

“The Sweat of Our Brows” - Rev. Martha Hodges
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The scene we just watched is taken from a film called “Powaqqatsi,” a Hopi word signifying an entity, or a way of life, that consumes the life forces of other beings in order to further its own life. Labor, and the social institutions it feeds, can do this: Some work can destroy not only a person’s health and vitality; it can also kill the soul.

This seems to be pretty much what Jehovah had in mind when he cursed Adam and all the generations to come for disobeying him by eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil: (Genesis 2:17- 19)

17 To Adam he said, "Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, 'You must not eat of it', cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life.

18 It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field.

19 By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return."

Death and work are the twin curses, punishment for Adam’s forfeited innocence; the price paid for free will; the wages of sin. Adam – and we – will pay with the death of the soul, both literally (returning to dust) and figuratively (through painful toil.)

And yet the human story is, among other things, a tale of our refusing to let our souls be destroyed by the work we do. We protest. We insist on looking for happiness even as we work. We claim as our right some measure of satisfaction in our labor. Even those of us at the bottom of the economic ladder with virtually no chance of attaining even the next rung up – those of us who have little or no choice in the kind of work we do. The peanut harvesters find solace in laughter and in shared misery; the fisherman patches together a beautiful sail for his boat, with colors that reflect the sun; the farmer meets friends in the marketplace and takes pride in the gorgeous vegetables she has produced; the camel driver rests at the end of the day, sharing his food and his stories. We insist on our humanness. We are not mere machines.

And the rest of us? Those who do have some choices in life and work – some power? We all too often feel anything but powerful. With our basic needs for food and shelter met, we are free to desire more for ourselves. More recognition, more autonomy, more creativity or variety in our work.

Sometimes – maybe even most of the time – we think that we want more money, more status. After all, in our society, our value tends to be measured by our income and

our job title. This means that even when we do the work that is most essential – caring for our children or for the ill or incapacitated; cleaning up after others; serving food; stocking the shelves in our stores – people who perform this work that is absolutely essential to our daily comfort are considered unimportant, expendable – and are paid accordingly.

And if we have a white-collar job with decent pay – one that earns us some measure of respect and status as well as a living – often we are just as miserable in our work. Stressed, frustrated, bored, empty. What more do we want?

We want work that means something – to ourselves and to others. Whether we work for pay or not, whether we are formally employed or not – we need work, or some comparable endeavor, that feels purposeful. Work that we take pride in. That challenges us. Work that contributes to something larger and more important than us, to something we value and respect and love. When we have such work – work that furthers and supports a purpose, an ideal, a community – work that enhances and serves life, or, if you will, the Spirit of Life – our souls are fed as well as our bodies. This kind of work – work that comes from love – is sacred work. Not a curse, but a fulfillment.

So how do we turn the tedious, the mundane, the stressful or spirit-numbing into something sacred?

It would be unrealistic and disrespectful to those for whom work really is a misery to suggest that this is always possible. Some jobs and some work environments – depending on our individual personalities – are never going to bring us joy or meaning or even minimal satisfaction. Work that earns you nothing but hostility, blame and criticism; work that you can barely drag yourself to each day – and I've had jobs like that – that kind of work drains the life out of you. If you really have no other options, all you can do is try to find the satisfaction you seek outside of work. Something that fulfills you and keeps your spirit alive. Something like church, perhaps.

That was my approach to the first several jobs that I held. I thought, yes, this job is pretty bad, but I can stand it if I minimize its importance to me. If I don't define myself by it and if I have a rich life outside of it. This might work for you, but it didn't for me. For a long time I didn't even realize that it wasn't working. I got so used to being bored, disrespected and ineffectual that I believed I was okay. It was only when I finally moved on to other work that I realized just how miserable I'd been – sort of like banging your head on the wall because it feels so good when you stop.

But what if the work you do is not horrible – not irredeemable. Just not especially meaningful or exciting or fulfilling? Can this kind of work become sacred? Can work become for you a kind of worship? That's really up to you.

A religious community such as this one can help. Ours is a religion that doesn't tell you what is of ultimate worth, or what the purpose of your life ought to be. Only you can answer those questions, but we can remind you to ask the questions.

Think of a moment – here at church or elsewhere -- when you stood in awe. When you were inspired, dedicated to whatever you were doing. A moment when you felt communion with others or with the Holy as you understand it; when your loneliness disappeared. Remember a time when you felt grateful. Or recall a time when you experienced the mystery within you, the mystery beyond you, and felt a connection between the two.

What were you doing? Who was with you? What brought on these instances of transcendence? Now remember – or imagine -- a similar experience while you were working.

Imagine being awestruck by the wonder, the surprise, the sheer uncontrollability and unpredictability of something that happened at work, by someone's words, by a look exchanged. You feel truly connected, however fleetingly, to something life-giving – a longed-for accomplishment, the knowledge that you have made someone's life easier, a moment of beauty. You know what you were doing and why. Your perspective shifts from the immediate concern at hand to a consciousness of how your task forms part of an interdependent web of other people, other tasks. Or, conversely, your focus narrows and you became totally engrossed in the moment; nothing else matters, you are so engaged in the moment, so attentive, so mindful.

Hear again the words of Jacob Trapp with which we began: To worship is to stand in awe under a heaven of stars, before a flower, a leaf in sunlight, or a grain of sand. To worship is to work with dedication and skill; it is to pause from work and listen to a strain of music. Worship is a loneliness seeking communion; it is a thirsty land crying out for rain. Worship is the mystery within us reaching out to the mystery beyond.

Is it beyond us to bring a sense of worship to our everyday lives, including our work lives? If we can do this, imagine the richness of those lives, work included! Imagine the Sacred pervading our hours in the office, on the road, in the kitchen or classroom or boardroom! Such a life would be a life transformed. Such a life would transform others. Such a life would change the world.

We refuse the curse of Adam. The Powaqqatsi, the way of life that feeds on our life force, is powerless in the face of such refusal – the refusal to empower that which dehumanizes us. Sacred work is work made sacred by us – neither more nor less. Our lives need such work. The world needs such work. Life is too short, and too precious, to settle for less.

May it be so.