

What is the Place of Work Within the Human Condition Today?

Throughout history, work has been an integral element of the human condition and that rings even more truly today. With the ever increasing speed of life and ever increasing complexity of our society, economy, and our own personal lives that we must somehow cram into and make fit with society, we are defined not by *who* we are, but *what* we are and what we *do*. As a result of the increasing speed of life and complexity of society and all of the fruits of our effort that go along with it, there is a markedly less amount of time available to us to relax and enjoy interests of our own that are not necessarily connected to work. This decrease in time available exclusively to ourselves is precisely the reason that we must find work that is meaningful to us, lest we find ourselves thirty years down the road with no joy or happiness being derived from our work, only stress and angst.

It is essential that we find work that has meaning for us or we will find ourselves looking into the mirror and seeing not ourselves, but Uncle Vanya- who, with no love or joy in his life, has spent his life caring after a manor that is not his own and surrounded by others who have wasted their lives away with things that have not brought them happiness. Further, feeling as though one has wasted their life, and living with and being surrounded by others who feel that they have wasted their lives, is a fantastic recipe for disaster, despair, and heartbreak. *Uncle Vanya*, above all, implores us to find meaning and happiness in our work and our lives.

While despair to the extremes that *Uncle Vanya* displays is likely not the norm for people living and working in society today, it is more than likely that at some point in life, people have become fed up with not only their work, but also their lives as they are adversely affected by their work. I stressed earlier that the work we do must have meaning for us if we are to be happy and successful and that is very much true, however, apart from those that were born into wealth, we all have or all will, at some point, take work that brings us no meaning at all, only the financial ability to allow us to continue to *labor*. There is nothing wrong with taking work only so that you can continue

to *labor*, however, when the opportunity arises, it is vastly important that you continue on into a position of work that provides you with meaning.

What happens, however, when the career that you have chosen, the one that had brought you or your family meaning for years, now alienates you and brings about a malaise that permeates your work and your life? Following the Industrial Revolution and the rise of cities and factories, the craftsmen began to die out in favor of the wage laborers who did the same work that they had done prior, whether it was building a chair, table, whatever, but for someone other than themselves and as such, lost meaning from their own work. No longer were these craftsmen artisans, as with the advent of the assembly line, they no longer built the entirety of the end product, they only produced one part *ad nauseum* and did not share in the profit and gain that the factory manager or owner did. By having their craft reduced to a process that a number of untrained workers could do more quickly and efficiently, however at a lower quality, the craftsmen and even the workers who replaced them, found no meaning and no special attachment to their products- they were transformed from *homo faber* to *animal laborans* and as such, lost their own identity.

Coupled with the alienation that occurred and occurs due to the rise of factories and wage labor is also an unease that arises in some and often most at some point about the speed of life and what can be done to slow it down and take more time for one's self to relax and enjoy. While the complex economy and the wealth that it has brought about and the technology that we enjoy, a certain amount of freedom was lost when we moved from our towns and villages to the cities and had to make our shipments via the railroads "on time." With the advent of the railroads, time became a standardized item, and while there had always been time, time seemed to move slower and was not regimented as it now is. "We don't run the railroads, the railroads run us," remarks Thoreau in *Walden*. With the importance that we have now placed on this new type of work and the money that it brings (some) of us, we have lost something very important, that being control of our own lives; instead of being able to amble on as we please at a pace that allows us to work and do our craft so that the end result is something we are pleased with, we now are held to a much more firm deadline that causes us to *rush* through products before they are completed to satisfaction only to more on to another project and another deadline.

This regiment of time did not only include a beginning and end to a workday, but efforts were made to standardize and time all aspects of factory work, so that the factory would be able to operate at peak efficiency, further reducing humans and workers to nothing more than machines that are expendable and are only one cog of an entire system, losing all sense of self-identity and having the identity of factory worker forced upon them.

Thoreau attempted to remove himself from that rush during his time at Walden Pond, but his experiment, like all others who attempt to follow it are, most likely, doomed to fail. To conduct his experiment at Walden Pond, Thoreau had to remove himself as much as possible from society so that he could “live deliberately” in the woods. The most important aspect of his experiment is that he had to *remove himself* from society. Society is now formed and set as to having strict deadlines and a rush from place to place and it is wholly unlikely that people will be able to permanently extradite themselves from society; Thoreau lasted only a year. It is a quaint idea, but humans are naturally social creatures and they naturally desire companions. Further, to live by one’s self in the woods, one would have to develop a set of survival skills that have been long lost to most as a result of the ease of life that we have come to expect and enjoy from the fruits of our wage labor, further increasing the difficulty of one being able to leave society.

Despite how I seem to come off when I write about *Walden* (I actually thoroughly enjoyed it and support the points that Thoreau tried to make), I feel that efforts to no longer take part in society are futile and that instead, efforts should be focused on reforming society. It would be a long and difficult process, but with the power of unions, real, honest reform can be made for the betterment of the workers in society. It is thanks to the power of unions that we now have an eight-hour day and a 40-hour workweek, which is quite an improvement over the nothing that we had before. Also, thanks to unions, we no longer have child labor in this country, with little children having their fingers and other extremities snapped off in cloth spinning machines or working deep down in the mines. France now, thanks to the power of unions, has a 35-hour workweek compared to our 40. Despite the fact that the United States is built upon the idea of the great individual, it is really only when we work together as a cohesive group that we are able to effect real change and exercise real power.

Work, despite how it has changed through out time, and in particular, the last few centuries, still plays an integral role in our human condition, and while I am not a luddite and reject the world today, a strong effort must be made to change humans and humanity back from the machines that we started to become and humans. We must become *who we are*, not *what we do*.