

The nature of work, in its purer forms

By JOHN W. BUDD

On Thanksgiving, we give thanks. On Memorial Day, we memorialize those who have sacrificed for us. On religious holidays, we worship. On Labor Day, we celebrate work by *not* working. Therein lies the complexities of work. It's important enough to celebrate — but in an odd twist of irony, we celebrate through avoidance.

There are many reasons to want to work less rather than more. Work can be a four-letter word. It can be physically, mentally and emotionally stressful. It can be dangerous or just plain dull. For centuries, then, work has been seen as a curse. In the opening verses of the Bible, humans are cursed with hard work as God's punishment for human imperfection. There is a long history of using work as the state's punishment of criminals, dissidents and enemies. Aristotle viewed work as interfering with the desired activities of citizens, and today work commonly conflicts with more desirable pursuits such as spending time with family and friends, pursuing a hobby or simply just relaxing.

So why work? We obviously work to survive — directly by caring for others and by producing food and other necessities, indirectly by earning money that can be used to obtain these things. But by only seeing work as an arduous means of survival and money, it becomes, in the words of Mark Twain, “a necessary evil to be avoided” that we prefer others do for us. In economic theorizing, work is viewed as a lousy activity endured solely to earn income, and thus corporations and sports teams use incentive packages to elicit effort; old-fashioned supervisors and new technologies are used to monitor workers to prevent shirking, and unemployment and welfare benefits are reduced so that the unemployed and impoverished have greater motivation for enduring the burdens of work experienced by the “productive members of society.”

As a result, it is easy to lose sight of why work is cause for celebration. When structured appropriately, work can be a key source of personal fulfillment. It can promote physical health and psychological well-being by satisfying human needs for purpose, achievement, mastery, self-esteem and self-worth. On an even deeper level, our work helps us and others make sense of who we are and is thus a source of identity — hopefully not our only source of identity, but an important one nevertheless.

When we work, we also create, care and serve others. We free ourselves from the slavish pursuit of food and shelter and build culture in a harsh natural world. We expend the physical, cognitive and emotional energy necessary for raising chil-

dren and caring for loved ones. Work provides the critical means for serving our communities and nations, whether rooted in humanitarianism, patriotism or a desire to serve God's kingdom. Even though frequently unpaid, these forms of work merit celebrating. Unfortunately, these important forms of work are frequently devalued by the tendency to only see work as a traded commodity and to determine the worth of work by the salary it commands.

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In these and other ways, work is fundamentally important. When we work, we experience our biological, psychological, economic and social selves. Work locates us in the world, helps us and others make sense of who we are, and determines our access to material and social resources.

It is time to reevaluate how we think about work, and by extension, what forms of work are valued or devalued; what defines acceptable employer practices or working conditions; whether there is a need for institutional safeguards, and who is able to craft a positive, healthy identity from their work. Work is too important to be dismissed as a curse, treated as a just another commodity or seen solely as a source of income. Environmental degradation means that we need to rethink how Western civilization considers work as the domination and mastery of nature. And the need for greater social inclusion of marginalized groups demands a wider embrace of work that goes beyond paid employment.

On Labor Day, the last holiday of the summer, the last thing many people probably want to do is think about work. But that's exactly the problem. We've taken work for granted, and let it become nothing more than the daily grind.

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