

Reflections on "Learning to Work"
Virginia Valian
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"Learning to Work" (Valian, 1977) is for people with a work problem - people who do not work as much or as effectively as they would like, who fall short of their aspirations, and who do not fit the canonical mold of a successful person. People without a work problem can and do enjoy the article (it's original, insightful, and funny) and can learn something from it. But it's for people who have a work problem.

The message of "Learning to Work" is: you can perform meaningful work even if you are riven by self-doubt and anxiety; you can work even if you have unresolved emotional problems; you can accomplish something even on 15 minutes a day. We tend not to think so. We tend to think that even semi-productive people are anxiety-free. We tend to think that people's insides and outsides exactly correspond, and that their insides are completely consistent. If you have a work problem, or want to help someone who does, you will have to challenge those tendencies of thought.

One woman who read "Learning to Work" asked a friend of mine, "Is this Virginia Valian the same Virginia Valian who's a psycholinguist?" It was inconceivable to her that the Virginia Valian whose work she knew was the same Virginia Valian who could sometimes only work 5 minutes a day. It was more likely that there were two people named Virginia Valian. Yet we need only look around - very carefully - to see that at least some people are complicated.

If you have a work problem, "Learning to Work" will not turn you into your beau ideal of a productive and successful person. It will not remove your self-doubts, resolve your inner conflicts, wipe away your anxieties, or eliminate your periods of mental paralysis. It will not wave a magic wand and turn you into someone who works effortlessly for hours every day. (I know, what good is it?)

What "Learning to Work" offers is a detached way of examining emotions about work and a few explicit tools for how to work. If you have a work problem, you will have to face up to who you are (no matter how embarrassing you appear to yourself) and devise a work program for that person (no matter how foolish you feel doing it). What's more embarrassing and foolish, clocking in with someone every day because you're so dependent, or not finishing your thesis?

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Working It Out

23 Women Writers, Artists, Scientists,
and Scholars Talk About Their Lives and Work

EDITED BY

Sara Ruddick and Pamela Daniels

With a foreword by Adrienne Rich



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Learning to Work

Virginia Valian



IN THIS PAPER I describe a particular work problem, its symptoms and my cure for it. The problem is a luxury. It can only surface if one has been relatively well-educated and if the work in question intrinsically allows for self-development and self-fulfillment. In general, then, only a small minority of people—those who are doing, or preparing to do, work they care about—can have the problem. The problem consists of being unable to work, not because of external pressures such as lack of time, but because of internal problems, which can be exacerbated or disguised by external pressures.

I discuss work problems from a personal point of view; however, two small incidents, both of which occurred more than six years ago, will illustrate why I came to think that work problems have more than personal significance.

Incident I: I was talking to a friend, a novelist, who had a work problem which he thought stemmed from living in an oppressive society. How could he write novels when the government was killing people in Vietnam? I couldn't believe that was the source of his work problem, because I knew it wasn't the source of mine, even though I was spending almost all of my time in anti-war politics. I was sure that even if the revolution happened the next day, and a politically perfect society immediately came into being, I would still have a work problem; so would he, and so would lots of other people. In fact, more people than ever before would have a work problem, because now *everybody* would have the same freedom from want and autonomy in work that only a few had before the revolution. I thought it was important to work for political equality, but that it was also important to understand the psychology of work.

Incident II: At a feminist meeting on the subject of women and socialism, a woman was discussing a waitress at a local restaurant. She described the waitress as completely dedicated to her job and to pleasing her employer, a perfectionist who worked long, hard hours for insufficient pay, without complaint. Then she said, "That's just the kind of person we need to work for socialism after the revolution." I was appalled. Was this waitress to be a slave her entire life? I hoped that her life would change after the revolution, that she would work because she wanted to and not because she was driven by a puritan ethic. Nor did I want to view people only as workers for socialism; I wanted people to get something out of society as well as contribute to it.

The questions raised by these incidents are complex. I don't have answers to them. The more I talked to people about work, however, the more it seemed that everyone had crazy, often punitive, attitudes toward it. The combination of political discussions of work and my own severe work problem led to my search for a personal solution, which I will describe in the following pages.

I had had a work problem all my life, but I didn't know it until college. The symptoms in college were straightforward. I never studied, I seldom went to class; yet I defined myself as a future psychologist and had no questions about the desirability of doing meaningful intellectual work for the rest of my life. I did so poorly in college that I did not apply to any graduate schools; I was not interested in going to any school that would accept me. To test my seriousness of purpose, I enrolled instead as a special student at a good school in Boston. I reached a nadir; of the three courses I registered for, I dropped two and failed the third. I drew a blank whenever I considered my future. At that point, a kind friend intervened. She helped me get a job as a technician and urged me to begin psychoanalysis, which I did six months later.

Two years after finishing college I felt ready to begin graduate study at a school that would accept me; the school was suggested by the same kind friend. Analysis had made, and continued to make, a difference. I attended classes, I studied periodically, I applied for and got a fellowship that assured me of support for three years. I ran experiments. On the other hand, I often spent days in which I did nothing but read novels and sleep. I wrote my papers only at the last minute, and I never once worked an intellectual problem through to its conclusion. I did enough to get by.

By the summer of 1969, I was twenty-seven years old, involved in the anti-war movement, and living in Cambridge in a \$140/month apartment with the man I still live with (a philosopher without a work problem). I had finished analysis the previous year, and had just finished the research for my thesis. It was time to write it. By the end of the year, however, I was spending all my time doing political work or sleeping, and no time working on my thesis. In January 1970 I resumed therapy (for eight months) because my future suddenly seemed as empty as it had before I had begun analysis. I knew that as things stood I could not write my thesis, and if I didn't write my thesis and get my degree, I didn't know what else I would do.

During those eight months it became clear to me that I did not want to become a full-time political person, because it was too limiting. I wanted to live an integrated life that included doing intellectual work,

having close relationships, being politically active, and developing other interests such as playing the piano. But that integrated life couldn't happen unless I got rid of my work problem. A few days before my last therapy session I began thinking about how to get rid of it.

THE PROGRAM. Masters and Johnson's book, *Human Sexual Inadequacy*, gave me the key. In it, Masters and Johnson stressed that sexuality is a natural physiological process, with orgasm as a natural end point. They were concerned with the internal roadblocks that prevented full sexual enjoyment; their clients, for example, consistently reported that they felt like observers rather than participants in their own sexuality, that they were always thinking of the hoped-for end point instead of enjoying the activity for itself. Together with constant discussion sessions, therapy took the form of breaking the sexual act down into its components and asking clients to begin by just touching each other, with no expectations or demands. The process was then slowly reassembled, with couples moving on to the next component only after they were comfortable with the preceding one.

It occurred to me that mental work is like sex in certain respects, although at first it seemed a bizarre comparison. The most important aspect of the analogy was the idea that work was natural. I had always thought of work as something I had to make myself do, something I didn't intrinsically enjoy. The analogy suggested that I was getting in my own way, that I was preventing myself from enjoying myself. It wasn't that I had to learn somehow to force myself to work, but rather to remove the roadblocks in the way of enjoyment.

I continued the analogy and decided I needed a similar form of therapy. I needed to break the process down, starting at the least threatening level, slowly building up and assembling the whole, and discussing how I felt and what I was learning as I was doing it. The program thus had something in common with behavioral modification techniques, but it was also different in a crucial way. The common feature was starting with a small, imaginable, doable piece of behavior and working up; the crucial difference was the absence in my program of any idea of punishment or reward. In my system, the intrinsic pleasure I now believed was obtainable through work would be reward enough; an external reward would imply that work was not rewarding in and of itself. The same was true for punishment: it was punishment enough not to work. An external punishment would imply that the work itself was not enjoyable, that I needed punishment to force me to work.

I decided that I wanted to work every day, because I wanted to experience that constancy of working that I had always denied myself, and because I thought that once I had my work problem under control I would want to work every day, even if only for a short time, and I wanted to approach the ideal state as nearly as possible at the very beginning. I also knew that if I were going to work every day, it had to be in small amounts or I would never manage it.

First I had to decide whether to work a set amount of time every day, or to work until I had completed a set amount of work every day. I chose time. A page can take an entire day to write, or only ten minutes, depending on how difficult it is. I knew that sitting at my desk concentrating and working for a whole day was beyond me. With a set amount of time I would know that I could stop, and exactly when the time would be up. That knowledge helped make it easier to start. Others with work problems have described to me the images they associate with working. They all have in common the theme of relinquishing control of oneself: of being a slave, or going into a tomb, being buried alive, being shut off from the world. The anxiety about working is reduced when the time period is fixed.

After opting for quantity of time rather than quantity of work, I needed a figure. I talked about it with J, the man I live with, and he suggested three hours. Three hours! The very thought gave me an anxiety attack. How about two hours? Two hours! The very thought . . . One hour? More reasonable, but still not possible. Half an hour? Getting closer but still too much. Fifteen minutes? Fifteen minutes. Fifteen minutes. Now there was a figure I could imagine. A nice solid amount of time, an amount of time I knew I could live through every day.

Of course, people laugh when I say fifteen minutes. What can you accomplish in fifteen minutes? Well, more than you would think. Fifteen minutes with no interruptions, no pencil sharpening, no trips to the bathroom, no trips to the kitchen, no telephone calls; fifteen minutes of solid work can be very profitable. I didn't plan to stay at fifteen minutes for the rest of my life, but it seemed like a good place to start.

In my first fifteen minutes I confronted my thesis. I figured out what different types of work were immediately involved in finishing it: 1) a linguistic analysis of a speech corpus; 2) background reading for an introduction; 3) writing the introduction; and 4) writing a methods section. I assessed how great a block I had against each of these activities, and decided to start by spending fifteen minutes analyzing the corpus (low anxiety) and fifteen minutes either doing background

reading or writing the methods section (high anxiety). By day number two I was going to be working half an hour—fifteen minutes on one thing, fifteen minutes on another. Soon I moved up to a total of forty-five minutes—fifteen minutes analyzing, fifteen reading, and fifteen writing the methods section. The moments of extreme anxiety were still to come. They appeared when I had done enough background reading to begin writing the introduction. I then realized that even fifteen minutes was out of the question, for by this time I knew just how long fifteen minutes was. So I scaled it down to five minutes.

I still remember that first five minutes. I didn't do it until the evening. I announced to J that I was going to begin my five minutes. I sat down and set the timer for five minutes. I think it was such a momentous event because it was a commitment. It wasn't this particular five minutes, but all the future ones that this one represented. I worked steadily, though with difficulty and anxiety; I knew, however, that I could last out five minutes of difficulty and anxiety, so I continued. At last the bell went off and I collapsed. I went into the bedroom and threw myself on the bed, breathing hard and feeling my heart race. It was really a big deal. After that evening it wasn't such a big deal, and I gradually worked my way up to fifteen minutes.

RULES AND RATIONALES OF THE PROGRAM. The first rule was that the fifteen-minute period had to be spent solely in working. My feeling of accomplishment depended on having a chunk of time that I did not fritter away in any way. I also had to learn that losing myself in my work was not dangerous. Most important, I noticed that I tended to stop working the minute I hit a difficult problem. Working in fifteen-minute chunks meant that occasionally I hit such a difficult problem in the middle of the required fifteen minutes and had to learn how to deal with it. Sometimes it simply required a little more thinking; sometimes it meant I would have to read something or talk to someone; sometimes it meant a lot more thinking. What I learned, though, was that I could deal with problems and didn't have to give up whenever I encountered them.

The second rule was that official increases in the amount of working time were limited to one fifteen-minute chunk at a time, with a break of any length available after every chunk. Fifteen minutes was the longest time I could guarantee being able to work solidly without fidgeting. I didn't want to make a rule about working twenty minutes straight, then twenty-five, and so on, because I was sure ahead of time that I wouldn't be able to do it. But I could imagine myself working four fifteen-minute chunks during the day. I was cautious: I disal-

lowed increasing work by more than one chunk at a time because I wanted to make sure I was really comfortable at a given level before going on to another.

What is so special about fifteen minutes? I don't know if it was just a good amount for me, or if there is something about the thinking cycle of most people that makes for a reduction in concentration about every fifteen minutes. Now, I only use the fifteen-minute-chunk approach when I'm having particular difficulty working on something. The main virtue of fifteen minutes for me was that it was long enough for me to get something done and short enough to be sure I could get through it.

The third rule—in some ways the most important one for me—was to work every day. I do not think this rule is essential for everyone; it depends on one's personality. For example, when I quit smoking (in January 1970), I knew I could never smoke another cigarette for the rest of my life. That knowledge meant that I didn't have to make endless decisions about taking just one cigarette, or any other plan. I could never smoke again, period. Similarly, by having an inviolable rule that I must work every day I didn't have to play games with myself and wonder whether or not I would actually work that day. I knew I would, even if it would be at two in the morning. Therein lay some of the value of fifteen minutes. No matter how sleepy, or tired, or anything else I was, I could always work for fifteen minutes; no excuse could rule out fifteen minutes.

The fourth rule was to ignore thoughts about the end product and how the end product would be received. I could too easily find myself inhabiting a fantasy world in which my thesis led to fame and renown. Not only was this eventuality extremely unlikely, but it led me further away from, rather than closer to, my goal of discovering the pleasures of the process of work. I wanted to work not because of the supposed effect of my work on others, but for the gratifications, to me, of working. My fantasies made the reality of my barely begun thesis look so shabby I didn't want to have anything to do with it. At the beginning, then, I refused to dwell on actually finishing my work and concentrated instead on doing it.

That was it, as far as rules go. I told all my friends about my new program; everyone was interested, but no one with work problems was tempted to try it. It was too everyday, too gradually incremental. Others preferred to try to write their thesis in a sixteen-hour-a-day blitz of working until it got done. I understood. I had always preferred the hare to the tortoise myself. Now, though, it didn't seem attractive to me to be the hare, just self-destructive. In the course of following

my program I learned how well the myth of the hare and the tortoise captured my ambivalence about competition, winning, and losing. I examined more deeply the role I wanted work to play in my life, and the role it did play in other people's lives. I also learned how not working had stunted my intellectual development.

FEARS AND FEELINGS. I approached work usually with two sorts of feelings. One was anger and resentment that I had to work; the other was a sense of competition as a life-or-death struggle—either I would kill others or they would kill me. Winning meant killing, losing meant being killed. Winning meant betraying the lives of those who were failures in the eyes of the world; it also meant that others would be jealous and envious of me, would want to destroy me. Losing meant that I was pathetic and unworthy. For most of my life my way of coping with that picture was neither to win nor to lose completely, to be smart and clever but to accomplish nothing. In other words, I could not renounce the picture, but I could embody the contradiction it evoked.

There were many reflections of my fears. For example, when I started my program, I preferred to work when J was around. I usually asked him to time me. His timing me served the function of sanctioning the act of working. I shared the responsibility of working with J, who was in effect telling me that it was all right to work, that nothing bad would happen to me, that he would still love me, that he would not be destroyed by my working.

Another example was my handicap fantasy, in which I imagined that I was handicapped, usually physically, and then was able to succeed. My being handicapped liberated me. After all, who could feel jealous of me if I became paralyzed from the neck down? I had two ways of implementing the fantasy in real life. One way, the "overwhelming odds syndrome," allows you to work if the deck is heavily (but not impossibly) stacked against you. What you have to feel is that for anyone else it would probably be impossible, but that you will just manage to get by. Thus, there was a magic amount of time before a deadline by which I could start to work. Not too soon or I would just waste time until I got close enough, and not too late or I would give up altogether. At just the right point I could feel that it would be a major achievement for me simply to get the assignment done; anything over and above that was a bonus.

The second implementation of the handicap fantasy was quite frightening to me, because it was completely unconscious and out of my willful control. It was a mental paralysis that prevented me from

being able to think. Before analysis, the paralysis was an almost constant condition; afterward it came and went. I did not understand for some time that I was responsible for the paralysis, not just a victim of it. It occurred in the context of an argument—either an actual argument with someone else, or an implicit argument with the author of a book or paper. I wanted to win the argument so much that my aggression frightened me. In response to the aggression, I turned off my mind and refused to allow it combat. I gave myself the only handicap I could. I would lose, and feel miserable, but at least I didn't destroy anybody.

I had exaggerated feelings of both my own power and my own fragility, to which the mental paralysis contributed in interesting ways. I discovered, every time my mind failed and I lost an argument, that I could survive after all, that I was not as fragile as I thought; this left intact the notion that if my mind had worked, it would have been curtains for the other person. Once I started winning arguments I discovered that the other person in fact could walk away undamaged, that arguments were not as symbolic for others as they were for me, or that even if they were, others would not suffer any more than I did. Once I started losing arguments, not because of mental paralysis but because I was wrong, or didn't know enough, or think fast enough, I discovered that losing was not serious, either.

I am convinced that most academics have the same kill-or-be-killed attitude as I did, but they usually cope with it differently: they try to kill. The widespread presence of such behavior among academics makes it hard to view it as crazy. Can everybody be crazy? Yes. The pervasiveness of the kill-or-be-killed attitude also makes it difficult to discover viable alternatives. If they're really out to kill you, don't you have to kill back? No. When an argument is no longer viewed as a power struggle, when winning or losing no longer symbolizes killing or being killed, it doesn't matter whether you win or lose; what matters is what the argument allows you to understand that you did not understand before.

Most academics, of course, are men. I think the stereotype of men as destructively competitive is true. There are enough men who do not fit the stereotype (or who want to escape it) to make life bearable, but there are few people of either sex whose attitudes toward competition are worthy of emulation. The problem is not with competition and feeling competitive, but with the interpretation and generalization of winning and losing. Feeling good about winning is fine, as long as what you feel good about is limited to what you *did* and does not involve an estimation of your worth as a person. Feeling bad about

losing is perhaps all right if you could have done better and your feeling bad is limited to that and, again, does not involve a judgment about your worth as a person.

Related to the fear of winning and losing was fear of having my own point of view. I had felt from childhood that I was separate from other people because I was different. While I prized my individuality, I also wanted to get rid of it. I wanted to be like other people so that they would accept me as one of them. Another reason, then, for not liking to argue with people was that it confirmed the idea that I was an oddball. The conflict between wanting to be myself and wanting to be like others also came out in how I viewed other's work. I often could not understand what other people were saying because I was afraid of losing myself and my own view in the process. If I were to figure out exactly what someone was saying, it was possible that I would not find anything wrong and would end up agreeing with them, abandoning my own former point of view, and by extension, myself. Work on my thesis helped reduce that fear. I did not get swallowed up by going deeply into someone's theory; when I had to modify my position, it was bearable.

For much of the time, however, I thought I had two choices. I could be myself or I could be like everybody else. It never occurred to me that I could be like others in some ways and unique in other ways. It also never occurred to me that others might prize the same aspects of my individuality that I did. Once I recognized that the conflict between being myself and being like others was largely of my own construction, it stopped being much of a problem.

I mentioned earlier that I had two feelings about work. In addition to feeling competitive, I felt resentful: work was an onerous obligation. When I approached the end of a project, I not only was afraid (as I will discuss later) that there would be nothing to take its place, but also feared the opposite: that the project I was about to complete was just one in a long series of endless tasks. Why should I finish this project when I'd just get another to take its place? I either saw my work as everything, so that to be without it was to be abandoned, or my work was simply an obligation, like working in a factory for somebody else, so that there was no point in fulfilling the obligation because another outrageous demand would appear in its place. To accept the idea that part of work is obligatory and part of it is personally important was the goal. This minor resentment was related to a larger one, namely, why is anything ever expected of me anyway? There is a pinch of rational objection here, which is that people's value as people should not be judged by the quality of their work. In particular, I don't

want to earn others' love by a display of my professional abilities. Yet there is an irrational edge to the resentment, for the real problem was that emotionally I accepted that form of judgment and valued others less because their professional abilities were slight.

As a result, for much of the time that I worked on my thesis I was preoccupied with questions about my ability. How smart was I? How smart was I compared to so-and-so? How creative was I? How good was I at critical analysis? There was no end to these questions. They plagued me. They interfered with my work. I worried about whether I was smart enough to solve such-and-such a problem instead of getting on with trying to solve it. My preoccupation with my ability seemed to imply a need to be perfect, which is both a sign of arrogance and of weakness. It says, in effect, "I am so smart I can demand perfection of myself, something impossible for lesser mortals." But it also says, "I have so little confidence in my personal worth that professional imperfection is symbolic of personal unworthiness." The only escape from the two extremes is to put the question of ability in its proper place, which is, I think, no place at all. Ability is not important.

The important thing is how much you can come to understand, which of your abilities you can develop, how far you can grow. The priorities of our culture, however, are completely different. The culture decrees that you should do what you are good at rather than what you most like to do; that what you produce rather than what you get out of what you produce is what counts; that your ability, reflected in achievements, is what matters. Given cultural expectations, it is all too easy to equate personal and professional worth. Once the two are disentangled, work becomes less symbolic and therefore less problematic.

SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF SUCCESSFUL WORKERS. During my work program I decided that successful workers differed from me in three principal ways: their attitude toward their mistakes, their attitude toward finishing their work, and the nature of their commitment to it. I noticed, early in my program, that I hated to reread what I had written, because I was terrified of finding a mistake. In contrast, when I cooked I was eager to finish the dish and taste it, so I could see how it had turned out and enjoy it. The only importance of a failure in cooking was in terms of what I could learn from it. I did not expect, or even want, a limit on the number of mistakes I might make in cooking; I merely hoped my mistakes would be interesting ones that would teach me something. I looked forward to being a better and better cook, and assumed I would never be a perfect one. In my professional

work, however, I did not think of my failures as useful to me or to others, but as a dead loss. Gradually I began to see that mistakes were a necessary part of learning and writing, that everybody (everybody!) made them, that they were to be exploited rather than ignored. One big difference between cooking and doing psychology was that I thought of cooking as woman's work, and I was sure I could succeed at any example of that. Another difference was that I didn't define myself as a cook, but as a psychologist; how good a cook I was didn't really matter.

Attitudes toward finishing work most distinguish successful from unsuccessful workers. I discovered that I resisted working my ideas out to the end. Many times I caught myself putting something away once the end was in sight. This was true both of writing papers and of doing more menial tasks. Sometimes, when I went back to a task, I would discover that I had as little as thirty minutes' work left. This resistance to the end product contrasts sharply with what I have seen of or read about successful workers, who always finish everything, even after they have lost interest in it. Successful workers are also always thinking about the next project, planning ahead, integrating their current work into a larger picture which is constantly being revised. I tended not to do this. One consequence of viewing work as a continuing process is that one wants to finish the present project to get on to the next. Although one could conceivably just go on to the next without finishing the present piece of work, important learning occurs in putting the finishing touches on a paper or project, learning that may govern the direction of the next work. One is gratified by the feeling of closure that comes with finishing a project, but aside from this feeling, the finishing touches to make what one has done presentable, to make sure the idea is expressed, puts the project in perspective, aligns it with what one has done so far and what one is going to do next.

Unfinished projects also have a way of nagging at the back of the mind, even if one has decided that the enterprise was mistaken to begin with. In everything I have begun but not finished there was an idea that I thought was interesting and still think is interesting, even if its context was wrong, even if it itself was wrong. It's hard to lay those ideas to rest until they've been worked out and either found hopeless or given formal expression.

It also becomes depressing to be unsure from the very beginning whether or not you're actually going to do something with a new idea. If it's just going to end up in a drawer along with a bunch of other half-alive ideas, it's hard to get committed to it. Lack of commitment

creates another problem; if you're going to be committed to an idea, you'll examine it very carefully at the outset to make sure it's worth spending time on. Thus, you are quicker to get rid of an idea that is only superficially appealing. The uncommitted person ends up neither developing worthwhile ideas nor getting rid of worthless ones soon enough.

To me, then, one of the striking differences between successful and unsuccessful workers is not necessarily how much time they spend working, or even how much they accomplish per unit of time, but how many half-written or almost-finished manuscripts they have lying around, how many interesting ideas for various projects that nothing much ever happened to.

I tried to analyze my own responses to finishing. Various emotions hit me when the end of a project was in sight: panic, boredom, fear. I almost never experienced impatience and eagerness to finish, unless there was a deadline. I may have wanted to finish magically, like waking up in the morning to find that I had finished the work in my sleep, but I didn't feel an urge to dispatch. This was invariably at odds with what I said. Although I said that I wished I were finished with project X, I didn't feel the corresponding emotions. Why not? If I were to finish something, then of course I wouldn't have it around anymore. I got panicky about finishing because I didn't know what I wanted to do next.

One way I coped with the fear of being bereft was to make projects infinitely long. Successful workers delimit what they're working on; when they get an ancillary idea in the course of a project, they keep it in mind to see if it will work in easily and naturally, or if it ought to be dropped temporarily and retrieved for consideration once the present project is finished. In contrast, I usually tried to incorporate that new idea no matter what; the result was that the project went all over the place and became impossible to finish. The panic mounted when this particular realization hit home, for then there seemed to be both nothing to do afterward (because hypothetically all problems would be solved once the project was finished) and nothing to do now (because the project had become impossible to finish).

In a way, work is like a love affair. It demands commitment, absorption, and care. The difference is that it is a love affair with oneself, or at least with one's creative abilities, and with an abstract world of ideas. For me there are two main rewards from working. One is the continual discovery within myself of new ideas; the other is deeper understanding of a problem. Before I started serious work on my thesis I had had flirtations with problems and ideas (to continue the love affair analogy), but no committed relationship. I was ignorant of

others' work and ignorant of the process of finding and nurturing ideas. That double ignorance prevented me from developing my ideas and making something interesting of them. I neither knew how to develop an idea nor how to connect my ideas with those of others. I did not understand that it is necessary to know the literature of one's field well and to use that knowledge to give depth to one's own ideas. Since my ideas could not develop in a vacuum, they didn't develop at all. My ignorance was so complete that I did not understand that my inability to develop and sustain interesting ideas was not a reflection of my ability but of my ignorance and lack of training. I did not understand that ideas cannot come from nowhere and relate to nothing.

To work well you have to love, respect, and value yourself, as if you were another person. This is especially hard to do if there is no actual accomplishment to consider, if all you have to go on is potential. In my case, before I could begin my thesis, it was necessary to forget altogether about the world and about the final product. Only by writing for myself alone was I able to discover the intellectual qualities I liked about myself and those I didn't, independently of what the rest of the world valued. It was at first an act of faith. I didn't know who I was or what I could do but I finally felt strong enough to find out; also, I had finally recognized the need to understand what others thought.

THE ROLE OF WORK. Since becoming an assistant professor I have acquired the usual battery of professional responsibilities beyond research and writing. I rather enjoy these responsibilities, but they require enough of my energies so that I have had to reduce the number of purely selfish activities that I had time for when I was a graduate student and postdoctoral fellow. I have also, all too often, used professional obligations like seeing students as an excuse for not writing. I am glad that my year of thesis writing was free of outside responsibilities, because it allowed me to figure out what role I wanted work to play in my life and to live it at the same time. In the five years since then, I have not doubted the rightness, for me, of what I worked out, although I have not been able to live that life for several years.

I started thinking about the role of work in the middle of my thesis work program. I had set myself an interim goal of completing a certain amount of linguistic analysis by a certain date; I found I had to work ten to twelve hours a day to reach it. I discovered that I only felt I had worked enough when I had overworked, when I was physically exhausted by the end of the day. Work was still an obligation that I

was fulfilling with a vengeance. Even the sternest evaluator would have agreed that I was working hard. The linguistic analysis was not as mentally taxing as actually writing, or it would have been impossible to do it for as long a stretch as I did. Furthermore, I was getting almost nothing of intellectual value from it—only a feeling of moral righteousness.

At this point I started thinking seriously about what I wanted the role of work in my life to be. I didn't want to work ten or more hours a day; moral righteousness was achieved at the cost of becoming a zombie. I asked myself what would I wish, fifty years from now, that I had done with my time. What would I most regret not having done? I had to distance myself from myself in this self-conscious way because I really didn't know what I wanted out of life, except that work and my relationship with J had to be part of it. What was the point of life? I asked myself. After a good deal of thought I decided that the point was to be happy. I consider this obvious to the point of triviality, except that I'm always running into people who can't believe I'm serious. I don't think it's a possible goal, given the political structure of the world, but it's possible for some to come close.

I decided that there were three main sources of happiness in my life: developing my various talents and interests; developing one talent deeply, namely my work; developing my relationships with other people in three ways—my intense involvement with J, my friendships, and my political interests. Before my work program, that is, before I was able to work, I didn't know how I spent my days, except that I never seemed to have enough time or energy to do things I wanted to do. By the end of a day, I would have accomplished nothing, have no idea where the time had gone, and then be very depressed. I felt so guilty about not working that I couldn't do anything else either, because I should have been spending that time working. But since I couldn't work when I "should," I often spent the allotted time doing nothing, literally nothing. One of the most self-destructive aspects of not working is that very little other activity or development takes place. When I started working I found I had a lot of time to do other things, as long as I wasn't working ten to twelve hours a day.

Once I began trying to fit work into the rest of my life, that is, once I began not just working but doing other things as well, I found that I had been denying myself many satisfactions. I had a number of interests and talents that had been lying fallow. I began to take up the piano again, to learn French, to learn about wines and wild mushrooms, to read more nonfiction for pleasure. I wanted to have more room in my life rather than less. This meant that I couldn't work eight to ten hours a day, but that was no longer a goal anyway.

Although work was not the sole important interest in my life, it was a major one. I wrestled with the problem of exactly how much time each day I should work. What was a reasonable amount? That way of putting it showed I still regarded work as punishment; for the most part it still was not something I freely chose to do. Now, I think that the right amount of time is whatever amount leaves room for the other important activities in my life and still allows me to make intellectual progress. There is no fixed right amount.

The short-term consequences of my work program were that I finished my thesis, and felt good about the part I had worked the hardest on, so good that I didn't even mind reading it over. My life seemed full for the first time, and happy. I began enjoying myself and my life without feeling so guilty about it. The enjoyable moments were not stolen from something else I was supposed to be doing; they were moments that I expected and planned for. I find it remarkable now that I had to convince myself that enjoyment and happiness were allowable for me. For a long time I didn't know what my attitude toward enjoyment was; I just assumed that of course I wanted to enjoy myself. Only when I started working and began to analyze my behavior with respect to work, did I realize that I didn't see a way to be happy unless that happiness was accompanied by guilt.

A footnote about the role of work in an individual's life is related to the analogy between work and love. In my experience, men's and women's work problems differ, reflecting a difference between men and women in how seriously they take themselves as workers. Men may have problems writing, particularly in finishing what they write, but they do not usually have trouble reading the work of others and discussing it. They appear to be full-fledged members of their field or profession, even where there is a lack of production. Women's alienation from their professional work, on the other hand, often seems more profound. For example, not only could I not write, but I could not read others' work or involve myself with the issues in my field at all. I always felt like an outsider, and could not take myself seriously as a thinker. The situation is undoubtedly related to our upbringing; boys are taught to take themselves seriously as workers and girls are not. In contrast, girls are taught to take themselves seriously as lovers and boys are not, which accounts for my observation that women have fewer problems than men in being committed in love.

THE PRESENT. It is hard to assess the long-term consequences of my program. On the plus side, I derive great pleasure from my work; I feel a part of my field; I have learned and am learning much; I have a realistically positive view of my abilities as a teacher, thinker, and

researcher; I have written several good papers. On the minus side, I have not been as productive or made as much progress as I would like. In short, I am not my ego ideal, but at the same time, my work problem is no longer a *problem*. I know now the role I want work to play in my life, and the sorts of internal changes I need to make. Although I still have problems working, the problems do not devastate me or make me despair; I handle them well and expect to handle them better.

Whew. Finished.

Virginia Calcia