
Labor and Station in Life

by Eugene V. Debs

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A writer in a journal of wide circulation, writes of “labor” in a way which in many regards is wholesome; as for instance the following:

There is always hope in a man that actually and earnestly works. In idleness alone is there perpetual despair. Work is the law of our being — the living principle that carries men and nations onward. The greater number of men have to work with their hands, as a matter of necessity, in order to live; but all must work in one way or another, if they would enjoy life as it ought to be enjoyed.¹

We unequivocally endorse the foregoing statements of the writer, but when he adds that labor “may be a burden or a chastisement” we think he upsets his premises, and taking the whole sentence, “Labor may be a burden and a chastisement, but it is also an honor and a glory,” we think the climax of nonsense is reached. Work being “the law of our being,” it is only a “burden and a chastisement,” when some fundamental law, not of our being, but of right and justice, has been violated. As a matter of course, we do not include convict labor, which may be imposed as a punishment, and is intended to be “a burden and a chastisement.” We are in full accord with the declaration that without labor “nothing can be accomplished. All that is great in man comes through work, and civilization is its product. It is

¹ The quotation is from the book *Character* (1871), by **Samuel Smiles** (1812-1904), and was excerpted in *The Canadian Monthly and National Review*, vol. 3, no. 1 (Jan. 1873), pp. 64-75. The line “In idleness alone is there perpetual despair” was extracted without credit by Smiles from *Past and Present* (1843), by **Thomas Carlyle** (1795-1881).

idleness that is the curse of man — not labor. Idleness eats the heart out of men as of nations, and consumes them as rust does iron. Happiness, prosperity and safety in any attained position depend upon work, which, of some sort or other, may be pursued by every member of the race.” Such ideas we have sought, from time to time, to place on record in these pages, and we have sought to show that the labor capital of the world, is the only capital that should the most seriously engage the attention of philanthropists and statesmen. But says the writer, “to do our duty in that station of life into which it has pleased God to call us, is the infinite thing to live for; which is full of blessed realities in the present, and prophetic of an ever-brightening future.” To all such propositions, we enter our protest. We do not believe God assigns anyone a station in life, or “calls” any one to a particular “station in life.” The theory is preposterous, repulsive and degrading to God and man.

The dominating theory of government in the past, and one that still prevails in many countries is that certain persons have a “divine right,” a God given right to rule, and out of this theory has sprung every other God-dishonoring and man-degrading theory in regard to “station of life.” Kings and lords, autocrats and aristocrats, by inheritance or fortune, love to prate about “the stations in life it has pleased God to call us.” They survey the field, and note the station of ruler and the station of subject; the station of master, and the station of slave; the station of wealth, and the station of poverty, and complacently say, “Behold, what God has done.” Accept the theory and civilization goes back to the Hindu idea of Caste.

Our idea is, in so far as God is concerned, that He creates all men equal. It is the shibboleth declaration that is to redeem mankind from the thralldom of degradation, if man is ever redeemed, that is to lift him to the glory crowned highlands of independence, if he ever reaches the elevation.

The world has had enough and more than enough of the drivel about God assigning men their stations in life. At the mere mention of such an ironclad law, ambition and self-respect, manhood and independence revolt and intuitively men know it to be a monstrous perversion of every principle of human action.

The power which the strong have exercised over the weak, the injustice of governments, the venality of the rich, all combined, have filled the world with lamentations, until the fact is universally admitted, that

Man's inhumanity to man,
Makes countless millions mourn.²

And yet, those who have been guilty of the wrongs, have sought to reconcile the nations to the theory, that it is God who calls them to stations in life, too often, stations of misery.

The mission of work is not only to obtain bread and meat, clothing and shelter, but to secure for the mind, wider fields for enjoyment, intellectual, as well as material luxuries. Work may be the law of our being, but to rise by virtue of work, into other and better conditions is also a law of our being, and the present is an age, we are glad to believe, when the laws of our being are to have full sway. Labor is not degrading, it never was degrading. The law of work is to work up, not down, it is to enlighten, not to darken. It develops the good, not the bad in human nature, and when human laws, which obstruct the way, are annulled, as they will be, man, who according to the late revision of the Bible "was made but little lower than God,"³ will ascend to his rightful position, and hold the fort against the devil, or what is worse, the aristocratic enemies of man's advancement.

Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport

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² From "Man Was Made to Mourn: A Dirge" (1784), by **Robert Burns** (1759-1796).

³ Apparently a reference to Henry Darling, *The Use and Abuse of the Greatness of Man: A Baccalaureate Sermon* (June 18, 1885), which adapts Psalm 8, verse 5. The original King James Version reads: "For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honour."