

**Excerpts from “Quitting the Paint Factory”  
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In Riverside Park in New York City, where I walk these days, the legions of “weekend nannies” are growing, setting up a play date for a ten-year-old requires a feat of near-Olympic coordination, and the few, vestigial, late-afternoon parents one sees, dragging their wailing progeny by the hand or frantically kicking a soccer ball in the fading light, have a gleam in their eyes I find frightening. No outstretched legs crossed at the ankles, no arms draped over the back of the bench. No lovers. No be-hatted old men, arguing. Between the slide and the sandbox, a very fit young man in his early thirties is talking on his cell phone while a two-year-old with a trail of snot running from his nose tugs on the seam of his corduroy pants. “There’s no way I can pick it up. Because we’re still at the park. Because we just got here, that’s why.” It’s been one hundred and forty years since Thoreau, who itched a full century before everyone else began to scratch, complained that the world was increasingly just “a place of business. What an infinite bustle!” he groused. “I am awaked almost every night by the panting of the locomotive. It interrupts my dreams. There is no Sabbath. It would be glorious to see mankind at leisure for once. It is nothing but work, work, work.” Little did he know. Today the roads of commerce, paved and smoothed, reach into every nook and cranny of the republic; there is no place apart, no place where we would be shut of the drone of that damnable traffic. Today we, quite literally, live to work. And it hardly matters what kind of work we do; the process justifies the ends. Indeed, at times it seems there is hardly an occupation, however useless or humiliating or downright despicable, that cannot at least in part be redeemed by our obsessive dedication to it: “Yes, Ted sold shoulder-held Stingers to folks with no surname, but he worked so hard!”

Not long ago, at the kind of dinner party I rarely attend, I made the mistake of admitting that I not only liked to sleep but liked to get at least eight hours a night whenever possible, and that nine would be better still. The reaction – a complex Pinot Noir of nervous laughter displaced by expressions of disbelief and condescension – suggested that my transgression had been, on some level, a political one. I was reminded of the time I’d confessed to Roger Angell that I did not much care for baseball.

My comment was immediately rebutted by testimonials to sleeplessness: two of the nine guests confessed to being insomniacs; a member of the Academy of Arts and Letters claimed indignantly that she couldn’t remember when she had ever gotten eight hours of sleep; two other guests declared themselves grateful for five or six. It mattered little that I’d arranged my life differently, and accepted the sacrifices that arrangement entailed. Eight hours! There was something willful about it. Arrogant, even. Suitably chastened, I held my tongue, and escaped alone to tell Thee.

Increasingly, it seems to me, our world is dividing into two kinds of things: those that aid work, or at least represent a path to it, and those that don’t. Things in the first category are

good and noble; things in the second aren't. Thus, for example, education is good (as long as we don't have to listen to any of that "end in itself" nonsense) because it will presumably lead to work. Thus playing the piano or swimming the 100-yard backstroke are good things for a fifteen-year-old to do not because they might give her some pleasure but because rumor has it that Princeton is interested in students who can play Chopin or swim quickly on their backs (and a degree from Princeton, as any fool knows, can be readily converted to work).

Point the beam anywhere, and there's the God of Work, busily trampling out the vintage. Blizzards are bemoaned because they keep us from getting to work. Hobbies are seen as either ridiculous or self-indulgent because they interfere with work. Longer school days are all the rage (even as our children grow demonstrably stupider), not because they make educational or psychological or any other kind of sense but because keeping kids in school longer makes it easier for us to work. Meanwhile, the time grows short, the margin narrows; the white spaces on our calendars have been inked in for months. We're angry about this, upset about that, but who has the time to do anything anymore? There are those reports to report on, memos to remember, emails to deflect or delete. They bury us like snow.

The alarm rings and we're off, running so hard that by the time we stop we're too tired to do much of anything except nod in front of the TV, which, like virtually all the other voices in our culture, endorses our exhaustion, fetishizes and romanticizes it and, by daily adding its little trowelful of lies and omissions, helps cement the conviction that not only is this how our three score and ten must be spent but that the transaction is both noble and necessary.

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There's something un-American about singing the virtues of idleness. It is a form of blasphemy, a secular sin. More precisely, it is a kind of latter-day antinomianism, as much a threat to the orthodoxy of our day as Anne Hutchinson's desire 350 years ago to circumvent the Puritan ministers and dial God direct. Hutchinson, we recall, got into trouble because she accused the Puritan elders of backsliding from the rigors of their theology and giving in to a Covenant of Works, whereby the individual could earn his all-expenses-paid trip to the pearly gates through the labor of his hands rather than solely through the grace of God. Think of it as a kind of frequent-flier plan for the soul.

The analogy to today is instructive. Like the New England clergy, the Religion of Business – literalized, painfully, in books like *Jesus, C.E.O.* – holds a monopoly on interpretation; it sets the terms, dictates value. [In this new lexicon, for example, "work" is defined as the means to wealth; "success," as a synonym for it.]

Although today's version of the Covenant of Works has substituted a host of secular pleasures for the idea of heaven, it too seeks to corner the market on what we most desire, to suggest that the work of our hands will save us. And we believe. We believe across all the boundaries of class and race and ethnicity that normally divide us; we believe in numbers that dwarf those of the more conventionally faithful. We repeat the daily catechism, we sing in the choir. And we tithe, and keep on tithing, until we are spent.

It is this willingness to hand over our lives that fascinates and appalls me. There's such a lovely perversity to it; it's so wonderfully counterintuitive, so very Christian: You must empty your pockets, turn them inside out, and spill out your wife and your son, the pets you hardly knew, and the days you simply missed altogether watching the sunlight fade on the bricks across the way. You must hand over the rainy afternoons, the light on the grass, the moments of play and of simply being. You must give it up, all of it, and by your example teach your children to do the same, and then – because even this is not enough – you must train yourself to believe that this outsourcing of your life is both natural and good. But even so, your soul will not be saved.

The young, for a time, know better. They balk at the harness. They do not go easy. For a time they are able to see the utter sadness of subordinating all that matters to all that doesn't. Eventually, of course, sitting in their cubicle lined with New Yorker cartoons, selling whatever it is they've been asked to sell, most come to see the advantage of enthusiasm. They join the choir and are duly forgiven for their illusions. It's a rite of passage we are all familiar with. The generations before us clear the path; Augustine stands to the left, Freud to the right. We are born into death, and die into life, they murmur; civilization will have its discontents. The sign in front of the Church of Our Lady of Perpetual Work confirms it. And we believe.

All of which leaves only the task of explaining away those few miscreants who out of some inner weakness or perversity either refuse to convert or who go along and then, in their thirty-sixth year in the choir, say, abruptly abandon the faith. Those in the first category are relatively easy to contend with; they are simply losers. Those in the second are a bit more difficult; their apostasy requires something more... dramatic. They are considered mad. In one of my favorite anecdotes from American literary history (which my children know by heart, and which in turn bodes poorly for their futures as captains of industry), the writer Sherwood Anderson found himself, at the age of thirty-six, the chief owner and general manager of a paint factory in Elyria, Ohio. Having made something of a reputation for himself as a copywriter in a Chicago advertising agency, he'd moved up a rung. He was on his way, as they say, a businessman in the making, perhaps even a tycoon in embryo. There was only one problem: he couldn't seem to shake the notion that the work he was doing (writing circulars extolling the virtues of his line of paints) was patently absurd, undignified; that it amounted to a kind of prison sentence. Lacking the rationalizing gene, incapable of numbing himself sufficiently to make the days and the years pass without pain, he suffered and flailed. Eventually he snapped.

It was a scene he would revisit time and again in his memoirs and fiction. On November 27, 1912, in the middle of dictating a letter to his secretary ("The goods about which you have inquired are the best of their kind made in the..."), he simply stopped. According to the story, the two supposedly stared at each other for a long time, after which Anderson said: "I have been wading in a long river and my feet are wet," and walked out. Outside the building he turned east toward Cleveland and kept going. Four days later he was recognized and taken to a hospital suffering from exhaustion.

Anderson claimed afterward that he had encouraged the impression that he might be cracking up in order to facilitate his exit, to make it comprehensible. "The thought occurred to me that if men thought me a little insane they would forgive me if I lit out," he wrote, and though we will never know for sure if he suffered a nervous breakdown that day or only pretended to one (his biographers have concluded that he did), the point of the anecdote is elsewhere: Real or imagined, nothing short of madness would do for an excuse. Anderson himself, of course, was smart enough to recognize the absurdity in all this, and to use it for his own ends; over the years that followed, he worked his escape from the paint factory into a kind of parable of liberation, an exemplar for the young men of his age. It became the cornerstone of his critique of the emerging business culture: To stay was to suffocate, slowly; to escape was to take a stab at "aliveness." What America needed, Anderson argued, was a new class of individuals who "at any physical cost to themselves and others" would "agree to quit working, to loaf, to refuse to be hurried or try to get on in the world."

"To refuse to be hurried or try to get on in the world." It sounds quite mad. What would we do if we followed that advice? And who would we be? No, better to pull down the blinds, finish that sentence. We're all in the paint factory now.