

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

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CHAPTER TWO: LEARNING ABOUT WORK

I. Introduction

I came into the world bearing an unanswered question and a bundle of possibilities. The question was: what would I do with my life? By this is meant: what work would I perform? For barring the unlikely event that I was for some reason incapable of it, this is what I would spend a great deal of my time doing. Work is what human beings do, and it is what we alone do. We face the great world around us, and we transform it to suit our needs and desires. Of course, in one sense, a lion does the same thing when it hunts and kills a wildebeest. But its efforts are not like ours. We can plan and act, conceive and execute. The first men and women could imagine their work before they did it, and what is more, their actions began to teach them that it was possible to improve their labor. From this came the invention of tools, and from the flaked rocks and woven baskets of ancient hunters and gatherers, there is a direct line to the wondrous machines of today. And who knows what we will do in the future, because it is clear that we are capable of greatness. From this most general perspective, that of the uniqueness of human consciousness, there does not appear to be anything we cannot do. So as my parents contemplated me in my crib, maybe they dreamed about the future miracles I would perform.

But unbeknown to me and only partially perceived by my parents, no sooner did I draw my first breath and open my eyes than the world was already constricting my possibilities. None of us is born into some abstract world in which anything is possible. Rather, we live in a specific and concrete world in which it is not possible to do or even to imagine certain things. Our society has decided ideas as to what work is. Most broadly, it is a world dominated by the production of goods and services not for their immediate use by those whose efforts produced them, but for the market, for sale only to those who can afford to buy them. And in order to be able to buy the products of human labor, people have to sell their own "labor power," which is then under the direction of someone else, the "owner" of the "property" which is needed along with our labor to make the objects to be purchased.

At the time of my birth in 1946, there were other systems of production. Scattered around the world, there were a few bands of gatherers and hunters, working without property or the sale of labor and its outputs, and by most modern accounts, living quite well, without onerous labor. But knowledge of what these "primitives" did was confined to a tiny group of scholars and adventurers. To the extent that the rest of us knew about them, we thought of them as almost less than human, something like the animals in the zoos and certainly not worth studying, let alone imitating.

On a much larger scale, there were modern societies trying to reorganize their systems of production away from the control of property by private individuals. To some extent these societies had eliminated the sale of the ability to work, but still, most people labored there as they did here. So, in the world as a whole, it was an absolute commonplace that people worked by first becoming employed. In fact, so common was it, that the very definition of work was completely entangled with the sale of labor. Work was defined in and through the labor market. Activities which occurred outside of these labor markets were not considered worthy of the appellation "work." My parents, like nearly everyone else, simply took these things for granted.

This system of work was at the heart of a complex web of organizations, institutions, ideas, and nations, the purpose of which was, in large part, to see to it that the system continued without disruption. To this end, my own nation, the United States, had established laws, organizations, bureaucracies, prisons, schools, and armies tied very closely to the work system. And it had encouraged other institutions, from churches to newspapers, to spread the word that it was a good and beneficial system, both necessary and inevitable. I would soon come into contact with all of this, and it would constrain and limit my possibilities.

My first experiences with work occurred within the framework of my family. What I thought work was began to take shape in my daily interactions with my mother and father, my grandparents, and my aunts and uncles. Since they happened first and before I could think, they no doubt still exert a very powerful influence on my view of labor. In this chapter, there are four essays. The first three are short, autobiographical sketches. The first is about my mother and grandmother; my early world, like that of most others, was a feminine one, so their words and actions naturally had a fundamental impact upon me. The second essay is about my father and his father, and the third is about my father and me. As readers will note, more space is given to the men. This is because in my childhood, "work" was largely the province of men. The fourth essay is analytical. In it I try to make sense of my early contacts with work from the perspective of what I have learned since.

II. Daughter and Mother

It was early in February, and she was waiting for the school bus along with the other high school students. They were all poor, the children of Italian immigrants, whose fathers worked in the coal mine down by the river. It was 1941 and the depression still raged, though there was more work now than there had been in a long time. She had come to this town just a few years before, after her father had died, when she was 12 years old. They had lived in another mining town, a little bigger than this one and with some other jobs available beside mining, but they had moved here to be close to her maternal relatives.

It had been a hard few years; they were among the poorest families in what to an outsider must have appeared to be a uniformly destitute place. There was no regular employment for a woman, so her mother took in laundry and mended other people's

clothes. She and her brother helped, struggling to carry water from the pump and heat it on the coal stove. Their house was rented from the coal company, a small place with tar paper shingles and no indoor plumbing or central heating. The upstairs bedrooms were freezing cold. Fires were a constant threat, and just the past winter a neighbor's house had caught fire killing the family's young daughter. She would never forget this; 50 years later she would get depressed during the winter months remembering that fire.

As her brother laughed with his friends, she thought about things. She did not have many friends from the town in which the high school was located. This was a factory town three miles up the river. It was home to an enormous glass factory, one of the biggest in the world, and a large pottery. You could see the great piles of white sand used to make the glass on the other side of the old iron bridge which led into the town. The town, itself, although modest in size, had many shops and bars and churches; one of the churches was made of stone and had marble altars and floors. Compared to the mining town, with its wooden church, company store, and tiny post office, the factory town was the big city. Most of the men in the town worked in one of the factories, and their children, especially those whose fathers had better jobs, made up the "in groups" at school. They had nicer clothes, and a couple had spending money and old jalopies. They snubbed the poor "dago" mining kids. So did some of the teachers. Years later, a teacher called her cousin a dumb coal miner. He got so mad that he grabbed the teacher and hung him out of the window.

My mother felt the condescension and wondered if something was wrong with her. Her friends told her that she was pretty, but she doubted it. How could anyone from her town be pretty? Sometimes she wished that she could be more like her brother. He had many friends and had more of "the gift of gab." He was a little wild and got in trouble, but nobody pushed him around. But he was a boy and that made all the difference.

She felt more at home in the mining town. There was no shame in being poor here. Everyone was in the same boat and nearly everyone was Italian, so people stuck together and showed each other the small kindnesses common in such places. No one turned away the beggars who sometimes knocked on the door asking for food. She was close to her mother. Women had it hard, but few so hard as her mother. A husband might drink or be abusive (though her own father had been a rare nondrinker and stern but not cruel), but he could work and bring home the money. So a woman without a husband might not have to worry about a man's meanness, but she would have a terrible time getting money. And people would say that she should get a man instead of working anyway, though not many men were interested in a woman with teenage children.

So far, her work experiences had not made her especially keen on a life of labor. Her father and uncle had had to work on their knees in the mine, sometimes in cold water; she remembered how they came home with their filthy clothes frozen stiff. Now she had to help her mother with the cleaning and cooking and the sewing and laundry. Her brother helped too; unlike most boys he could sew and cook. In fact, he was considered one of the best-dressed boys at school, though he had only two pairs of pants. He ironed them every day, so that they always looked nice. Her mother took pride in this and in keeping a

spotless house. Poverty was no excuse for being dirty; she had nothing but scorn for people who didn't keep clean houses. But it was a lot of work. She didn't think of herself as a good student, but she studied hard, and that took time. For several months she had been getting up early in the morning, to help her mother unloading dynamite from the trucks at the mine. Many of her relatives walked past them on their way to work, but none of them helped unload the dynamite, just like none of them intervened when the office manager had tried to grab her on a Saturday when she cleaned his office. It was hard to lift the heavy boxes, but they did it and went back home wheezing and gasping for breath. They all had asthma. Her father had had it too; maybe that's what killed him.

She missed her father. Life had been easier when he was alive. He had been different from the other men. He could read and write, in English and Italian both. He would translate for the workers who could not speak English and help them get their immigration papers. He was dapper and could dance up a storm, though her mother had not been keen on the dancing. Her mother's father had warned her about marrying a man who liked to dance so much. It was strange, how her mother would stand up to him and how he, himself, had been in mortal fear of his own mother to whom he had dutifully given his paycheck even after he was married. Yet it was clear that her father had been the "boss" of their household. She was a little afraid of her mother, but if her father said her name in that special way, she knew she had better listen.

One thing she looked forward to in school was seeing her boyfriend. He was two years older and a senior in high school. He would graduate this year if he didn't play hooky too much. She felt lucky to have such a boy friend, different, not only not Italian, but not Catholic either. Her mother did not mind this, but his parents were not so happy about her. They were strict Baptists and as quiet and reserved as the Italians were noisy and gregarious. They weren't rich, but they were a lot better off than her family. The father had worked all through the hard times, as an engineer in the glass factory. He wore a coat and tie to work and even around the house. Her boy friend could get a job there and have a steady source of money and that was the main thing.

He wanted to get married as soon as she finished school. She hadn't thought about saying no. If they married and he had a job, it would make it easier for her mother to get by. Maybe they could help out. If they married, her future would be secure. They would have a place of their own and start a family. He loved kids and so did she. She knew all about keeping a house, and how hard could it be to raise children. That's what women did, and she would have a good man besides. Not that she didn't have dreams about being an actress or an artist. All girls did, but dreams came true for a different class of people. For people like her, only security mattered. She just hoped that the war everyone was talking about didn't come.

III. Father and Son

His feelings toward his father were ambivalent. He admired his father's abilities. Though he had quit school in the eighth grade, he had become a time study engineer at the plant. He could add long columns of numbers in his head, and he could tell time

without a watch. He had been a skilled athlete, a long-distance runner and a baseball player. His father used to take him to the local games; he remembered yelling "that's my dad" when he had hit a home run. His father's best sport was bowling. He was the best bowler in town, and he almost never missed a spare. He was a good bowler, himself, the one sport besides pool he could play well. His high school yearbook had even commented that "he could give his dad a run for his money" on the lanes. But he wasn't as good as his father, and that was the problem. He felt that his father didn't really respect him. Maybe it was because he had been sickly when he was a baby, with tubercular bones which had cost him two years in a sanitarium. He still wasn't that strong, and he never could play baseball or any of the rougher sports. He sure wasn't much of a fighter.

The one thing he did have over his father was that he had been in the War. He had enlisted right after Pearl Harbor, in the Navy. He had graduated from high school in 1940 and, with his father's help, started to work in the glass factory, packing glass into crates for 50 cents an hour. He hadn't liked school much; what was the point of studying when you could hang out with the guys. Working and earning a paycheck were alright, although the work was monotonous. He had been to a CCC camp a couple of summers before, so he was used to getting up early and working hard. He wasn't a troublemaker or a loudmouth, and that helped too. Most of his classmates were either working or had turned in applications, which meant that he had a lot of friends at work, which was nice. It was strange at first, going through the long tunnel and into the enormous plant, punching the time clock and getting to work. He had started at the south end, where the unskilled assembly work was done, but he hoped to get a better job, maybe in one of the shops or at the north end where they made the specialty glass. Right before he had started to work there, the men had organized a union, and now they didn't have to take all the crap the foremen had handed out before; at least that's what the old-timers told him. He had heard more than a few unkind comments about his father from the men, though they had a grudging respect for his skills, especially his baseball and bowling. But they didn't like his stop watch, timing their every move and motion, always trying to make them work faster and harder. His father was a "company man," something he could not afford to be. For his father it was "PPG this and PPG that." For him it was just a job, though he couldn't see why you shouldn't put in a good day's work for your pay.

Everyone in the town had been talking about war. It sounded exciting, a chance to get away and do something different. Almost every guy he knew had enlisted. Not only had he joined the Navy, but right after boot camp, he had married his high school sweetheart. His wife had lived with her mother during the war and made a little money working in the company store. Everything boomed during the War; he remembered the crowded streets and bars the one time he had gotten home on leave, before shipping out. Some bastards had made a lot of money, cheating the servicemen by raising their prices. He hated people like that, guys who'd get ahead whatever the cost and screw anyone who got in their way. After boot camp, he went to radio school in Chicago. Some nights he had guard duty in front of the Chicago Stadium. Only later did he learn that inside people were helping to develop the atomic bomb which had finally brought him home.

The War had been an experience like no other. Young guys thousands of miles from home, guys like him from all over the country and all over the world. He had been in the Ellice Islands in the South Pacific for two years. He remembered the smell of the bodies piled up on the beach of the island on which he was stationed. You could smell them from 10,000 feet up in the plane; it was a smell that stayed with him still. Later he watched U.S. marines pick the gold out of the dead men's teeth before they were dumped into mass graves. He remembered getting bombed every night; one of his bunk mates had been hit in the middle of the night without him even knowing it. The radio operators listened to Tokyo Rose, and she would tell them that they were going to be bombed that night. She used to "interview" American prisoners of war, and one night he heard the voice of a guy from his hometown. He wrote back to his wife to tell the boy's parents that their son was alive. He never made better friends than his buddies in the War.

When he got back home, he went back to work. He lived with his wife and mother-in-law for a year. That had been hard, with no hot water and an outhouse, not to mention the coal smoke and foul air. After their son had been born, they moved to a small house on a farm, closer to work but still a long walk and still an outhouse. The excitement of the War had made it difficult to go back to the factory. You just didn't want to take any shit from the boss after you had seen so much death. The War had made him and his buddies men, and they wanted to be treated like men. There had been confrontations and strikes, but now at least it looked as though the Company had learned that it couldn't run them over. The War had changed his view of his father a little. He hadn't been there and done what he'd done. And his parents hadn't been so nice to his wife either. They'd actually sold the car he'd bought right before the War and kept the money. His car and his money!

What kept him going was his own family. All through the War he had sent pictures of babies he'd cut out of magazines back home to his wife. Now he was a father. Now he wanted things, so his family could have a good life. He wanted lots of kids too. He had begun to do a little planning. It didn't look like the depression was going to come back. Work was steady; you could put in a lot of overtime. Funny, he had told his wife that he was working overtime when, instead, he had been playing cards for money after work. She caught him, though, and that ended that. Well, he'd take the overtime and put a little money aside. The government was giving low interest mortgages to GI's, and he was thinking about building a house on a hill above the town. People said he was crazy to take such a risk, but he thought that it would be worth it to have a place of his own, with lots of space around for his kids to play. A house, with indoor plumbing and a fireplace; that would be something. Maybe he would take a correspondence course and go into radio repair. He was a radioman, after all; he knew about radios and everybody had one. He had bought a used Hallicrafter shortwave in Texas where he was stationed on his return from the South Pacific. He could practice on that. He would make everyone, including his father, see that he was not just some ordinary guy.

IV. At the Factory Gate

If I had some money, I would walk down the steep path to town, landing on Seventh Avenue, and past the row houses and small neat homes, make my way to Petroleum

Sales. My eyes gleamed in anticipation for this was a store filled with a child's delights: gumballs, exotic stamps, airplane kits, baseball cards, and fake cigarettes which smoked when you blew into them. These cigarettes were a special favorite of mine. With one of them dangling out of the corner of my mouth, I could pretend that I was a tough guy hanging around my uncle's dairy store looking cool and hard in jeans hung low on my hips, held up with a thin pink belt. Once in the alley behind the school yard, "Scoop" Folta, dazzling in his sunglasses and d.a. haircut, actually asked me for a cigarette. "Got a weed?" he said. I felt for a moment that maybe we could be friends, but then I shamefacedly remembered that my cigarette wasn't real.

Bald old Mr. Ringler kept a sharp eye out for youthful thieves, but they didn't have trick mirrors and store dicks in that poor town, so you could pocket a treasure or two if you were careful. Mean-faced Mr. Ringler! I never minded stealing his trinkets. He wore a suit and he looked like my dad's bosses. He was rich and probably a Jew. Surely he would never miss a set of triangle stamps from Monaco or a baseball or a pack of those cigarettes.

Petroleum Sales was in the middle of a block on Fifth Avenue, between 7th and 8th streets. On leaving, I always turned left toward the stores downtown. I might be a little apprehensive because my pal Jack's mother could come stumbling drunk and disheveled out of the side door of the bar at the Fifth Avenue Hotel. Slobbering, toothless, and in a flimsy housecoat, she would babble out some wild tale, trying all the while to grab and kiss you. More than once Jack and I witnessed this together. He would swear and tell her to get the hell home. I would pretend not to notice, and we never talked about it. Jack liked me, and I was glad for that. I knew he liked me because he invited me home even when his mother was there. Oh, I saw some terrible scenes. At eighth grade graduation, our parents were invited to a communion breakfast after morning mass. Jack's mother came, in a pretty dress and wearing makeup, trying hard to make small talk and mingle among the parents unnoticed. But no one except my mother would speak to her. Poor woman. She was like an old and broken plate, shoddily glued together and with all of the cracks showing. We waited for her to break, the meaner among us snickering as her voice rose and her speech thickened. The nuns shared knowing glances with the parents, secretly blaming Jack for the sins of his mother. Funny how those angels of mercy had so little compassion for those who needed it and how easily they were impressed by all of the material things which they had forsaken. Finally, she announced, almost in a shout, that she had to go home to turn off the stove. We watched her leave in silence and then returned to our eggs and toast, basking in the glow of our parent's pride. All but Jack. He had no appetite. Tonight there would be a violent argument. His mother would screech at his bookkeeper father. Jack's dad could add faster than a calculator, but he didn't have speed enough to avoid the flying shoes and the screams of "Eddie, you bastard;" Eddie, you cocksucker."

When I think of Jack's mother, I remember something she told my grandmother. Grandma was working at Greenbaum's department store, and one day she was accosted by Jack's two aunts who tried to sell her some pies which they had just bought on sale at

the supermarket. Jack's mother sidled up to my grandmother and said, *sotto voce*, "you have to watch out for my sisters. They're crazy."

The Fifth Avenue Hotel was a three-story gray tenement, buttressed by fire escapes. It was home to an assortment of derelicts, old bachelors, and shady deals. Through the side door oozed the cool, sickening smells of dirt and stale beer. Ceiling fans muted the sodden chatter of the barflies and petty racketeers who drank away the afternoons there. I longed to walk in there and order a coke or ask for change for the pinball machine. Maybe Ruben or Shannon or Jumbo Lawrence would say, "How's it going kid?" On the other hand, crazy Johnny Luscatoff might goose me, or the gangster bartender, Pauly DiRenzo might tell me to get the fuck out of there. So, I never did go in. Instead, I turned left on 9th Street and headed for the park. If it was early, I might cross the street to look longingly at the gobs in the window of Kunst's bakery. Later when I learned that "kunst" means "art" in German, I had fantasies about the bakery: a banner with huge, sensuous letters cut out of construction paper which said "Cakes decorated by Matisse;" or fancy breads shaped and ornamented to look like Picasso's harlequins. Mr. Kunst could have made a fortune.

The park took up a whole block, between 9th and 8th Streets and 4th and 3rd Avenues, a pretty park and large too for a small town, with a bandstand in the middle, just right for patriotic speeches on Memorial Day and the Fourth of July. Near the bandstand was the flag-bedecked statue of John Ford, the town's founder. On a summer day, women would watch over their children from the park benches conveniently located along the walkways and under the tall trees. At one corner of the park, across the street from the factory gate, pensioners would play checkers and talk, some smiling because their days as working stiffs were over and some wistful because they were locked out of their second home. In 1957 the park was a peaceful place. But a dozen years later, when my classmates trooped back from Vietnam, time bombs, bearded and wearing peace signs on their olive drab fatigues, the park became a war zone. We desecrated the flag, smoked dope, painted our faces, and fought with the police. The park was ours, and who could blame the matrons and retirees for seeking shelter elsewhere.

I have always been obsessed with being on time, so I usually arrived at the park twenty or thirty minutes before shift change. I had come to town to meet my father at the factory gate. To kill time, I would walk around and through the park, chewing on a toothpick and daydreaming. If no one were looking, I would practice my pitching motion, kicking my right leg high like Warren Spahn, but quickly shifting into calling the play-by-play. If you can picture this, you'll understand why the neighbors said that they could always pick me out at a distance by the way I walked.

At about five minutes to four, I would try to get a seat on one of the benches near the Works 6 gate, which was located across from the northwest corner of the park, and wait for the whistle to blow. Strung out along the river, from the bridge at the lower end of town to 13th street, over a mile in all, the factory was divided into three units: Works 4, Shop 2, and Works 6. Works 4, the largest, was one long assembly line, starting at the Batch House where sand, cullet, chemicals, and the other ingredients used to make glass

were mixed and cooked, to G & P where the finished plates of glass were ground and polished. From Shop 2, came the journeymen who did all of the factory's carpentry, painting, electrical repair, and general maintenance; it was here too that apprentices learned the various trades. Finally, at the northern end of the factory, was Works 6, where my father worked. Works 6 was special because the glass was still made in small batches, by skilled workers. Huge kettles of molten glass were cooked and poured by hand, and then the plates were cut into basketball bank boards or aircraft windshields so thin that they could be bent. The men who cooked the glass worked irregular stints, sometimes doing a double shift, sometimes coming out in the middle of the night, and sometimes just sitting around waiting for the spectacular pouring of the glass. They had a kitchen outfitted with stove and refrigerator, and they weren't very friendly to strangers. My father was an examiner then, although he had had many different jobs, from lowly packer to skilled cutter. He checked the plates for flaws in front of a high intensity lamp in a dark room; rejecting those pieces with more than a certain number. He told me that the company didn't like to ship bad glass, but the foremen weren't happy when he rejected too many plates either. That was a company for you.

My father was a precise man, but not as precise as his father, who also worked at Number 6. Well, grandfather wasn't actually a worker. The truth is, he was a time-study engineer, a regular Frederick Taylor who worahipped efficiency and the piece-rate. I admired my grandfather, mostly because he was such a good bowler, but I didn't quite trust him. He wore a suit and tie, always, like Mr. Ringler. My father never wore a suit and tie, and he never went to church on Sunday. Grandfather tithed at the Baptist Church and supported Temperance and the Republican party. He voted against Roosevelt four times. But my distrust was small by comparison to that of my father's work mates. They hated grandpa's stopwatch and always slowed down when he made his rounds. I wonder if his son did too.

I got excited when the whistle blew. The gate faced 3rd Avenue, but it was at the end of a long tunnel under the railroad tracks, so it would be a couple of minutes before anyone came out. Maybe Jack's aunts, who spent eight hours sitting in a dimly-lit room checking thin pieces of optical glass and who that morning could have been seen flying down the street to punch in at 7:59, would be the first to surface. Or more likely it would be the slackers like Frank Swain, who always got to the time clock first. Then small groups of three or four, some smoking and backslapping, others sullen and pensive, would stream steadily up the steps and onto the street. A human machine, breaking into its component parts, and then, as if by magic, decomposing into solitary faces. I looked for people I knew. Roy, with a plate in his head. Moe, the union vice president. Dom, a premature greaser with a Harley and an armful of tattoos. Nick, my dad's best friend, a solid, heavy set Russian with a sly sense of humor. I liked those men, but my father was the main attraction. He would be in the middle of a row of buddies, smoking a Lucky Strike. So handsome with his jet black hair, perfectly parted and always in place, his shirt smartly tucked into his creased trousers. Many of the men had potbellies and wore old-fashioned caps, but he was slim and bareheaded. He never had a five o'clock shadow, and his shoes were always bright and shiny. And while Dom might smell so strongly of sweat

that it was hard to breathe, dad always smelled as if his clothes had just come off the drying line. He was sharper, finer, and I was proud that he was my father.

When I saw him, I would wave to catch his attention, and then walk over to join the exodus. His buddies might pat me on the head and say, "Bud, is that your boy,?" or "Hi, Mike," or "Boy, he's getting big." When we got to his black '51 Chevy, we'd say goodbye to his friends. Someone would surely say, "See you at work." We'd get into the car. I'd show him my booty, but I wouldn't tell him how I got it. He'd offer me a stick of Beechnut gum, and we'd drive home.

V. Reprise and Analysis

When I was a boy, work appeared to be something which men did. My father got up in the morning, had his breakfast and then left for a mysterious place down along the river. So did all of the men on my street, nearly all of whom worked in the factories. Early on, I made a distinction between the men like my father, who went to work in work clothes and those few like my grandfather who went dressed in suits and ties. These men were not real workers in my mind; they were suspect because of their clothes and no doubt because of more subtle attitudes which they conveyed to me. Two men in particular I did not like. One was a store clerk. He thought himself above the factory men, despite the fact that he made a lot less money than they did. He identified with the other suit wearers and acted condescendingly toward the factory workers. The other man was our next-door neighbor, and my mother and his wife were best friends. This man was obsessed with success, which to him meant making money. He had more jobs than my father had pairs of pants. He taught school; he had a milk route; he gave accordion lessons and played at clubs; and he sold mutual funds. Eventually he was able to move to Florida, where he worked himself to an early death. My father detested this man's greed and his failure to spend time with his children. I hated his superior attitude as much as the fact that I wore his son's hand-me-down clothes.

Several other men in the neighborhood were supervisors of one kind or another, and today I can still feel their sense of being better than my father. He never cared for these men much, although this would have been hard for an outside observer to notice. The lines of class division are often subtle, but they are there nonetheless. They would become sharper in a crisis like a strike. The suit wearers would still go to work, while the factory hands would walk the picket lines. Of course, the men with the real power, the plant manager, the owners of the bank, and so forth, did not live near us, so they formed no part of my early understanding of work.

It should not be thought that the workers, united as they were by their jobs and incomes, were a homogeneous group. Ethnic differences marked the town, and epithets hurled at persons of a different ethnicity than oneself were common. People were "dumb dagos" or "stupid pollocks" or just "hunkies." I remember my father telling me that all the "hunky" kids had their heads shaved in the summer to save money for haircuts, and I have already remarked upon how the factory workers in the town felt about the Italian miners and how I felt about the Jewish storekeeper.

In one sense, religion was a unifying element among the workers, most of whom were Catholic. The company men were overwhelmingly Protestant and expressed dislike and distrust of Catholics. My grandfather never tired of warning us of the great dangers which would befall the country if John F. Kennedy were elected President (curiously, his own faith was Baptist and this, itself, was suspect among the top corporate officials, who were more sedately protestant). But the Church spread its own brand of bigotry, and it is probably from the church that I came to express the anti-Semitism in the story about meeting my father. Not many Jews lived in the town or worked in the factories. Some Jews owned small shops and were victimized by the stereotype of the miserly Jew; one shopkeeper was known as "Jew Jackson." Workers had mixed feelings toward the merchants. On the one hand, the merchants needed their business and so treated them with respect, but on the other, they represented a higher status and allied themselves with the companies. If the merchant was a Jew and had some money, ambivalence often gave way to bigotry. In retrospect this prejudice is remarkable, given that many of the town's men had so recently fought, and some died, fighting the Nazis and had been appalled at what they had seen of the death camps.

Besides the division by sex, which is the main theme of this chapter, the most serious divide was that of race. The issue of race requires separate treatment, but a few comments must be made here. The town had a small black population, completely segregated in the south or "lower" end of town, so named because black people lived there. Some black men worked in the factories, though they were usually confined to the more menial jobs. On the surface, there seemed to be a good deal of racial harmony. The town was known for its fine basketball teams, and many of the best players were black. We regularly talked about the prowess of the "lower end's" athletes, and the teachers helped ease their way through school when that was needed. But "nigger" was never very far from a white person's lips, and any behavior which went beyond the bounds of white acceptability, such as interracial dating, led to trouble and often violence. White people certainly did not consider blacks to be their equals. To whites they were exotic, with odd nicknames, funny speech, and ready knives.

The masculine bias of my work perceptions hid from my view an obvious fact. The first workers with whom most of us come into contact are women, our mothers. All the while that my father was going to work, my mother was working right under my nose. It is common today, even for some women, to disparage "homemakers." When my wife told another woman that she had spent the day cooking, her friend said, "Well, you're a real 'Betty Crocker'." My wife and my daughter both worked once in a daycare center, and most of the mothers were health care "professionals." Before one Thanksgiving holiday, they asked some of the mothers if they were going to make a Thanksgiving dinner. One of them replied, "Hey, this is the nineties. We don't cook." Their belief seemed to be that cooking, and child care as well, were tasks best left to the hired help. Curiously, none of the mothers asked the workers what they were doing for the holiday.

I took my mother's work for granted, and, to a certain extent, she did too. She did not think of herself as skilled or smart. Quite the contrary, she often denigrated her own abilities. Still today, I have heard her grandchildren say "grandma!" in a way which says

that they do not think she is especially competent either. Yet, when I had a family of my own and did a small fraction of the work my mother did, I saw it as the work it is. A mother's day is an endless procession of tasks, large and small: cooking for sometimes unappreciative people with diverse appetites and tastes; cleaning floors, walls, windows, carpets and rugs; doing endless loads of laundry and hanging them out to dry; ironing; food shopping; making and changing beds; and caring for five children--nursing them, walking them, teaching them, watching them, day and night. When my father came home, his work day was over, except for yard work and paying the bills, but my mother's work continued into the night. If he worked at night, then she had to do her work quietly, so that he could sleep. So many tasks! No wonder it was sometimes hard to concentrate; no wonder she was sometimes forgetful.

All of this is not to say that my mother's work was simply drudgery. Given her initial circumstances, having a stable household with a steadily employed and industrious husband was no small achievement as was the satisfaction of creating a place where her children were safe from the grinding poverty that had kept her from having a childhood. The idle rambles I took for granted on the way to meet my father had formed no part of her young life. And if we force ourselves to look at work outside of the context of the labor market and at our lives outside of consumption, what could be more important than caring for our children? My mother's work was unmediated by the market; it was direct and personal and done for immediate use. Furthermore, unlike my father, she had considerable control over the timing, quality, and pace of her work. No rigid distinction had to be made between work and other activities. Often both could be done together; she could cook and have coffee with a neighbor at the same time or she could stop to visit a friend on the way to the store. A mother's interactions with her children are often pleasurable; she can learn from them as they learn from her. Her intimacy with them cannot be duplicated in any wage work. Her work is her own, planned and executed by her, and again unlike almost all wage labor. There is no doubt whatever that she preferred her work to that forced upon her mother, and any rational person would have felt the same. Grandmother once asked her rich employer, "You don't think that I work for you because I like it, do you?" Despite her abusive second husband, she enjoyed keeping her house and tending her flowers. She had nothing but contempt for women who didn't or couldn't do housework.

During my childhood, most married white women stayed at home. Throughout the 1950s in the United States, the labor force participation rate (the ratio of women in the labor force to the noninstitutional female population over 16) of all women was well below 40%. The ratio for married women was considerably lower than this; it did not reach 40% until 1970. Therefore, my mother was not unusual in what she did, and this helped to give some status and dignity to her work. In addition, it made the work less lonely; the neighborhood women helped each other through the tribulations of sick children and husbands, misbehaving teenagers, and unemployment. We had many relatives, and this gave her an extended network of support and sympathy. And while my father seldom cooked or cleaned, he played with the children, did minor house repairs, planted flowers and trees, and painted. Being a glassworker, no one could clean windows better than he!

The problem is that the 35 years my mother spent raising children only begins to describe her working life. My two sisters, closest in age to me, did not go on to college, in itself a telling commentary on the inequality of men and women since they were both capable enough. Instead they married young and had children. They frequently visited home, and my mother dutifully cooked for them and their children. When my older sister's husband left her and their children, my mother devoted many hours to caring for her grandchildren, at a time when she still had a child of her own at home. Until my late twenties, I often came home on weekends and during the summers. I don't remember ever doing my own laundry or cooking for myself, much less for the rest of the family. By her mid-fifties, she had begun to take on many of the household chores of her own mother, and ultimately did all of them.

The union of glass workers had won relatively generous pension benefits from the company. It was possible for a man to retire at age 62 or even sooner and receive a pension which, when added to social security, would allow him and his wife to live decently. Unlike the unorganized laborers of the past (and increasingly of the present), these men would not have to work until they no longer could. It was a rare man who worked beyond the minimum retirement age, a clear indication that the previous 30 or 40 years of labor had been less than voluntary. However, retirement did not usually mean the sudden beginning of the good life of freedom and leisure. Work in a glass factory exacted a heavy toll. Lifting heavy plates of glass, working in awkward positions, and constantly facing extremes of heat and cold made joints ache with arthritis and damaged tendons and ligaments. Years of shift work, too much coffee, and too many cigarettes ruined stomachs and gave chronic headaches. Most diabolically, glass work generated glass dust, and this destroyed the lungs. Lung damage was compounded by daily exposure to asbestos and cigarettes. My father began to have difficulty breathing a few years before he retired. Luckily, like the local union president who had lost his arm in a grinding machine, he was able to bid onto easier jobs, and he ended his working life as a gate man watching television monitors and checking people into the plant. He took early retirement at 62 and began emphysema's long march toward the grave. In the years after retirement, he had a string of increasingly debilitating ailments, including pneumonia five times. Toward the end, he often needed help to walk the few feet from his bedroom to the living room chair in which he spent so many of his days.

Chronic illness does not ordinarily bring out the best in a person. As his illness progressed, my father became difficult to live with, constantly nagging and complaining to my mother. She had to labor mightily to care for him, literally keeping him alive the last few years. Life became a constant round of oxygen tanks, medications, doctor's visits, ambulances, cooking, cleaning, giving baths, and watching him slowly and painfully die. Unless he was extremely sick, he watched television all day, mostly political talk shows and news. He gradually became almost as conservative as his father, and there were many times that he drove my mother and older sister to distraction with his ranting about the Democrats. Last year we had a painful argument in which he accused me of not respecting the flag he had fought for and of having a picture of Mao Tse Tung in my house. He had become addicted to sleep medication, so sometimes it was hard to tell if he was speaking coherently or if the drugs were talking. At one point, my

mother was taking care of both him and her mother as well as babysitting her youngest grandchildren, the children of my youngest brother who was having his own work difficulties. Sometimes she had to give up her volunteer work at the local library because my father could not be left alone. This was a hard blow, since it was the one activity which got her out of the house for an extended period of time.

In my view, my parents' circumstances are not uncommon. For both men and women a work life is a lifetime affair. Those who work in the labor market subject themselves to a host of troubles, and these will invariably spill over into the home and affect the rest of the family. The most obvious outcomes of labor market work are injury and illness. Work is like a dangerous drug; it can and will harm you. My father was one of the few men still alive on his street, and he joined his neighbors all too soon. In the United States nearly 30% of all persons between 60 and 64 receive some sort of disability payments, and this would be much higher if our disability payments were more generous. The comparable figure for The Netherlands, which does have more generous benefits, is close to 60%. Compounding work-related health problems is the inadequacy of health insurance. My father was fortunate to have his union-negotiated health benefits still available to him; otherwise, I am afraid that he would have died long ago. But still, the work of caring for sick and injured workers falls mainly on their spouses, whose labor subsidizes the employers just as surely as a government tax break. When my mother was waiting for her school bus and thinking about marriage and family, I doubt that she foresaw the lifetime of heartbreaking toil ahead of her. It is true that she avoided the horrors of her mother's wage labor, but other horrors were waiting in the wings.

Work is stressful. Juliet Schor informs us that "Americans are literally working themselves to death--as jobs contribute to heart disease, hypertension, gastric problems, depression, exhaustion, and a variety of other ailments." Workers cope with stress in a variety of ways, many of which are not healthful for themselves or their families. After the men streamed out of the gate, not all of them went home. My father sometimes went to a card game after work, telling my mother that he was working overtime. She caught him and that ended that, but gambling was a common diversion among the workers, though not always a harmless one. Not long after my youngest brother was born, my father began to go to the race track several times a week with his work buddies. I used to go with them, and it was great fun to talk and gamble. We never thought much about my mother and the wives of the other men working at home and picking up the pieces when betting became more than a pastime. One of the men, the president of the local union at the pottery works next to the glass factory, gambled away so many paychecks that his family went without food. We laughed ourselves sick when he told us the story about how he had traded in his new car for an old clunker after he had lost his entire vacation pay at the track. Some joke for his wife and kids. And even when gambling or bowling or shooting pool did not become drains on the family's resources, they took men away from their homes night after night.

In my story, I relate the tragedy of my friend Jack's mother. It is curious that this stuck in my mind so sharply. No doubt I was sorry for Jack, but perhaps another factor is that this was an alcoholic woman. Men often drank to excess; they filled up the town's

numerous bars and clubs after work and on weekends. I wonder how many women had to face and defend themselves from drunken husbands, and I wonder how many sons learned how to abuse women by watching their fathers? Bars and clubs were places where workers could socialize and commiserate with one another and, as such, they played an important role in helping workers to understand the world around them. But they were also breeding grounds for the worst kinds of sexism and male chauvinism. If there a man could feel free and out from under the stifling power of the bosses, it might be true that he would use his own physical power on his wife and children when he got home. Suppose that women had acted in ways which men took for granted? What would people have thought? You only have to ask the question to know the answer.

The labor force participation rates of women, and especially of married women, have risen dramatically since the end of the second World War and accelerated since 1970. Within a generation, the rates for men and women will be roughly equal. Besides sheer economic necessity, which has pushed women, particularly women of color, into the workforce ever since our economy became fundamentally capitalist and which has taken on special force with the collapse of male real wages since about 1970, one of the driving forces of female wage labor is the utter debasement of work at home. As human identity became increasingly equated with money and as money was made chiefly by men, women became, by definition, not worth very much. While lip service was sometimes given to the worthiness of the job of homemaker, the truth was that the women who held such jobs were not respected either by men or by the larger society. Women had to give up so much to stay at home that the lure of wage labor began to overcome the human aspects of work at home.

But the commodification of female labor has certainly not been an unalloyed victory for women. For one thing, as more women have become wage workers, staying home to work has become more alienating. I once lived on an urban street in which there were many families with children. My wife and I had four children all close in age, and she chose to stay at home to care for them and for the household. She was virtually alone in this, so during the day she labored in isolation, without the female companionship that my mother took for granted. What is more, among our children's peers, a stay-at-home mother was so rare that our own children began to resent the fact that their mother did not "work." They would make insulting comments about this, hurting their mother more than they could know and in a way which would not have occurred to me when I was a child.

For working-class women who have entered the labor market, there have been significant benefits. They do not have to rely upon men so much for economic security and therefore, can be more independent. They can choose not to marry, they can have a child outside of marriage, and they do not have to be so fearful of divorce. All of the social features of a workplace are now theirs and not the sole province of men. And the labor force has provided a beachhead for the struggle against sex discrimination of all kinds. When women work outside of the home, they become less tolerant of men who will not share household tasks. Greater economic independence also gives women the opportunity to participate more fully in the nation's political life, since politics is for those with access to money and some freedom from the home.

Yet these important gains must be set against the fact that the labor market into which women have flocked is a fundamentally inhuman place to be. First, the labor market has been sex-segregated from the beginning. The jobs available to women were those which most closely mirrored women's work at home: school teachers, secretaries, domestics, nurses, daycare workers. Women have fought valiantly to obtain better jobs, and they have had some success. But they face constant male anger and harassment, on construction sites, in auto factories, in coal mines, in middle management, everywhere.

Second, as the labor market has become the dominant workplace of all both men and women, home life has become increasingly commodified. We buy our fast-food meals; we survive on convenience foods; we hire less fortunate souls to clean our houses and watch our children. Instead of family life, broadly construed to include all sorts of families, being the center of life and the raising of children one of life's most important functions, they become simply adjuncts to the market place, things bought and sold. The result is the collapse of social life as all adults chase after the job and the consumer goods that go with it.

Third, the influx of women into the labor market has failed to "humanize" it; it is still the place where workers go to maim and kill themselves. Now women get carpal tunnel syndrome, lung diseases, and mental stress, just like men. Worse, they still do most of what work at home is done, stretching themselves to the limit of endurance, only to have husbands leave them anyway and children grow up without knowing them. Are they better off than my mother? It's an open question. It is true that more women than ever have opted out of the family altogether and decided to work for wages and live alone, figuring that they could at least avoid some of the problems just described. But it seems a sad state of affairs that the choice is to live miserably in a two-earner family or to live alone, when living alone will not eliminate the problems inherent in our wage labor.

Don't misunderstand me. I am not saying that my mother's life has been better than that of my two sisters, both of whom work for wages and at home. What I am saying is that ubiquitous wage labor will never give rise to human liberation. No matter what labor we perform, we sell our ability to work to someone else, and it is that other person who controls it, not us. Woman wanted the same right to sell their labor power as men, but winning this right did nothing to alter the fact that it is still a sale. In fact, when everyone sells his and her ability to work, this transaction appears more and more to be the only way to organize society's production and distribution. Ironically, the "liberation" of women has strengthened the very system that bore down so heavily upon their fathers, husbands, and sons. It has done nothing to diminish unequal and exploitive work relationships. Women managers are no better than men. Professional women do not usually show solidarity with other workers, like the ones at the daycare center. What is more, the family has become only slightly less hierarchical as a result of women pushing so mightily to become wage workers. I would be happy to entertain proof that my male students are less sexist than my college classmates, but I know that there is no such evidence. Walk into any bar where men congregate. Listen to how they talk about women. If you could time travel back 50 years, you couldn't tell the difference.

VI. Final Thoughts

The men from whom I learned to labor performed highly alienated work. My father worked at jobs which used only a small fraction of his capabilities. His father used more of his, but he did work whose purpose was to diminish the skills of others. Dad helped to make plates of glass destined for others, under circumstances over which he had only the slightest control. To the company, he was just a cost of production, and in the end, he was treated accordingly. Gradually, the need to support a family overwhelmed his ambitions for another kind of work life. He didn't have the energy to complete the correspondence course, and he could not save enough money to open a restaurant. Thus, he resigned himself to the factory and consoled himself with the knowledge that at least his job was secure and the pay was good. After 44 years, the company gave him the clock which sits on my mantle. A clock for a life. I listen to it tick and think about the man that used to be, before he had to learn how to breathe in short cruel gasps. And in the end too, his labor, the shifts, the overtime, the lost holidays, the sickness, alienated him from those he loved best, his wife and his children.

My mother's work was alienating as well, though in different ways. She, too, never achieved what she might have had she not been enslaved to her family. She had the security she had wanted, but it came at a high price. After a certain point, it would have been difficult if not impossible for her to live without her husband's income, and this dependence cannot have been altogether healthy. So, she did what women did and kept quiet about it. But, most horribly, she is still doing it, and with no end in sight. In a painful song, Marianne Faithful sings about a woman who later commits suicide, "At the age of 37, she realized she'd never ride in Paris in a sports car with the warm wind in her hair." My mother is well past 70, and she says that the only traveling she will do will be through watching episodes of "The Love Boat." I don't believe in life after death, but if there is such a thing, grandmother must be grieving in heaven for her daughter.

And what about me? All other things equal, I was headed for that factory gate, to replicate the life of my father. Thanks to them, however, I beat that rap, just as I later, again with their help, beat my trip to Vietnam. Like most working-class parents, they wanted better for me, and luckily their labors didn't make us all incapable of helping dreams become realities. They urged me to read and study, and I was good at these things and I did. I avoided a life of factory work and its attendant miseries. I stayed out of the war, and therefore did not fall victim to the mindless patriotism to which so many working people succumbed after World War Two and which helped to weaken their labor movement.

However, there are a lot of raps I did not beat, and none more serious than the idea that women are not quite the equal of men. I have come to see that all of the rituals which prepared me to be a man--the pool rooms, the bowling alleys, the competitive sports, the fighting, the war stories, the worship of my father--did little to prepare me to be a "human" being. They all seem so stupid now, just tricks of the male trade so to speak, lessons in domination and separation from half of the human race. Still, the sexual division of labor has been so deeply ingrained in me that I have to struggle constantly to

overcome it, and I lapse all too frequently into male ways of thinking and acting. In my mind, the only women who come out of the factory gate are Jack's crazy aunts (who, after all, needed their jobs as much as the men and were not the only women factory workers thought to be crazy), and no heroic images form when I think of my mother's daily chores. And yet surely there can be no human happiness and harmony until men and women work together, in the home, in factories and fields and offices, in the larger society, everywhere, as absolute equals. What a shame that, thousands of years after humans began to labor, this is a matter for debate. What a pity that I have to devote any energy to overcoming it.