

What Are We Working For? The Economic System is a Labyrinthine Trap

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“One also knows from his letters that nothing appeared more sacred to Van Gogh than work.” – John Berger, “Vincent Van Gogh,” Portraits

Ever since I was a young boy, I have wondered why people do the kinds of work they do. I sensed early on that the economic system was a labyrinthine trap devised to imprison people in work they hated but needed for survival. It seemed like common sense to a child when you simply looked and listened to the adults around you. Karl Marx wasn't necessary for understanding the nature of alienated labor; hearing adults declaim “Thank God It's Friday” spoke volumes.

In my Bronx working class neighborhood I saw people streaming to the subway in the mornings for their rides “into the city” and their forlorn trundles home in the evenings. It depressed me. Yet I knew the goal was to “make it” and move away as one moved “up,” something that many did. I wondered why, when some people had options, they rarely considered the moral nature of the jobs they pursued. And why did they not also consider the cost in life (time) lost in their occupations? Were money, status, and security the deciding factors in their choices? Was living reserved for weekends and vacations?

I gradually realized that some people, by dint of family encouragement and schooling, had opportunities that others never received. For the unlucky ones, work would remain a life of toil and woe in which the search for meaning in their jobs was often elusive. Studs Terkel, in the introduction to his wonderful book of interviews, *Working: People Talk About What They Do all Day and How They Feel About What They Do*, puts it this way:

This book, being about work, is, by its very nature, about violence – to the spirit as well as to the body. It is about ulcers as well as accidents, about shouting matches as well as fistfights, about nervous breakdowns as well as kicking the dog around. It is, above all (or beneath all), about daily humiliations. To survive the day is triumph enough for the walking wounded among the great many of us.

Those words were confirmed for me when in the summer between high school and college I got a job through a relative's auspices as a clerk for General Motors in Manhattan. I dreaded taking it for the thought of being cooped up for the first time in an office building while a summer of my youth passed me by, but the money was too good to turn down (always the bait), and I wanted to save as much as possible for college spending money. So I bought a summer suit and joined the long line of trudgers going to and fro, down and up and out of the underground, adjusting our eyes to the darkness and light.

It was a summer from hell. My boredom was so intense it felt like solitary confinement. How, I kept wondering, can people do this? Yet for me it was temporary; for the others it was a life sentence. But if this were life, I thought, it was a living death. All my co-workers looked forward to the mid-morning coffee wagon and lunch with a desperation so intense it was palpable. And then, as the minutes ticked away to 5 P.M., the agitated twitching that proceeded the mad rush to the elevators seemed to synchronize with the clock's movements. We're out of here!

On my last day, I was eating my lunch on a park bench in Central Park when a bird shit on my suit jacket. The stain was apt, for I felt I had spent my days defiling my true self, and so I resolved never to spend another day of my life working in an office building in a suit for a pernicious corporation, a resolution I have kept.

"An angel is not far from someone who is sad," says Vincent Van Gogh in the new film, *At Eternity's Gate*. For some reason, recently hearing these words in the darkened theater where I was almost alone, brought me back to that summer and the sadness that hung around all the people that I worked with. I hoped Van Gogh was right and an angel visited them from time to time. Most of them had no options.

The painter Julian Schnabel's moving picture (moving on many levels since the film shakes and moves with its hand-held camera work and draws you into the act of drawing and painting that was Van Gogh's work) is a meditation on work. It asks the questions: What is work? What is work for? What is life for? Why paint? What does it mean to live? Why do you do what you do? Are you living or are you dead? What are you seeking through your work?

For Vincent the answer was simple: reality. But reality is not given to us and is far from simple; we must create it in acts that penetrate the screens of clichés that wall us off from it. As John Berger writes,

One is taught to oppose the real to the imaginary, as though the first were always at hand and the second, distant, far away. This opposition is false. Events are always to hand. But the coherence of these events – which is what one means by reality – is an imaginative construction. Reality always lies beyond – and this is as true for materialists as for idealists. For Plato, for Marx. Reality, however one interprets it, lies beyond a screen of clichés.

These screens serve to protect the interests of the ruling classes, who devise ways to trap regular people from seeing the reality of their condition. Yet while working can be a trap, it can also be a means of escape. For Vincent working was the way. For him work was not a noun but a verb. He drew and he painted as he does in this film to "make people feel what it is to feel alive." To be alive is to act, to paint, to write. He tells his friend Gauguin that there's a reason it's called the "act of painting, the "stroke of genius." For him painting is living and living is painting.

The actual paintings that he made are almost beside the point, as all creative artists know too well. It is the doing wherein living is found. The completed canvas, essay, or book are what is done. They are nouns, still lifes, just as Van Gogh's paintings have become commodities in the years since his death, dead things to be bought and sold by the rich in a culture of death where they can be hung in mausoleums isolated from the living. It is appropriate that the film ends with Vincent very still in his coffin as "viewers" pass him by

and avidly now desire his paintings that encircle the room that they once rejected. The man has become a has-been and the funeral parlor the museum.

“Without painting I can’t live,” he says earlier. He didn’t say without his paintings.

“God gave me the gift for painting,” he said. “It’s the only gift he gave me. I am a born painter.” But his gift has begotten gifts that are still-births that do not circulate and live and breathe to encourage people to find work that will not, “by its very nature, [be] about violence,” as Terkel said. His works, like people, have become commodities, brands to be bought and sold in a world where the accumulation of wealth is accomplished by the infliction of pain, suffering, and death on untold numbers of victims, invisible victims that allow the wealthy to maintain their bad-faith innocence. This is often achieved in the veiled shadows of intermediaries such as stock brokers, tax consultants, and financial managers; in the liberal and conservative boardrooms of mega-corporations or law offices; and in the planning sessions of the world’s great museums. Like drone killings that distance the killers from their victims, this wealth accumulation allows the wealthy to pretend they are on the side of the angels. It’s called success, and everyone is innocent as they sing, “Hi Ho, Hi Ho, it’s off to work we go.”

“It is not enough to tell me you worked hard to get your gold,” said Henry Thoreau, Van Gogh’s soul-mate. “So does the Devil work hard.”

A few years ago there was a major exhibit of Van Gogh’s nature paintings at the Clark Museum in Williamstown, Massachusetts – “Van Gogh and Nature” – that aptly symbolized Van Gogh in his coffin. The paintings were exhibited encased in ornate gold frames. Van Gogh in gold. Just perfect. I am reminded of a scene in *At Eternity’s Gate* where Vincent and Gauguin are talking about the need for a creative revolution – what we sure as hell need – and the two friends stand side by side with backs to the camera and piss into the wind.

But pseudo-innocence dies hard. Not long ago I was sitting in a breakfast room in a bed-and-breakfast in Houston, Texas, sipping coffee and musing myself awake. Two men came in and the three of us got to talking. As people like to say, they were nice guys. Very pleasant and talkative, in Houston on business. Normal Americans. Stressed. Both were about fifty years old with wives and children.

One sold drugs for one of the largest pharmaceutical companies that is known for its very popular anti-depressant drug and its aggressive sales pitches. He travelled a triangular route from Corpus Christi to Austin to Houston and back again, hawking his wares. He spoke about his work as being very lucrative and posing no ethical dilemmas. There were so many depressed people in need of his company's drugs, he said, as if the causes of their depression had nothing to do with inequality and the sorry state of the country as the rich rip off everyone else. I thought of recommending a book to him – *Deadly Medicines and Organized Crime: How big pharma has corrupted health care* by Peter Gotzsche – but held my tongue, appreciative as I was of the small but tasteful fare we were being served and not wishing to cause my companions dyspepsia. This guy seemed to be trying to convince me of the ethical nature of the way he panned gold, while I kept thinking of that quote attributed to Mark Twain: “Denial ain’t just a river in Egypt.”

The other guy, originally from a small town in Nebraska and now living in Baton Rouge, was a former medevac helicopter pilot who had served in the 1st Gulf War. He worked in finance for an equally large oil company. His attitude was a bit different, and he seemed sheepishly guilty about his work with this company as he told me how shocked he was the first time he saw so many oil, gas, and chemical plants lining the Mississippi River from Baton Rouge to New Orleans and all the oil and chemicals being shipped down the river. So many toxins that reminded him of the toxic black smoke rising from all the bombed oil wells in Iraq. Something about it all left him uneasy, but he too said he made a very good “living” and that his wife also worked for the oil company back home.

My childish thought recurred: when people have options, why do they not choose ethical work that makes the world more beautiful and just? Why is money and so-called success always the goal?

Having seen *At Eternity's Gate*, I now see what Van Gogh was trying to tell us and Julian Schnabel conveys through this moving picture. I see why these two perfectly normal guys I was breaking bread with in Houston are unable to penetrate the screen that lies between them and reality. They have never developed the imaginative tools to go beyond normal

modes of perception and conception. Or perhaps they lack the faith to dare, to see the futility and violence in what they are working for and what their companies' products are doing to the world. They think of themselves as hard at work, travelling hither and yon, doing their calculations, "making their living," and collecting their pay. It's their work that has a payoff in gold, but it's not working in the sense that painting was for Vincent, a way beyond the screen. They are mesmerized by the spectacle, as are so many Americans. Their jobs are perfectly logical and allow them a feeling of calm and control.

But Vincent, responding to Gauguin, a former stock broker, when he urged him to paint slowly and methodically, said, "I need to be out of control. I don't want to calm down." He knew that to be fully alive was to be vulnerable, to not hold back, to always be slipping away, and to be threatened with annihilation at any moment. When painting, he was intoxicated with a creative joy that belies the popular image of him as always depressed. "I find joy in sorrow," he said, echoing in a paradoxical way Albert Camus, who said, "I have always felt that I lived on the high seas, threatened, at the heart of a royal happiness." Both rebels, one in paint, the other in words: "I rebel: therefore we exist," was how Camus put it, expressing the human solidarity that is fundamental to genuine work in our ephemeral world. Both nostalgic in the present for the future, creating freedom through vision and disclosing the way for others.

And although my breakfast companions felt safe in their calmness on this side of the screen, it was an illusion. The only really calm ones are corpses. And perhaps that's why when you look around, as I did as a child, you see so many of the living dead carrying on as normal.

"I paint to stop thinking and feel I am a part of everything inside and outside me," says Vincent, a self-described exile and pilgrim.

If we could make working a form of such painting, a path to human solidarity because a mode of rebelling, what a wonderful world it might be.

That, I believe, is what working is for.

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