

A review of
The Working Life
by Joanne B. Ciulla
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Rating: 9

(The Official Ayers Rating Scale goes from 1-10. Anything lower than 6 is thrown out. This produces a net five point scale from 6-10.)

This book carries an interesting subtitle: *The promise and betrayal of modern work*. Ahhh ... another paradox, another *both/and*. In this work, Ciulla a panoramic survey of the history of work. She describes ancient times and village life, the Middle Ages and craft guilds, the Industrial Revolution, and onward to the late 20th-Century and downsizing. Most of the attention, however, falls onto the contemporary work scene. What about the Promise? The Betrayal?

In the introduction, she writes, “Under the old school of scientific management, the alienated worker did what he or she was told, got paid, and went home. The work may have been boring, the wages low, but at least everyone knew where he or she stood. Today the transaction is not as honest.” Why not as honest? Because when we engage in today’s work, largely ‘knowledge work’, we pay not so much a physical toll as an emotional toll.

In the course of building her case, she includes chapters dedicated to: why people work (contrasted with leisure), how we define work, whether we work to live or live to work, and the notion of work as profession. She points out that the contemporary Western work ethic is a combination of three ideas. The concept of work has included the first two for millennia: a principle of fairness and social obligation to provide for oneself coupled with the idea that one should perform one’s work to the best of his or her abilities. “The third idea, distinctive to Luther and Calvin,” she writes, “is that work *itself* has moral and spiritual value and everyone is called by God to some kind of work in life. In this view, work is good no matter how menial and regardless of pay.” This sets up the promise of work, and the potential for the betrayal.

She describes the promise this way: “The great advantage of a strong corporate culture was that it was an all-inclusive, self-regulating social system. The disadvantages included the fact that it could be oppressive and resistant to change. But perhaps the greatest downside to it was that employees became increasingly dependent on work to fill needs – e.g., for friendship – that they might otherwise have filled outside of work. Hence, if you lost your job, you lost much more than your work and income.” The promise concentrated on the one-stop shopping idea: get all of your needs met at work. Who needs a separate religious community or a recreational community or a fraternal organization when you have work and *its* employee clubs and *its* prayer meetings and *its* recreational opportunities?

Ciulla then goes on to describe the betrayal this way: “Luther’s and Calvin’s work ethic pales next to this work ethic of fear. Unlike the Protestant work ethic, the work ethic of fear does not hold out hope of salvation, but only offer the opportunity to work more. The marketplace is fickle and far more demanding than any single boss. Nowadays when people are

laid off, employers tell them, 'Sorry, it's the economy' or 'We can't compete unless we move the plant overseas.' Frustrated unemployed workers don't always know who to blame or who to yell at. They can't blame managers or politicians, because nobody can control the global economy. Unemployed workers often blame themselves or harbor an unfocused rage. Their lives have been turned upside down, often for the sake of making the company more competitive in some yet-to-be-defined future."

The employer somehow seems to expect loyalty and commitment and "bringing your whole self to work." But if the interest of the faceless stock analysts or shareholders requires moving a factory from Detroit to Mexico or St. Paul to Brazil ... well, what can you expect, who can you blame? Of course, the betrayal becomes just that much more insidious if the employees *also* own shares, either directly through some sort of actual employee purchase plan or indirectly through a retirement scheme. "We're sorry," say the executives, "but *we* have to sacrifice *your* job in the present for the sake of *your* retirement in the future. You understand, don't you?"

Under the influence of Luther and Calvin, many people have come to believe that work should have meaning. That consideration opens a whole new set of complexities. Ciulla writes: "For some, meaningful work is interesting and satisfying; for others it is work that contributes to society. Still others want work that gives meaning to the lives. To explore the nature of meaningful work and the desire for meaningful work, we must first confront the mother of all philosophic questions: What is the meaning of life?" Most employers have not studied philosophy; most do not have the background, much less the interest, to discuss "the meaning of life."

In fact, Ciulla asserts that management generally does not seem to have much appreciation for history or philosophy or thinking at all. Commenting on the successive waves of silver bullets (TQM, reengineering, seven habits), she writes, "The problem with management fads is that they are often uncritical and ahistorical. As a result, management theorists discover the same things about work over and over and are equally delighted every time they do so." And the consultants find a ready and gullible market for their re-packaged and re-labeled common sense.

Ciulla offers hints at her own idea for a solution to the promise/betrayal conundrum. Expecting the employers to provide ever more services will ultimately fail. "Prayer meetings at work are not the solution to employees' needs for something more. They are a symptom of the problem. The real problem is that their work zaps them of the energy, the time and perhaps even the will to take part in meaningful activities and communities outside of work. ... [Employers] need to rethink the structure of the workplace and give employees more time and flexibility to lead good lives outside of work without fear of losing promotions, bonuses, or jobs." So, the employers have a critical role to play. Ciulla goes on, however, to write, "But employers are not the only ones to blame. Many employees have gotten lazy and willingly let their employers take responsibility for parts of their lives." Employees also have a critical role to play.

The burden rests squarely on the employer. The burden rests squarely on the employee. Ahhh ... another paradox, another *both/and*.