

# introduction

It is Labor Day, and I am sandwiched in the backseat between my two school-aged daughters. Driving from Stanton, Nebraska, to Independence, Missouri, we three are southerners on a Midwest sojourn. Commenting on the now-familiar agricultural expanse, my eleven-year-old sarcastically exclaims, “Look, Mom, *more* corn!” I begin to opine about how farming and food production have been transformed in the past few decades—the “from family farm to global agribusiness” narrative—but the kids aren’t interested, and my Missouri relatives in the front seat have had enough of that sad tale. Hours in the car offer ample time for reflection. On this national “day of rest,” I am pondering work.

Like millions of other Americans on this particular Labor Day, I feel profoundly blessed simply to have a job. During this Great Recession, unemployment has reached a twenty-five-year high. Millions of people have given up looking for work and thus aren’t even included in that statistic, and millions more have had their hours cut or are settling for part-time work. The talk around the kitchen table last week was of three more family friends who had lost their jobs. These days, it seems like everybody knows somebody who is unemployed. People are still firing up the grills and slicing the watermelon this Labor Day, but there is caution in the air. Suddenly, that statistic about most Americans being only a paycheck away from poverty is too close for comfort.

Some of us have lost our homes, moving back in with Mom and Dad at record-setting rates, slogging from one friend or coworker's sofa to another, or joining the growing ranks of those sleeping in cars, vans, and trucks. Others of us have lost jobs or found our hours and/or benefits reduced. Debt-financing shenanigans may have been a major cause of this recession, and sociologist Zygmunt Bauman may be right that most of us suffer from "debt addiction," but credit cards are the only thing keeping increasing numbers of us afloat these days.<sup>1</sup> Never mind the mounting finance charges and impossible balances; we depend on credit cards to buy groceries and pay the car note. Fingers crossed we won't need medical care.

Even those of us with good, secure jobs are feeling the squeeze in the form of salary and hiring freezes, budget reductions, and rising health insurance premiums, not to mention the pressure to work harder, faster, and longer as employers try to increase productivity with a reduced workforce and decreased spending. At times like this, people with jobs tend to hunker down. With the casualties of economic downturn all around, many work longer hours without asking for overtime pay, while others choose not to act on grievances against employers; collective action on behalf of workers can seem an irrational distraction. Such responses can function as a shot in the arm to the economy, resulting in higher productivity and, eventually, increased profit for owners, managers, and stockholders, but they also threaten to undermine worker well-being in the long run.

Surely, better days are ahead. We respond to the occasional whisper of "economic recovery" or "modest job growth" with dreams of fatter, less-anxious times. Even so, what millions of middle-class Americans are experiencing during this global recession—the instability, the pressure, the material loss and emotional trauma—is merely a taste of what our lower-wage compatriots live with day in and day out, with little or no hope of "recovery." For them, these

particular hard times may be getting a lot of media attention but are not especially new.

When we consider the gamut of work and workers today, it is easy to see that work isn't working particularly well, at least not for millions and millions of honest, industrious Americans whose labor is rewarded with far less than the well-being it should nurture. Whether we're overworked, underworked, or out of work, we Christians probably ought to be getting a little worked up about work. This short book is a kind of guide to that process. It begins with a portrait of work and workers in today's complex, globalized world (chapter 1), considers insights into work from Christian scriptures (chapter 2) and tradition (chapter 3), and offers reflections and proposals for how Christians today might interpret and navigate with integrity, compassion, and imagination the turbulent worlds of work in which we find ourselves (chapter 4). The ideas developed in the book build on the thoughtful labors of a multitude of scholars and practitioners, only a fraction of whose names appear in its pages. More than anything, this book has been shaped by the hundreds of Millsaps College students who have taken my course, "The Meaning of Work," over the years.

Each fall, about twenty-five young people and I embark on a fourteen-week journey together, pondering formative texts, movements, and ideas about work. In addition to reading important works written by famous thinkers from the past, we consider contemporary descriptions and analyses from diverse sources, including the "texts" of students' own lives—their family's work history, for example, and their own diverse forays into working. We also engage in a hands-on cost-of-living experiment in which students attempt to make ends meet on a low-wage worker's income. After interviewing real low-wage workers, students gather in small groups to search for decent housing, shop for groceries, decipher a city bus schedule, develop a monthly budget, and consider how they would pay for things like clothing and medical care.

What if they had to include a child in the calculus? Back to the drawing board they go, visiting the public school near the apartment they thought they could afford and thinking about after-school and enrichment options for “their” child. Or how about retirement? What would that look like when the only relevant “benefit” their low-wage job offers is an employee savings plan without a dollar of employer contribution? This assignment tends to function as a reality check for my bright and ambitious young students, opening their eyes to how much it costs simply to subsist in today’s world and how difficult it is to attain life’s most basic necessities on a low-wage income. It also sends them back to those famous philosophers, theologians, and political theorists with a new cadre of questions and challenges.

As a result of that course, I find myself each fall immersed in thoughts about working—considerations of work’s function and meaning, questions about its organization and its economic and social valuation, and worries about the impact of these things on the everyday lives of workers. Most of my students will eventually join the professional and managerial classes, so the opportunity to walk a mile in a low-wage worker’s shoes could be transformative. In addition, the practice of stepping back from work to ask about its motivations, aims, and outcomes, and especially about its relationship to the public good, may also inform my students’ future work practices, and perhaps also those of the readers of this book. The role of religion in shaping attitudes toward work is also an important dimension of the course we engage in together and is usually an entirely new set of considerations for my students.

This book on working is, then, an outgrowth of a decade’s journey with young people in Jackson, Mississippi. We engage the topic of work from the context of a small liberal arts college in the middle of the poorest state in the nation. Our lovely campus is only a few blocks from the state capitol, from impressive medical centers, museums, business complexes,

restaurants, concert halls, and genteel neighborhoods. It is also barely a stone's throw from chronic unemployment and underemployment and the intergenerational poverty and problems they breed. My students have a world of opportunity at their fingertips and a world of suffering at their backs. In this context, they have been brave and thoughtful interlocutors on the complex subject of working, and I have been privileged to share the conversation with them. This small book is in debt to numerous others as well, including faculty and staff colleagues at Millsaps College; friends and partners in the Midtown and Mid-City neighborhoods of Jackson; Don Compier and his generous Community of Christ colleagues in Independence, Missouri; members of the Workgroup in Constructive Theology, especially Dave Jensen; and Michael West and his wonderful colleagues at Fortress Press. My family, especially Sharon, Pamela, Raymond, Chandler, and Elena, provided vital hospitality, patience, and good humor. For their work in support of my work, I am deeply grateful.