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## Work Is Our Religion And It's Failing Us

By: Benjamin Hunnicutt, May 18, 2018

Work. The modern fetish. No previous age has been so enthralled, or longed for more, rather than less, work to do. No other people have imagined nothing better for their posterity than the eternal creation of more work.

Work sits squarely at the center: the enduring economic imperative, political mandate, source of morality and social identity. Some have claimed that work has become [the modern religion](#), answering what theologian Paul Tillich called the “existential questions” we all have as humans. Robert Hutchins, legendary president of the University of Chicago, called the faith “salvation by work.”

This can be traced back to the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century. As [Max Weber](#) observed, the Reformation sanctified work as a spiritual end in itself. Gradually this Protestant “hard work” ethic evolved into the spirit of capitalism, losing its traditional religious supports to become a purely secular faith. As [traditional faiths lose followers](#), the religion of work swells to fill the void.

However, as a faith, work is transient, based on a specific set of historical circumstances. Work may seem to be an eternal given, but what we experience as work is only a few centuries old; an emerging product of history, not an unchanging truth.

Of course, activities necessary to sustain life are fundamental. People have always had to eat. But work as we now understand it, as something abstract – independent of its particular forms (such as plowing, building, trading) – has a modern origin. Hunter-gatherer people had no such general word.

For most of written history, jobs as we know them as a place to go to, away from home and separate from ordinary life, were rare; aspirations, success, meaning, purpose, and identity were found largely in traditions and faiths.

It is only with the coming of the Industrial Revolution that work as we now understand it emerged, defined by specific modern characteristics such as being hired and paid, resulting in clear, and now fundamental, divisions of work and life.

Not only is this work a recent accident of history, it is flimsy and fragile. Our belief in the everlasting creation of new work to sustain eternal full-time, full employment is one of history's all-time, fantastic utopian dreams. Even the short-term looks increasingly bleak.

Capitalism is built on a contradiction. There is the need to propagandize work to ensure a pliant labor supply, but there is also the drive for maximum profit, which ultimately means replacing as much human work as possible by cheaper machines.

Assurances that new work will automatically be created as economies grow are less and less convincing with the approach of a new wave of computers, robots, drones and self-driving vehicles, all threatening what The Atlantic called "[a world without work](#)." Few doubt that the vast majority of current jobs that involve doing the same things over and over will soon be replaced by computer algorithms.

More important, work is failing as a faith. Millennials depend less and less on their jobs as the place to realize their dreams, having found the overblown promises of work empty. According to a 2014 [Harris poll](#), nearly 70 percent of U.S. employees are not "involved in, enthusiastic about or committed to their work."

It's not just millennials. Many others feel "[betrayed by work](#)," having made it the centerpiece of their lives and a key source of happiness only to realize how dispensable they are when things go wrong, for example if they are passed over for promotion, sidelined or laid off.

People are turning to other, non-earning sources of fulfillment: volunteering, spiritual explorations, relationships, and to alternative venues such as their homes, community spaces or clubs for social and even economic exchanges. Writing in The New York Times, columnist David Brooks describes a [shift of values from consumerism](#) and ownership to experiences, a process that is giving life to the burgeoning "experience economy."

Research from McKinsey found that over the past few years spending on experiences – such as eating out and traveling – [had grown nearly four times faster](#) than spending on goods.

The prospect of any religion's failure is an awful thing for its devotees. Unlike most human beings through history, most of us have no idea that there may be life beyond work. We are unable to imagine, much less believe in an alternative.

There are, however, plenty of alternatives to work that are both more realistic and reliable. I have spent a good deal of my life trying to write a history of labor's century-long fight for progressively shorter work hours, and the accompanying dream of what Walt Whitman called the "higher progress." This was once the confident expectation that economic progress was paving the way to humane and moral progress. After providing for the material necessities of life, technology would free us, increasingly, for better things. Eventually we would have plenty of time for family, friends, beauty, joy, creativity, God and nature.

It seems unlikely that the U.S. government will lead the way; legislation providing a guaranteed annual income or limiting work hours seems exceedingly unlikely. What is more likely is that ordinary people, finding better things to do with their lives, will shorten their work hours on their own when they are able to afford it, gradually choosing to "buy back" their lives.

The results of the return of progressively shorter hours would be dramatic. Economists such as [Monsignor John Ryan](#) reasoned that progressively shorter hours will act to redistribute wealth – value now in the form of capital will gradually flow back to ordinary people in the form of time.

We all might *reclaim* ownership over more of our lives instead of continuing in thrall, sacrificing our lives for the profit of the ultra-rich. In this opening realm of freedom, equality might also be within reach; we all have the same amount of hours to live each day.

It would be reckless to predict a world entirely without work. However, it is reasonable to expect that work will eventually return to its historical set-point as a means to an end rather than an end in itself. Work can be tamed, and made more of an adornment to life rather than its center. And the forgotten American dream of "higher progress" may be reawakened.

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