



Olympia  
Unitarian  
Universalist  
Congregation

# Labor of Love - January 21, 2024

*Sermon by Rev. Sara Lewis*

## Section 1: Love of Labor

Perhaps you have heard the saying “do what you love and you’ll never work a day in your life”. There are inspirational posters with this saying. Artist Adam J Kurtz created a version of this that crosses out that last part of that saying and replaces it with “do what you love and you’ll work super (expletive deleted here) hard all the time with no separation or any sense of boundaries and also take everything extremely personally.” Ouch, I don’t know about you but I feel called out!

This year I took part in a conversation organized by staff at the UUA to explore the ideas raised by Simone Stalzoff in his essay we just heard an excerpt from and in his longer book, *The Good Enough Job: Reclaiming Life from Work*. The idea of a conversation about work, calling, and compensation was floated on the facebook page for the liberal religious educators association, and the interest was large enough to lead to many sessions with wait lists to get to participate.

It was a very enlightening conversation for me, as we were surveyed and then shared our qualitative thoughts about our motivations and feelings around our work, our satisfaction with our work and our compensation, and the stressors that lower that job satisfaction. I wasn’t surprised to hear that others in my profession find great personal satisfaction in their work, often feel appreciated, even loved, for the work they do, and that the greatest stressor is just not making a living wage that is enough to support a family.

And this experience, like many others I have had with people in many professions and people who volunteer their time, also supports my belief that our human

nature isn't nearly as self-interested and mercenary as theories of market based capitalism would have us believe. Plenty of people will work incredibly hard for all kinds of motivations, most of which could be summarized as forms of love.

For much of the history of capitalism, the idea that people would only work if incentivized to do so by necessity and money was the norm. Labor and work were an economic arrangement, and labor that wasn't ... because there has Always been labor that isn't part of the market economy ... was simply made invisible.

But then something has shifted, at least in developed countries like America. In the last fifty or so years, roughly the time since the publication of the book *What Color is Your Parachute* by Richard Bolles, we as a culture have shifted from an idea of work being a strictly economic arrangement to it being a source of personal satisfaction and meaning. This time has also, coincidentally or not, coincided with declining real wages and a shift toward more of the profits of the market economy going to fewer and fewer people.

Meaning, identity, mission, calling, or even just a fun workplace that offers a sense of community .... All of these can help people love a job and be willing to put in long hours and great effort. Many will choose a lower paying field because they feel a sense of duty, love, passion, or calling.

But even here there are inequities to watch out for, as not everyone can afford make this choice. Many of these public service sectors are filled with white women from middle class families and it is very much not because people like me are the ones who want to do this work but because it requires a level of privilege in education and a safety net. We also continue to devalue feminized professions with the assumption that women will be supported by a spouse, presumably one who makes more money than they do.

By making some workers into various kinds of saints, we paradoxically honor them and devalue their work at the same time. Some call this the Halo Effect, or vocational awe. In a 2018 paper librarian Fobazi Ettarh coined this term "vocational awe" for the belief that workplaces and institutions like libraries are inherently good, sacred notions, and beyond critique. These jobs and professions are seen as sacred callings. The paper struck a note for librarians and those in other fields too and Fobazi Ettarh was flooded with letters from teachers, chefs, zookeepers, nurses, and many more all describing the particular form that

vocational awe takes in their fields. During the Covid-19 pandemic this vocational awe and the halo effect could be seen in full strength as we simultaneously lauded essential workers, demanded that they put their own health and that of their families in danger, and also continued to pay most a lower than fair wage. They were saints, afterall, performing a sacred duty for love and goodness.

But this strategy is spreading to more and more forms of labor, undermining workers' ability to demand fair compensation and to make meaningful change in the structures of their work. As Simone Stolzoff puts it in *The Good Enough Job*:

*Our society treats those who haven't found a calling – who don't love what they get paid to do – as if they've committed some kind of moral failure. "The only way to do great work is to love what you do", Steve Jobs proselytized at Stanford. "Life is too short not to follow your passion" read proverbs on Instagram and LinkedIn. However, the notion that we should always love our jobs creates outsized expectations for what a job can deliver. It ignores the tedium that exists in every line of work, blinds us to the flaws a dream job may have, and creates conditions in which workers are willing to accept less than they deserve.*

## **Section 2: Labors of Love**

As our second reading says, if you work for money, it is labor, and if you work for love, that is labor too. There are so many labors of love and ways that we work to make life better for one another and the world a better place, but if it is not explicitly paid labor, these labors of love often are invisible.

One type of labor that has been particularly invisible until recently is called Emotional Labor. Rose Hackman, in her book *Emotional Labor: The Invisible Work Shaping Our Lives and How to Claim Our Power*, defines emotional labor as identifying or anticipating other people's emotions, adapting yours in consequence, and then managing to positively affect other people's emotions. It can often look like putting other people's feelings first. While this type of labor is something any of us can, and I would argue sometimes should, do for each other, too often this is labor that is expected from those with less power toward those with more power. This is a type of labor that many women perform but is also

expected from people of color toward white people, from disabled folks toward abled folks, and more.

Other forms of care labor follow the same pattern. While we all can perform various forms of care labor and love one another, our systems of power and hierarchy assign this work to those with less power, with women of color and immigrant women being the ultimate caregivers in this system.

In her book *Essential Labor: Mothering as Social Change*, Angela Garbes tells of her experience of being a Pinay woman with multiracial light skinned children and getting taken for the caretaker of her own children, and of her parents being part of the cycle of medically trained immigrants from the Philippines. She says *We like to tell ourselves that American women are better off – freer – than other women around the world, in part because we can easily work outside the home. But we are not free or unburdened from other people ... the domestic load is as heavy as ever, but if we have the means, we spread it out among multiple people ... white women's reliance on the low-wage labor of women of color actually deepens racial inequities in America and around the world.*

Garbes describes what has been called the international transfer of caretaking, with much of low-wage caregiver work being done by immigrant women in America. Latinx women dominate the field of household maintenance and Filipinas comprise a large section of elder care. But we often don't think about how our caretaking needs in this country are part of the continued pattern of a flow of resources (for caregivers are a resource) from less developed nations to richer ones.

And then there is care work done in families or in other situations that are completely unpaid. This labor goes uncounted in our economic counts of well being, but according to OXFAM, *if women around the world made minimum wage for all the unpaid hours of care work they performed in 2019, they would have earned 10.9 trillion. In America alone, they would have earned 1.5 trillion.* This is not trivial labor and our whole society would grind to a halt if it was withdrawn.

Academics Raj Patel and Jason Moore put it this way in their book “A History of the World in 7 Cheap Things: A Guide to Capitalism, Nature, and the Future of the Planet”:

*Capitalism ... could not survive a day without ... the appropriation of human reproductive labor, conducted largely outside the cash nexus. The global factory and the global farm each relies on a family, on a community of care.*

The theory of the market doesn't account for communities of care or for family care, really as it doesn't account well for any common good such as health, beauty, or nature either. The system of capitalism doesn't place love at its center.

Or, as Angela Garbes puts it in "Essential Labor": *Care is expected to be cheap the world over, in part because the global economy doesn't have the ability to properly value care work; conventional economic measures – concepts such as supply, demand, and markets – fall woefully short.*

Patel and Moore write in *7 Cheap Things*: *If the struggles for the recognition, equal distribution, reduction, and compensation of care work are successful, it will be a hopeful sign of the end of cheap nature and a shift toward valuations premised on care work, not exploitation. To imagine a world of justice in care work is to imagine a world after capitalism.*

OK, this may feel a bit radical. A world after capitalism? Let's take a breath. Breath and air are a free resource, a natural resource, a common good. Breathe again. Most of us find it a scary radical thought to imagine a future where we might ever have to pay for the air we breathe.

What if care and the labors of love are just as natural, just as essential a part of human nature, as the air we breathe? What if we all take care of each other because we are part of an interdependent web, part of a great mutuality of love, and no one needs to be exploited in that process? What if we leaned into the Gift Economy as described by indigenous author and botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer in her book *Braiding Sweetgrass*, where gifts are passed forward and the economy is built on principles of abundance and gratitude? What if we trusted love?

We have examples of how this works all around us. While the pandemic was a time of danger and exploitation for some, of the halo effect gone awry, it was also an example of other ways that we all came together to take care of one another. People formed pods, traded goods with their neighbors, and took other actions of simple care and love in the face of a global disaster.

Caregivers and passion workers and sacred duty or essential workers needn't be exploited if they are part of an entire system built on love and care rather than being made into the cushions of compassion and love in an otherwise uncaring system.

Can we put love at the center of our economy rather than the edges? I believe we can. We humans are mostly motivated by love, are naturally loving. I believe this, I have faith in this.

I'll end with this quote from Angela Garbes, from *Essential Labor*:

*Meal trains, playdates, and hand-me-downs are not proper substitutes for a society that provides affordable childcare, adequate wages, and time for leisure, but these patchwork solutions are precisely how so many of us survive. We will always find ways to take care of one another. When we lean into this natural, unstoppable, and very human urge, the results are expansive.*

Let me repeat that: We will always find ways to take care of one another. Let us lean into this natural, unstoppable, and very human urge, for the results are truly expansive. May it be so, and blessed be.