The Psychology of Worth I: Control and Work

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"A person's worth is measured by the worth of what he values."
— **Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations***

What is Worth? Is it some eternal, immutable verity that demands respect and compliance? Or, as Marcus Aurelius has proposed, is Worth conditional and dependent on what is valued by a person or society? Then there is the matter of assessing Worth, whether absolute or arbitrary. What is something Worth? How do we determine the value of things we own?

We can count the money in our checking account, look up our credit rating, or determine the financial value of our stock portfolio—but are these markers valid indicators of our financial Worth given the volatility of our mid-21st-century financial world? Perhaps even more importantly, how do we assess the Worth of our talents and capacities? Are we "worthy" of the respect and admiration others in our community might award us? Even more fundamentally, are we worthy of self-respect?

What is the scorecard being used to determine our Worth, the Worth of institutions that employ us, the Worth of our community, and the Worth of our nation? Is Worth determined by individuals or by a collective assembly of people (a society)? Are specific people living in diverse cultures likely to differ in their determination of Worth? Are individuals likely to establish their criteria for determining Worth that are often not aligned with the criteria used by the community in which they live and work?

The Construction of Worth

These important questions deserve clear answers. However, coming from different disciplines (ranging from economics, sociology, and political science to history, philosophy, and theology), the answers most often provided are rarely clear and inevitably controversial. To begin with, we need to acknowledge that the foundation of Personal Worth is not the same as the foundation of Societal Worth. We may agree on some basic values as a society that determine (as Marcus Aurelius proposes) the collective nature of Worth. However, a different set of values and alternative notions about Worth might exist in our individual lives and determine our personal actions.

This set of essays concerns the questions just identified. I begin this essay and the next essay with an exploration of personal worth, and then, in one essay, I consider worth to be defined by the collective and expressed in communities. In five subsequent essays, I identify an important bridge existing between personal and collective Worth. This is the bridge of Generativity. In our generativity and deep caring, we find the modes for translating Personal Worth into actions that operate on behalf of the Collective Worth. I portray a Worthy Society (blending of Personal and Collective Worth) in this series' final essay.

Before considering the sources and dynamics of personal worth, collective worth, and generative worth, I disclose my perspectives (and biases) regarding the nature of Worth.

Social Constructions

As a psychologist, I think that the matter of Worth can be addressed by exploring how individually and collectively we think and feel about Worth individually and collectively. I agree with Marcus Aurelius that Worth relates directly to our personal and collective values. As someone who is oriented toward a "constructivist" rather than "objectivist" view of the world, I am inclined to believe that there is no such thing as an "objective" definition of Worth (or of values), not a single, quantifiable way in which to measure the "amount" of Worth held by an individual or community.

Rather, Worth is a constructed narrative (Bergere and Luckmann, 1966). It is a "story" about important things or outcomes that are highly valued (as Aurelius proposed). It is a multifaceted lens that can be directed to any element in society, be it monetary, societal, or religious. The lens can instead be directed systemically to many elements that are tightly interconnected in a complex societal web. Taking a constructivist and systemic perspective regarding Worth, I propose that the psychology of Worth is interwoven with the economics of Worth and the location of Worth in a specific societal context.

As an arbitrary construct, "Worth" can be used in either a constructive or destructive manner by members of a society. We can seek to be Worthy by trampling over other people or being of service to members of our community. Governmental leaders can determine the Worth of our nation by focusing on the generation of wealth, irrespective of the damage done to people and the environment in pursuit of wealth. These leaders can also gauge national Worth by assessing the quality of life led by the citizens of their country or by determining the extent to which national institutions seek to sustain the global environment on behalf of future generations who will (hopefully) be living on Mother Earth.

Individual and collective worth

I first consider Worth as it relates to an individual's sense of contributing to the world constructively and tangibly. Worth, in this regard, centers on the world of work. How do we achieve a sense of Worth through the work we do? I focus in particular on the matter of control. To what extent do we have control over the work in which we engage? Are the outcomes of our work mostly in our own hands or in the hands of other people? I consider the forces that influence the dynamics of control in our life and point in particular to the forces of capitalism in our society as they determine or at least strongly influence the extent to which we control our work—and our destiny.

While the matter of individual Worth is "worthy" of study in and of itself, our mid-21st-century world provides a sense of Worth at both a collective and personal level. Our community is "worthwhile" or "worthless," as is the country where we reside. There are widely publicized assessments of Worth at a national level, and proclamations in religious institutions of the Worth to be assigned to lives being lived in an ethical and "Godly" fashion and to lives being lived in an "unworthy" and sinful manner.

The collective assessment of Worth is important because of the power residing in collective perspectives on human values and societal outcomes. A collective perspective is also of value because the leverage points to increasing (or decreasing) a personal sense of Worth often reside at the level of community and society. I turn to this second level of analysis regarding the Psychology of Worth in the third essay in this series. Consideration is given to what Alexis de Tocqueville (de Tocqueville, 1835/2000) once identified as the "habits of heart" in a community. These habits engender a sense of Self-Worth. In subsequent essays, I consider ways individuals can engender Worth in other people by giving back to their communities (and families) through acts of generativity.

Before moving to the Psychology of Worth in community and in acts of generativity, I bring out a lens that enables me to focus on the sources of personal Worth and then focus on Worth as it is found in the world of Work.

Sources of Personal Worth

As a social construct, Worth comes in many different forms, serving multiple purposes. It is a construct that dwells in both a sacred and secular/profane domain (Eliade, 1959). Some assume that Worth is established and maintained in the "real" world of hard labor and smart financial management. Other people believe that Worth ultimately is to be found in a divine realm. Worth is established and maintained "by the grace of God" or another entity transcending "real" space and time. Many secular perspectives regarding Worth rely on quantitative measures to determine the "amount" of worth to be found in a person (or in society). Reports regarding Worth are conveyed through numbers and other "objective" benchmarks. Conversely, the sacred perspectives of Worth typically elude measurement. A qualitative appraisal is required, the results of which are often conveyed via "subjective" narratives.

Quantitative/Secular Worth

Some of us choose to slowly accumulate Worth—often in the form of money or reputation. We embrace a "savings account mentality" that might have been instilled in us when we were very young. Our "prudent" parents helped us set up an account at the local bank where we placed the money earned from babysitting or mowing lawns. We learn about "compound interest" and are told that in 30 years our savings account will enable us to buy the moon (or at least "live happily ever after!").

Money is often used to measure Worth because the dollar bill is an "objective", tangible entity. We can feel currency as it is being exchanged for goods and services. Yet, this currency is itself a social construction. The dollar bill no longer represents a small portion of a gold bar in the Fort Knox vault. The gold standard is itself a social construction, for there is no reason to value gold other than valuing its beauty and scarcity. We can return to Marcus Aurelius for wisdom regarding the source of Worth in the arbitrary assignment of value to a specific entity (such as gold) or specific activity (such as serving the underserved).

As young adults, we are told to be patient. Our parent or mentor reassures us that if we work hard, show up every day at work, and be kind to our co-workers, then one day we will be acknowledged as "employee of the month"—and might move up in the organization. We defer gratification to obtain an education or engage in other developmental activities. Our resume will soon be filled with many "self-improvement" indicators. We become a "self-made" man or woman. Worth in this regard is evolutionary. We gain wealth or knowledge incrementally. As a result, it is often hard to determine when we are actually "worthwhile." It might take someone else to identify our "worthiness". They declare, "Hey, you're rich!" They award us an educational degree. Or they chair a committee that determines we are "worthy" of receiving an award or a celebration dinner. More tangibly, we get a salary increase and/or a new, higher position in the company.

At the heart of the matter is an approach to Worth that requires Planning. We anticipate rather than indulge. Our destiny and Worth are ultimately under our control, but it requires diligence and a self-interested focus on opportunity and challenge. Marcus Aurelius is likely to note that we are valuing tangible achievement. Worth is often assessed by examining our pocketbook, bank account, or stock portfolio. The diplomas on our wall indicate that we are "knowledge-worthy." Alternatively (or

additionally), our Worth is measured by gradually accumulated reputation, contributions to the good of society, or simply a life lived graciously.

Qualitative/Sacred Worth

Some of us believe (or assume) that Wealth comes to us all at once. Our Worth resides in secular entrepreneurship. We embrace a spirit of enterprise, preparing to "strike it rich" by introducing that needed product or service. Or we invest in Luck. There might not be a God, but there is Good Fortune. We buy Lottery tickets at our local convenience store and wait for our fortune to arrive by "Luck." We have decided that our destiny and Worth are ultimately not under our control. We have only to "take a chance" and rely on fate and a benevolent universe. There is no winning the jackpot if we never buy a ticket!

Alternatively, Worth might also come from the Grace granted by some beatific divine source. A gift or revelation of a spiritual nature is bestowed on us. We are "worthy" in the eyes of God or some other spiritual presence. Our Worth is created by our presence in a community of faith. We may be born into this community; thus, we are "once-born" into a world of Spiritual Worth. We are baptized and saved, thus finding ourselves "worthy" in the eyes of God. Alternatively, we radically change our perspectives and practices given some spiritual revelation: "I was lost but now I'm found!!" Our conversation leads us to a "twice-born" recognition of Personal Worth (God's grace) and membership in a community of Collective Worth (among the "chosen ones") (James, 1900/1982).

Worth is also to be found in our relationship with the natural world in which we dwell. While animism is usually considered a primitive "religion", we might find that "Mother Nature" has blessed us with a sense of personal Worth. Our precious status is evident in the beauty bestowed on us when walking in the woods or enjoying personal health. Our Worthy presence within a spiritual reality is manifested daily in everything we touch and feel. The world in which we live is saturated with Spiritual and Worth-inducing properties.

There is yet another way in which we find Worth. It comes in the revelation that we are inherently worthwhile, as are all people in our world. Matt Haig (2021) offers this perspective in *The Comfort Book*:

> Your worth is you. Your worth is your presence. Your worth is right there. Your worth isn't something you earn. Your worth isn't something you buy. Your worth isn't something you gain through status on popularity or stomach crunches or having a really chic kitchen. Your worth is your existence. You were born with worth, as all babies are, and that worth doesn't disappear simply because you have grown a little older. You are a human, being.

While this self-affirmation might provide us with comfort, it is also quite fragile. For there is not firm, tangible base for assuming our Worth. No God is telling us that we are "OK" nor is any religious community, financial entity, educational institution, or award committee affirming our self-appraisal.

From this qualitative perspective, when Worth arrives fully-formed at a specific moment, we find ourselves in the business not of Planning, but rather of Hoping. We hope for the revelation of Worth or the arrival of Wealth and Worth in the form of economic benevolence. We anticipate a world of Revolution, not Evolution. While Worth can be slowly acquired in a world where we are born and where we remain throughout our lifetime (the once-born status), we might find instead that Worth arrives

suddenly and changes everything. There is an overwhelming sense of conversion. Our life is reborn (the twice-born status) (James, 1900/1982). Worth is infused everywhere in our world.

Temporary Worth

There is a third way in which Worth arrives at our doorstep. Worth arrives for a short time in a temporary setting. We find a moment of Worth during an inspiring Sunday morning sermon or a ceremony in which we honor a divine presence that operates within us. We also find temporary Worth when we are briefly generous, giving, or (even) forgiving. We "pay it forward" and find that our actions are indeed Worthy. For a brief period, we feel "worthwhile" in our world. We find that it is possible to be "altruistic" and unconcerned about being rewarded for our efforts (though we "know" that our actions are in some ways self-rewarding, given that altruistic and generous acts often come with a neurobiological hit of pleasurable dopamine).

It is in this temporary setting that we "taste" Worth for a moment in a revolutionary manner ("twice-born"). We then return to our "ordinary" life (once-born). We use our "taste of Worth" as a motivator and guide that enables us eventually to accumulate Worth.

Appreciative Worth

Each of these perspectives on Worth requires that we gain some clarity regarding the nature of Worth and how it is "won" or granted to us. We need "specifics." This requires that we engage in a process of self-appreciation. Even if Worth is given to us by some outside source, we must fully appreciate the nature of the gift (grace) given to us. Furthermore, if our Worth derives from what we value, we must act on behalf of these values. With Grace comes an obligation to act on behalf of something greater than ourselves.

A poignant example of this acting for the greater good was offered in a recent *Boston Globe* story (Wen, 2025). This story concerns a whistleblower who was fired by ExxonMobil for revealing the potential misreporting of oil drilling projections. As a climate scientist, Lindsey Gulden was deeply disturbed by the massive environmental impact her company was having on the environments of northeastern Alberta, Canada, and the Permian Basin in Texas. She specifically reported on inaccurate data given by ExxonMobil to the US Government and was dismissed from her job for filing this report.

Gulden shares her difficult decision-making process: ". . .she feared repeating what she saw as a troubling pattern in her way of thinking—blocking out negative information she didn't want to confront. She realized that some of the good things about working at Exxon had blinded her." (Wen, 2025, p. 24) Lindsey Gulden could have looked the other way, remaining blind (as did many co-workers). Yet, her sense of self-worth was at stake. She recalled a statement in her father's obituary: "One's integrity is his only possession of true value." For Gulden, integrity meant reporting on the abuse of data by her corporation. Self-worth ("true value") was on the line, and Lindey Gulden decided that she needed to "think" (and feel) in a new way. A higher level of love (Agape) was winning the day, this being her love of Mother Earth's environment. Other ExxonMobil employees have left the company. Apparently, Agape (or at least the courageous act taken by Lindsey) is contagious, especially when coupled with the challenging of self-worth. Lindsey Gulden has made a difference.

The Ancient Greeks identified this obligation *as Agape*, the love and devotion to something greater than ourselves. Martin Buber (1958), the noted Jewish theologian, wrote about the *I/Thou* experience in which we create a relationship that involves something more than the two of us. Agape and I/Thou represent a powerful *Generative Stance*. This is the stance about which I am devoting four essays in this series. We are Generative when caring deeply about the Worth of children, projects, co-workers, heritage, and community. We are "worthy" in our generation of Worth in other people, on behalf of a Greater Good in our society.

Self-appreciation requires something beyond gratitude and Agape. We must move beyond self-appreciation to appreciation of others. We must attend to and appreciate the Worth of people with whom we interact. In essence, an appreciative perspective concerns a willingness to engage with another person from an assumption of mutual respect, in a mutual search for distinctive competencies and strengths, intending to help them fulfill their aspirations and potential.

The term appreciation itself has several meanings that tend to build on one another; however, appreciation refers first to a clearer understanding of another person's perspective. Their perspective is "worthwhile." We come to appreciate the point of view being offered by our colleague or the challenges that the other person faces. This appreciation and assignment of Worth, in turn, comes not from some detached observation but rather from direct engagement. One gains knowledge from an appreciative perspective by "identifying with the observed." (Harmon, 1990, p. 43)

Appreciation also refers to an increase in Worth or value of not just people but also the world around us. A painting or stock portfolio appreciates. Van Gogh looked at a vase of sunflowers. In appreciating (painting) these flowers, he increased their value for everyone. Van Gogh similarly appreciated and brought new value to his friends through his friendship: "Van Gogh did not merely articulate admiration for his friend: He created new values and new ways of seeing the world through the very act of valuing." (Cooperrider, 1990, p. 123) Returning once again to Marcus Aurelius, we bestow Worth on what we value. We increase the Worth of our friends and our friendship when we value our friends' unique strengths and the special way they relate to us.

Peter Vaill recounts a scene from the movie Lawrence of Arabia in which Lawrence tells a British Colonel that his job at the Arab camp was to "appreciate the situation." (Vaill, 1990, p. 323) By appreciating the situation, Lawrence assessed and helped add credibility to the Arab cause, much as a knowledgeable jeweler or art appraiser can increase the value of a diamond or painting through nothing more than thoughtful appraisal. Lawrence's appreciation of the Arab situation, in turn, helped to produce a new level of courage and ambition on the part of the Arab communities with which Lawrence was associated.

From yet another perspective, the process of appreciation concerns recognition of contributions made by another person. "I appreciate the efforts you have made in getting this project off the ground." Sometimes this appreciation is reflected in the special recognition we give people for a particularly successful project, or in the bouquet or thank you note we leave with an assistant. However, when this form of appreciation is the only kind provided, praise inflation is likely to occur, along with praise addiction and the tendency to keep people who report to us permanently in a needy and, therefore (ironically), one-down position (Kanter, 1977).

Appreciation can be exhibited more constructively through the daily interaction between an administrator and her associates. It involves mutual respect and active engagement, accompanied by a natural flow of feedback and an exchange of ideas. More specifically, appreciation is evident in attitudes regarding the nature and purpose of work. If the administrator "sees work as the means whereby a person creates oneself (that is, one's identity and personality) and creates community (that is, social relations), then the accountability structure becomes one of nurturing and mentoring." (Cummings and Anton, 1990, p. 259)

Each aspect of appreciation adds to our sense of Self-Worth, even when the appreciation is directed toward other people. There are essentially two ways in which we come to appreciate our distinctive strengths. This appreciation comes through self-perception and the perceptions of others. Our self-perceptions of strength are based on the processes of reflection upon our impact on the world in which we live and work, and comparisons we draw with other people who are also impactful. Other people's perceptions are made known to us through direct or indirect feedback. In appreciating their strengths, we find reciprocal assessment by them of our strengths.

A cycle of shared appreciation is engendered. This cycle is of great value in our self-assessment of Worth. In some cases, we know of our strengths and our Worth. In other cases, we do not. Similarly, in some cases, others know of our distinctive strengths and Worth. In other cases, they do not. Given this scheme, there are four possibilities, which we can diagram as a four-pane Window of Strength/Worth.

Window of Strength/Worth

	Known to Other People	**Unknown to Other People**
Known to Myself	**Public Strengths/Worth**	**Protected Strengths/Worth**
Unknown to Myself	**Opaque Strengths/Worth**	**Potential Strengths/Worth**

First, some of our strengths and aspects of our Worth can be known to ourselves and many other people. These are *public strengths and publicly acknowledged Worth*. Second, we might personally be aware of other strengths that we possess. We are aware of being "worthwhile." However, other people might not be aware of these

strengths. We might be hesitant to reveal these strengths because it would be arrogant for us to articulate these strengths. Or the revelation of these strengths might burden us with new expectations. We are modest or we are cautious. These are *protected strengths*. We are aware of these strengths, but they are rarely of much value to us, given that we rarely use them. Our potential Worth is often blunted by our failure to publicly acknowledge or use these strengths. To borrow from the New Testament (Matthew 5:15-16), we hide our light under a bushel.

The third possibility is one in which we are not fully aware of a distinctive strength we possess, whereas other people are aware. They find us to be "worthwhile," but we aren't fully aware of their appraisal. We might even believe that we are "unworthy, given that our strengths are unknown to us. These are *opaque strengths*. We may be aware at some level of these strengths. However, they have never been verified by a trusted source. These strengths are of little value to us until we have become fully acquainted with them. It is often with surprise (and gratification) that someone tells us that we have done a "great job," are "very talented," or are "surprisingly gifted"—especially if this positive appraisal is accompanied by an articulate statement regarding the impact that we have made. Our Worth is determined not just by our talented and gifted performance but also by tangible contribution we have made.

Finally, there are strengths we possess that have never been acknowledged by anyone—including ourselves. These are *potential strengths*. This is the domain of Expanding Worth. It represents the edge of our growth and development. The process of active appreciation expands the size of the public windowpane by providing an opportunity, through giving feedback, for each of us to learn more about our observed strengths. This feedback process also enables us to reflect on the nature of our strengths. The protected windowpane becomes smaller in an appreciative relationship.

We begin to feel more comfortable in sharing personal insights about distinctive strengths. We have less need to protect, because there is more trust in the relationship. The opaque windowpane also shrinks with appreciation. Our friends and co-workers have access to clearer information regarding our distinctive strengths and feel comfortable providing us with this information. Finally, the potential pane shrinks as both the protected and opaque panes diminish. Potential strengths are recognized for the first time by ourselves and those with whom we interact. A cycle of appreciation leads to an expanded sense of self-worth and an increased willingness to focus on the Worth of other people and the collective worth of the community in which we live and work.

One final point. Significant control is found when we engage the appreciative process and expand the public pane in the Window of Strength. We are not passive recipients of information about ourselves that is "leaked out" in the verbal (or often nonverbal) feedback we receive from other people. We are not "frozen" in a reticence to share our impressions of other people with these people. We are not caught in a powerless cycle of restraint and resistance. With appropriate control comes contribution and care regarding other people. With control comes a sense of Worth regarding ourselves and those with whom we relate.

Fundamental Conditions of Worth and Control

The matter of control seems to be showing up throughout our exploration of Worth. Virtually all sources of Worth relate to some sense of personal control. Furthermore, in the secular world, Worth is often established through the Work we do. If we are to be "worthwhile" in the secular world, we must contribute to our community. While God may grace us with Worth, we are often required by God to

work hard and make smart decisions. We are generative in our work with other people by mentoring, preserving, and improving the community. The imperative for us when engaging *Agape* and creating an *I/Thou* relationship is to do something that benefits an important cause. We relate in *I/Thou* by working together on behalf of something valued ("worthwhile"); we find a transcendent love (*Agape*) by acting on behalf of something of value beyond ourselves.

Feeling "worthy"

Given these conditions, I now focus on the generation of Worth at the personal level as it occurs in the work we do and actions we take. I focus in particular on the engagement of work over which we have some control and on the conditions that exist when we do not have control over the work we do. Control resides at the heart of the matter regarding our sense of personal Worth. We feel "worthy" when we hold some control in our life. We feel unworthy when control resides elsewhere. Similarly, our sense of collective Worth is dependent on control. A nation is Worth something to the extent that it retains control over its own boundaries and operations.

How "worthy" do we feel given our current condition in life? To what extent do we have some control over our life and labor? To what extent does the control reside outside our life? Has the world of work so invaded our life and sense of self that we can no longer differentiate ourselves from the work we are doing? To what extent do we find our community and nation unable to control impinging forces? Are the conditions of VUCA-Plus (volatility, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity, turbulence, and contradiction) so powerful that our leaders feel they are impotent in their guidance (Bergquist, 2020)?

It is a matter not only of the actual extent to which we have some control over our life and labor, but also the extent to which we *perceive* that we have some control. Similarly, our perception of control determines our attitudes about leadership in our community and nation. It is the "psychology" of Worth (constructivism) rather than the "reality" of Worth (objectivism) that wins the day. We have seen this vividly demonstrated in recent election results from countries worldwide. To what extent is this an accurate perspective? How realistic are we about our ability to tilt the scale of control in our favor?

As we will see, these perspectives are informed and shaped in part by two powerful forces (capitalism and individualism) and by two counter-forces (community and collectivism). The relative weight of each force strongly influences our sense of Worth individually and within our community. The countering sense of community and a concern for the collective welfare often offset the abuse inherent in capitalism and individualism. On the other hand, under conditions of VUCA-Plus, we are inclined to escape into a self-serving, isolated, and profit-driven world of distorted reality and a false sense of Serenity (Bergquist, 2025).

Control resides at the heart of any balancing of individual and collective, or balancing of capitalism and community. The key question to ask is: Where is the locus of control? Does it reside within the person's or institution's domain or outside this domain?

External locus of control vs. internal locus of control

The *Locus of Control* concept was originally formulated by Julian Rotter (1966). This concept regarding human viewpoints begins with the proposal that some people favor an internal locus of control, while others favor an external locus. For those with an internal perspective, an assumption is made that they have considerable influence over their fate and impact in the world. These men and women believe they

are “captains of their ship.” Therefore, they are accountable for the outcomes of their labor. By contrast, those with an external perspective believe that powerful forces operating outside of themselves determine their behavior and labor outcomes. They do not feel accountable for their behavior. Instead, they point to conditions out in the world as the primary determinants of any negative impact. As Flip Wilson, the comedian, proclaimed: “The devil made me do it!”

External forces often control many members of our society. They are required to work to generate income for themselves and/or their family. Other people determine the nature and duration of their work. They are subject to abuse that they can’t readily address themselves. It is quite understandable that these people might feel helpless and experience hopelessness (often leading to depression and sometimes even to suicide).

Push is often prevalent. They are pushed into their behavior—maybe not by the Devil but certainly by forces that can be just as malevolent as the Devil. They might escape from one controlled reality only to find a new reality that requires their accommodation. Many years ago, Lillian Rubin (1992) wrote about their stumbling through multiple repressive settings in her book appropriately called *Worlds of Pain*. She focused on the difficult, externally controlling setting of working-class residents of Oakland, California. At about the same time, Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb (1993) wrote about the hidden injuries of class. It is hard to feel “worthy” or to avoid psychological (and often physical) injury that comes with the absence of any control over your life.

The full story of control for the working class is not quite this simple. Ultimately, they have considerable control over their labor and life. Those in Oakland’s working class often came to this California community searching for a job. They may have found work on the docks of Oakland, where one finds many stacks of shipping containers. Some level of Pull is to be found in their life stories. The Push of economic necessity compelled their decisions.

However, these working-class citizens of Oakland (and those featured in Sennett and Cobb’s book on social class) were ultimately responsible for their working and living conditions. Their often-occurring alcoholism and spousal abuse were under their control. Unlike the slaves throughout history, who were captured and placed in bondage, those in America’s working class are ultimately free—unless there have been threats by employers leading to the loss of freedom on the part of these men and women.

The decisions made by many other workers during the modern era and today during the postmodern era are equally as complex. It is not just a matter of internal vs. external locus of control. Assuming an internal locus of control, some workers feel they are free to frame their work experiences as either positive or negative. As Stephanie Land (2019) notes in *Maid* (her best-selling book and television series), her happiness might be just as great as the happiness of the people for whom she is working.

It is possible to be just as happy doing the hard work as a maid as doing the stressful work of those who are paying for the maid service (Land, 2019, p. 141):

> Most of my clients had these things—the things I yearned for in those dark nights sitting up along—and they did not seem to enjoy life any more than I did. Most worked long hours, away from the homes they fought so hard to pay for, with even father commutes than mine.

For Stephanie Land, there seems to be happiness in imagining the acquisition of some possessions found among the households she services. She dreamed of building a home that would compare with those

she was cleaning. Finishing a productive day of work can itself be gratifying. As vividly portrayed in *The Help*, Katheryn Stockett's (2009) novel and movie, we see this sense of aspiration among the African American women who are cleaning the homes of their White employers. For both Lamp and the women portrayed in *The Help*, there was also occasional work-related Flow—the highly motivating state described by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990). Women of *The Help* took pride (and some delight) in ordering the disheveled rooms of their less diligent employers.

Flow is created in the threshold existing between boredom and anxiety. Taking on the task of cleaning up a household mess can be neither boring nor overwhelming (anxiety-producing). The maids can do the job; however, it requires the capacity to critically inspect and organize (not unlike skills required of a corporate executive). Flow for these women (and C-Suite occupations) involves not just *Achievement,* but also *Aspiration*, which concerns envisioning work being done to achieve both short-term work-related goals and long-term personal goals. Flow is often realized when aspiration is coupled with achievement. Work can truly be meaningful, even under conditions of economic necessity. Harsh external control might be imposed by an unfeeling and "sloppy" employer who wants her messy bedroom cleaned up; however, the work can still be gratifying (internal locus) if framed as an opportunity for Flow.

Finally, there is the matter of finding temporary moments and settings where one can experience full control. There are valued moments and settings where someone in the working class can find sanctuary. The maids featured in both *Maid* and *The Help* often found sanctuary when returning to their own homes after a long day of work. Stephanie Land and the maids featured in *The Help* found time to be with their family and in their supportive community. Stephanie had the opportunity every evening to be with her family (especially her daughter). Like those in *The Help*, Land was living in two homes—the home in which she worked and the home in which she lived. Like many of us in contemporary times, Stephanie and the African American maids in *The Help* were struggling not with loneliness, but rather with finding quality time with those they love.

Unfortunately, it is hard to sustain a positive perspective on the lives being led by many working-class people. Workers portrayed in Rubin's *Worlds of Pain* can never find sanctuary. Even Stephanie Land and our protagonists in *The Help* suffered from the imposed external control. Stephanie found at the end of the day that she was living with a profound sense of hopelessness. Even with the ultimate possession of freedom and moments of happiness, achievement, and Flow, Land (2019, p. 158) found that she was:

> . . .walked along a deep precipice of hopelessness. Each morning brought a constant, lip-chewing stress over making it to work and getting home without my car breaking down. My back ached constantly. I dampened my hunger pangs with coffee. It felt impossible to climb out of this hole.

The matter of control becomes even more complex. And the experience of being in charge of one's life becomes more elusive.

Diverse sources of control

Stephanie Land was employed by a clearing service that hired her to work in many households. She didn't have to like her work. She had to be only minimally nice to her temporary employees. Stephanie just had to do the "dirty work" each day. While Stephanie could form a thoughtful and caring relationship with some of her clients, this was not a job requirement. Furthermore, her independence

ended up being a side benefit for Stephanie Land—she could write about these caring homes (and dysfunctional homes) in her best-selling book.

By contrast, many people employed in the service industry have to "like" their job. They are accountable for the smile on their face when serving their customers. These service workers have to uphold the appearance of positivity in the workplace. This requirement of positive appearance by the Harvey Girls serves up an important dimension of control that should not be overlooked. There can be an internal management of one's heart in the life and labor of those providing services.

I can point to the work of Arlie Hochschild (1983), who wrote about how flight attendants (and other human service workers) not only learn how to serve their customers politely, but also learn how to change their own emotional state so that they will "really" like the people they are serving. At day's end, this means that the women and men providing this customer service might be unable to trust their emotions regarding other people in their lives. They may similarly be managing these emotions. If this is the case, control of work (and life) has become subtly (and powerfully) externalized. They are now dancing someone else's tune—and might not even be aware that this is the case. Their "heart is being managed" by an external entity in the workplace.

In sum, there might be little room for a justifiable internal locus of control when considering work lives. Those dwelling in the demanding world of work might not be in charge. The matter of happiness, achievement, aspiration, and Flow might finally have to be addressed not as a work-related issue, but rather as something with much deeper origins. We may need to take a theological perspective regarding Worth.

As human beings, we are "blessed" and "cursed" with the capacity of transcendence. We can look down upon our life. We see it without purpose or possibility. We know it will come to an end one day. Is living this meaningless life really "worth" it? Emotional costs associated with this transcendence often outweigh the emotional benefits of momentary happiness, especially when one is living in a world that does not seem to allow us much control. It is indeed existentially challenging to find gratification (let alone Flow) in doing a dance when we are never allowed to call the tune. It is hard to feel "worthy" when we are not worthy of the right to control our destiny.

Another theological perspective can be offered. Feeling "Worthy" and in charge is possible, even under difficult working-class conditions. Some of us believe they are "blessed" by a divinely based sense of life-purpose. These spiritually inspired workers believe that "God" has placed them in charge of their fate. They are obliged, in turn, to work on behalf of the greater good. For them, it is a privilege to be working with customers and/or an organization they admire. These dedicated men and women are "worth" something because they serve other "worthy" people and an organization that is "worth" being served. They managed to find joy and gratitude in their heart, which, in turn, alters the way they view and live with their work. The value and meaningfulness ("worthiness") of work might have penetrated deeply into their mind and heart, and perhaps even into their spirit and soul. As we are about to see, this spiritually based vision of life-value and Worth was often grown in the soil of capitalism and nourished by the light of individualism.

Diverse reasons for control

In this essay, I am focusing on the world of work and the matter of control within a work environment. However, most of our lives are spent away from work. We relate to people and retain a certain amount

of control in our interpersonal relationships that are not work-related. Behavioral economists (e.g. Huettel, 2013) differentiate between these two domains, the work environment being based on what these economists call a *Market Exchange,* and the relationships outside of the work environment being primarily based on a *Social Exchange*. We pay for the person mowing our lawn (market exchange) unless it is being mowed by our partner or child (social exchange). We pull out our credit card after eating dinner at a nearby restaurant (market exchange), but pull out a bouquet, bottle of wine, or "hostess" gift when arriving at the home of our parents or neighbors for Thanksgiving (social exchange).

Our work-based relationships are primarily *Transactional*, meaning that each person participating in this relationship expects to benefit in some tangible way from the exchange. By contrast, our nonwork relationships are not benefit-driven. While no word is commonly used as an antonym for transactional, I would reintroduce the term, *Autotelic.* No tangible benefit inherently derives from the relationship—it is self (auto)-purposing (telic).

While the autotelic relationship might be engaged to bring about pleasant experiences (often inducing a dopamine hit), this is not always the case. The relationships might "thrive" on contention, competition. and even feelings of anger. What then is the purpose of a relationship that is ostensibly self-purposing? As with many other autotelic behaviors, the nonwork relationship might exist for the playful experience it provides. After all, human beings ("*homo ludens*") show a proclivity toward play (Huizinga, 2008).

Among the other intangible benefits that might accrue are the offering of unconditional support, the willingness to listen to the other person's narratives, and the accumulation of a shared history (found among long-term acquaintances). Many other intangible benefits might accrue; however, the one explicit purpose to be found in most autotelic relationships is a continuation of this relationship. We are "kind" and "courteous" not only to align with accepted social norms but also to ensure that someone doesn't go away.

Most of us are involved in both work-related and non-work-related relationships. We sometimes blend them. We are also concerned with both market and social exchange, sometimes merging them. Yet, with the pull toward both transactional and autotelic relationships, greater value is often placed on one over the other. Some of us assign the greatest Worth to relationships we establish with people involved with us in completing a project.

Most of our friendships are established in the workplace or at a local community-service organization. We begin with the assumption that the exchange in which we are about to engage is market-based. There is something of tangible benefit to be gained for each of us. To be successful in this exchange, we must hone our cognitive IQ. We must find ways to acquire additional, competitive knowledge regarding the sector in which we are engaging during a market exchange.

In other instances, the greatest value (Worth) is placed on relationships with family members, friends, and those sharing an advocational interest (such as model building or quilting). For those people who are oriented toward autotelic relationships, work becomes just a means to an end. An assumption is made that relationships should exist for something other than task accomplishment. The relative "success" of a work group is based not so much on the outcome of the task as on the quality of relationships among those working on the task. No "success" is to be found at the end of a project if everyone wants to get away from everyone else as soon as possible. To succeed in this human

enterprise, we must hone our emotional IQ (Goleman, 1995) and find ways to learn more about the people with whom we are interacting in the social exchange.

We find that market or social exchange preferences can be found at a cultural level. For instance, my work with fellow Americans is often most eagerly engaged when I immediately place in a printed agenda or bullet-pointed plan of action in front of us. I recall many business relationships that initially are “all business” (market exchange). A dinner out on the town (social exchange) only occurs after a productive workday. Trust is based on demonstrated competence (Bergquist, Betwee, and Meuel, 1995).

Conversely, I find that it is “rude” in my work with Asian clients to begin by talking about the work to be done (market exchange). One starts with a lengthy “getting-to-know-you” conversation over a cup of tea, at a lengthy banquet, or while touring a temple or public garden. I find that when trust is established via a social exchange. Trust is established based on clarity regarding sustained intentions (Bergquist, Betwee, and Meuel, 1995). Emphasis is placed on “habits of the heart” (Bellah, and others, 1985)—contrasting with habits of the mind expected in a culture focused on market exchange. Firm work-based alliances can be formed based on the trust in intentions. Clear intentions are critical in a social exchange culture.

An emphasis on social exchange was vividly and poignantly displayed in one of my long-term business relationships. An Asian colleague provided substantial financial support to the graduate school where I served as President. The loaned money was “insured” by only a handshake between us. In turn, I would agree to provide teaching and consulting services for my colleague at a moment's notice. I immediately permitted him to translate several of my books into his Asian language. Without hesitation, I permitted him to feature me in his promotional materials. Market and social exchange were fully integrated. Our relationship was transactional, but based on a foundation of powerful, mutual trust.

The distinctions drawn between transactional and autotelic relationships, and between market and social exchange, are important to acknowledge when considering control and Worth. Those of us who lean towards transactional relationships and market exchanges are inclined to focus on controlling these interactions. We want to know the parameters of the relationship and the extent to which we have any control over these parameters.

We are “worthy” in a transactional relationship to the extent that we influence what occurs in the market exchange. In some cultures, deliberations (bartering) are extensive. The outcomes of these deliberations help to define the level of one’s success and ultimately the value (Worth) of this relationship. Ironically, if one chooses NOT to barter, this is a sign that the other person is not “worthy” of being in this transactional relationship. A long, complex barter is often considered evidence of both parties to the barter being Worthy.

Bartering is prevalent in premodern societies where craftsmanship is valued (“worthy”) and high-quality service is desired (“worthwhile”) (Bergquist, 1993). Individual items are produced (rather than there being mass assembly-line production). Service to other people is tailored to their needs (often based on close neighborly knowledge of this person and their needs). The small country store that provides everything reigns supreme--for the large mall and virtual marketplace are yet to come.

The provider and the customer both conclude that they have sufficient control in the premodern setting because the parameters (especially social norms) are clear and consistent for both parties. Furthermore, the market exchange is easily blended with a social exchange, for the transactions occur within a close

premodern community. “Worthy” relationships are readily sustained. Successful market exchanges are not hard to achieve.

Then comes modernity and post-modernity with VUCA-Plus conditions disrupting the transactions and market exchanges (Bergquist, 1993)! Market and social exchange break apart, with transactions occurring among strangers or even among people relating to one another in a virtual setting. There is no certainty of control by either the provider or customer, in part because the exchange often extends across cultural boundaries and at great distances. Mass production requires mass marketing. We must convince someone to buy our newly produced chair because we have many chairs to sell (Bergquist, 1993).

Trust is difficult to establish under conditions of a hard sell by a stranger or virtual avatar. Legal forms replace a handshake of Trust, while resumes replace personal knowledge of another person’s background, competence, and intentions. Given manufactured and alternative realities, we can’t even trust the legal form or resume. The Worth of another person is elusive when we have no control over the veracity of information received about this person.

Our sense of personal Worth is also hard to establish, for we are forced to “hard-sell” our competencies and intentions to strangers. As Ken Gergen (2000) has proposed, most of us suffer from post-modern “multiphrenia.” We choose to display so many different selves that it is hard to find any of them to be “authority.” None of these conveniently created selves is “Worthy” of being valued by us (or other people). Market exchange becomes a challenge.

Social exchange is also now in trouble, as we move from small communities and close neighborhoods to a world in which there might be temporary “lifestyle enclaves” (Bellah, and others, 1985) that provide community but no sustaining community where we live or even where we work. The “temporary society,” predicted by Bennis and Slater (1968) many years ago, had morphed into a “virtual society” thanks to the Internet and mobile communication devices. Our social exchanges tend now to be based on temporary (often transactional) relationships as well as relationships engaged on a computer screen or handheld device. Trust is established minimally via text messaging; control comes through the manipulation of reality. Worth is bought and sold on the digital marketplace.

Conclusions

While much of the deterioration in relationships and Worth can be attributed to the new technologies, we must not ignore the roots of this deterioration in the two-century-long reign of capitalism in American life (and in the life of many other societies). With the emergence of capitalism, we find the premodern clarity and consistency regarding control giving way to the modern (and eventually postmodern) loss of this clarity and consistency. In the next essay, I specifically consider the ways in which capitalism has challenged our sense of control in the workplace and accompanying sense of personal Worth.

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