

“Against the Protestant Work Ethic”
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UU Congregation of the Susquehanna Valley

Hello humans! Happy Labor Day!

I began thinking about this sermon with a simple question, why are so many capitalist institutions sustained by people working beyond their physical and mental capacity? Particularly in “helping” fields like education, medicine, and psychology (in my mind fields that should be socialized) there is a terrible friction between systems that only want to make more and more money and people who care and therefore push themselves to work through everything, including the collapse of their own bodies and minds.

A great example of this is Dr. Robby on The Pitt. He is a walking burnout poster who, like many of us, thinks that if he doesn’t do it, it won’t get done. Working within the system is not only making him sick, it’s making him dangerous, and not just to his patients. His attitude is the opposite of community intent – indeed it weakens the collective as those who don’t pull their weight get used to depending on those who overwork.

For most of the 28 years I have taught at Bloomsburg I have had between 90-100 students per semester with each of them writing 4-5 papers. The lowest estimate would be that I have graded 20,160 papers, not including the 10 years I taught during graduate school. All of this plus the same service and publication requirements professors have at any institution. For years I got up at 4 in the morning to grade, until I couldn’t do it anymore and function during the day.

Now, in retrospect, I wonder why did I work this hard? The easiest answer is because my institution demanded it (more classes per professor and larger class sizes generate more income). Number two is that as a highly privileged person I felt hugely responsible to my students, most of whom came from working class backgrounds. But three is the really interesting one here. I liked walking into a room and bragging about how exhausted I was, how overworked, how much I was doing. It gave me status. It made me holy somehow, a sort of overworked martyr to the cause.

This is the crux of the issue, I think. How many times have you had a conversation with someone where you try to prove you are working harder than them, that you are more exhausted and damaged than they are by your labors? Why isn’t there the same braggadocio surrounding leading a rich spiritual life or connecting deeply with a community?

In his book *The Protestant Work Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, German sociologist Max Weber (vaber) connects the USA's early Protestant ethics and values, along with the Calvinist doctrines of asceticism and predestination, to the rise of modern capitalism. For Weber, Protestant ideology provided an ideal environment for the rise of capitalism as many lived in continuous fear that they were not part of the elect, the blessed by God, and therefore sought tangible proof (both internal and external) they weren't one of the damned by working hard and accumulating wealth.

Quite simply put, in a society from which ours still takes many values, those who worked hard and visibly accumulated capital were blessed by God. Indeed the bible says

The Lord shall command the blessing upon thee in thy storehouses, and in all that thou settest thine hand unto; and he shall bless thee in the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee. The Lord shall open unto thee his good treasure, the heaven to give the rain unto thy land in his season, and to bless all the work of thine hand. *Deuteronomy 28: 8, 12*

My husband, who was raised in a Fundamentalist family says this viewpoint is a foundational tenet in many of today's Christian churches. Those who accumulate capital are chosen by God. The flip side of this belief is really dark: the poor are by default lazy and sinful and godless. Another bible quote: "By much slothfulness the building decayeth; and through idleness of the hands the house droppeth through." Ecclesiastes 10: 18

Obviously, these people are not "Dolly Christians." But their beliefs, otherwise known as the Protestant work ethic, make the rise of a certain Orange Menace and related Christian Nationalism a lot clearer.

Unfortunately, the damage of the Protestant work ethic extends even to those of us who have never set foot inside a Fundamentalist Christian church; I believe the capitalist/Calvinist zeitgeist affects our approach to work despite our religious identification. In American culture constant productivity is holy; idle hands make the devil's work.

But here's the rub: idle hands often give us gifts we are unable to receive if we are constantly working. For example, last night I found no less than ten different kinds of mushroom in my front yard. This morning I watched a flock of black throated blue warblers take a bath in my waterfall. Then I had a wide-ranging political discussion with my son Julian, who can talk for three hours straight. None of this helped me accumulate capital, nor did it feed into any system except my own body.

Don't get me wrong here. I recognize the necessity and value of work. I am honored and privileged that I have been able to support my family for the last 28 years. But I do

want to challenge you to think hard about some essential questions, and as the song goes, not be afraid of some change.

Who does your labor actually belong to? Do you support that system?

If you are overworking, who are you actually benefitting?

Does your work keep you from spending time in spiritual and community pursuits that may bear more fruit than mere capitalism?

Our Soul Matters theme this month is beginnings. Might I suggest that this reflection is a place to start.