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OPINION
GUEST ESSAY

The Future of Work Should Mean Working Less

By Jonathan Malesic

With resolutions from New York Times readers

Mr. Malesic is a writer and a former academic, sushi chef and parking lot attendant who holds a Ph.D. in religious studies. He is the author of the forthcoming book “The End of Burnout,” from which this essay is adapted.

A dozen years ago, my friend Patricia Nordeen was an ambitious academic, teaching at the University of Chicago and speaking at conferences across the country. “Being a political theorist was my entire adult identity,” she told me recently. Her work determined where she lived and who her friends were. She loved it. Her life, from classes to research to hours spent in campus cafes, felt like one long, fascinating conversation about human nature and government.

But then she started getting very sick. She needed spinal fusion surgeries. She had daily migraines. It became impossible to continue her career. She went on disability and moved in with relatives. For three years she had frequent bouts of paralysis. She was eventually diagnosed with a subtype of Ehlers-Danlos syndromes, a group of hereditary disorders that weaken collagen, a component of many sorts of tissue.

“I’ve had to evaluate my core values,” she said, and find a new identity and community without the work she loved. Chronic pain made it hard to write, sometimes even to read. She started drawing, painting and making collages, posting the art on Instagram. She made friends there and began collaborations with them, like a 100-day series of sketchbook pages — abstract watercolors, collages, flower studies — she exchanged with another artist. A project like this allows her to exercise her curiosity. It also “gives me a sense of validation, like I’m part of society,” she said.

Art does not give Patricia the total satisfaction academia did. It doesn’t order her whole life. But for that reason, I see in it an important effort, one every one of us will have to make sooner or later: an effort to prove, to herself and others, that we exist to do more than just work.

We need that truth now, when millions are returning to in-person work after nearly two years of mass unemployment and working from home. The conventional approach to work — from the sanctity of the 40-hour week to the ideal of upward mobility — led us to widespread dissatisfaction and seemingly ubiquitous burnout

even before the pandemic. Now, the moral structure of work is up for grabs. And with labor-friendly economic conditions, workers have little to lose by making creative demands on employers. We now have space to reimagine how work fits into a good life.

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As it is, work sits at the heart of Americans' vision of human flourishing. It's much more than how we earn a living. It's how we earn dignity: the right to count in society and enjoy its benefits. It's how we prove our moral character. And it's where we seek meaning and purpose, which many of us interpret in spiritual terms.

Political, religious and business leaders have promoted this vision for centuries, from Capt. John Smith's decree that slackers would be banished from the Jamestown settlement to Silicon Valley gurus' touting work as a transcendent activity. Work is our highest good; "do your job," our supreme moral mandate.

But work often doesn't live up to these ideals. In our dissent from this vision and our creation of a better one, we ought to begin with the idea that each one of us has dignity whether we work or not. Your job, or lack of one, doesn't define your human worth.

This view is simple yet radical. It justifies a universal basic income and rights to housing and health care. It justifies a living wage. It also allows us to see not just unemployment but retirement, disability and caregiving as normal, legitimate ways to live.

When American politicians talk about the dignity of work, like when they argue that welfare recipients must be employed, they usually mean you count only if you work for pay.

The pandemic revealed just how false this notion is. Millions lost their jobs overnight. They didn't lose their dignity. Congress acknowledged this fact, offering unprecedented jobless benefits: for some, a living wage without having to work.

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The idea that all people have dignity before they ever work, or if they never do, has been central to Catholic social teaching for at least 130 years. In that time, popes have argued that jobs ought to fit the capacities of the people who hold them, not the productivity metrics of their employers. Writing in 1891, Pope Leo XIII argued that working conditions, including hours, should be adapted to “the health and strength of the workman.”

Leo mentioned miners as deserving “shorter hours in proportion as their labor is more severe and trying to health.” Today, we might say the same about nurses, or any worker whose ordinary limitations — whether a bad back or a mental health condition — makes an intense eight-hour shift too much to bear. Patricia Nordeen would like to teach again one day, but given her health at the moment, full-time work seems out of the question.

Because each of us is both dignified and fragile, our new vision should prioritize compassion for workers, in light of work’s power to deform their bodies, minds and souls. As Eyal Press argues in his new book, “Dirty Work,” people who work in prisons, slaughterhouses and oil fields often suffer moral injury, including post-traumatic stress disorder, on the job. This reality challenges the notion that all work builds character.

Wage labor can harm us in subtle and insidious ways, too. The American ideal of a good life earned through work is “disciplinary,” according to the Marxist feminist political philosopher Kathi Weeks, a professor at Duke and often-cited critic of the modern work ethic. “It constructs docile subjects,” she wrote in her 2011 book, “The Problem With Work.” Day to day, that means we feel pressure to become the people our bosses, colleagues, clients and customers want us to be. When that pressure conflicts with our human needs and well-being, we can fall into burnout and despair.

To limit work’s negative moral effects on people, we should set harder limits on working hours. Dr. Weeks calls for a six-hour work day with no pay reduction. And we who demand labor from others ought to expect a bit less of people whose jobs grind them down.

In recent years, the public has become more aware of conditions in warehouses and the gig economy. Yet we have relied on inventory pickers and delivery drivers ever more during the pandemic. Maybe compassion can lead us to realize we don't need instant delivery of everything and that workers bear the often-invisible cost of our cheap meat and oil.

The vision of less work must also encompass more leisure. For a time the pandemic took away countless activities, from dinner parties and concerts to in-person civic meetings and religious worship. Once they can be enjoyed safely, we ought to reclaim them as what life is primarily about, where we are fully ourselves and aspire to transcendence.

Leisure is what we do for its own sake. It serves no higher end. Patricia said that making art is often “meditative” for her. “If I’m trying to draw a plant, I’m really looking at the plant,” she said. “I’m noticing all the different shades of color that maybe I wouldn’t have noticed if I wasn’t drawing it.” Her absorption in the task — the feel of the pen on paper — “puts the pain out of focus.”

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It’s true that people often find their jobs meaningful, as Patricia did in her academic career or as I did while working on this essay. But for decades, business leaders have taken this obvious truth too far, preaching that we’ll find the purpose of our lives at work. It’s a convenient narrative for employers, but look at what we actually do all day: For too many of us, if we aren’t breaking our bodies, then we’re drowning in trivial email. This is not the purpose of a human life.

And for those of us fortunate enough to have jobs that consistently provide us with meaning, Patricia’s story is a reminder that we may not always have that kind of work. Anything from a sudden

health issue to the natural effects of aging to changing economic conditions can leave us unemployed.

So we should look for purpose beyond our jobs and then fill work in around it. We each have limitless potential, a unique “genius,” as Henry David Thoreau called it. He believed that excessive toil had stunted the spiritual growth of the men who laid the railroad near Walden Pond, where he lived from 1845 to 1847. He saw the pride they took in their work but wrote, “I wish, as you are brothers of mine, that you could have spent your time better than digging in this dirt.”

Pursuing our genius, whether in art or conversation or sparring at a jiu-jitsu gym, will awaken us to “a higher life than we fell asleep from,” Thoreau wrote. It isn’t the sort of leisure, like culinary tourism, that heaps more labor on others. It is leisure that allows us to escape the normal passage of time without traveling a mile. The mornings Thoreau spent standing in his cabin doorway, “rapt in a reverie,” he wrote, “were not time subtracted from my life, but so much over and above my usual allowance.” Compared with that, he thought, labor was time wasted.

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Dignity, compassion, leisure: These are pillars of a more humane ethos, one that acknowledges that work is essential to a functioning society but often hinders individual workers’ flourishing. This ethos would certainly benefit Patricia Nordeen and might allow students to benefit from her teaching ability. In practice, this new vision should inspire us to implement universal basic income and a higher minimum wage, shorter shifts for many workers and a shorter workweek for all at full pay. Together, these pillars and policies would keep work in its place, as merely a support for people to spend their time nurturing their greatest talents — or simply being at ease with those they love.

It’s a vision we can approach from multiple directions, befitting America’s intellectual diversity. Pope Leo, Dr. Weeks and Thoreau criticized industrial society from the disparate, often incompatible

traditions of Catholicism, Marxist feminism and Transcendentalism. But they agreed that we need to see inherent value in each person and to keep work in check so everyone can attain higher goods.

These thinkers are hardly alone. We might equally take inspiration from W.E.B. Du Bois's contention that Black Americans would gain political rights through intellectual cultivation and not only relentless labor, or Abraham Joshua Heschel's view that the Sabbath day of rest "is not an interlude but the climax of living," or the "right not to work" advocated by the disabled artist and writer Sunaura Taylor.

The point is to subordinate work to life. "A life is what each of us needs to get," wrote Dr. Weeks, and you can't get one without freedom from work's domination. "That said," she continues, "one cannot get something as big as a life on one's own."

That means we need one more pillar: solidarity, a recognition that your good and mine are linked. Each of us, when we interact with people doing their jobs, has the power to make their lives miserable. If I'm overworked, I'm likely to overburden you. But the reverse is also true: Your compassion can evoke mine.

Early in the pandemic, we exhibited the virtues we need to realize this vision. Public health compelled us to set limits on many people's work and provide for those who lost their jobs. We showed — imperfectly — that we could make human well-being more important than productivity. We had solidarity with one another

and with the doctors and nurses who battled the disease on the front lines. We limited our trips to the grocery store. We tried to “flatten the curve.”

When the pandemic subsides but work’s threat to our thriving does not, we can practice those virtues again.

Design by Shoshana Schultz