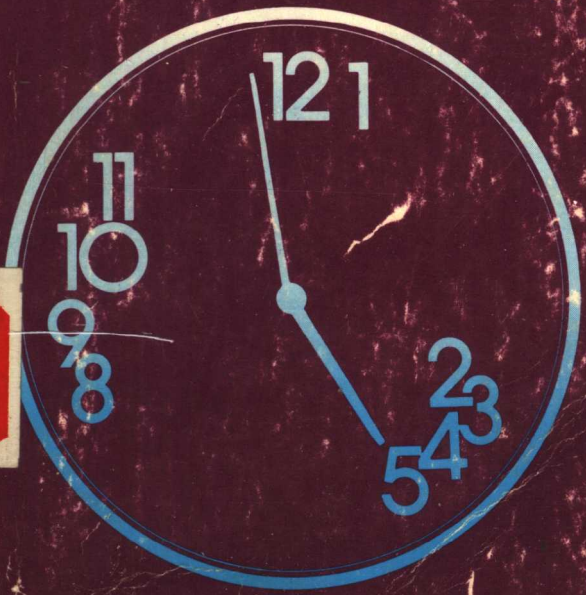
ALL THE LIVELONG DAY

The Meaning and Demeaning of Routine Work

Barbara Garson



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FOREWORD
Whistle While You Work

At the Bumble Bee seafood plant in Oregon I talked to a tuna cleaner named Starlein. Her job was to pull the veins of dark meat (cat food) from the skinned white loins of tuna.

"The loins come past me on a moving belt," she explained. "I put the clean loins on the second belt and the cat food on the third belt and I save my bones." [The supervisor later checks her output by counting the bones.]

"Do you talk a lot to the other women?" I asked.

"Not really," she answered.

"What do you do all day?"

"I daydream."

"What do you daydream about?"

"About sex."

At this point her boyfriend apologized proudly. "I guess that's my fault," he grinned.

"No it's not you," she said. "It's the tuna fish."

I wondered what she meant.

"Well first it's the smell. You've got that certain smell in your nose all day. . . . It's not like out here. [Starlein and I and the boyfriend were talking in the smelly cannery yard.] Your own fish

next to you is sweet. . . . But it's mostly *handling* the loins. Not the touch itself, because we wear gloves. But the soft colors. The reds, the whites, and the purples. The most exciting thing is the dark meat. It comes in streaks. It's red-brown and you have to pull it out with your knife. You pile it next to your loin and it's crumbly and dark red and moist like earth.

"You're supposed to put the cat food on the belt as you finish each loin. But I hold it out to make as big a pile of dark meat as I can."

Starlein was new at the cannery then. The next time I met her the tuna cleaning process had lost some of its sensual allure.

"I still try to see how much cat food I can collect but it's just for the size of the pile now."

At a Ping-Pong factory in Rhode Island I talked to a girl whose job was to stack Ping-Pong paddles into piles of fifty.

"Maybe it wouldn't have been so bad if I could have seen all the piles I stacked at the end of the day. But they were taking them down as fast as I was piling them up. That was the worst part of the job."

At the same Ping-Pong plant a Haitian box assembler amused himself by doing the job with his eyes closed. He was very proud of the fact that if the foreman passed behind him he could not tell the difference.

Many assembly-line workers deliberately slow their pace from time to time and watch the pieces pile up. Sometimes this is for revenge against the company that "treats us like machines," "uses us like tools." More often it's just for a break, a chance to talk, kid around, take a drink of water. But the most common motive is one that I hadn't expected.

Young workers like to let the work pile up just so they can race to catch up with the line. This creates a few minutes of seemingly purposeful exertion. It makes hills and troughs, minor goals and fulfillments while you're waiting for the day to end or the line to break down.

I have spent the last two years examining the way people cope with routine and monotonous work. I expected to find resentment,

and I found it. I expected to find boredom, and I found it. I expected to find sabotage, and I found it in clever forms that I could never have imagined.

But the most dramatic thing I found was quite the opposite of nonco-operation. *People passionately want to work.*

Whatever creativity goes into sabotage, a more amazing ingenuity goes into manufacturing goals and satisfactions on jobs where measurable achievement has been all but rationalized out. Somehow in an unending flow of parts or papers, with operations subdivided beyond any recognizable unit of accomplishment, people still find ways to define certain stacks of work as "theirs," certain piles as "today's" and "tomorrow's."

Almost everyone wants to feel she is getting something accomplished—to see that stack of paddles, the growing pile of dark meat, or to master the job blindfolded since there's not much to master the other way.

Which is not to say that workers don't also resent and resist the subdivision and trivialization of their jobs.

At the Fair Plan Insurance Company a young clerk named Ellen told me about a not quite so co-operative game.

"The other day when I was proofreading endorsements I noticed some guy had insured his store for $165,000 against vandalism and $5,000 against fire. Now that's bound to be a mistake. They probably got it backwards.

"I was just about to show it to Gloria [the supervisor] when I figured, 'Wait a minute! I'm not supposed to read these forms. I'm just supposed to check one column against another. And they do check. So it couldn't be counted as my error.'

"Then I thought about this poor guy when his store burns down and they tell him he's only covered for $5,000. But I figured the hell with it. It'll get straightened out one way or another."

I must have looked disapproving at that moment.

"Listen," she apologized, "for all I know he took out the insurance just to burn down the store himself." Then growing angry: "Goddamn it! They don't explain this stuff to me. I'm not supposed to understand it. I'm supposed to check one column against the other.

"If they're gonna give me a robot's job to do, I'm gonna do it like a robot."

I met a few more people who played that passive resistance game—"gonna be as dumb as they think I am." But not too many. And as a matter of fact, when I questioned further it turned out that Ellen had reported the error after all. For most people it is hard and uncomfortable to do a bad job.

At Lordstown, Ohio, General Motors runs the fastest assembly line in the world, manned by a work force whose average age is twenty-four. At 101 cars an hour, each young worker has thirty-six seconds to perform his assigned snaps, knocks, twists, or squirts on each passing vehicle.

I visited Lordstown the week before a strike amid union charges of speed-up, company charges of sabotage, and a great deal of national publicity about "the new worker," "the changing work ethic."

While a young Vega worker and his friends argued in the living room about the strike and disciplinary layoffs, I talked to his mother in the kitchen. Someone in the supermarket where she works had said that those young kids were "just lazy."

"One thing, Tony is not lazy. He'll take your car apart and put it together any day . . . the slightest knock and he takes care of it. And he never will leave it half done. He even cleans up after himself.

"And I'm not lazy either. I love to cook. But supposing they gave me a job just cracking eggs with bowls moving past on a line. Pretty soon I'd get to a point where I'd wish the next egg was rotten just to spoil their whole cake."

Occasionally Lordstown workers toss in a rotten egg of their own by dropping an ignition key down the gas tank, lighting a work glove, locking it in the trunk, and waiting to see how far down the line it will be stopped, or just scratching a car as it goes past because you can't keep up with the pace.

But sabotage, though much publicized, is really quite limited. Much of the ingenuity at Lordstown goes into creating escape devices and games that can be squeezed into the thirty-six-second cycle.

No ingenuity at all goes into building cars.

I wasn't particularly surprised by the negative things I saw in factories: speed, heat, humiliation, monotony. I'm sure the reader

will have guessed that I began this research prepared to expose and denounce "the system."

It was the positive things I saw that touched me the most. Not that people are beaten down (which they are) but that they almost always pop up. Not that people are bored (which they are) but the ways they find to make it interesting. Not that people hate their work (which they do) but that even so, they try to make something out of it.

In factories and offices around this country work is systematically reduced to the most minute and repetitious tasks. Supervision ranges from counting bones, raising hands to use the bathroom, issuing "report cards" with number and letter grades for quantity, quality, co-operation, dependability, attendance, etc.

Through all this workers make a constant effort, sometimes creative, sometimes pathetic, sometimes violent, to put meaning and dignity back into their daily activity.

I realize now, much more deeply than ever, that work is a human need following right after the need for food and the need for love.

The crime of modern industry is not forcing us to work, but denying us real work. For no matter what tricks people play on themselves to make the day's work meaningful, management seems determined to remind them, "You are just tools for our use."

This book is not a revolutionary tract. It doesn't present a complete tactical program for winning back control over our jobs. Still, I hope I will stimulate thinking and action in that direction by introducing the men and women who renewed my faith that while capitalism stinks, people are something else.

INTERVIEWING IS A FUNNY BUSINESS

The conversations in this book are based on verbatim quotes. The characters are real. They are not creations or composites. The only thing I've done is to change people's names for their peace of mind and for my own. In two cases I have moved and renamed entire enterprises because the towns were just too small, the stories just too personal.

The rest of the corporate names, like Bumble Bee Seafoods, Reader's Digest, General Motors, the American Kennel Club, are obviously unchanged. I have also left the real names of company and union officials who present themselves as public figures and give appropriately guarded interviews. Perhaps it's not fair to discriminate against the powerful, but they could not be disguised in any case because of their unique positions.

* * *

Interviewing is a funny business. As I stand outside a factory gate, hang around a cafeteria, or loiter in a corporate bathroom, I can always spot the people it would be easy to approach. I recognize them by a sparkle or a dimple or some other sign of openness that I can't quite put my finger on. When I was feeling particularly timid I would approach just those people. But for the most part I am brave, or at least disciplined. No matter how difficult, I made it a point to introduce myself to the severe, care-worn or indifferent-looking workers.

I always expected such people to rebuff me. After all, what did I want with them? What was I doing? Was I some kind of hippy or what? I was especially diffident with anyone who had worked his whole life at the job. Wasn't I somehow denigrating their years of loyalty? Still, I always made that effort to talk to the individuals honored in the company magazine for twenty-five years' perfect attendance or for giving a record eleven gallons of blood to the blood bank over the last thirty-four years. I was frightened, but I phoned them.

Oddly enough, I was almost never turned away when I rang the bell and said, "I saw your picture in the company paper" or "I got your name from a woman in another department."

Sometimes I felt bad that people responded so politely to the lady with the notebook, and so dutifully answered whatever I asked. I realize that they don't know how to say no to me any more than to the supervisor. As a reporter I take advantage of that very lack of confidence which, as an organizer, I am determined to cure. I benefit from that sense of confusion and helplessness, those cumulative poisons that are the most toxic products of modern industry.

But, no matter how I get through the door, once I'm inside

something else usually happens. Even the people who say they'd rather not talk to me usually keep talking and talking until I have to say, "Wait, wait, I'll get another notebook." I don't know how it happens, but once they get started they can hardly slow down to let me turn the page.

It's an odd thing, though; no matter how many successful interviews, I was always sure that the next person would turn me away. Or I simply couldn't imagine that they would have anything new to tell me.

Sometimes I would stand outside an office building watching the dull or brassy robots go past. I could not bring myself to stop anyone. Why should I? Hadn't I already interviewed them? Didn't I talk to the same people yesterday? This one's single, this one's married. This one likes the job, this one hates the job. What is there to hear?

Most of the time, but not always, I overcame these doubts. I take a step. I stop one of the glazed or glossy figures. And then, as soon as a human being speaks, I hear things I never expected to hear, things I never could have invented. Yet they are things I know to be true, things that I somehow knew all along.

And this entire experience repeats itself with every interview. I never approached anyone without being scared. And I never came away without being amazed and in love.

I am not falsely modest. There are some extraordinary interviews in this book. When people say to me, "How do you do this? You must be such a warm person," I know I am a fraud. The people I interview go right through me, through my notebook and down onto the paper. I tell you quite frankly, the more that's on the final page, the less that's left in me.

There are some people who I've never gotten quite right on paper and they remain with me. But those who are reproduced the most whole and the most vivid are nothing to me any more.

That's the part that seems so strange. I don't really feel bad about using people to write a book. I remind them frequently that that's what I'm doing. Besides I'm sitting there with a pen and a notebook taking it all down. It's not that part that makes me feel exploitative. It's the false friendship.

I have a soul-meshing experience with someone, and when it's

over, it's over. I see them at the factory the next day, after they have revealed their doubts, and the intimate mechanism by which they cope, and if I've gotten a good interview, I don't want to talk to them again. My only consolation is that it has often been that kind of experience for them too. If it was really cathartic, they don't want to see me either.

Still I wonder . . .

One hour I'm in utter sympathy with an assembly-line worker who must devise every means to keep his distance and his dignity vis-à-vis a foreman who wants to squeeze every drop out of him.

And then the next day, or even later that same afternoon, I share the irritation of a foreman whose desire to do a good job or advance himself is continuously frustrated by workers who just don't care a damn about anything.

If it weren't for the fact that I, myself, am turned inside out by these interviews, I'd certainly consider myself a fraud. Let me just hope that the love that leaves me as I write it down is there on the paper for you now, as you meet my people.

CONTENTS

PING-PONG

I met a girl named Cindy who worked for a while in a Ping-Pong factory.

"My job was stacking the Ping-Pong paddles into piles of fifty. Actually I didn't have to count all the way up to fifty. To make it a little easier they told me to stack 'em in circles of four with the first handle facing me. When there got to be thirteen handles on the second one from the front, then I'd know I had fifty. After a while of stacking I didn't have to count anyway. I could tell fifty just by looking at the pile.

"I had to work real fast. I had to keep three labelers and three packers supplied all the time.

"After I stacked 'em, the women would take 'em off the stacks and put labels on the handles—for whatever brand it was. After that they got packed into table tennis sets, four paddles, two balls and a net.

"Sometimes I got ahead building up these barricades of stacks. I would have liked to have finished three full walls all around myself but I never got that far ahead. As soon as I'd stack 'em, they'd unstack 'em.

"Maybe it wouldn't have been so bad if I could have seen all the piles I stacked at the end of the day. But they were taking them down as fast as I was piling them up. That was the worst part of the job.

"No," she corrected herself. "That wasn't the worst part of the job. The worst part was you had to stand up all day doing it."

"Why did you have to stand up?" I asked.

"I don't know," Cindy answered. "All I know is you weren't allowed to sit. Even between orders.

"There were a couple of retards they hired to shove the stuff around and sometimes you'd have to wait for them to bring you more paddles. Even then if I sat down the forelady, Alma, would come screaming at me.

"You couldn't talk either. You wouldn't want to anyway because it was too noisy and the way we were all spaced apart, you'd have to lean over and shout. But if you ever tried to talk Alma would come running over with a lot more paddles or she'd tell, 'Why aren't you finished yet?' So you were alone with your head all day.

"I once had a job stuffing envelopes and then I didn't mind daydreaming all day. But at the time I was working in the Ping-Pong factory I was having domestic problems with the man I was living with. So I didn't want to be alone with my head all day. And I didn't want to be standing on my feet all day. And I didn't want to be hearing Alma yell at me all day. And at $1.85 an hour, I figured I could afford to quit."

* * *

About four and a half million Americans work for small manufacturing firms that hire less than 100 people.* The Paragon Table Top Sports Corporation, with around fifty factory workers, sounded pretty typical of this sort of industry. So I decided to interview the workers that stayed on at the Ping-Pong factory.

I asked Cindy for some names, but she didn't know any. Oh yes, the people had been friendly to her, especially the older women, but after all there were only those two ten-minute breaks and then at noon forty minutes to rush to the deli, make phone calls, get to the bank, and then eat your sandwich, if you could fit that in.

Cindy could remember some first names. "There was this one little old lady, Lilly, sat at a bench screwing the screws on the

* Compiled from *County Business Patterns, U. S. Summary, 1971.* Published by the U. S. Bureau of the Census.

wing nuts. She was a gas! . . . A couple of black women looked like they'd been there a long time. . . . The young people? They're probably all gone by now. Listen, if you do it and you talk to Lilly, find out for me how she managed to stay so cheerful all the time. I mean she was always carrying on or chuckling and I'm sure she wasn't still enjoying the two great jokes."

"Jokes?"

"Yeah. The foremen had their favorite jokes when they dumped some more paddles or balls on you. 'O.K. ladies, make a racket. Here girls, have a ball!'"

* * *

The Paragon Table Top Sports Corporation is located in the factory-warehouse section of town. There is no way to take a casual look around. A paneled office enclosure at the front blocks any view of the factory. The windows along the alley are high and their lower panes are painted over so no one can look in, or out.

Cindy told me about a side door where the canteen truck parked during breaks. She thought I could meet people there when they came out for coffee. She was certain I would be ejected immediately if I tried to get in. "You can't just stroll around you know. I mean I worked there and they'd still chase me out if I wandered into shipping or sewing or some other section. It's hard to get to know anyone there."

If I wanted to meet the workers at Paragon Table Top I would have to stand outside their factory and introduce myself. And that is just what I did. I waited in front of the Ping-Pong plant at ten o'clock, three o'clock and five-thirty every day of the rainy week before Christmas.

* * *

First one out at quitting time on Monday was a lad with a big broad grin and beautiful long hair, washed and brushed and shining like a Breck commercial.

I told him I was writing articles about work. "Do you think I could interview you sometime?"

"I'm not a worker," he said. "I just work here."

I could see his point. But so far he was the only one there. I felt I could spend a little time talking to a hippy till the "real workers" started coming out.

"Well, but what do you do here?" I asked.

"Ping-Pong paddles."

"Oh, you do paddles. Well how does that work . . . I mean . . ."

"You wanna know what I do. I'll give you my whole day. Here it is. They ring a buzzer at seven-forty. Seven forty-five they ring another. You clock in after the first buzzer. If you're not in by the second you're late. And that's the end of your life till break. Around ten o'clock they give you ten minutes' break. They ring it when the canteen truck gets out back.

"The buzzer is right on the clock and Frank the foreman he rings it. Man I stare at that clock all day and I have such an urge. Someday I'm gonna push that buzzer myself. Wait'll you see Alma and Frank tearing down at me. 'What the hell are you doing?' I swear I'm gonna do it. I'm gonna do it the day I quit.

"Anyway, lunch is the same deal as the morning. Two buzzers in, two buzzers out and forty minutes between 'em. Then death till three when the canteen comes back. Then you go out of your head till the last buzzer. Then quittin' then splittin'. Out of here—whish." And he split. But he called back from the corner.

"You be out here tomorrow?"

"Yeah."

"You should talk to Lilly. I'll tell a couple of the old people about you. They're the ones ought to be complaining to the papers."

* * *

The real workers came out in clumps. They were no particular sex or type. There was a large number of hippies—which is to say young people—a lot of colors of colored people, West Indian, Latin, Portuguese, a couple of fat white women and a couple of white women not so fat but older. A pair of young black men with bright-colored hats broke the over-all brown-gray tone.

I stopped a black woman with no afro, no dress style and no