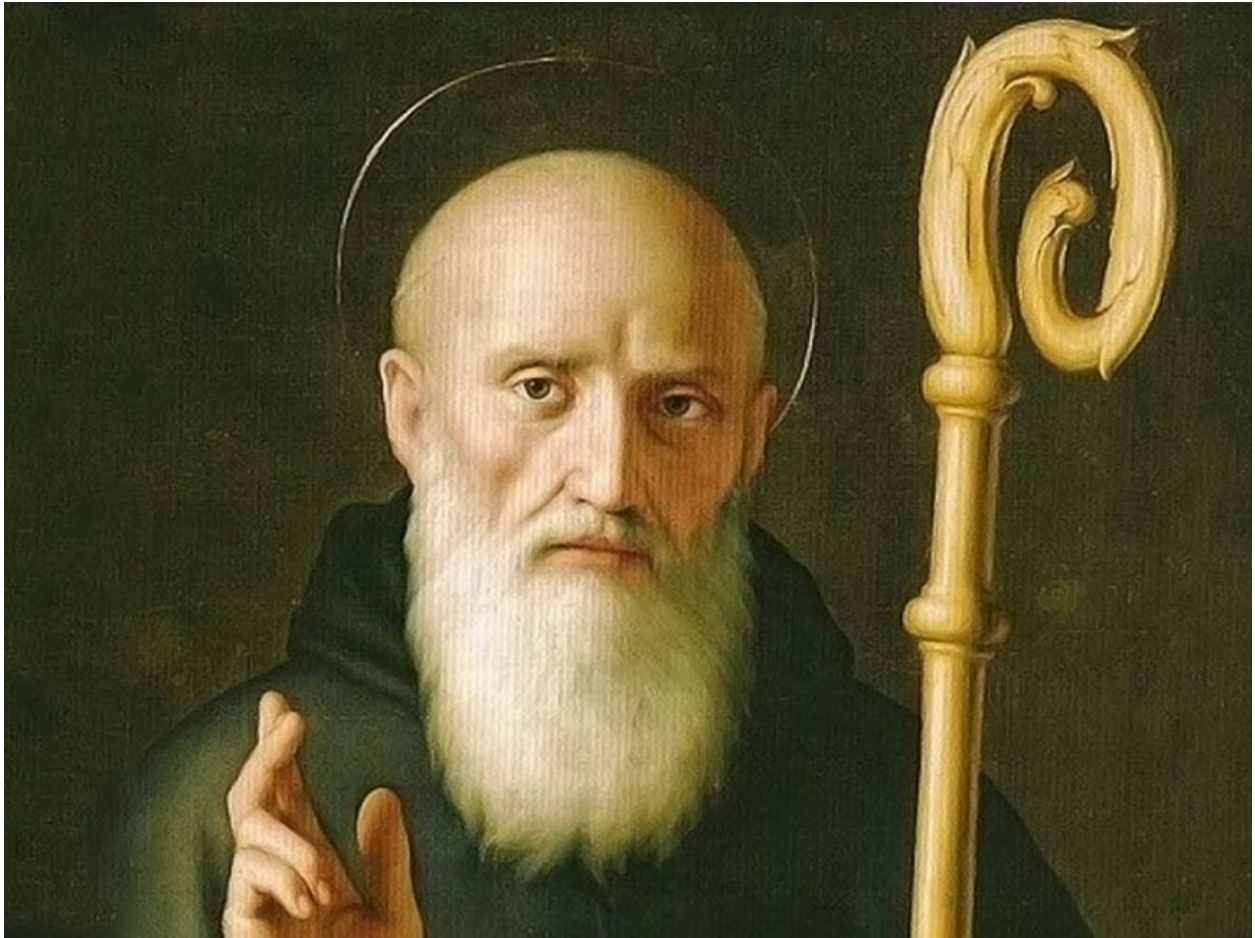




Epsilon Theory
In Praise of Work

March 5, 2019



Idleness is inimical to the soul.

- *The Rule of Saint Benedict*

And let them not be distressed if poverty or the needs of the place should require that they busy themselves about gathering in the crops with their own hands; for then are they truly monks, when they live by the work of their own hands, as did our fathers and the apostles.

- *The Rule of Saint Benedict*

Peter: Let me ask you something. When you come in on Monday, and you're not feelin' real well, does anyone ever say to you, 'Sounds like someone has a case of the Mondays'?

Lawrence: No. No, man. Shit, no, man. I believe you'd get your ass kicked sayin' something like that, man.

- *Office Space (1999)*

Chef: It's very simple, children. The right time to start having sex is seventeen.

Kyle Broflovski: Seventeen?

Chef: Seventeen.

Sheila Broflovski: So you mean seventeen as long as you're in love?

Chef: Nope, just seventeen.

Gerald Broflovski: But what if you're not ready at seventeen?

Chef: Seventeen. You're ready.

- *South Park, Season 5, Episode 7 ("Proper Condom Use")*

It is all very well and good for someone like me to write about work.

I have never really wanted for anything. My father had a good job. He spent his entire career as an engineer with the Dow Chemical Company. My mother was a homemaker. We were square in the squarest middle of the American middle class. Me personally? I was even more fortunate. I was a kid with good test scores from a poor, rural high school that no one had heard of, so I got to hop in the short line to get the Team Elite stamp on my passport. I'm a terrible person to lecture you about how you should think about your relationship to your work.

Hear me anyway: Your work is holy.

Work is on my mind right now in part because of two essays I read this week. One was [written by Ben Carlson at Ritholtz Wealth Management](#). The other – which was heavily referenced in Carlson's piece – was written by Derek Thompson and [published in the Atlantic](#). They are both really good and worthy of your time, but it's Thompson's piece I want to talk about (in part because I don't disagree with anything in Ben's excellent piece). I think Thompson gets nearly everything right, too, but for all that somehow ends up in the wrong place.

In short, Thompson's contention is that we have imbued work with almost religious significance. No, not almost. True religious significance, to which end Thompson coins the expression workism to describe our search for meaning, identity and community in the work we do. For most of us, he notes, this obsession with work isn't working. By any measure, we are more emotionally invested and connected to our jobs and our coworkers. We aren't any happier.

Thompson is right. *Of course* he is right.

American corporate culture has embraced the appearance of exhaustion. To be harried, frantic and busy is the mark of being in-demand, of being important. Our unread emails are a source of pride, our hard stops on a meeting a badge of honor. We are on mute but listening because we've got too much else to do. The savviest among us, of course, have learned how to humblebrag our way through all of this, to wrap it in a metagame of subtlety and hand-waving that says 'Oh yes, I suppose I've got a lot going on, but I'm learning to be a bit more Zen about it.'

But why now? The Protestant Work Ethic has been a dominant narrative in northern and western Europe for a few centuries now. Even the term Max Weber used to describe it is more than 100 years old. Hell, even Office Space, America's seminal cultural criticism of workism, is 20 years old now. Are we just now acting out the inevitable ennui of a decadent culture largely finally unthreatened by famine, disease and war? Is workism the soul-crushing manifestation of the force multiplier social media applies to our own tendencies to compare our lots in life to those of others?

Yes! Well, yes and no.

And as much as I agree with Thompson, it is the 'no' part which interests me. We are clearly missing something in our explanation here. I think it can be found by asking two further questions. To wit, if all of that about workism is true, why isn't this happening in the trades and what is left of blue collar labor? And why was this the dominant culture of consulting and banking for >50 years before it found its way to the rest of white collar work?

My answer is this:

The problem isn't that we derive too much of our worth and value from work.

The problem is that our jobs are becoming increasingly abstracted from work.

Consider the jobs of the construction worker and the banking analyst for a moment. The construction worker builds and then he comes home. His job and his work are more or less the same. His job is to make and he makes. He probably has some complaints about his hard-ass foreman and about that rotator cuff that keeps giving him issues. He might not be totally satisfied with his pay or the fact that the new guy is getting paid the same even though he takes twice as long to frame a wall. But office facetime demands and exhaustion porn play little role in his conversations over a beer on Friday afternoon.

The banking analyst, on the other hand, will have a little more difficulty telling you what his work is – what he produces. If he's got more years of college telling him how to answer this question than he has experience actually doing it, he'll give you the something something matching capital with those who can deploy it answer. Even then, he will have some difficulty explaining how the things in which he invests his mind and body during the average day contribute to that result. Over time, he comes to understand that his job function is explicitly this: to permit his immediate boss to signal competence to her immediate boss, a chain of signaling which ultimately ends with a client who wants to do something (e.g. buy another company) while offloading some of the various types of risk and accountability associated with that thing to the most credible third-party sources (i.e. you). Sure, in rare cases the matching function may be the kind of thing that wouldn't have happened without their help, but generally speaking, banking and consulting make nothing – not even ideas, not even connections. Their service is to shift and allay the career risk of institutional decision-makers.

So it is that workism was alive and well in these fields long before social media provided avenues to compare, long before millennials, long before it became fashionable to treat our jobs as our calling. The reason for the emergence of workism was that the jobs of banking and consulting were fundamentally about signaling intelligence, competence, credentials, hard work and availability. They were not about what sliver of work was being done, or how much meaning anyone invested in it. The job was – and is – almost wholly abstracted from that work. **That is the soul of workism: that the job is, in every meaningful respect, to look like you are doing the job.**

I think it is a mistake to be too narrow and prescriptive about why workism spread to other professional fields in the last quarter century. Social media has exerted powerful influence. Even outside of social media, more rapid information flow and stronger common knowledge effects about what other companies are doing has exerted influence. The search for our place in the world that is the natural result of a rapidly expanding and crowded populace of talented people we cannot hide from – yeah, this has exerted influence, too. Yet I maintain that the strongest influence has been the coming-to-maturity of software-dependent professional fields, which is to say...just about everything. Industries and careers formed around innovation and creative destruction have transformed into those in which conventions reign, IP is a thing to be protected and harvested, risk is a thing to be transferred, and the job is to look like you are doing the job.

I know this because we talk to all of these people daily. They are among our 100,000+ subscribers, and in our prior lives, they were our clients. It has happened in software. In video game development. In mobile app development. In FP&A, corporate development and strategy functions across industrial, chemical, materials, consumer goods and consumer devices companies. It has happened in investments, from public active management to venture capital. It has happened in media and entertainment, in digital media, in publishing, and even in the arts. We are a nation full of people doing jobs where the real job is to look like you are doing the job.

As all this happened, American corporate culture proposed two solutions. As we became disillusioned with the increasing gap between our jobs and any work product which might influence the world in a meaningful way, the first solution was, as Thompson points out, to introduce myths of meaning, belonging and calling into our offices. Workplaces became places to feel comfortable and at home. Colleagues became family – *you wouldn't ignore a call from family at 10PM, would you?* This kind of meaning was a nutritionless husk, a crude analog to real human engagement. It goes without saying that it made the problem worse, adding guilt and moral judgment to the weight of pointlessness in the jobs we all performed.

Perversely, the second solution we promoted was nearly the opposite of the first. We promulgated the mythology of work-life balance. This remains, in fact, the ultimate recommendation of Thompson's piece, in which he observes:

It is the belief—the faith, even—that work is not life's product, but its currency. What we choose to buy with it is the ultimate project of living.

The basic idea is this: suffer the mind-numbing frustration of unproductive labor, but you know, turn off your phone sometimes and actually take your vacation days. Treat work as a means and not an end. A way to buy free time and leisure. This is not the same nutrition-less husk that the poisonous mantras of 'we're your second family' were. At the very least, it suggests that we spend more of our hours engaging in true human interaction. That's all for the good. But it is like treating a sinus infection with an expectorant – it may alleviate a symptom, but gives us no answer for the disease. And it forgets another point.

Hear me again: your work is holy.

No I don't mean your job. I also don't mean your passions. Your life's greatest work may never be a passion. And no, this isn't another paean to artisanry, crafts and trades, although these are perfectly legitimate paths to meaning, too. I mean your work: what you make. When you set your mind and hands to work, what do they produce? Does your labor result in knowledge, happiness and health, beauty and wealth, for yourself or for others? Even if you manage to reserve a good amount of time for leisure with friends and family, make no mistake: Your work will still matter to your happiness.

The form work takes for you will differ based on the talents you have. Whatever it is, there is no substitute for it. If you reduce your work-less job from 70 hours to 55, you will still be unhappy. If you are able to find relationships and connections and even follow your passions at your job, if it is not work, you will still be unhappy. If you are retired early, sedentary and wealthy enough to do nothing for as long as you want, you will still be unhappy. Good people are wired to be productive, to contribute and to give more than they got. Unless you are a sociopath, you cannot trick your brain around this.

Yes, yes, there is an obvious, ever-so-tiny problem with committing to the dignity of work and rejecting the abstraction of the modern job: We are not communists. You want to make money and live a fruitful life. So do I. You are not always going to be in a position to determine how much of your job can be defined by something other than looking like you are doing the job. I get it. But **you're not nearly as powerless as you think you are**. Clear eyes, full hearts, y'all. Neither you nor I have the option of doing all these things, but we both can do some:

Clear Eyes:

Get Your Passport Stamped, Then GTFO: If you can, and if you want the flexibility to determine how closely related your work and your job will be, there is no substitute for spending time in what others consider to be an elite employer in your chosen profession, at an elite educational institution, and probably with time spent in a big city. Like Ben wrote in the above piece, of course there are workarounds! But we don't have to like or agree with credentialing and signaling to recognize that they are a thing. They are. But whereas others might tell you that you'll have to figure out yourself how long to spend working at one of these places, or to stay as long as it takes to learn what you need to learn, I'll give you a straighter answer: **three years**. Spend three years at one of these inherently work-abstracted, soul-sucking institutions, get your passport stamped, and GTFO. You'll find plenty of reasons to convince yourself to stay longer. Don't.

Don't Be a Hero: Unless you're the boss (and even then it's hard as hell), you won't fix your company's workism culture. Don't try. Do this for you, but as much as you possibly can, be intentional and honest about connecting your time and tasks to non-zero-sum, actual work products. Get in the practice of documenting and journaling how you're spending your time at your job and how it connects to your work. Even in soul-sucking hell-holes, I guarantee that you can find at least two more hours a day to spend on something that matters.

Tell A Partner or Friend What You Did. Every Day: This is a piece of advice I got from Jerry Albright, now the CIO at Texas Teachers, and it has saved my sanity. Every day when you get home, tell your spouse or partner what you did that day. Everything. Do it for two reasons. Do it to check yourself on your how much time you are wasting on looking like you're doing your job instead of doing work. And do it so that you won't forget to properly value how much work you really are doing.

Full Hearts:

Spend At Least Three Hours Making. Every Day: Hopefully you can do this by contributing to real, non-risk-shifting, paper-shuffling, zero-sum work you do in your job. If not, then maybe it's a lesson for the kids. Maybe it's a hobby or a craft. Maybe it's time invested in exhorting a friend. Maybe it's preparing a meal. Maybe it's volunteering. All of these things may be your work. But unlike the counsel provided in the Atlantic, I think that part of the answer to our jobs supplanting the fulfillment that can only be provided by work is doing more actual work. Anything that contributes to knowledge, happiness and health, beauty or wealth. Do this for a month, and I think you will find that this kind of intentional, true work fills the gaps more than hours of idleness and pure leisure ever could.

Train Your Voice and Use It (Stolen shamelessly from [Ben's note here](#)): It's one of the most disappointing outcomes in life – to know that you're a creative person, to have something Important that's going to burn you up inside if you don't share it with the world ... but to lack the words or the music or the art to do so. In my experience, the unhappiest people in the world are mute creatives. To paraphrase Langston Hughes, sometimes they shrivel. Sometimes they fester. And sometimes they explode. Every creative person should start a blog to express and develop their art. Do not distribute it. Do not publicize it. Do not play the ego-driven Game of You. Erase it all every six months if that's what you need to do, because odds are you have nothing interesting to say! But start training your voice NOW, because one day you will.

When I say that I think your work is holy, I mean exactly what I say. Your work supersedes your job. Your work will often supersede your passions, because it isn't a thing you feel. Your work is what you do with the gifts of life, talent, intelligence, fortune and strength you have been given. Be shrewd, but where you have the power to do so, reject any who would tell you to squander them.

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