

# WORK OVERVIEW

"All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy," the old saying or proverb goes. So, life is often conceived of being a contrast or balance between work and play (leisure, rest). Some would add: work, play and worship. Consideration of work is important because some children have never been taught to work and because some are never able to find employment. The dangers of workaholism also calls for reflective consideration of work.

The American Heritage Dictionary (1983) defines work as "physical or mental effort," employment, or "a task or duty." "Works" usually refer to the artistic or engineering products of physical and mental effort.

The idea of work is more complex than first anticipated. Some dictionaries take a whole column to give us its various definitions.

In *The Human Condition* (1958) Hannah Arendt develops a three-fold distinction between labor (all life sustaining efforts out of biological necessities), work (which produces products, worldliness), and action (human cooperative activity, politics).

In traditional societies work was gender-specific. Throughout human history, women raised children, gardened, and took care of the home whereas hunting and war were more the special tasks of men. In urban societies, roles are much more interchangeable and complementary.

There is wisdom to be gained from the past and different cultures. A saying from Guinea: "He who does not cultivate his field, will die of hunger." A Nigerian proverb warns, "Fine words do not produce food." And from the Ashanti: "It is no shame at all to work for money." (*African Proverbs*, compiled by Charlotte and Wolfe Leslau, Peter Pauper Press, Mount Vernon, NY, 1962, pp. 31, 45, 10)

Biblical proverbs tell us, "A hard worker has plenty to eat, but people who waste time will always be poor;" and "...a virtuous woman...gets up before daylight to prepare food for her family...she is always busy and looks after her family's needs." (Proverbs 28:19; 31:29a, 13, 27 (TEV))

Jewish and Christian wisdom see human work as a reflection of divine activity, "...on the seventh day God ended his work which he had done, and... rested on the seventh day." "Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of the Lord your God. (Genesis 2:2; Exodus 20:9-10a, NKJV)

The Torah, furthermore, describes craftsmanship as a special gift from God: "...the Lord has filled him with Spirit of God, in wisdom and understanding, in knowledge and all manner of workmanship, to design artistic works, to work in gold and silver and bronze, in cutting jewels...and to work in all manner of artistic workmanship. (Exodus 35:31 (NKJV))

St. Paul's teaching includes instruction about work.

...we used to tell you, "Whoever refuses to work is not allowed to eat." We say this because we hear that there are some people who live lazy lives and who do nothing but meddle in other people's business. In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ we command these people and warn them to lead orderly lives and to work to earn their own living.... If anyone does not take care of his relatives, especially the members of his own family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever. (2

Thessalonians 3:10-12 and 1 Timothy 5:8, TEV)

Not enough is written and discussed about the place of work in our lives. There were promises of a shortened work-week and extended leisure during the second half of the twentieth century in some societies. Instead many seem to be driven by longer work hours than ever before. On the other hand, too many are unemployed or underemployed. The full impact of not working for a living is not fully understood. There seems to be a certain dignity that comes from hard or creative work well done, and the indignity of not being able to support one's family is a mark of injustice in a society.

There are many reasons why a person might grow up with strong negative feelings toward gainful, socially-approved employment. Others may fear the workplace because of past experiences or phobias. We also need to distinguish between the informal economy that works outside regular business rules and practices and criminal activity.

Life needs a healthy balance of work and play or leisure. Too much or too little work is not good for an individual or society

### **QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION**

1. Do you consider work to be an optional part of existence, a crucial right of all human beings, or an obligation that most people have to endure? What difference does one's attitude towards work make?
2. What different beliefs and attitudes toward work do you see between generations (not only between older and younger, but between those growing up in different cohorts)?
3. What is the responsibility of a society, and what of the individual, in regards to those who have no work for which they are getting paid? Is there a right to work like rights for "life, liberty, and property" (as Jefferson originally put it)? Should government guarantee all households housing, education, medical attention, and jobs?
4. What happens to and in a person who could work but chooses not to? How would you deal with such a person? What legitimate factors cause some to fear or resist employment? What steps need to be taken to help those afraid of the whole employment process?
5. Do you believe in work therapy for troubled youth who cannot find or keep a job? If so, how can this be set up?
6. How might youth work deal with job training, the location of jobs, and follow-up of those who have been placed in job situations?
7. What does your religious tradition teach about work and the work ethic?

### **IMPLICATIONS**

1. Work is a huge, but sometimes undervalued and under-discussed, part of our lives.
2. Some of us believe that work is a necessary part of life and that those left unemployed are

denied an essential part of human dignity. This is especially important for heads of households.

3. Such an opinion holds that it is important for children to see their parents working, to be taught to work themselves, and to be guided regarding future vocations.
4. Students have a sense, either vague or clear, that they are headed for a life-time in some kind of job or career. They can profit from discussions about their future.
5. It is a scandal, especially for developed nations, when a society allows pockets of unemployment to continue over generations. Racism and classism often contribute to such corporate irresponsibility. Our common goal ought to be for a just society in which as many as possible can be engaged in significant work.
6. Religious traditions believe that work is good because God works... and that God has made humankind partners in the work of stewardship of the physical world, animal life, children, culture and communities.

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