

Listen to the Singing of a Factory (inspired by Walt Whitman)
by Ken Mandile

When I stand in my machine shop, I hear the singing of a factory.

I listen and watch and smell and feel its life.

Listen to the singing of a factory. Alive with work. Alive with creation.

Listen to the screech of a drill. Listen to the rap-rip-rup of spinning metal bars.

Listen to the whirr of motors pumping, spinning, moving, lifting.

Watch the workers gathering, chatting, solving, measuring, tweaking, *creating*.

Watch the oil flowing and splashing, cooling the cutting tools, shimmering and splashing more.

Smell the oil.

It's permeates the air and your clothes and your skin and your hair.

You don't mind though.

It's good.

It's creation.

If it's true that we are made in the image of our creator, then who but other creators could be doing the work of God?

Machinists, carpenters, crafters, tailors, miners, welders, farmers, and many more, outside of the factory. Billions of creators.

The Bible's creation fable ended too soon. On the 8th day, and every day after, the process of creation continued.

Listen to the singing of a factory, alive with creation.

Bringing Creation Toward Perfection

by Ken Mandile

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I'm a big fan of the reality television show Survivor. Survivor was one of the first reality television shows and it remains very popular, even after 15 years. In the show, two or three teams of people are left on a sandy beach to outwit, outplay, and outlast each other. Players form alliances and develop personal strategies, usually involving a significant amount of deception, lying, and backstabbing.

Each weekly episode covers three days on the island. Each episode ends with a Tribal Council, where a player is voted off the island by their fellow team members. The winning survivor receives \$1 million. Over the past few seasons, the producers have created a variety of themes, rule changes, and team groupings to keep the show interesting. Teams of young versus old, veteran players vs. rookies, men versus women, etc.

This past season, the show was called Worlds Apart. It pitted three teams against each other: White Collar, Blue Collar, and No Collar. The players' occupations determined what team they were on. As the show puts it White Collars make the rules; Blue Collars follow the rules; and No Collars break the rules. In case you are wondering what a No Collar is, they are free spirits with non-conventional jobs, such as a coconut vendor and a You Tube sensation.

This grouping of people by occupation mirrored the de facto caste system that exists in every society. Often, upon meeting someone new, the first thing we ask is "What do you do?", meaning, "what is your occupation". It's a good conversation starter, and it immediately allows us to place them in the right status bucket. Are they white collar, blue collar, or no collar?

For many people, their job not only determines their value to society, it weighs heavily in measuring their own self-worth. Just ask someone who has been laid off. It can leave a devastating emotional scar, not just because of the potential financial crisis that may result from joblessness, but because of the perceived judgment that their work was not valued. Just the fact that one is working gives us the feeling of being a *somebody*. Society recognizes our skills and contributions as workers.

Work also gives us the sense of being connected to something larger than oneself, and an appreciation of our dependence on others and their dependence on us. Despite all that we know about the importance of work on our sense of identity, people still have mixed opinions about work. Hard work is seen as a virtue, but loving work is often seen as character flaw.

Some see their work as answering a calling. Others see work as drudgery.

Some can't wait to stop working, while others are anxious to begin their careers.

Some work for money. Others work for a purpose.

Some work because they love their jobs. Others work to feed their families.

A Huffington Post commentary on job identity sees a problem with letting your job be too much of your identity:

"... your job is just your social face, what psychologists call a "persona." The term comes from the masks actors wore in ancient plays to indicate their various roles. The persona is a mask you need to function in society, but it's not the real you. When you think it is, you lose track of the authentic person behind the mask and that character's needs, interests and values. You make yourself vulnerable to "contingent self-esteem," worth based on a narrow domain, subject to the fickle approval of others. It's a very flimsy affair."

Wow. This is disappointing to those of us who love our jobs. How did loving your work get to be a character flaw?

One day, my job persona will be removed. In my case, I had a plan for when that day would come.

Diane and I have planned for years to move to Colorado when the last of our three children graduated from high school and left for college. Diane moved away from her family in Colorado more than 25 years ago. Our youngest child, Ben graduated from high school this spring and, like his two older siblings, he will go to warmer climate and never look back. For me and Diane, we knew that it was time for us to be closer to Diane's family.

The nice thing about this plan was that it had a definite date, so we could prepare for it. It wouldn't just be one of these dreams that was off in a future time that never seemed to arrive. We would sell our business and our home and I would retire or try my hand at something new. So, last fall, we had found a buyer that gave us a good offer and who would fund employee ownership of the business. It was a deal that made me comfortable that the life work of my parents and of me and Diane would be in good hands.

The lawyers and the accountants did their work and everyone was ready. The mechanics of completing our plan had been well thought out and there was nothing stopping us now. Or so we thought.

Our brains said this was exactly what we wanted and planned for. Our hearts said otherwise. At the last minute, we walked away from the deal. Among other things, I realized that our company, my job, was more than a source of income. My job is part of who I am. I had this odd sense of a spiritual connection to what I do and I hadn't properly prepared to let go.

The Huffington Post article said that my connection to my job was "a *very flimsy affair*." I didn't agree, so I searched for another view that would help me make sense of what looked like an irrational decision to everyone else.

I came across a concept called "spirituality of work". It has old roots in Christianity, particularly in Catholicism. St. Francis of Assisi devoted himself to the task of sanctifying daily labor and bringing it back to right relationship with God. The sanctity of work is even written into the Rules and Constitutions of the Secular Franciscan Order.

"Daily work is not only the means of livelihood, but the opportunity to serve God and neighbor, as well as a way to develop one's own personality. There is a conviction that work is a right and a duty and that every form of occupation deserves respect..."

Spirituality of work isn't about praying at work. It's not about sharing your religious beliefs with your co-workers. It's not even about having a job that involves some kind of grand effort to save the world from any of its many ills. Spirituality of work is based on the belief that people are, by nature, workers. Value is placed upon every person's contribution, whether they are a corporate or political leader, an artist, a skilled mechanic or a merchant or a tiller of the soil or even an unpaid worker, such as an at-home parent or a child taking care of an elderly parent.

This is from a book called *Confident and Competent - A Challenge for the Lay Church*:

"The first aim of work is to bring creation toward perfection."

I want to repeat that because it is so important in understanding this concept. *"The first aim of work is to bring creation toward perfection."*

"If one's work entails production of physical objects, then it means building the best objects possible: spacecraft launchers, automobiles, books, works of art. If one's work is service, then those services must be brought to successful completion: administering therapy, serving a meal, giving a lecture, or finishing the family laundry. If one is responsible for the institutions of society, then work entails making those institutions

responsive: by serving on a community board, voting in an election, writing a letter to an editor, participating in a union or professional association.”

Another author writes “... *man, created in the image of God, shares by his work in the activity of the Creator*” and that, “*within the limits of his own human capabilities, man in a sense continues to develop that activity, and perfects it as he advances further and further in the discovery of the resources and values contained in the whole of creation.*”

This idea of spirituality of work is based on the belief that we are all continuing God’s work of creation. It recognizes that even God had to work for 6 days before earning a day of rest. I really like this concept. It almost sounds like something that the Catholics could have derived from Unitarian Universalist principles. It values the worth and dignity of every person and places people firmly in the interdependent web of creation, not as only products of creation, but as creators.

It says that there is a oneness of all being and that each of us has an important contribution to the whole. While each contributes to the whole, the importance of the individual can never be understated.

The first aim of work is to bring creation toward perfection, but there is a second aim. “*The second aim of work is the completion, and realization of the worker. Pope John Paul II said, “Work is supposed to serve the subject of work, the one who does the work – the worker, the person.”*”

When my factory sings, it’s not just because of the skilled machinists, the engineers or the managers. The worker that washes the floor, the shipper and the office clerk, the driver that delivers our raw material, the UPS driver who picks up the finished product, the landscaper that mows the lawn, the town’s snow plow driver, the teachers who educated our workers, the day care workers who watch the children of the workers, all contribute. Though they may not realize it, they are all important to the singing of the factory. They are all helping with creation.

There’s a danger on the horizon though. The future of work may be at risk. We have all heard talk of robots and automation and artificial intelligence displacing huge swaths of workers. An Oxford University survey of over 700 occupations determined that 47% of them were at risk due to automation. There are even websites now where you can calculate the odds of your occupation being replaced by automation.

This is not a new fear. In 1930, economist, John Maynard Keynes predicted that one day we would have much more leisure time available than work. He thought that this time might be 100 years off, so sometime around 2030. That’s just around the corner.

Keynes predicted that we would spend our days in leisure and contemplation. In a world without work, Keynes saw us with new freedom, that our lives would be blessed in ways that were not possible when we needed to work.

“I see us free...to return to some of the most sure and certain principles of religion and traditional virtue-that avarice is a vice, that the exaction of usury is a misdemeanor, and the love of money is detestable, that those who walk truly in the paths of virtue and sane wisdom are those who take the least thought for the morrow.

We shall once more value ends above means and prefer the good to the useful. We shall honour those who can teach us how to pluck the hour and the day virtuously and well, the delightful people who are capable of taking direct enjoyment in things, the lilies of the field who toil not, neither do they spin.”

Well, this is an interesting dilemma. Under the concept of spirituality of work, one of the aims of work is the completion, and realization of the worker. What happens if Keynes’ prediction does come true and there comes a time when there is no work to do? If we are by nature workers what will be our contribution to creation and perfection of our world?

The good news is that futurists have always underestimated the adaptive abilities of the human race. We continue to advance despite the challenges of rapid change. The demise of the worker is for another era to concern itself with. Today, we have plenty of work to do.

We have much that is broken in our world.

We have an Earth that is scarred.

We have people who are hungry and cold and sick.

We each struggle with our own weaknesses.

We have fences to mend in our neighborhoods.

We have seeds to plant, weeds to pull, windows to wash, streets to sweep.

There are many people who need to be lifted from poverty and despair and war and neglect and oppression and ignorance and racism and many other isms. If the first aim of work is to bring creation toward perfection, then we still have plenty of work to do.

I want to end with a poem by Rudyard Kipling called “When Earth’s Last Picture Is Painted”. In it, Kipling speaks of another lifetime, when we all work for pleasure.

*When Earth's last picture is painted
And the tubes are twisted and dried
When the oldest colors have faded
And the youngest critic has died*

*We shall rest, and faith, we shall need it
Lie down for an aeon or two
'Till the Master of all good workmen
Shall put us to work anew.*

*And those that were good shall be happy
They'll sit in a golden chair
They'll splash at a ten league canvas
With brushes of comet's hair.*

*They'll find real saints to draw from
Magdalene, Peter, and Paul
They'll work for an age at a sitting
And never be tired at all.*

*And only the Master shall praise us.
And only the Master shall blame.
And no one will work for the money.
No one will work for the fame.*

*But each for the joy of the working,
And each, in his separate star,
Will draw the thing as he sees it.
For the God of things as they are!*

If we use our short time on Earth to continue the work of bringing creation toward perfection, we too can paint the world as wish to see it and we can dream of doing it with a comet’s tail, *each for the joy of the working, and each, in his separate star, will draw the thing as he sees it, for the God of things as they are!*

Benediction by W.E. B. DuBois

*“Now is the accepted time, not tomorrow, not some more convenient season.
It is today that our best work can be done and not some future day or future year.
It is today that we fit ourselves for the greater usefulness for tomorrow.
Today it the seed time, now are the hours of work, and tomorrow comes the harvest and
the playtime.”*

Go forth today with appreciation for role that we all play, as we create a more perfect realm of justice and peace and beauty and love. Paint the world as you wish to see it.