

A Profession Is Not A Personality  
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If you work for yourself or you're retired, you may not have noticed or heard – apparently, people dislike their jobs more than ever. The journalist Caitlin Penzey Moog explores this phenomenon in an article for “Vox” that focuses on the new series on the Apple TV streaming service called *Severance*. I can tell you that this dystopian twisty drama is compelling. I loved it and can't wait for season 2.

Moog writes that Americans are quitting in droves. And this includes a startling number of clergy, by the way. Companies paying poverty wages are having a hard time finding and retaining workers. Teacher and nurse shortages abound. Highly paid digital workers don't want to return to the office and managers can't offer a convincing reason why they should. The gig economy has exploded. The pandemic stripped the padding that made white collar jobs bearable – lunches with co-workers, Starbucks runs, breaks in the fresh air, leaving only what Moog terms “the rotten core of actual work behind.”

Setting aside these generalities, consider your own work. The work you are doing now or the work you did before retirement. Is it draining, energizing, is it meaningful or just a paycheck? Does it detract from the parts of your life that bring you meaning, or is it the only thing that makes you feel like life has meaning?

Enter the Apple TV show I praised earlier. The main character, Mark, has voluntarily undergone a procedure known as severance, which means he has had a device planted in his brain that enables him to not remember what happens during his workday. His outie becomes his innie in a special entry elevator at the futuristic, creepy and cult-like Lumon Industries, where he works alongside his coworkers on what's called the severed floor. It's an intoxicating premise. If you were paid handsomely to do it, would you?

Mark and his severed comrades have been led to believe that Lumon offers the most in-demand perk of all – work-life balance. His job self (his innie) spends his days sorting and filing numbers in the Macro-data Refinement Department, for no reason he knows of. And his outie is blissfully unaware of that pointlessness, but this hasn't translated into happiness for his personal self. No spoilers here...I promise.

Moog notes that Mark and his co-workers (Dylan, Helly, and Irving) make an ideal workforce to be exploited. “With no personal memories and no context of the outside world, attempts to understand their jobs and surroundings are childlike and naïve. They even lap up the surreal perks that management dangles in front of them (clearly a spoof on the goodies offered at the high tech campuses of the Silicon Valley) – an egg bar, a

melon party, a dance experience with defiant jazz, and a waffle feast in the Perpetuity Room. Don't ask.

Yet, being severed or the sterile environment doesn't quiet the human impulse to care about your co-workers. In this way, *Severance* is a sneaky paean to worker solidarity. This is not *The Office* or *Cheers* or any other workplace setting I've ever seen on TV. No show has captured quite so accurately how damaging work can be in real life. Moog believes that *Severance* spotlights the idea that we are our jobs. That we speak of work-life balance because we KNOW work is opposed to life. When Mark tells Helly he just hopes he has things he cares about outside of Lumon, its because he knows his job is not one of those things.

Today, as we honor International Worker's Day, its essential to report that entire sectors of our economy are based on a large pool of low-wage earners – 44% or 53 million people in America. Often this work is physically exhausting and arduous. Self-employed gig workers live precariously while their employers fight tooth and nail so they won't be classified as employees. Ask any adjunct lecturer at NAU about that. Or an Uber driver. Or a part-time teacher's aide or home health care worker, with no benefits. The pandemic heightened this brutality by deeming some jobs essential and others non-essential. It seemed like lots of the essential jobs are the very ones where workers are underpaid and poorly treated.

The stakes have never been higher for workers. The mutual loyalty that characterized work in much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is gone. While the wealth of American billionaires (need I name them?) grow greater than the GDP of more than half of the world's countries, the turnover rate at their companies is extreme. At Amazon warehouses notoriously, workplace injuries are rampant and people have literally collapsed at their work stations. The loss of dignity is laid bare as we receive our guaranteed 2-day delivery.

Unions can't solve every worker's issue, but they can win workers a seat at the table. Tech companies, media, non profits, museums, and other groups not traditionally drawn to unionization are revolting against the new norms that dehumanize them. The creator of *Severance*, Dan Erikson, underscores this idea, commenting that "there are certain things we learn as humans, like empathy and self-worth that we're often discouraged from bringing to the workplace, to our own detriment. The less of ourselves we bring to work, the easier we are to exploit, or roped into immoral practices. But, also, we need some separation in order to not lose ourselves entirely."

Even if you work or worked in a humane environment, reducing yourself to any single characteristic, whether by your title or your job performance, is a deeply damaging act. A profession is not a personality. In his essay entitled "Estranged Labor," Karl Marx wrote that workers are objectified and made into miserable shells. Whether you agree

with that assessment or not, too many people who work hard and strive for success self-objectify as excellent work machines and tools of performance. Waffle party, anyone?

Other objectify us, too. In my case, as a minister, I am supposed to be non-anxious and inspiring, and humble and yet, poised and confident, and never use swear words or think churlish thoughts. It's a reduction down to a postage stamp of a stereotype. Think of your own profession – what does that postage stamp look like? And do you feel required to fall for it?

In her poem entitled “Vocation,” Sandra Beasley captures the zombie-like trance dance of the human-as-worker writing:

For six months I dealt Baccarat in a casino.  
For six months I played Brahms in a mall.  
For six months I arranged museum dioramas;  
my hands were too small for the Paleolithic  
and when they reassigned me to lichens, I quit.  
I type ninety-one words per minute, all of them  
Help. Yes, I speak Dewey Decimal.  
I speak Russian, Latin, a smattering of Tlingit.  
I can balance seven dinner plates on my arm.  
All I want to do is sit on a veranda while  
a hard rain falls around me. I'll file your 1099s.  
I'll make love to strangers of your choice.  
I'll do whatever you want, as long as I can do it  
on that veranda. If it calls you, it's your calling,  
right? Once I asked a broker what he loved  
about his job, and he said “Making a killing.”  
Once I asked a serial killer what made him  
get up in the morning, and he said, “The people.”

In a healthy system (one that the protagonist in Beasley's poem doesn't inhabit), your career or job should be an *extension* of you, not *visa versa*. Arthur Brooks takes on this topic in his piece for the Atlantic called “How to Stop Your Job From Becoming Your Identity.” He tells us: “I know many people who talk of almost nothing besides their work, who are saying essentially, “I am my job.” He adds that this may feel more humanizing and empowering than saying, “I am my boss's tool,” but that reasoning has a fatal flaw. In theory, you can ditch your boss and get a new job. But you can't ditch you.” (well, unless you reside in the twisted world of Severance).

And then, when the end inevitably comes, either through job loss or professional decline or perhaps, retirement, we can be set adrift. As one CEO self-objectifier par

excellence quipped to Brooks, “In the six months after retirement, I went from Who’s Who to Who’s He?”

Brooks lays out some self reflective questions for us on this score:

- Are you or were you a self objectifier in your career?
- Is or was your job the biggest part of your identity?
- Do you or have you sacrificed personal relationships for work? Forgone romance, friendship, or family for your career?
- Do you have trouble imagining being happy without your professional identity (present or past). Does this feel like a death to you?
- Does being special or “important” mean more to you than being happy?

In a personal essay for The New Yorker called “The Work You Do, The Person You Are,” author Toni Morrison recalls her pride in earning \$2 by housecleaning a lovely home with wall to wall blue and white carpeting and plastic covered furniture. She remembers that the woman of the house had butter, sugar and seam up the back stockings.

This was during the 1940s when “children were not just loved or liked, they were needed. They earned money.” She got better at cleaning and gained more responsibility. Her employer made increasing demands she did not know how to refuse. One day, she whined to her father. He listened intently and told young Toni, “Listen, you don’t live there. You live here. With your people. This is your life. Go to work, get your money and come on home.”

Morrison concludes that she’s worked “for all sorts of people since then, geniuses and morons, quick witted and dull, big-hearted and narrow. I’ve had many kinds of jobs,” she tells us, “but since that conversation with my father I have never considered the level of labor to be the measure of myself. And I have never placed the security of a job above the value of love.”

So may it be for us. Blessed be. Blessed we. And Amen.

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