

Sermon on Labor
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Scripture Reading. Soul of the Bible, Page 287.

Also, as a possible suggestion or illustration, from Ruskin's *Crown of Wild Olive*:

You knock a man into a ditch, and then you tell him to remain content in the "position in which Providence has placed him." That's modern Christianity. You say, "We did not knock him into the ditch." We shall never know what you have done or left undone, until the question with us every morning is, not how to do the gainful thing, but how to do the just thing during the day, nor until we are at least so far on the way to being Christians, as to acknowledge that maxim of the poor half-way Mahometan, "One hour in the execution of Justice is worth seventy years of Prayer."¹

Also:

Now it is only by labor that thought can be made healthy, and only by thought that labor can be made happy, and the two cannot be separated with impunity.
Ruskin. *The Stones of Venice*.²

This pregnant sentence of Ruskin's voices essentially the same principle and point of view as the old phrase from Ecclesiasticus, "In the handiwork of their craft is their prayer."³

That aspect of life which we commonly have in mind when we use the word "work" or "labor" is as complicated and penetrating as life itself. There is a constant constructive creative process of adjustment going on all the time in the relation of the

¹ John Ruskin (1819-1900) English writer, philosopher, art critic, artist. This quotation is from his 1866 work *Crown of Wild Olive*. The quotation provided here does not quite exactly match the passage from the 1894 edition of the book, *Crown of Wild Olive*, New York: Bryan, Taylor & Co., p. 34-35.

² John Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice, Volume the Second: The Sea Stories*, London, Smith, Elder & Co., 1867, p. 169.

³ Ecclesiasticus 38:34.

individual towards the whole of things. This constant adjustment obtains not only in the life of man, but as well in the animal and plant life.

Food, shelter and raiment of some kind are essential. Whether we like it or not, we must keep up this pace of labor: it is part of the structural relationship that we bear towards the whole of things.

But beyond this primitive necessity of labor comes another factor, the constant urge of our creative and adventurous search into the mysteries of the universe; the scientist, the inventor, the discoverer of new things and ways; here we share in the creative process that is constantly alluring us on into the undiscovered wilderness upon the edge of which we live.

Our activities, both under the pressure of primitive necessities, and under the creative urge, demand much labor that is of only immediate importance, chores, drudgery, involving comparatively little intellectual labor. At times labor becomes predominantly intellectual, with tremendous intellectual drudgery involved. But whatever may be the proportion involved, all labor as thus defined, comes under the head of response to the demands made upon us in the fact of creative living. We labor that we may have life and have it abundantly.

So far, so good.

Our difficulties arise, and they are plenty, from two sources: first from those who, either by limitation of nature or limitations of training, are simply passive drones in the real processes of life. They want the abundant life, but they want it handed to them. Thus they miss the real point of life, and at best get but second rate results, and enjoy second rate living. They never enter into the zeal of living. They constitute of [sic] [the] pleasure seeking idle, whether rich or poor; they are the scum and cast off refuse of the vital strain of human life. We have not yet learned how to meet the problem that they present. They are the pitiable rags and tatters of life.⁴

The second source of our difficulties arises from the very variety of human qualities that makes life interesting and worthwhile. Our varied capacities and aptitudes are bound to

⁴ There is a handwritten note in the margin that both this paragraph and the next one have "nothing to do with present concrete problems."

create varied results, and varied centers of interest and purpose. Hence the necessity for exchange of products, for adjustments of values. From the point of view of ourselves as laboring human beings we do not know how to fairly exchange the products of our activity.

In our ignorance and confusion at this point we have lost sight of the main purpose of the whole process of creative labor. We measure things of the utterly false standard of abundance of goods, rather than the abundance of life. At the moment we are like unto the man who built a great treasure house in which he stored all his wealth that he and his large family might enjoy an abundant life, and feel secure in reserve protection safely stored in the treasure house. In his extreme joy and satisfaction that he had at last made himself and all his friends secure, his mind slipped a cog and he lost the combination of the intricate lock to the door behind which his treasures were secured. Even in his need and his knowledge that the treasures were secure, they were not available. What could be done?⁵

Some advised destroying the treasure house. Some advised forgetting it, and beginning all over again. Some advised putting the man in complete control of the treasure house and await the time when the lost combination to the lock might come to the man's mind.

But we are reminded by poignant fact that the gathering of goods and wealth is of no avail in itself, but only as it leads to abundance of life. We are also reminded that even the man who should know the combination of the lock to the treasure house, but has lost it, did not create the treasure of himself. Many minds and many hands combined in the task. In these two suggestions implicit in the nature of our situation, is the hint as to what lies behind and beneath all turmoil of our labor problems, our terrible and tragic unemployment, our social unrest, our threat of violence, social disintegration and revolution. It presents the central challenge of the times with two important statements by Ruskin as symbols of the task.

First: Those whom we have knocked into the ditch of poverty and unemployment and despair were not put there by Providence, but by our careless and brutal ignorance. They have no right to remain content in the position in which Providence did not place

⁵ There is a handwritten note in the margin that this paragraph is "too metaphysical."

them. Even if they have no moral or intellectual passion to find their way out of the ditch of their despair, the very urge of the vital processes, the very passion to live, will give unto them a titanic power of dangerous proportions. No social order can rest on the quicksands of human despair. Out of the ditch they must come, and in part by the helping hand of those on relatively safe ground. That is emergency work.

Second: Labor must be coordinated with thought. This is a long-range task, facing us in our individual lives and in our social and corporate interests, not for the primary purpose that we may have wealth and goods and activity in abundance, however essential these are as means to life, but primarily that we may have life, rich and abundant, intelligent, creative, decent, and purposeful. Along this line is health, individual and social.