

To Whom Does Our Work Belong?

A Sermon by the Rev. Angela Herrera

First Unitarian Church

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The first Sunday in September marks the beginning of a new program year, and we have a new theological theme to go with it: belonging. I love what researcher Brené Brown has to say about belonging: that it is not the same as fitting in. She says fitting in has to do with making ourselves fit the culture and norms of a group. But belonging is about being accepted for who you are by those who know you. She says you can't experience true belonging if your authentic self is hidden. If we wear a false self all the time, the false self may be embraced by others, it might fit in, but deep down we will know that our true self remains an outsider, an observer, hidden. Fitting in versus belonging.

We also belong in a different sense though, to larger human communities, through processes that are less personal. In that case, belonging isn't about acceptance so much as socio-historical location. Socio historical location means the social and historical context in which we live. These are the often human-made larger forces that shape our lives.

We each inhabit a certain area of a city in a certain country in the early 21st century. Artificial Intelligence is about to transform things, but we don't fully understand how yet. Some of it is charming. This week I read an article about applying AI to the sounds that animals make. It turns out mole rats have distinct dialects. Imagine an app like Google Translate, but for animals. That... might happen? But other results of AI are much less predictable.

We also belong to the Anthropocene: an era marked by human consciousness, knowledge, art, and music as well as by our profound impact on the planet, irreversible now in our lifetimes or in our children's or grandchildren's. It's an absolutely gorgeous and terrible time.

And we live in a time in which capitalism's unsustainable features have created some snowballing problems that cannot be ignored. And by they can't be ignored, I mean they are impacting our lives right now whether we like it or not. For one thing, capitalism is focused on profit and production. The capitalist perspective makes everything—your life, the earth—look like the means to an end. Everything is viewed as a resource that can be used to produce profit. It's competitive before it is collaborative.

In this time of capitalism, a few people hold a lot more resources than everyone else, and that is worsening. The top 1% of Americans hold more wealth than the bottom 90% combined.¹ It's so uneven that while some people build private rocket ships to space and are still billionaires (many times over) afterward, others can't even afford a space to sleep safely at night.

Billionaires. It's hard to wrap our minds around that. A billion is not ten times more than a million. Ten times more than a million is just ten million. And a billion is not one hundred times more than a million. That would be 100 million. A billion is *one thousand* times more than a million. If I were to deposit one million dollars in your bank account and tell you to spend \$1000 each day, and to come back and see me when the money runs out, you would be back in just about three years. If I deposited one billion dollars in your account and told you the same thing, you'd be back in approximately 3000 years. That's how much money the poorest billionaire—the one with only one billion dollars—has. Elon Musk has 219 billion. Jeff Bezos,

171 billion. This year Forbes Magazine reported that there are 2,668 billionaires in the world.ⁱⁱ How many billionaires does the world need?

I'm going to go out on a limb here and say none. Not one. About a third of Americans my age feel that way. Older folks are less likely to agree. But among adults under thirty: 50% believe that allowing some people to accrue a billion dollars or more is a bad idea.ⁱⁱⁱ The youngest Americans face more financial hardship and insecurity than previous generations did at their age and, since money makes money, that snowballing effect will continue to shape their lives.

When people are treated as a means to an end, as in capitalism, they tend to be seen as replaceable, or even expendable. Many are expected to work jobs with unsafe conditions, toxic work environments, wages that don't keep up with inflation, and not enough leave time. This can make it feel as though our work, and by extension maybe even ourselves, belong to someone else. However: people are ends in themselves. What I mean is that a person does not exist just to further another person's goals. Our lives are of value in and of themselves. Everyone has inherent worth and dignity, as we say in our faith. It is not a matter of how productive we are.

In the early part of last year, the US began an economic phase that came to be known as the Great Resignation, when massive numbers of people began to quit their jobs. Between April and September of 2021, more than 24 million Americans quit. That's about four million per month. This year, between March and June, the average was even higher—4.25 million per month.^{iv} There has been a lot of discussion about why this is happening. In 2020, there were massive layoffs due to the pandemic. How did we go from that to a great resignation one year later? Some people who quit had to leave their jobs in order to take care of kids while schools continued to be shut down. Some became disabled with long COVID. About one out of every forty people who catch COVID are still sick three months later.^v

Anecdotally, the pandemic also seemed to have caused people to reassess their priorities. Life seemed shorter and more fragile, after so many deaths. Making a big change—like leaving an unhappy job or starting a new career-- was intimidating before the pandemic. But the pandemic ushered in so much big change, maybe other changes started to look less daunting.

And then there is the issue of flexibility. During the worst of COVID, many people got to experience remote work for the first time. Often that was a plus—they stayed healthier, saved time and money on commuting, and it was better for the environment. Maybe it improved work life balance— that was a toss-up though with many people reporting that they never totally clocked out when working remotely. Now with the shutdown lifted, many employers tried to require workers to come back to the office full time—but the workers weren't buying it. They went to companies that embraced the new flexibility. Others who were not allowed to work from home—like essential workers—were called heroes in the first few months of the pandemic, but any temporary benefit was soon replaced by hostile customers and low pay that no longer seemed worth it. You might think the Great Resignation is mostly made up of white-collar workers, but low wage workers in leisure and hospitality industries are actually the ones with the highest quit rate.

Studies have revealed some other specific issues, too. MIT's business journal, Sloan Management Review, reported that during the Great Resignation, toxic workplace culture is the

most likely reason given for quitting.^{vi} Another MIT study investigated what employees mean when they describe a culture as toxic. The most commonly reported toxic thing is feeling disrespected at work; feeling that there was a lack of courtesy, consideration, and dignity for others.^{vii} Number two was a lack of equity and inclusion. That included not only race, but also LGBTQ, ability, age, and gender. Other toxic experiences included workplaces that are overly competitive or “cutthroat,” are unethical, or are abusive, including not only bullying and harassment, but also hostility.

Has anyone here ever experienced a hostile work environment? I have, for sure. One example was when I worked as a housekeeper back in the 1990’s. One well-off woman I worked for made disparaging comments about my weight as she ordered me to do meaningless tasks like dusting the underside of her dining room table. The underside!

A stressful workplace is a big deal. Work stress directly impacts an employee’s health. It can lead to anxiety, depression, relationship problems, substance abuse, high blood pressure, heart attacks, and strokes. So lots of people have been quitting. Not every job is stressful. Many employees enjoy their jobs. But what should you do if you work at an unpleasant or even toxic job, but quitting is not an option? Or what if you are unhappy in your job, but you aren’t at the point of needing to quit? This goes back to a question Bob and I often address in sermons: how do we do right by ourselves and others when we live within larger systems that do harm? How do we thrive and encourage others to as well?

Well, this is Labor Day weekend. Labor Day was founded by labor activists to celebrate the achievements of regular working people, including achievements that they won through organizing. So I’d be remiss if I did not point out that organizing with your fellow workers can be a really effective way to make change in the workplace. It may be just a few people combining their voices to bring an issue or a request to their boss. Or it can be joining or organizing a whole union. Our denomination, the Unitarian Universalist Association, actively supports labor organizing and worker justice. Through organizing, we build relationships with each other, too—and those meaningful relationships increase our happiness.

You could also try “quiet quitting.” That’s a phrase that has been trending in social media recently. It’s a misnomer—it isn’t about totally quitting your job. It’s about deciding not to participate in being taken advantage of. Quiet quitting is not providing free work beyond what you are paid to do. It is fulfilling one’s job duties, but not going the extra mile in ways that cut back on your rest time. It’s setting healthy boundaries at work. This is good, but as soon as I heard it I also thought about how much more of a radical act this is for someone with a marginalized identity, whose experience may be that they have to work twice as hard as someone else just to be seen as adequate.

Theologian Tricia Hersey talks about capitalism as a culture that grinds people down; wears them out, uses them up like so much stuff. She says capitalism doesn’t look at things from an ethical or values place. Instead capitalism asks, “How can we use this being, to push our agenda, to become a tool for our production... If we have to not pay people what they’re worth, let’s do it. If we only have people working minimum wage, we don’t care. People are sick, still come to work. Capitalism does not have a framework for looking at us as human beings.”^{viii} Hersey points out that this “grind culture” has roots in colonialism and white supremacy. That’s why people with marginalized identities find themselves working twice as hard as others. In this culture, she says, slowing down is an act of resistance. And she says that

is true for everyone who is ensnared in it. Going slower, we disrupt it. She launched the nap ministry. It's about resting. Because you are valuable. Because you are not your work. You don't belong to it. It belongs to you.

Even though paid work is necessary for most of us in order to provide for ourselves and our families, ultimately all of our work—paid and voluntary— is our own, because it is part of how we show up, and we are in charge of that. Our work is part of how we show up. And we are in charge of that. How other people show up... well that is their choice. It's a reflection of them. Not you. That woman who ordered me to dust the underside of her table? She was a cranky, unhappy person. I don't think behaving that way helped her feel better. I think that kind of behavior is just a way of actively stewing in misery, rather than passively stewing in it. Actively, by inflicting it on others.

One of my professors in divinity school talked one day about how hard it is to differentiate ourselves from the negative way others might behave toward us. He said when others are hostile, "It's not personal, but it's sure meant to be!" Right? Someone behaving badly toward you, or not seeming to notice that you are a person, it can really bring you down. But it's a reflection of *them*, of their state of mind and their level of skillfulness at being human. Maybe they are caught up in the goals of capitalism or other isms, and have not examined the impact of that on their relationship with others. Maybe they are power tripping (which healthy people do not do), or maybe they are carrying some deep pain inside that is impossible to guess.

This is all true beyond the workplace, too. Of course. How we show up in the world, what we bring to each relationship, that belongs to us. It's up to us to decide whether to live with intention and integrity. To set healthy boundaries where we can. To decide how we want to act and be, how wise, how spiritually grounded, how compassionate and healthy, and then be that way, be our authentic selves, regardless of whether others do the same or whether they are actively stewing in misery. In this way, we claim our ownership of our work and lives. It does take a lot of mindfulness to do this though, doesn't it?

I'm thinking of our reading now, the one you heard earlier, by Nancy Shaffer: "This making of a whole self takes such a very long time," she writes. "...We work here, then there, hold up tattered fabric to the light... We sew at what most needs us, and as it asks, sew again. The self is not one thing... unaltered. It's everything we come upon, make ours." Blessings on your beautiful selves, and on all your work, whether it is for money or love or both. Labor Day blessings to you.

ⁱ <https://www.cnn.com/2022/04/01/richest-one-percent-gained-trillions-in-wealth-2021.html>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/chasewithorn/2022/04/05/forbes-36th-annual-worlds-billionaires-list-facts-and-figures-2022/?sh=b45b26a7e303>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/07/28/americans-views-about-billionaires-have-grown-somewhat-more-negative-since-2020/>

^{iv} <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/jolts.t04.htm>

^v <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/long-term-effects/index.html>

^{vi} <https://sloanreview.mit.edu/article/toxic-culture-is-driving-the-great-resignation/>

^{vii} Toxic culture: <https://sloanreview.mit.edu/article/why-every-leader-needs-to-worry-about-toxic-culture/>

^{viii} Werning, Kate. "40 Rest as Reparations with Tricia Hersey of The Nap Ministry." Podcast Interview. *Irresistible*, 4 July 2019, irresistible.org/podcast/40.