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## Take This Job and Love It: Dorothy Sayers on Work

by Kimberly Moore-Jumonville

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Let's face it. In our worst moments of early adulthood, the *Zombie Job* can lurk in the dark recesses of our imaginations, haunting us with images of hollow men and women creeping through offices, myopically intent on numbers, lists, formulas, equation—the kind of keyboard-crunching, mind-numbing dullness that deadens our spirits. Worse yet, in this nightmare, the hours drag on endlessly for days, months, and years, but we suffer the dread land of this twilight kingdom to pay off debt and accumulate retirement options. The challenging adventure we had hoped for when we trained for this occupation has withered into a pale, red-eyed resolve to survive. And yet, despite our dread, we doggedly pursue our dream of meaningful life-giving work; we slog through job training and internships hoping above hope that training will give way to miraculously satisfying jobs, and hoping above hope that we're not turned into *Zombies* in the process. The people in this scenario are dying *at* work; we want to be dying *to* work.

What is there to save us from such a soul-deadening life? Dorothy Sayers posits a “gospel of work” grounded in God's nature itself. God is essentially creative; the story through which God reveals himself to us begins with THE creative act. The first verb of scripture is the strongest action verb: “to create”; the first action we see God take is to create: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1). The Nicene Creed also recounts Jesus as a fundamental presence in God's creative work. Jesus is “God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one Being with the Father. Through him all things were made.”

Made in the image of God, then, made to be like Christ, it is human beings' nature to create. We share in God's creative nature; in fact, creativity is such a critical aspect of humanity that to deny it is to deny part of what it is to be human. Dorothy Sayers's “gospel of work” is that our work “must allow people to fulfill their vocation by being creative, or else it *cheats* them of their essential humanity” (Simmons

112). In other words, we *must* create or become less than human. Sayers's detective Harriet Vane muses in *Gaudy Night* that "to be true to one's calling, whatever follies one might commit in one's emotional life, that was the way to emotional peace" (28). Later Harriet remarks, "When you get the thing dead right and know it's dead right, there's no excitement like it. It makes you feel like God on the Seventh Day—for a bit anyhow" (149). What I like about this is that Harriet is not referring to writing poetry or composing music, typical creative tasks, she is solving a mystery that is haunting a women's college. Her work is detection, and doing it effectively is her creative gift—in other words, *our particular giftedness is our creative work*. (We don't have to dance ballet, play violin, or do graphic design to exercise creativity).

Sayers also describes work in its creative vitality as "the outward and visible sign of a creative reality" (Letter to V.A. Demant April 10, 1941, 247). Such sacramental language should encourage us to regard our work as a sacramental act. In her essay *Vocation in Work* she goes so far as to assign our work a *redemptive* measure, as it is "the creative activity that can redeem the world" (*Creed or Chaos?* 90-91). The upshot of this claim is that fulfilling our unique vocation, doing the thing we are uniquely made to do, serves the creation in such a way that God's work on earth is forwarded. In his biography of Steve Jobs, Walter Isaacson recounts Jobs's response to hearing Yo Yo Ma play Bach: "Your playing is the best argument I've ever heard for the existence of God, because I don't really believe a human being alone can do this" (425). Perceptive observations like Jobs's demonstrate that finding our vocation brings us to full creative vitality. This is what we long for. People of faith can go further to recognize that doing the thing we are made to do gives our soul life. It also fulfills God's intention for our gifts and in some way forwards God's kingdom on earth.

Yet, we have to admit that work does not always give us life; it can drain and frustrate as often as it vitalizes. In fact, we sometimes give our lives to work that actually goes against our value system without realizing it. Even in the church we can work for all the wrong reasons. In her 1947 essay, *Why Work*, Sayers suggests that generally in the West, we are accustomed to value our work in terms of the money it generates. She is quick to remind us that the question "what does it pay?" is the wrong question. If we work only to earn money, then it is an end in itself, a dead end, soul-deadening because comfort and leisure don't make us happy. We work longer hours to secure leisure funds to buy a fancy boat or glitzy vacation package, but wear

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ourselves out playing hard. We hate Mondays. We exhaust ourselves on a squirrel cage that hopes to secure happiness.

Consider this familiar parable:

A wise man is happily relaxing in the shade of a tree by a large beautiful lake. He is playing his guitar and beside him lays a fishing rod cast out into the lake. A businessman walks up to him and asks him what he is doing.

He replies that he is waiting for a fish to pass by. The businessman asks whether he has seen anyone else around the lake. The wise man replies that he has not seen anyone else for weeks.

Spotting an opportunity, the businessman advises that he should build himself a boat, cast a net into the lake and sell the surplus fish at the market.

“And what next?”

The businessman replies that he could then use the profits to build himself a bigger boat to catch more fish.

“And then?”

The businessman advises that he could then build a fleet of vessels and hire a crew of people to help him catch even more fish.

“After that?”

The businessman proclaims that he would then be rich and be able to retire early.

The wise man questions, “And then what should I do?”

The businessman replies that he could then sit by the lake, relax and play his guitar!

If leisure and comfort are the goal, then we really can forego the work and take the leisure!

Of course we must work to live, to bring home the bacon as it were; there is some necessity here. But we do well to remember that economic necessity always stands secondary to another claim upon us, given the fact that we are creatures of a creator. The first claim on us follows from God’s nature and the creation; thus, Sayers urges us to consider a potential job in terms of the *end* it serves. Rather than “what does it pay,” we should begin with the question, “Is it good?” Does this work serve a good? Is it an aspect of creation that warrants cultivation? Does it promote the good of something or someone—an individual, a group or a cause? Does it answer a human need or speak to a human

longing? In other words, does it need doing?

And how do we determine whether a job needs doing? Basically, there are two sources of real wealth (and this claim reaches back to thinkers of the Middle Ages like Dante and Aquinas): Nature, the stuff we have to work with; and human labor, the effort we exert upon nature to produce something. Work related to agriculture and ecology obviously draw on the fruits of the earth to serve aspects of Nature. But a plethora of consumer goods not directly related to the earth are also important: the car industry, for example—transportation is a good, after all. The question about car production should go further than profit margin and shareholder gains to issues of employee wages and benefits, working conditions, and also the quality of the product and its relationship to the community and environment. Questions such as “does this product deplete natural resources or put harmful chemicals into the environment?” are important. Asking about a product’s efficiency record, about how long it will last is also helpful. Does it perform its function reliably with satisfying results or does it figure in a program of planned obsolescence (not mentioning any names). Would fewer cars or more public transportation in densely populated regions actually offer more humane living conditions? The question, “Is it worth doing?” can be determined by whether it serves a good. That question should be accompanied by another question as well, the question of whether the work is good in itself.

Ultimately, then, the worth of, the value of the job should be assessed not in terms of cost or pay but in terms of what the thing in itself is worth. The question of intrinsic value goes beyond the treadmill of production and consumption to absolute terms of a Christian worldview that begins with absolute values. Because we see ourselves as creatures submitted to a Sovereign Creator, Christians look outside ourselves for the meaning of experience. We see the world in theological terms that take precedence over a secular economic paradigm of work. The absolute value I refer to here is the intrinsic worth of our work well done. Work well done is a life well lived. If the secular paradigm regards the value of the person in terms of what she does, that assumes her meaning lies in earning a paycheck. Therefore, the goal of life becomes money, which assumes the material world is our primary reality; the material world is then the only thing that must be taken into account. However, such a philosophy of materialism denies spiritual reality as ultimate. For us, being created in God’s image acknowledges that our soul is the eternal part of us and the source of our uniqueness. Therefore, we are intrinsically valuable and

our work with the creation is also intrinsically valuable.

One essential question about our work, then, is “Is it good?” “Have we done it well?” Our reward comes not in dollars but in knowing that we have honored a particular aspect of the creation by exercising our human labor (creativity) upon it as well as we possibly can. The only Christian work, after all, is work well done. No job poorly planned and executed honors the Creator; there is no good Christian music or good Christian book unless it is well-composed or well-performed or well-written. As Sayers admits, “The worst religious films I ever saw were produced by a company which chose its staff exclusively for their piety. Bad photography, bad acting, and bad dialog produced a result so grotesquely irreverent that the pictures could not have been shown in churches without bringing Christianity into contempt” (*Why Work* 80). Furthermore, she insists that “. . . A building must be good architecture before it can be a good church; [a] painting must be well painted before it can be a good sacred picture; work must be good work before it can call itself God’s work” (78). Thus, work done as an excellent example of its kind serves the creation and points to the creator.

Sayers’s play, *The Zeal of Thy House* (1937), takes up this question of quality (of *work well done*) in the building of the Canterbury Cathedral. Its architect, William of Sens, makes up for his lack of piety with a commitment to the excellence of the product. “At my age, one learns that sometimes one has to damn one’s soul for the sake of the work. Trust me, God shall have a choir fit for His service. *Does anything else really matter?*” (emphasis mine) (27). Despite his unorthodox lifestyle, the monks give Sens the job of building the cathedral because they want the church whose grandeur will give God the greatest glory. It doesn’t take long for them to question their choice, but the angels in the play, a kind of Greek chorus, validate Sens as one of those “men who work like angels—and whistle while they work. They are much the most cheerful kind” (7). Sayers makes her point clear; the morality of our actions finds its value in relation to the end it serves. The greater sin is to produce a poor product; thus, the quality of the product is what matters most.

If work is good in itself, if it is intrinsically valuable, worth doing because it serves a human need, and honors God when done excellently, we have ample reason to pursue it, a right reason to work. But we also have to ask, does it exercise our faculties, our gifts and abilities to the fullest, because work can make us more fully whole, more fully ourselves. God made us to do the thing that gives us

spiritual, mental, and physical satisfaction (Simmons 102). This kind of work could become a prayer, the medium through which we offer ourselves to God. When we are fortunate enough to find work that is our work, it changes the goal from getting paid to working for our fulfillment and reward; it becomes the measure of our life—as long as society gives us enough return to do work properly. It only follows that we need to find the work we are uniquely gifted for. Not the highest paycheck, but the highest level of satisfaction. Bigger is not always better, more is not always advantageous. Numbers in church do not always imply more spiritual success for the community, for instance. The joy of work that fits our giftedness is that in doing it we are becoming what we are created to be; we are becoming what we already are. Right work for the right reason in the right way exercises the strengths God gave us and calls out the particular beauty already latent in us, waiting to be developed. In our beginning, God had a particularly beautiful, breathtaking human being that He hoped we would become; our life is a chance to grow into the fullness of that person and work that exercises our gifts and abilities moves us toward that ideal being we were made to be.

Of course, the culture does not recognize this reality—that being created in God’s image predisposes our nature for work, for work that needs to be performed by us for God’s glory. We have to admit that social expectations and economic pressures militate against the importance of matching the worker with the work for the good of society. But if we drudge through tasks in order to receive a paycheck at the end of the day, we recognize that frustration, despair, anger, and boredom is a formula for a shoddy, lackluster culture. We know we don’t want the *Zombie job*; we dread living in a *Zombie society*.

When we do discover the work that suits us, work we were meant for, work that calls out the expression of our full self, work that shapes our selfhood, we realize that it is *sacramental*. In fact, all work, even secular work, can help redeem the world. Therefore, all work is sacred. Christians do not have to think of the so-called Christian vocation or Christian job as the only “sacred work.” Any work is potentially sacred, as long as it avoids the soul-denigrating or soul-destroying thing; certainly work as slavery rampant around our world is an outrage. But we can fall into the trap of validating church-related work or ministry as more admirable or more holy than the secular. Specifically church-related work seems more obviously Christian. Sayers urges the church to remember that “every maker and worker is called to serve God *in* his profession or trade—not outside it” (107). The question isn’t sacred

or secular, the question is, “what am I suited for?” What calls me to it? Because all creation needs to be served. And, as Sayers noted earlier, “the only Christian work is good work well done” (108).

One final reason for work is really the most important for Christians, and that is that we should take on a job in order to serve the work. Frequently, when we describe the goal of work as service, it often gets translated to “serving the community.” Sayers warns us, however, that the community can inadvertently become the focus of our work and therefore falsify what we want to offer as a gift. How so? When serving the community, we can take our eyes off the task to see how the community is measuring it. We can end up altering or reshaping what we are doing to get the response we want, which isn’t necessarily healthy for the outcome. To ask, ‘Do they like me, do they like my sculpture?’ isn’t helpful because we can end up trying to please the audience rather than striving to create something excellent. Remember, the work needs to be judged by its own standards rather than what people outside the discipline think. And work that is less than quality work serves neither God nor the community. Done for the wrong reasons, it serves only “mammon” (112).

It is also easy for us once we imagine we are serving people to assume they owe us something. We can think it’s legitimate to expect a reward, a recognition, or at least some form of gratitude (113) and to resent not getting these. In Sayers’s words: “The only true way of serving the community is to be truly in sympathy with the community, to be oneself part of the community, and then to serve the work without giving the community another thought. Then the work will endure, because it will be true to itself” (114). The more difficult thing to do is to serve the work—then our focus is the satisfaction of observing the quality of the thing well done. To serve the work is the thing. It demands our best efforts and gives back what we put into it—labor becomes love. “Take this job and love it,” the title for this paper, suggests that to love is to labor at the good thing worth doing, the task that calls out our gifts, that moves us toward being more fully ourselves, nurtures some aspect of the creation and serves the work itself. In the end, the creation is served, the community is served, and love is extended into the universe.

My spiritual mentor describes a vision of heaven in which explosions of creativity resound; people are free to express their gifts fully in the afterlife, and that beauty sets off constant chain reactions that reverberate new waves of inspiration. In a vision like that, Heaven will be so pervaded with joy and love that we will be constantly renewed

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and energized. The Trinity, the originating force of it all will form its center. I want to spend eternity in such a place. In fact, I believe my work can begin to participate in it now. Such a vision gives continuity to the work I do now; I am participating in the Kingdom of Heaven on earth imagining that it is going to go on for eternity.

Thus, Dorothy Sayers's vision of work helps us see that our task is to find the thing God has created us to do in a way that no one else can because of our unique gifting, and then serve the integrity of that work with all our heart, soul, and mind because it deserves cultivation, because it promotes a good, because it is worth doing well, and because that work calls for the fullest expression of our gifts. We can look to her for ways to avoid the *Zombie job* and discover we *can* leave home each morning dying *to* work—not dying *from* work!

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