

“The Pace of our Lives”  
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In his book, *The World Is Flat*, Bethesda writer Thomas Friedman described some ways Wal-Mart keeps its prices down. Friedman wrote:

*While I was touring the Wal-Mart distribution center in Bentonville [Arkansas], I noticed that some boxes were too big to go on the conveyor belts and were being moved around on pallets by Wal-Mart employees driving special mini lift trucks with headphones on. The computer tracks how many pallets each employee is plucking every hour to put onto the trucks for different stores, and a computerized voice tells each of them whether he is ahead of schedule or behind schedule. “You can choose whether you want your computer voice to be a man or woman, and you can choose English or Spanish.”*

The image of these workers with their forklifts and their headphones connected to a computer tracking their work and telling them whether they are behind is scary to me. It is scary to me because, like all assembly line work, the work does not involve much creativity. However, it is also scary because I imagine that if I were a forklift driver, I might fall behind, I might not be good enough. The computer would catch me. I feel guilty when I am not working, and when I am not working effectively or efficiently.

Historians (<http://www.coe.uga.edu/~rhill/workethic/hist.htm>) say that my guilt is because of the teachings of John Calvin, the sixteenth century French theologian who taught the idea of predestination. Central to Calvinist belief was the “Elect,” those persons chosen by God to inherit eternal life. God damned all other people and nothing could change that since God was unchanging. While knowing for certain whether a person was one of the Elect was impossible, one could have a sense of it based on the person's daily life. Success in worldly endeavors was a sign of possible inclusion as one of the Elect. A person who displayed idleness was likely to be one of the damned, but a person who was active, austere, and hard-working gave evidence that he or she was one of God's chosen ones.

Calvin taught that all people must work, because to work was the will of God. People were not to lust after wealth, possessions, or easy living, but were to reinvest the profits of their labor into financing further ventures, reinvesting earnings repeatedly again. Encouraging the pursuit of unlimited profit as a religious duty was a radical departure from the Christian beliefs of the middle ages.

Max Weber, the German economic sociologist, coined a term for the new beliefs about work, calling it the "Protestant ethic." The key elements of the Protestant ethic were diligence, punctuality, deferment of gratification, and primacy of the work domain.

The English Puritans were one of the religious groups that subscribed to John Calvin's teachings about work. Puritans believed that the moral life was a life of hard work and determination. They approached the task of building a new world in the American wilderness as an opportunity to prove their own moral worth. They called the religious denomination they founded the Congregational Church.

Despite the efforts of Calvinists to maintain the dominance of their system, some Congregational churches, especially in the older settlements of New England, gradually developed leanings toward Unitarianism. When a Congregational church called a Unitarian minister, the Trinitarians left and started their own church. In 1825, the Unitarians decided to form their own denomination, the American Unitarian Association. Although the Unitarians abandoned the trinity, the work ethic of John Calvin's theology continued to be a part of Unitarian theology.

Therefore, today I feel guilty when I am not working effectively and diligently, because my parents raised me in a Unitarian Universalist congregation whose religious roots we can trace back to the Calvinist work ethic, a work ethic that remains strong throughout our society.

However, guilt is only one of the feelings I have, because Unitarians are ambivalent about the Protestant work ethic. One of the most important critics of this work ethic was a 19<sup>th</sup> century Unitarian, Henry David Thoreau, whom my faith taught me to honor and celebrate. Although Thoreau himself at times worked hard (with his father, he was a talented and successful pencil manufacturer), Thoreau rejected the premise that work for worldly gain is a godly or noble pursuit in and of itself.

In his 1836 essay "Nature," Emerson had written that we know God exists because of the intuitive feeling of joy that we have when we experience the beauty of nature. Thoreau read Emerson's essay, and inspired by it, he asked Emerson to let him build a hut on land that Emerson owned near Walden Pond.

Today Unitarian Universalists live with these two conflicting heritages. On the one hand, our religion is rooted in the belief that we proved we are good people by working hard. On the other hand, we celebrate the writings and the life of Henry David Thoreau who said "Most men lead lives of quiet desperation." He wrote:

*I sat in my sunny doorway from sunrise to noon, rapt in a revelry, amidst the pines and hickories and sumacs, in undisturbed solitude and stillness, while the birds sang around or flitted noiseless through the house, until by the sun falling in at my west window, or the noise of some wagon on the distant highway, I was reminded of the lapse of time. I grew in those seasons like corn in the night. . . .*

Thoreau did work when he was at Walden. He built a cabin, he tended a field of beans. He caught fish in the pond. He wrote in his journal in preparation for a book that he would publish on his experiences. He also participated in public life. He went to jail for refusing to pay his taxes in protest of slavery. In one week, Cedar Lane Stage will perform an excellent play about this called "The Night Thoreau Spent in Jail."

On the other hand, he also took time off from work. He was the friend of squirrels and chipmunks; the observer of moss and sunshine; the pied piper of childish enthusiasms; the idle dreamer who could see the world in a ripple of the pond.

Inspired by Thoreau, a week ago I took four days off from my work of serving as your minister. The John Calvin side of my personality cried out to me that I should not leave, that I should be working, that I should be making hospital calls, or joining a protest demonstration against offshore drilling for oil, or working harder on sermons so that they will inspire deep passion in the congregation and bring more people to the good news of Unitarian Universalism. My upbringing has deeply internalized the voice of the Protestant work ethic in my head. I was anxious about leaving. Perhaps you have had similar experiences when you have planned to take off from work.

However, I looked at the words of Henry David Thoreau. He wrote “There are moments when all anxiety and stated toil are becalmed in the infinite leisure and repose of nature.”

So I took off my coat and tie, remembering that Thoreau had said “Beware of all enterprises that require a new set of clothes.”

Leslie and I drove to the Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge on the Delmarva Peninsula. For a while, we watched the Osprey baby chicks being cared for by their parents. Thoreau said, “In wilderness is the preservation of the world.”

We spotted a bald eagle sitting in a tree looking wise as it stared out at the wetlands. Thoreau said, “Nature is full of genius, full of the divinity . . .”

I saw a muskrat swimming slowly, slowly across a marsh. “Why should we live in such a hurry and waste of time? We are determined to be starved before we are hungry.”

I watch small blue dragonflies with their two transparent wings. Thoreau said, “Nature will bear the closest inspection. She invites us to lay our eye level with her smallest leaf, and take an insect view.”

We drove to Assateague. Although I have lived in Maryland for seventeen years, I had never before been to Ocean City or to Assateague Island National Seashore. We waded in the ocean, immersing our feet in the cool waves, becoming part of the water. Thoreau had said, “Shall I not have intelligence with the earth? Am I not partly leaves and vegetable mould myself?”

We walked along the beach. Thoreau had said, “An early-morning walk is a blessing for the whole day.”

We sat and watched wild ponies play on the beach. Thoreau had said, “It is not enough to be busy. So are the ants. The question is: What are we busy about?”

We drove to Ocean City. Thoreau had said, “If a man walks in the woods for love of them half of each day, he is in danger of being regarded as a loafer. But if he spends his days as a speculator,

shearing off those woods and making the earth bald before her time, he is deemed an industrious and enterprising citizen.”

After ten minutes in Ocean City, we turned back to Assateague. I said a prayer of thanks to those wise persons who had preserved the island.

After four days, I returned. Work is good. I was honored to participate in child dedications and to officiate at a memorial service, celebrating a life well lived, and to help a couple plan their wedding, celebrating a new relationship.

And I read a newspaper story about the pace of modern life. An article in *The New York Times* described a troubling incident between a young boy and his mother that occurred at Fair Oaks Mall in Virginia. The boy, who was about two and a half years old, attempted to talk to his mother, but the mother would not look up from her BlackBerry. The boy said “Mama? Mama? Mama?” and she said, “Just wait a second.” He started tapping her leg. The mother said again “Just wait a second.” Finally, the boy was so frustrated that “he said, ‘Ahhh!’ and tried to bite her leg.”

I thought of Thoreau. He asked:

*Why should we live in such a hurry and waste of time? We are determined to be starved before we are hungry. I wish to live deliberately, to front only the essential acts of life. I do not wish to live what is not life, living is so dear . . . It is the task of everyone to make his life, even in its details, worthy of the contemplation of his most elevated and critical hour . . .*

I will not tell you what pace of life is right for you—that is your choice. I do believe that hard work is good, valuable and important. However, I try to pay attention to both the Protestant work ethic and to Mr. Thoreau. He encourages me to put down the phone and be present in the moment. He suggests that I smell of the trees, watch the birds, feel the air against my skin, taste the food, and hear the voice of a child.

*On this June day:  
May the spirit of life bless you and keep you,  
In your work and in your play,  
In your dreams and in your prayers.  
In your songs and in your poetry,  
In your pain and in your joy,  
Today and tomorrow  
And in all the moments of your precious lives.  
Amen.*