living to Work*

Michael Yates

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

I. Introduction

Not long before she died, my grandmother said to me, "It hasn't been a happy life." She was sitting in her only cushioned chair, in the one-room apartment to which she had moved at age eighty-seven to escape an abusive husband. "I just hope she has a couple of peaceful years," my mother had said. I remember looking at my grandmother and thinking, "No, it hasn't been a happy life." Of course, a lot of people have unhappy lives; the tabloids are full of stories about the unhappiness of the rich and prominent. But it has struck me many times that the unhappiness of ordinary people, like my grandmother, is intimately tied to the problem of work.

My grandmother was born on a small farm near Brandycamp, a tiny mining town in central Pennsylvania. Her parents couldn't live by farming alone, so they took in boarders, coal miners working the nearby mines. You can imagine the work. The miners were Northern Italians, like my great grandparents, so everyday an enormous batch of polenta (a type of cornmeal porridge. There are hundreds of ways to prepare it.) had to be made in a big iron pot. Stirring the pot for more than an hour was back-breaking labor, but this only began the day; it would be followed by cleaning, sewing, farm chores, and more cooking. Life was work, but the work never brought in enough money.

Grandmother married a miner and went to live with his family, where she continued the drudgery she had known as a child. Coal mining is dangerous employment, especially when you go into the pits before you are 13. Grandfather, an educated, elegant, and radical man, died young, leaving his wife with two children and no money. It was the middle of the Great Depression. His family expected her to take care of her husband's brother, but her mother refused to allow this, and grandmother moved away to a town near her family. She rented a house owned by the mining company and began to work. She took in laundry and mended clothes. Before dawn, she and her children walked down over the hill to the mine shaft along the river bank. There, they unloaded from trucks the dynamite which the miners used to open the seams of coal. None of the men offered to help. All three of them had severe asthma, and when they came home from the mine, they collapsed on the couch and remained still until they could breathe freely again.

After World War Two, the children began their own families, and grandmother became a governess for the children of the rich, in Manhattan, Newport, Westchester, Grosse Point, Sewickley, and other wealthy outposts. Some of these members of "high society" exploited her so shamelessly that her mother had to send her food. Later, she took a job as a cook on the tugboats which pushed the barges of coal and steel from Pittsburgh down the Ohio and Mississippi rivers to New Orleans. Her asthma disappeared, but she ruined

her back. After a series of jobs near where we lived, she moved in with us. But this made her feel like an intruder, so when a factory worker began to call on her, she agreed to see him. I wanted her to stay with us, so I used to put him off when he'd ask in his broken English, "Is a Lucille there?" Sadly, she married him, and he and his children made her life miserable for the next 30 years. It was always the same: not enough money, arduous and debilitating work, torment and misery. The only happy work she ever had was raising her children, and this was surrounded by so much hardship that she worried too much to enjoy it. Her life was one long crisis of work: finding it, doing it, and trying to live from and with it.

Naturally, my grandmother's is just one story, and my jaded readers might say it is only interesting because she is my grandmother. And besides that was so long ago, no more instructive to us today than Dickensian tales of the horrors of the Industrial Revolution. However, if we look at work without the blinders we usually wear, we see that grandmother's story is all too common, then and now. In fact, it is paradigmatic for most of the people in the world. Consider first the lack of work, a problem faced by her husband, by many of her relatives, and by herself often enough. As I write this, in February of 1999, the unemployment rate has hit a 30-year low in the United States, 4.3 percent. This "good news" translates into 5.8 million persons without work, and it does not include millions of people working part-time involuntarily or so discouraged that they have given up looking for work. A truer unemployment rate would be closer to 8 percent, or more than 10 million persons. If we look at the other advanced capitalist economies, the results are far worse; Western Europe has had double-digit unemployment rates for years. And if we extend our vision to the rest of the world, where most of us, in fact, live, unemployment is at depression levels. Of the 2.2 billion people in the world's labor force, between 700,000,000 and 800,000,000 are fully or partially unemployed. This unemployment is a modern plague, because it causes death and misery: suicides, homicides, arrests and imprisonments, spouse abuse, drug addiction, and homelessness. What can we say about a world in which so many persons are redundant? Is it really any better than the world my grandmother knew?

But then consider the 1.5 billion or so who are employed. There are 200 million children working. In the United States hundreds of thousands of boys and girls labor in the field harvesting grains, fruits, and vegetables to feed us. Every day they are being poisoned by pesticides, deformed by stoop labor, and denied an education. In Bangkok and in Bombay children in the countryside are sold into slavery and forced to become prostitutes. The sex trade earns Thailand its foreign exchange, while it gives AIDS to 90% of the inhabitants in some Thai villages. In Pakistan, the average age of the 200,000 children who make rugs is eight and will soon be seven. The Pakistani countryside is a land of destitute peasants, so strapped for money that they indenture their children to rug manufacturers. These worthy gentlemen, who have strong ties with the police and the government, pay the parents a small sum of money for their children with the promise of more to come. The children then belong to the manufacturers who put them to work in dark, hot sweatshops knotting rugs, all day every day. Within a few years, the children are deformed and crippled, ready for the rest of their short lives. Their "upkeep" is deducted from the money owed to the parents; strangely there is seldom anything due to

them in the end. Nearly all of the work in Pakistan is done by children; they serve as pack animals in rural areas and they make soccer balls in the cities. My grandfather's brother became a miner when he was nine, but he still lived with his family. And he was still considered a human being, at least by his fellow workers, his kin, and his countrymen if not by his employers. My friends and my students are astounded when I tell them how young were the workers in the mines and mills of the industrial revolution. I read them pages from Marx's *Capital*, and they stare at me in disbelief. But the child workers of Pakistan, India, China, Mexico, and the United States are today's reality, and they will be tomorrow's too.

Grandmother was employed more often than she was unemployed, but employment had its own pitfalls. Her pay was always inadequate, and not one job provided a pension and regular benefits. Is this an unusual circumstance today? There are garment workers in Los Angeles, sewing at home for one of the thousands of subcontractors in the industry, who earn less than one dollar an hour. In the United States, several million workers, most of them women and over 40% of them full-time, earn the minimum wage or less. These minimum wage workers cannot support a family of two persons at the poverty level of income. The poverty income is now \$15,600 for a family of four, and it takes an hourly wage rate of about \$7.80 per hour to support such a family at this level. Unfortunately nearly 30% of all jobs pay a wage rate less than this. Tens of millions of jobs still do not provide health insurance and pensions. And once again, if we extend our view to the world, low wages are the norm. In Mexico, workers along the border with the United States, employed in factories owned by the great American corporations and employing the most modern technology, are paid \$4.00 dollars a day. No doubt Mexico would seem a paradise to workers in Haiti or Indonesia or the Phillippines, where wages are still lower. Misery is the lot of most workers in the world, just as it was that of my grandmother. Not much has changed.

My grandmother's work ruined her health. A generation later, work in a glass factory ruined my father's health as well. Go into any workplace today, anywhere in the world, and the chances are good that work is killing or crippling the people there. We worship our football players, even as we decry the money they earn. The life expectancy of a professional football player is 57; the majority of former players suffer debilitating traumas. Still, they are more fortunate than farm laborers, who live, on average, fewer than 50 years, and who are poisoned at work every day. Some writers wax enthusiastic about work in modern automobile factories, especially those built by Japanese companies. The filth and disorder of the old plants is gone, replaced by neat, clean, and eye-pleasing work spaces. But author, Laurie Graham, who worked in one of these new plants, tells us that, "Immediately after official start of production (SOP), there was an outbreak of hand and wrist injuries. . . . Within only a few weeks, dozens of workers were wearing splints on their wrists and forearms." By 1990, workers in the automobile industry had an injury rate of "28.5 for every 100 full-time workers, more than three times the rate for all workplaces." Repetitive motion injuries are epidemic in U.S. industries, especially in meatpacking, grocery stores, offices, and automobile plants. And many of these jobs are good jobs or at least clean ones. Imagine how much worse health conditions are for the Polish immigrants who remove asbestos from New York City

buildings, or for the poor people who labor along the dis-assembly lines in our chicken processing plants, or for the young women wasting away their lives in Manila's factories putting circuits on the silicon chips which power our computers. No doubt the lucifer match makers of long ago, with their lockjaw, and the pottery workers with their lung diseases were worse off than the average worker in the rich nations today, but this seems a small victory for societies which can send rockets into space. And there are still plenty of "dark, satanic mills" in the rest of the world.

"A woman's work is never done," and this was certainly true for my grandmother. She put in a "double day" of work for pay and work at home. Men also labored long hours; in the steel mills of the 1920s, workers regularly worked a 24-hour shift once every two weeks and averaged 12 hours a day, six or seven days a week. Now, in these more modern times, has there been such a great improvement? Economist, Juliet Schor, in her classic, *The Overworked American*, tells us no. In the United States, one-eighth of all full-time workers put in at least 60 hours of work per week, often at two or more jobs. The only thing which has prevented a sharp decline in average family incomes has been the increase in hours of work. Most of the extra hours are worked by women, many of whom are putting in an additional two months of wage labor compared to their hours of work 30 years ago. This work has not been compensated by a proportionate decrease in hours of work at home, so women still put in a double day. People now routinely work so much that they experience stress as a way of life. The Japanese, who are encouraged to forego their vacations and seldom miss a day's work, have coined a word, *karoshi*, which means that a person has worked himself to death.

As usual, hours in the rich nations pale compared to those in the poor ones. Women in the mining villages high in the Bolivian Andes, spend their 18- to 20- hour days cooking, cleaning, waiting in food lines, selling tortillas, and gathering tin scrap on the mountainous slag heaps which dwarf their homes. Their husbands slave away in the mines, spitting out their lungs and making their wives widows. I have no doubt that these women and my grandmother would be *companeras* if we could somehow have them meet on the boney piles in the town of my birth. For most of the world's workers, the cry of the Haymarket marchers would resonate as strongly today as it did in 1886: "Eight hours for work, eight hours for sleep, eight hours for what we will."

The bleakness of work--the low wages, the long hours, the dangers, the worry that the job won't last--is compounded by its sheer meaninglessness. On the one hand, millions perform labors that are debased by their natures: advertisers, purveyors of dangerous drugs like cigarettes, armament workers, prison guards, welfare workers, and a host of others. Should these jobs involve skilled labor, the nature of the work completely negates the enjoyment which skills might provide. When grandmother cared for a wealthy woman's children, she had to use many skills. But she could not possibly have been satisfied with this work, especially since she had access to material goods grossly greater than those which had been available to her in the raising of her own children.

On the other hand, these and nearly all other workers are systematically denied any part in the planning of the work they do. The dynamite was on the truck, and my

grandmother unloaded it. Just like the car body comes down the assembly line, and the workers do their assigned tasks. Or the customer appears at the register and the cashier moves the items across the scanner and the bagger bags them. Some scholars claim that work in places organized according to modern management practices has transcended the monotony of the assembly line. Workers now learn many tasks, they rotate jobs, and they meet with management to discuss better ways to do the work. Here is Laurie Graham's description of what she did in one of these "modern" factories:

1. Go to the car and take the token card off a wire on the front of the car.
2. Pick up the 2 VIN (vehicle identification number) plates from the embosser and check the plates to see that they have the same number.
3. Insert the token card into the token card reader.
4. While waiting for the computer output, break down the key kit for the car by pulling the 3 lock cylinders and the lock code from the bag.
5. Copy the vehicle control number and color number onto the appearance check sheet.
- .
- .
- .
8. Lift the hood and put the hood jig in place so it will hold the hood open while installing the hood stay.
- .
- .
- .
22. Rivet the large VIN plate to the left-hand center pillar.
23. Begin with step one on the next car.

This work is so intense that it is not possible to steal a break much less learn your work mate's job so that you can double-up and rest while she does both jobs. Yet this is work which supposedly re-skills workers. I once engaged in a debate with Secretary of Labor, Robert Reich. I argued that most of the jobs currently being created were "junk jobs," poorly paid and requiring little skill. He responded that there were a lot of good jobs, not necessarily in terms of skill requirements but in terms of workers having a real say in the daily operations of their workplaces. He used the example of cashiering jobs. I was so startled that I blurted out, "cashiering jobs!" Has he ever been a cashier, or ever known one, or noticed the splints on the cashiers' wrists? The simple truth is that a tiny fraction of all jobs involve significant planning and difficult to learn execution skills. Even when re-skilling does occur, as when secretaries master various computer programs, it typically involves acute work intensification and no increase in wages.

The great tragedy of my grandmother's life is that she was capable of so much more. She had intelligence, courage, and wonderful resourcefulness. Much the same is true of working people everywhere. What they can do and what they get to do are in terrible discord. We are nearly all capable of doing meaningful work, work which fully utilizes our capacities. What is more, we all need to do such work because such work is a primary feature of our nature. This mismatch between our actual and our potential work is, I

believe, the source of our unhappiness, our alienation, if you will. We should be living to work, but instead we work merely to live.

## 2. This Book is About Work

I have been working at one job or another since I was 12: paper carrier, camp counselor, night watchman, teaching assistant, insurance salesman, teacher, union research director, consultant, labor arbitrator, writer, and father. For the last 30 years, I have worked as a teacher whose main subject is also "work." So you might say that work is my passion. Of course, this does not mean just that I like it, which is not always so, but rather that I think it is something special. In fact, I would go so far as to say that the key to creating a better world is to insure that everyone has the freedom and the right to do meaningful work, and as a consequence of this work, the right to share enough of society's bounty to live a long and healthy life. In this book, I want to say what I have learned about work, my own and that of men and women in general.

The thesis of the book can be stated as follows: Purposeful work is an essential human need; in fact, it defines us as human beings. Work under current social arrangements, however, is inherently meaningless, that is, it denies us systematically our full humanness. This denial is brought about in part by society's failure to guarantee work of any type and to insure that work is adequately remunerated and safe, and in part by society's degradation of work of all types. In other words, modern societies generate a profound alienation, one impossible to overcome within these same social arrangements. We are not completely unaware of our alienation, and we try as best we can to overcome it. But we are not fully cognizant of what is happening to us, so our solutions are incomplete and sometimes make our alienation worse.

The essays which comprise the book explore work along many axes but all connected to the thesis of alienation. Each chapter contains two types of essays. At least one essay in every chapter is autobiographical. These essays explore my own work and that of those from whom I learned to labor. They are organized chronologically, from my perceptions of the work of my parents to my work as a teacher and as a parent. They chart my experiences with the various aspects of work, including its sexual, racial, and unionized dimensions, and they also illustrate my growing alienation from my own work and my attempts to understand and end this. The second type of essay is analytical, that is, it examines the themes of the autobiographical essays in a critical fashion. These essays can be thought of as "reprises and analyses," in which the chapter's themes are put into historical and philosophical context. For example, it is clear to me now that my initial notion of work was both masculine and white; work was done by white men. How did I come to have this view? How did I transcend it? Do others share this bias, and, if so, how can it be socially transcended?