

# WORKING

## *People Talk About What They Do All Day and How They Feel About What They Do*

Studs Terkel | excerpts from his book Working | 1972

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**This book, being about work**, is, by its very nature, about violence—to the spirit as well as to the body. It is about ulcers as well as accidents, about shouting matches as well as fistfights, about nervous breakdowns as well as kicking the dog around. It is, above all (or beneath all), about daily humiliations. To survive the day is triumph enough for the walking wounded among the great many of us.

The scars, psychic as well as physical, brought home to the supper table and the TV set, may have touched, malignantly, the soul of our society. More or less. ("More or less," that most ambiguous of phrases, pervades many of the conversations that comprise this book, reflecting, perhaps, an ambiguity of attitude toward The Job. Something more than Orwellian acceptance, something less than Luddite sabotage. Often the two impulses are fused in the same person.)

It is about a search, too, for daily meaning as well as daily bread, for recognition as well as cash, for astonishment rather than torpor; in short, for a sort of life rather than a Monday through Friday sort of dying. Perhaps immortality, too, is part of the quest. To be remembered was the wish, spoken and unspoken, of the heroes and heroines of this book.

There are, of course, the happy few who find a savor in their daily job; the Indiana stonemason, who looks upon his work and sees that it is good; the Chicago piano tuner, who seeks and finds the sound that delights; the bookbinder, who saves a piece of history; the Brooklyn fireman, who saves a piece of life ... But don't these satisfactions, like Jude's hunger for knowledge, tell us more about the person than about his task? Perhaps. Nonetheless, there is a common attribute here: a meaning to their work well over and beyond the reward of the paycheck.

For the many, there is a hardly concealed discontent. The blue-collar blues is no more bitterly sung than the white-collar mean. "I'm a machine," says the spot-welder. "I'm caged," says the bank teller, and echoes the hotel clerk. "I'm a mule," says the steelworker. "A monkey can do what I do," says the receptionist. "I'm less than a farm implement," says the migrant worker. "I'm an object," says the high-fashion model. Blue collar and white call upon the identical phrase: "I'm a robot." *"There is nothing to talk about,"* the young accountant despairingly enunciates. It was some time ago that John Henry sang, "A man ain't nothin' but a man." The hard, unromantic fact is: he died with his hammer in his hand, while the machine pumped on. Nonetheless, he found immortality. He is remembered.

As the automated pace of our daily jobs wipes out name and face—and, in many instances, feeling—there is a sacrilegious question being asked these days. To earn one's bread by the sweat of one's brow has always been the lot of mankind. At least, ever since Eden's slothful couple was served with an eviction notice. The scriptural precept was never doubted, not out loud. No matter how demeaning the task, no matter how it dulls the senses and breaks the spirit, one *must* work. Or else.

Lately there has been a questioning of this "work ethic," especially by the young. Strangely enough, it has touched off profound grievances in others, hitherto devout, silent, and anonymous. Unexpected

precincts are being heard from in a show of discontent. Communiques from the assembly line are frequent and alarming: absenteeism. On the evening bus, the tense, pinched faces of young file clerks and elderly secretaries tell us more than we care to know. On the expressways, middle management men pose without grace behind their wheels as they flee city and job.

There are other means of showing it, too. Inchoately, sullenly, it appears in slovenly work, in the put-down of craftsmanship. A farm equipment worker in Moline complains that the careless worker who turns out more that is bad is better regarded than the careful craftsman who turns out less that is good. The first is an ally of the Gross National Product. The other is a threat to it, a kook—and the sooner he is penalized the better. Why, in these circumstances, should a man work with care? Pride does indeed precede the 'fall.

Others, more articulate—at times, visionary—murmur of a hunger for "beauty," "a meaning," "a sense of pride." A veteran car hiker sings but, "I could drive any car like a baby, like a woman changes her baby's diaper. Lots of customers say, 'How you do this?' I'd say, 'Just the way you bake a cake, miss.' When I was younger, I could swing with that car. They called me Lovin' Al the Wizard."

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In all instances, there is felt more than a slight ache. In all instances, there dangles the impertinent question: Ought not there be an increment, earned though not yet received, from one's daily work—an acknowledgement of man's *being*?

An American President is fortunate—or, perhaps, unfortunate—that, offering his Labor Day homily, he didn't encounter Maggie Holmes, the domestic, or Phil Stallings, the spot-welder, or Louis Hayward, the washroom attendant. Or especially, Grace Clements, the felter at the luggage factory, whose daily chore reveals to us in a terrible light that Charles Dickens's London is not so far away nor long ago.

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To maintain a sense of self, these heroes and heroines play occasional games. The middle-aged switchboard operator, when things are dead at night, cheerily responds to the caller, "Marriott Inn," instead of identifying the motel chain she works for. "Just for a lark," she explains bewilderedly. "I really don't know what made me do it." The young gas meter reader startles the young suburban housewife sunning out on the patio in her bikini, loose-bra'd, and sees more things than he would otherwise see. "Just to make the day go faster." The auto worker from the Deep South will "tease one guy 'cause he's real short and his old lady left him." Why? "Oh, just to break the monotony. You want quittin' time so bad."

The waitress, who moves by the tables with the grace of a ballerina, pretends she's forever on stage. "I feel like Carmen. It's like a gypsy holding out a tambourine and they throw the coin." It helps her fight humiliation as well as arthritis. The interstate truck driver, bearing down the expressway with a load of seventy-three thousand pounds, battling pollution, noise, an ulcer, and kidneys that act up, "fantasizes something tremendous." They all, in some manner, perform astonishingly to survive the day. These are not yet automata.

There are cases where the job possesses the man even after quitting time. Aside from occupational ticks of hourly workers and the fitful sleep of salaried ones, there are instances of a man's singular preoccupation with work. It may affect his attitude toward all of life. And art.

At the public unveiling of a celebrated statue in Chicago, a lawyer, after deep study, mused, "I accept Mr. Picasso in good faith. But if you look at the height of the slope on top and the propensity of children who will play on it, I have a feeling that some child may fall and be hurt and the county may be sued. ..."

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Is it any wonder that in such surreal circumstances, status rather than the work itself becomes important? Thus the prevalence of euphemisms in work as well as in war. The janitor is a building engineer; the garbage man, a sanitary engineer; the man at the rendering plant, a factory mechanic; the gravedigger, a caretaker. They are not themselves ashamed of their work, but society, they feel, looks upon them as a lesser species. So they call upon promiscuously used language to match the "respectability" of others, whose jobs may have less social worth than their own.

At hospitals, the charming bill collector is called the patients' representative! It's- a wonderland that Alice never envisioned. Consider the company spy. With understandable modesty, he refers to himself as an industrial investigator. This last—under the generic name, Security—is among the most promising occupations in our society today. No matter how tight the job market, here is a burgeoning field for young men and women. Watergate, its magic spell is everywhere.

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In a further bizarre turn of events (the science of medicine has increased our life expectancy; the science of business frowns upon the elderly), the matter of age is felt in almost all quarters. "Thirty and out" is the escape hatch for the elderly auto worker to the woods of retirement, some hunting, some fishing. ... But thirty has an altogether different connotation at the ad agency, at the bank, at the auditing house, at the gas company. Unless he/she is "with it" by then, it's out to the woods of the city, some hunting, some fishing of another sort. As the work force becomes increasingly younger, so does Willy Loman.

Dr. John R. Coleman, president of Haverford College, took an unusual sabbatical during the early months of 1973. He worked at menial jobs. In one instance, he was fired as a porter-dishwasher. "I'd never been fired and I'd never been unemployed. For three days I walked the streets. Though I had a bank account, though my children's tuition was paid, though I had a salary and a job waiting for me back in Haverford, I was demoralized. I had an inkling of how professionals my age feel when they lose their job and their confidence begins to sink."

Perhaps it is this specter that most haunts working men and women: the planned obsolescence of people that is of a piece with the planned obsolescence of the things they make. Or sell. It is perhaps this fear of no longer being needed in a world of needless things that most clearly spells out the unnaturalness, the surreality of much that is called work today.

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As with my two previous books, I was aware of paradox in the making of this one. The privacy of strangers is indeed trespassed upon. Yet my experiences tell me that people with buried grievances and dreams unexpressed do want to let go. Let things out. Lance the boil, they say; there is too much pus. The hurts, though private, are, I trust, felt by others too.

. . .this [book]—in which the hard substance of the daily job fuses to the haze of the daydream—was alien territory. It concerned not only "what is" but "what I imagine" and "what might be."

Though this was, for me, a more difficult assignment, my approach was pretty much what it had been before. I had a general idea of the kind of people I wanted to see; who, in reflecting on their personal condition, would touch on the circumstances of their fellows. Yet, as I suspected, improvisation and chance played their roles. "A tip from an acquaintance. A friend of a friend telling me of a friend or non-friend. A face, vaguely familiar, on the morning bus. An indignant phone call from a listener or a friendly one. . . ."

I realized quite early in this adventure that interviews, conventionally conducted, were meaningless. Conditioned clichés were certain to come. The question-and-answer technique may be of some value in determining favored detergents, toothpaste and deodorants. but not in the discovery of men and women! There were questions, of course. But they were casual in nature—at the beginning: the kind you would ask while having a drink with someone: the kind he would ask you. The talk was idiomatic rather than academic. In short, it was conversation. In time, the sluice gates of dammed up hurts and dreams were opened.

Choices were in many instances arbitrary. People are engaged in thousands of jobs. Whom to visit? Whom to pass by? In talking to the washroom attendant, would I be remiss in neglecting the elevator operator? One felt his job "obsolete." Wouldn't the other, too? In visiting the Chicago bookbinder, I missed the old Massachusetts basket weaver. I had been told about the New Englander, who found delight in his work. So did my Chicago acquaintance. Need I have investigated the lot of an assembler at the electronics plant, having spent time with spot-welders at Ford? An assembly line is a line is a line.

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As some occupations become obsolete, others come into being. More people are being paid to watch other people than ever before. A cargo inspector says, "I watch the watchman." He neglected to tell who watches *him*. A young department head in a bank finds it amusing. "Just like Big Brother's watching you. Everybody's watching somebody. It's quite funny when you turn and start watching them. I do that quite a bit. They know I'm watching them. They become uneasy."

Here, too, grievances come into play. The most profound complaint, aside from non-recognition and the nature of the job, is "being spied on." There's the foreman at the plant, the supervisor listening in at Ma Bell's, the checker who gives the bus driver a hard time, the "passenger" who gives the airline stewardess a gimlet eye ... The indignation of those being watched is no longer offered in muted tones. Despite the occasional laugh, voices rise. Such humiliations, like fools, are suffered less gladly than before.

Perhaps it is time the "work ethic" was redefined and its idea reclaimed from the banal men who invoke it. In a world of cybernetics, of an almost runaway technology, things are increasingly making things. It is for our species, it would seem, to go on to other matters. Human matters. Freud put it one way. Ralph Helstein puts it another. He is president emeritus of the United Packinghouse Workers of America. "Learning is work. Caring for children is work. Community action is work. Once we accept the concept of work as something meaningful—not just as the source of a buck—you don't have to worry about finding enough jobs. There's no excuse for mules any more. Society does not need them. There's no question about our ability to feed and clothe and house everybody. The problem is going to come in finding enough ways for man to keep occupied, so he's in touch with reality." Our imaginations have obviously not yet been challenged.

"It isn't that the average working guy is dumb. He's tired, that's all." Mike LeFevre, the steelworker, asks

rhetorically, "Who you gonna sock? You can't sock General Motors ... you can't sock a system." So, at the neighborhood tavern, he socks the patron sitting next to him, the average working guy. And look out below! It's predetermined, his work being what it is.

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But there are stirrings, a nascent flailing about. Though "Smile" buttons appear, the bearers are deadpan because nobody smiles back. What with the computer and all manner of automation, new heroes and anti-heroes have been added to Walt Whitman's old work anthem. The sound is no longer melodious. The desperation is unquiet.

Nora Watson may have said it most succinctly. "I think most of us are looking for a calling, not a job. Most of us, like the assembly line worker, have jobs that are too small for our spirit. Jobs are not big enough for people."

### LINCOLN JAMES

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*He works in a rendering and glue factory. He's been at it for thirty-six years. "A lot of people refer to me as a maintenance man. But I call it a factory mechanic."*

Rendering is where you get the scrap—fat and bones—from the butcher shops and cook them into a grease. We receive things people normally don't want. Years ago, we principally supplied soap factories. But today we make all different products from the residue. Tallows, glycerine, bone meal, poultry feed, fertilizer. The bones usually go to glue. Out of the marrow of the bones is where the glue comes from. People have no interest whatsoever in what they throw out. This rendering process takes it and makes millions of dollars off of it. They export this grease to foreign countries. That's our big business nowadays.

They bring it in by truck. It's unloaded on conveyors. Bones go one place, the fats go another. They take it through a cooking process and this is where we get the glue. It may start out like water, but when it cooks over and over, it gets almost like a syrup. It's just a thickening process.

I started out as a laborer. I became an oiler and from that to repairman. When I labored, I transported the meat and the bones after they were separated. Women were doing that at the time. Today it's automation. No women now. They were eliminated.

The odor was terrible, but I got used to it. It was less annoying when you stayed right in it. When you left for a week or so, a vacation, you had to come back and get used to the thing all over again. I've had people that say, "How do you stand it?" I say it's like anything else. I don't say you get exactly used to it, but it does get less annoying in time. It's not a stink, but it's not sweet either. It's a different odor altogether. Whenever meat lays around for a few days it smells like that. But once you cook it, it changes to a different odor. I can't explain . . .

I sometimes have a little fun with some of the guys. I say, "I work in one of the filthiest places in Chicago, I believe." Some of 'em work in tanneries and they say, "Your place is sweet smellin' besides a tannery." Some of the others kid me; "How do you survive it?" I say, "Did you know the percentage of stuff that we

produce here you use it every day?" They says, "Oh? What?" I says, "You brush your teeth with toothpaste?" "Yes." "You have glycerine in your toothpaste. We produce that." They says, "Really?" "Do you eat chickens?" "Yes." "Well, we produce the poultry food, and this is the residue of some of the stuff you see laying around here looking so bad and smelling so bad." (Laughs.) They just look at me, mouth open.

I say, "I know you have in time past kissed good with lipstick." "Oh yeah." "Well, look man, we used to supply one of the biggest lipstick factories of all the grease they use. Now don't kiss no more girls." (Laughs).

I sometimes says, "I really don't think you know what's happening," I'll tell 'em about soaps, the stuff they use to fatten the chickens, the glue you use to lick the stamps to go on your letter. (Laughs.) We manufacture here what you use daily.

It's all purified, of course. (Pause.) But you just think about what all this is. Could any part of this stink possibly be used in an individual's life? You wonder sometime. But you search it down and you find it do. Yes, yes. Many other things, if you really knew from where it come, you probably wouldn't be very interested. I had some years in a packinghouse and I see some of the stuff manufactured and I don't relish it too much myself. I happen to Be around and know what goes on.

You have to wear rubber gloves, but there'd still be an odor to your hand. You had to wash it real good in order not to smell it when you were eating lunch. The risk of infections and stuff are pretty great because of this contaminated stuff. They provide employees with tetanus shots every so often. They never had too many infections. Of course, there was a few.

Accidents wasn't too frequent, but sometimes they got burns. Oh yes, we've had some. If you puts the meat in the pot and you would cook this meat until it was done, then you drain the liquid off, you want to empty the tank. Pull the residue out—why, we've had some guys get burns. It seldom, if ever, get the face. It hits the chest, down to the. middle leg length. It lasted for months before some employees were able to return to work.

I've known them to have six hundred people here. Now they're down to less than three hundred due to automation. Where they used to have five people separating the rubbish and things, they have only one or two doing it now. I'm assigned to breakdowns on these hydraulic pumps. If a lot of it goes bad overnight, I have to get 'em going that day. It's not the same routine every day. You never know.

This plant runs seven days a week, twenty-four hours a day. They have a scheduled five-day week. But many of them work six days and some of them seven days. Sometimes ten hours a day, sometimes twelve hours a day. In some instances, the overtime is compulsory. The equipment's gotta be used.

You speak of my working life? I like what I'm doing. I never been laid off in thirty-six years. I look forward to going to work. I'd be lost if I wasn't working. But I guess after you put in so many years ...

Some of the younger help, they seems to have the attitude, "I won't be here long." They say, "How long you worked here?" I say, "Oh, somewhat longer than you all." They says, "I don't want nobody's job that long." They don't feel like coming to work, they take the day off. Saturday, Sunday, Monday, it don't make no difference. I would think they went out and had a big time. It doesn't seem to bother them to take a couple days off. Wherein it was a rare thing for me to lose a day, years back. I don't lose any time now.

I still think it's a wonderful thing to be employed. I don't know how I'd feel without it. (Pause.) But I'd like the experience. After so many years—I would just like the experience of not having to go to work. I look forward to retirement in another three, four years. I don't know what it would really turn out to be ...

## JOHN FULLER

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*He has been a mail carrier since 1964, though he's worked in the post office for twenty-six years. "Back in '47 I was a clerk at the finance window. I had a break in the service and came back as a truckdriver. I was a little confined. Bein' a carrier gives me more street time where I'm meeting more of the public." He is forty-eight years old.*

I'm doing a job that's my life ambition. When I was in school, you said in the yearbook what you're most likely to be. I did say mailman. First thing came to my mind. As a kid, when I was coming up, I didn't have any idea this would wind up as my chosen profession. It has.

This is a profession that everyone has looked up to and respected. They always say, "Here comes the mailman"— pony express or something. This always brought a gleam to everybody's eye. Everyone likes to receive mail. I feel it is one of the most respected professions that is throughout the nation. You're doing a job for the public and a job for the country.

It's getting to a point where it's payin' now. Used to be they didn't pay 'em much. Everyone thought the mailman was making much more than he makes, "Aw, you got a good job, you're makin' lots of money." What it takes to live, you're barely scraping it, just barely getting along.

You find that most people in the post office have two jobs. Some of 'em have three jobs. I have had two most of the time. Now I only have one. My wife, she's working. If she wasn't, I don't know how we'd make it.

Now the top is eleven thousand dollars. This is just the last couple of years, they'd progressed to that status. For quite a while, the top was only in the seven thousand bracket. A mailman, breaking in, he makes somewhere along \$3.60 an hour. This is subs. They progress somewhere about seven cents a year.

Everybody in the post office are moonlighting. We have a lot of men in the post office and their wives also in the post office. There are more women carriers today. And they're doing a bang-up job. It's a fabulous job for a woman. At the eleven-thousand-dollar bracket after eight years, it's a nice piece of change for a woman.

My day starts at four o'clock. I hit the floor. At five thirty I'm at work. We pull mail from the cases that the night clerks have thrown. I start casin', throwin' letters. At my station we have fifty-three carriers. Each one has a pigeonhole that his mail goes in. You are constantly pulling mail out of these pigeonholes.

I have one big office building downtown and a smaller one. Each firm is a case. As you work on a case, you get to know the people who get personal mail. You throw it to that firm. I have sixty different outfits in the building that I service. Downtown is much easier than the residential district. You could have about 540 separations in the residential. I know about ninety percent of the people in the office building. We are on a first name basis.

I make two trips a day. The mail is relayed by truck. I get over to the building, I unsack it and line it up according to various offices. Then I start my distribution, floor by floor. We have twenty-three floors in this building. I take the elevator up to the fifteenth, and as I go up, I drop the mail off on each floor. Then I walk down and make the distributions. Later, I get the upper floors.

The various people I meet in the building, we're constantly chatting, world affairs and everything. You don't have a chance to go off daydreaming. My day ends about two o'clock. During the day I might feel sluggish, but at quitting time you always feel happy.

I worked residential six months and flew back downtown. (Laughs.) Quite a bit more walking there. I had one district that covered thirty-two blocks. In a residential district you have relay boxes. It's a large brown box, which you probably see settin' on a corner next to the red, white, and blue box. You have a key that will open this. You have maybe three relay boxes in your district. You can run about twenty-five miles a day. If I had a pedometer, I'd be clocked around ten on this job.

Walking is good for you. It keeps you active. You more or less feel better. The bag's on my shoulder with me at all times. It varies from two pounds to thirty-five—which is the limit you're supposed to carry. The shoulder's not affected. Just keep goin', that's all.

Constantly you walk. You go home and put your feet in a hot basin after. That feels good. About twice a week, you give 'em a good soakin'. When I'm home, I keep 'em elevated, stay off 'em as much as possible, give 'em a lot of rest. I wear out on the average about three or five pairs of shoes a year. When I first started the bag, seemed like I was carryin' a ton. But as you go along, the bag isn't getting any lighter but you're getting accustomed to it.

When I come home, I walk in the door, turn the one-eyed monster TV on, take my uniform off, sit on the couch to., watch a story, and usually go to sleep. (Laughs.) Around six, seven o'clock, my wife comes home. "You tired?" "Somewhat." So I watch TV again with her and eat dinner. Nine thirty, ten o'clock, I'm ready for bed.

If you've got a second job, you get off at two, hustle and bustle off to that second job. You get off from there eight, nine o'clock and you rush home, you rush to bed. Sleep fast and get up and start all over again. I've had a second job up until last year. I tried to get away from walkin' on that one. To find something wherein I was stationary in one spot. But most of my part-time jobs have always been deliveries. I was on the move at all times. If I hadn't been on the move, I would probably be asleep on the job. Moving about on my feet kept me awake.

Most things a carrier would contend with is dogs. You think he won't bite, but as soon as you open the door the dog charges out past the patron and he clips you. This is a very hectic experience for the mailman. On a lot of residential streets, you have dog packs roaming, and a lot of times you don't know whether the dog is friendly or not. You try to make friends with him in order that you won't be attacked. In some cases, he'll walk your district with you. He'd walk this block with you. When you reach the corner, he'd turn back and go home, (Laughs.) You got a vicious dog, he chases after you. (Sighs.) There's more dogs nowadays. Yes, they have dogs that's always out. Oh, I've been attacked. (Laughs.) I've had several instances where dogs have made me jump fences. One was over in a vacant lot. I was about a hundred yards from him. I was doing steps and coming down. I'm watching him, and he's evidently watching me. As I pass this lot, here he comes, It's a middle-class white area. The woman, she was walking down the



street. She musta knew the dog. She called him by name and shooed at him. Shot mace at him. (Laughs.) She come up and said, "I'm sorry he's bothering you." She spoke to him and told him to go and he went off.

Most people have the mailman pretty well timed as to what time he'll be around. You have old lady pensioners. You have ADC. They're constantly waiting for checks. They're always waiting. If they miss you on this block, they will run around to the next block. "Mailman, you got my check?" (Laughs.) You know it's not there 'cause you know what you have. "Look in the bag again. It might be mixed up with somebody else's mail." You look anyway to make 'em feel good. You know who are getting checks. Therefore you have to be ready for 'em. Interesting life.

I'll work until retirement. I have the years of service but I don't have the age. Last year they made a special package. We could get out at twenty-five years of service and fifty-five years of age. I need seven more years. Retirement pays anywhere from \$250 to \$300 a month. Not much. That's why quite a few of 'em didn't go.

With thirty years of service, you can go up to seventy years of age. If the retirement's right, I'll not be here. At retirement, I'll be looking for another job where it wouldn't be life and butter. This other job would be just a supplement. I'm thinkin' about goin' in business for myself. So when I reach my reclining years I wouldn't have to work so hard.

*Ever talk about your day's work with your wife?*

No. She has enough problems of her own.

### **DOLORES DANTE**

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*She has been a waitress in the same restaurant for twenty-three years. Many of its patrons are credit card carriers on an expense account—conventioners, politicians, labor leaders, agency people. Her hours are from 5:00 PM to 2:00 AM six days a week. She arrives earlier "to get things ready, the silverware, the butter.*

*When people come in and ask for you, you would like to be in a position to handle them all, because that means more money for you.*

*"I became a waitress because I needed money fast and you don't get it in an office. My husband and I broke up and he left me with debts and three children. My baby was six months. The fast buck, your tips. The first ten-dollar bill that I got as a tip, a Viking guy gave to me. He was a very robust, terrific atheist. Made very good conversation for us, 'cause I am too. "Everyone says all waitresses have broken homes. What they don't realize is when people have broken homes they need to make money fast, and do this work. They don't have broken homes because they're waitresses." I have to be a waitress. How else can I learn about people? How else does the world come to me? I can't go to everyone. So they have to come to me. Everyone wants to eat, everyone has hunger. And I serve them. If they've had a bad day, I nurse them, cajole them. Maybe with coffee I give them a little philosophy. They have cocktails, I give them political science.*

I'll say things that bug me. If they manufacture soap, I say what I think about pollution. If it's automobiles, I say what I think about them. If I pour water I'll say, "Would you like your quota of mercury today?" If I serve cream, I say, "Here is your substitute. I think you're drinking plastic." I just can't keep

quiet. I have an opinion on every single subject there is. In the beginning it was theology, and my bosses didn't like it. Now I am a political and my bosses don't like it. I speak *sotto voce*. But if I get heated, then I don't give a damn. I speak like an Italian speaks. I can't be servile. I give service. There is a difference.

I'm called by my first name. I like my name. I hate to be called Miss. Even when I serve a lady, a strange woman, I will not say madam. I hate ma'am. I always say milady. In the American language there is no word to address a woman, to indicate whether she's married or unmarried. So I say 'milady'. And sometimes I playfully say to the man 'milord'.

It would be very tiring if I had to say, "Would you like a cocktail?" and say that over and over. So I come out different for my own enjoyment. I would say, "What's exciting at the bar that I can offer?" I can't say, "Do you want coffee?" Maybe I'll say, "Are you in the mood for coffee?" Or, "The coffee sounds exciting." Just rephrase it enough to make it interesting for me. That would make them take an interest. It becomes theatrical and I feel like Mata Hari and it intoxicates me.

People imagine a waitress couldn't possibly think or have any kind of aspiration other than to serve food. When somebody says to me, "You're great, how come you're *fust* a waitress?" *Just* a waitress. I'd say, "Why, don't you think you deserve to be served by me?" It's implying that he's not worthy, not that I'm not worthy. It makes me irate. I don't feel lowly at all. I myself feel sure. I don't want to change the job. I love it.

Tips? I feel like Carmen. It's like a gypsy holding out a tambourine and they throw the coin. (Laughs.) If you like people, you're not thinking of the tips. I never count my money at night. I always wait till morning. If I thought about my tips I'd be uptight. I never look at a tip. You pick it up fast. I would do my bookkeeping in the morning. It would be very dull for me to know I was making so much and no more. I do like challenge. And it isn't demeaning, not for me.

There might be occasions when the customers might intend to make it demeaning—the man about town, the conventioneer. When the time comes to pay the check, he would do little things, "How much should I give you?" He might make an issue about it. I did say to one, "Don't play God with me. Do what you want." Then it really didn't matter whether I got a tip or not. I would spit it out, my resentment—that he dares make me feel I'm operating only for a tip.

He'd ask for his check. Maybe he's going to sign it. He'd take a very long time and he'd make me stand there, "Let's see now, what do you think I ought to give you?" He would not let go of that moment. And you knew it. You know he meant to demean you. He's holding the change in his hand, or if he'd sign, he'd flourish the pen and wait. These are the times I really get angry. I'm not reticent. Something would come out. Then I really didn't care. "Goddamn, keep your money!" There are conventionees, who leave their lovely wives or their bad wives. They approach you and say, "Are there any hot spots?" "Where can I find girls?" It is, of course, first directed at you. I don't mean that as a compliment, 'cause all they're looking for is females. They're not looking for companionship or conversation. I am quite adept at understanding this. I think I'm interesting enough that someone may just want to talk to me. But I would philosophize that way. After all, what is left after you talk? The hours have gone by and I could be home resting or reading or studying guitar, which I do on occasion. I would say, "What are you going to offer me? Drinks?" And I'd point to the bar, "I have it all here." He'd look blank and then I'd say, "A man? If I need a man, wouldn't you think I'd have one of my own? Must I wait for you?" Life doesn't frighten me

anymore. There are only two things that relegate us—the bathroom and the grave. Either I'm gonna have to go to the bathroom now or I'm gonna die now. I go to the bathroom.

And I don't have a high opinion of bosses. The more popular you are, the more the boss holds it over your head. You're bringing them business, but he knows you're getting good tips and you won't leave. You have to worry not to overplay it, because the boss becomes resentful and he uses this as a club over your head.

If you become too good a waitress, there's jealousy. They don't come in and say, "Where's the boss?" They'll ask for Dolores. It doesn't make a hit. That makes it rough. Sometimes you say, Aw hell, why am I trying so hard? I did get an ulcer. Maybe the things I kept to myself were twisting me.

It's not the customers, never the customers. It's injustice. My dad came from Italy and I think of his broken English —*injoost*. He hated injustice. If you hate injustice for the world, you hate more than anything injustice toward you. Loyalty is never appreciated, particularly if you're the type who doesn't like small talk and are not the type who makes reports on your fellow worker. The boss wants to find out what is going on surreptitiously. In our society today you have informers everywhere. They've informed on cooks, on coworkers. "Oh, someone wasted this." They would say I'm talking to all the customers. "I saw her carry such-and-such out. See if she wrote that on her check." "The salad looked like it was a double salad." I don't give anything away. I just give myself. Informers will manufacture things in order to make their job worthwhile. They're not sure of themselves as workers. There's always someone who wants your station, who would be pretender to the crown. In life there is always someone who wants somebody's job.

I'd get intoxicated with giving service. People would ask for me and I didn't have enough tables. Some of the girls are standing and don't have customers. There is resentment. I feel self-conscious. I feel a sense of guilt. It cramps my style. I would like to say to the customer, "Go to so-and-so." But you can't do that, because you feel a sense of loyalty. So you would rush, get to your customers quickly. Some don't care to drink and still they wait for you. That's a compliment.

There is plenty of tension. If the cook isn't good, you fight to see that the customers get what you know they like. You have to use diplomacy with cooks, who are always dangerous. (Laughs.) They're madmen. (Laughs.) You have, to be their friend. They better like you. And your bartender better like you too, because he may do something to the drink. If your bartender doesn't like you, your cook doesn't like you, your boss doesn't like you, the other girls don't like you, you're in trouble.

And there will be customers who are hypochondriacs, who feel they can't eat, and I coax them. Then I hope I can get it just the right way from the cook. I may mix the salad myself, just the way they want it.

Maybe there's a party of ten. Big shots, and they'd say, "Dolores, I have special clients, do your best tonight." You just hope you have the right cook behind the broiler. You really want to pleasure your guests. He's selling something, he wants things right, too. You're giving your all. How does the steak look? If you cut his steak, you look at it surreptitiously. How's it going?" Carrying dishes is a problem. We do have accidents. I spilled a tray once with steaks for seven on it. It was a big, gigantic T-bone, all sliced. But when that tray fell, I went with it, and never made a sound, dish and all (softly) never made a sound. It took about an hour and a half to cook that steak. How would I explain this thing? That steak was salvaged. (Laughs.) Some don't care. When the plate is down you can hear the sound. I try not to have

that sound. I want my hands to be right when I serve. I pick up a glass, I want it to be just right. I get to be almost Oriental in the serving. I like it to look nice all the way. To be a waitress, it's an art. I feel like a ballerina, too. I have to go between those tables, between those chairs . . . Maybe that's the reason I always stayed slim. It is a certain way I can go through a chair no one else can do. I do it with an air. If I drop a fork, there is a certain way I pick it up. I know they can see how delicately I do it. I'm on stage.

I tell everyone I'm a waitress and I'm proud. If a nurse gives service, I say, "You're a professional." Whatever you do, be professional. I always compliment people.

I like to have my station looking nice. I like to see there's enough ash trays when they're having their coffee and cigarettes. I don't like ash trays so loaded that people are not enjoying the moment. It offends me. I don't do it because I think that's gonna make a better tip. It offends me as a person.

People say, "No one does good work anymore." I don't believe it. You know who's saying that? The man at the top, who says the people beneath him are not doing a good job. He's the one who always said, "You're nothing." The housewife who has all the money, she believed housework was demeaning, 'cause she hired someone else to do it. If it weren't so demeaning, why didn't *she* do it? So anyone who did her housework was a person to be demeaned. The maid who did all the housework said, "Well, hell, if this is the way you feel about it, I won't do your housework. You tell me I'm no good, I'm nobody. Well, maybe I'll go out and be somebody." They're only mad because they can't find someone to do it now. The fault is not in the people who did the—quote—lowly work.

*Just* a waitress. At the end of the night I feel drained. I think a lot of waitresses become alcoholics because of that. In most cases, a waiter or a waitress doesn't eat. They handle food, they don't have time. You'll pick at something in the kitchen, maybe a piece of bread. You'll have a cracker, a little bit of soup. You go back and take a teaspoonful of something. Then maybe sit down afterwards and have a drink, maybe three, four, five. And bartenders, too, most of them are alcoholics. They'd go out in a group. There are after-hour places. You've got to go release your tension. So they go out before they go to bed. Some of them stay out all night.

It's tiring, it's nerve-racking. We don't ever sit down. We're on stage and the bosses are watching. If you get the wrong shoes and you get the wrong stitch in that shoe, that does bother you. Your feet hurt, your body aches. If you come out in anger at things that were done to you, it would only make you feel cheapened. Really I've been keeping it to myself. But of late, I'm beginning to spew it out. It's almost as though I sensed my body and soul had had quite enough.

It builds and builds and builds in your guts. Near crying. I can think about it . . . (She cries softly.) 'Cause you're tired. When the night is done, you're tired. You've had so much, there's so much going . . . You had to get it done. The dread that something wouldn't be right, because you want to please. You hope everyone is satisfied. The night's done, you've done your act. The curtains close.

The next morning is pleasant again. I take out my budget book, write down how much I made, what my bills are. I'm managing. I won't give up this job as long as I'm able to do it. I feel out of contact if I just sit at home. At work they all consider me a kook. (Laughs.) That's okay. No matter where I'd be, I would make a rough road for me. It's just me, and I can't keep still. It hurts, and what hurts has to come out.

Postscript: *"After sixteen years— that was seven years ago— I took a trip to Hawaii and the Caribbean for two weeks. Went with a lover. The kids saw it—they're all married now. (Laughs.) One of my daughters*

said, "Act your age." I said, "Honey, if I were acting my age, I wouldn't be walking. My bones would ache. You don't want to hear about my arthritis. Aren't you glad I'm happy?"

## DONNA MURRAY

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*She has been binding books for twenty-five years. Among her clients have been the University of Chicago, the Arboretum, the Art Institute, and private collectors. Her reflections are somewhat free associative in nature. "I didn't even really become a bookbinder. It happened because we had so many books. I inherited this great big library from my father, and John\* had many, many art books that were falling apart. We had acres of books, and I thought this was the thing to do: I'll put these books together and make them fit. So I began a sort of experiment and I enjoyed it very much. I became a bookbinder because I had nothing else to do."*

At first no one taught me. I wasn't doing much of anything. Then a *marvelous* woman, who's a brilliant artist, gave me a *marvelous* frame that her father made for her, for sewing books and that sort of thing. So I learned to sew books. They're really good books, it's just the covers that are rotten. You take them apart and you make them sound and you smash them in and sew them up. That's all there is to it.

I have a bindery at home, it's kind of a cave, really. It's where you have your gear—a table where you work, a cutter, a press, and those kinds of things. You have a good screw press, a heavy one that presses the books down. A binder's gear is principally his thumbnail. You push, you use your thumbnail more than anything else.

I mustn't pose as a fine binder because I'm not. That's exhibition binding, gold tooling. You roll out this design and you fill it with egg white. Then you cover it with pure gold leaf. I enjoy restoration very much—when you restore an old book that's all ragged at the back. You must make a rubbing of the spine. The spine's all rotten, so you put that aside and you turn back the pages *very carefully*. That's what I enjoy most of all.

Obviously I don't make much money binding books, but it's very cozy work. Carolyn\* and I did simple, necessary things for the university. We bound precious pamphlets in a way that preserved them. Incunabula—books printed before 1500. Architectural works and something of the Latin poets.

Those made of vellum are usually just rotten in the back. Vellum's a wild thing, the hide of a calf or a lamb. It's treated with acid. The pages are falling apart. You take them out if you can and wash them, deacidify them in a certain solution. Then you fold them together and press them in your press.

Some of my private customers have very splendid collections, beautiful bindings you'll never see again. I have very specific, lovely clients. One, who's no longer living, had a magnificent collection of Stevenson and Dickens, first editions.

I go to the house and take my equipment, oils and paints and a certain binder's paste. And a painter's drop cloth. There's a beautiful Oriental rug, and indeed you may not drop anything on it. You set up a card table and book ends and that's about it, really.

We calculate the books. We make a point of being sure that the books go back exactly where they were before. We look at each book and pull it out and test it for tears. Almost everybody pulls books out by their tops, and they're always broken. Tom from beautiful leather bindings. In dusting books, you never touch them inside. The dust only goes to the top. People who pull them out with the idea of dusting them—it's just ridiculous. It only destroys the book.

My assistant takes the cloth for me, and then we line up the books. She dusts the tops. You always dust from the spine out, cleaning the book. Then you use the *marvelous* British Museum formula, potassium lactate. It's swabbed on the books to put back in the leather the acids that were taken out, that were in the hide in the beginning. They've been dried out completely and all the salts have been destroyed. So we swab all the leather goods with this potassium lactate. A very little swab, and let it sink in. Then these books are polished and put back on the shelves. It preserves books that could never exist in this climate after five years.

It's an arduous thing, but I suppose it's important because if that kind of thing didn't happen, the books would just disintegrate. Father's library did. Especially in the city with its very high potency of sulphur dioxide, which eats up the books. The hideous air, the poisonous air of the city. People love to have whole sets of Dickens or Mark Twain or Dumas—the kinds of popular acquisitions in our mother's age, when they filled up their shelves. The books in Chicago are disintegrating to a most appalling degree in comparison to the books of the same issue in Lake Forest.\* It's been going on for years. It destroys them. It eats them up. Terrible.

I usually arrive at about ten thirty. I work as long as it pleases me. If I fill up the table and the books are oiled, I often leave at four or six. I might work for one client two or three weeks. In the case of Mrs. Armour's books, it was a matter of six months. She had a superb collection stored in the old house. It took two days to unpack the crates. Her mother was a collector of exceedingly marvelous taste. It was undeniably one of the most beautiful collections of books I've ever seen. Not only in the binding, but in the selection. It was kind of wonderful to be there at that moment.

I wouldn't want to bind anything that was flimsy. You have to think of what's inside. If you're binding a book about a big idea—Karl Marx! (laughs)—you obviously would accommodate a binding, wouldn't you? The idea of the binding should reflect what's inside. The books at the Arboretum are among the most interesting. Some of them are sixteenth- and seventeenth-century books, marvelous herbals. Beautiful, beautiful books. Flower papers. There is no special way you relate your own taste, your reflections.

If they're the *marvelous* trees of Japan—oh dear, oh dear. I was reared in California where I saw the redwoods that are now being systematically destroyed. And there's some redwood trees in Japan that relate to what you're thinking, oh dear (softly). You must be very clever with a binding and give it the dignity it deserves. Because the pages are so full of stunning, *fantastic* things that say, This is life. So what do you do with a binding like that? I don't know. You just give it a strength. If it's leather or it's cloth or it's paper, you give it strength, an indication of what is inside.

I only enjoy working on books that say something. I know this is an anathema to people who insist on preserving books that are only going to be on the shelves forever—or on coffee tables. Books are for people to read, and that's that. I think books are for the birds unless people read them.

That's what I discovered when I worked in Florence after the big flood. I came in the summer. John and I lived there and he worked there during his first sabbatical. I loved that city so much. And when someone from the Biblioteca Nazionale asked me to come . . .

It would be *darling* to look into books when you're working on them, lured by them—but obviously you can't. You'd never finish your work. I can read books on my own time. I feel very strongly about every book I pick up. It's like something alive or—or decadent, death. I wouldn't for one moment bind *Mein Kampf*, because I think it's disgusting to waste time on such an obscenity. Are you offering me a million dollars to bind that? Of course not.

I adore the work. It's very comforting. The only thing that makes me angry is that I'm almost all the time on the outside rather than on the inside. I'd like to be reading them. But I do think working in my house and being comfortable and doing something you feel is beneficial—it is important, isn't it?" "I'm just a swabber. (Laughs.) I'm not an artist. I just use aniline dyes, so they won't be hurting the leather. Aniline's a natural dye, and that's about it. It isn't very skilled work. It's just knowing what books need, if you want to preserve them. It's just something you do. A mechanic takes care of a tire, and he knows . . .

Oh, I think it's important. Books are things that keep us going. Books—I haven't got much feeling about many other things. I adore the work. Except sometimes it becomes very lonesome. It's nice to sit beside somebody, whether it's somebody who works with you or whether it's your husband or your friend. It's just lovely, just like a whisper, always . . . If you were really brainy, you wouldn't waste your time pasting and binding. But if you bind good books, you make something good, really and truly good. Yes, I would like to make a good book hold good and I would like to be involved in a pact that will not be broken, that holds good, which would really be as solid as the book.

Keeping a four-hundred-year-old book together keeps that spirit alive. It's an alluring kind of thing, lovely, because you know that belongs to us. Because a book is a life, like one man is a life. Yes, yes, this work is good for me, therapeutic for old age . . . *just keep going* with the hands. . .

### **BILL TALCOTT - Organizer**

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My work is trying to change this country. This is the job I've chosen. When people ask me, "Why are you doing this?" it's like asking what kind of sickness you got. I don't feel sick. I think this country is sick. The daily injustices just gnaw on me a little harder than they do on other people.

I try to bring people together who are being put down by the system, left out. You try to build an organization that will give them power to make the changes. Everybody's at the bottom of the barrel at this point. Ten years ago one could say the poor people suffered and the middle class got by. That's not true anymore.

My father was a truckdriver with a sixth-grade education. My uncle was an Annapolis graduate. My father was inarticulate and worked all his life with his hands. My uncle worked all his life with his mouth and used his hands only to cut coupons. My father's problem was that he was powerless. My uncle's problem was that he was powerless, although he thought he was strong. Clipping coupons, he was always on the fringe of power, but never really had it. If he tried to take part in the management of the

companies whose coupons he was clipping, he got clipped. Both these guys died very unhappy, dissatisfied with their lives.

Power has been captured by a few people. A very small top and a very big bottom. You don't see much in-between. Who do people on the bottom think are the powerful people? College professors and management types, the local managers of big corporations like General Motors.

What kind of power do these guys really have? They have the kind of power Eichmann claimed for himself. They have the power to do bad and not question what they're told to do.

I am more bothered by the ghetto child who is bitten by rats than I am by a middle-class kid who can't find anything to do but put down women and take dope and play his life away. But each one is wasted. "I came into consciousness during the fifties, when Joe McCarthy was running around. Like many people my age—I'm now thirty-seven—I was aware something was terribly wrong. I floundered around for two years in college, was disappointed, and enlisted in the army. I was NCO for my company. During a discussion, I said if I was a black guy, I would refuse to serve. I ended up being sent to division headquarters and locked up in a room for two years, so I wouldn't be able to talk to anybody. "At San Francisco State, I got involved with the farm workers movement. I would give speeches on a box in front of the Commons. Then I'd go out and fight jocks behind the gym for an hour and a half. (Laughs.) In '64, I resigned as student body president and went to Mississippi to work for SNCC. I spent three years working in the black community in San Francisco. "At that point, I figured it was 1 time for me to work with whites. My father was from South Carolina. We had a terrible time when I visited— violent arguments. But I was family. I learned from that experience you had to build a base with white people on the fringe of the South. Hopefully you'd build an alliance between blacks and whites.

I came to East Kentucky with OEO. I got canned in a year. Their idea was the same as Daley's. You use the OEO to build an organization to support the right candidates. I didn't see that as my work. My job was to build an organization of put-down people, who can *control* the candidates once they're elected.

I put together a fairly solid organization of Appalachian people in Pike County. It's a single industry area, coal. You either work for the coal company or you don't work. Sixty percent of its people live on incomes lower than the government's guidelines for rural areas.

I was brought in to teach other organizers how to do it. I decided these middle-class kids from Harvard and Columbia were too busy telling everybody else what they should be doing. The only thing to do was to organize the local people.

When I got fired, there were enough people to support me on one hundred dollars a month and room and board. They dug down in their pockets and they'd bring food and they'd take care of me like I was a cousin. They felt responsible for me, but they didn't see me as one of them. I'm not an Appalachian, I'm a San Franciscan. I'm not a coal miner, I'm an organizer. If they're gonna save themselves, they're gonna have to do it themselves. I have some skills that can help them. I did this work for three years.

The word organizer has been romanticized. You get the vision of a mystical being doing magical things. An organizer is a guy who brings in new members. I don't feel I've had a good day unless I've talked with at least one new person. We have a meeting, make space for new people to come in. The organizer sits next to the new guy, so everybody has to take the new guy as an equal. You do that a couple of times and the guy's got strength enough to become part of the group.



You must listen to them and tell them again and again they are important, that they have the stuff to do the job. They don't have to shuck themselves about not being good enough, not worthy. Most people were raised to think they are not worthy. School is a process of taking beautiful kids who are filled with life and beating them into happy slavery. That's as true of a twenty-five-thousand-dollar-a-year executive as it is for the poorest.

You don't find allies on the basis of the brotherhood of man. People are tied into their immediate problems. They have a difficult time worrying about other people's. Our society is so structured that everybody is supposed to be selfish as hell and screw the other guy. Christian brotherhood is enlightened self-interest. Most sins committed on poor people are by people who've come to help them.

I came as a stranger but I came with credentials. There are people who know and trust me, who say so to the others. So what I'm saying is verifiable. It's possible to win, to take an outfit like Bethlehem Steel and lick 'em. Most people in their guts don't really believe it. Gee, it's great when all of a sudden they realize it's possible. They become alive.

Nobody believed PCCA\* could stop Bethlehem from strip mining. Ten miles away was a hillside being stripped. Ten miles away is like ten million light years away. What they wanted was a park, a place for their kids. Bethlehem said, "Go to hell. You're just a bunch of crummy Appalachians. We're not gonna give you a damn thing." If I could get that park for them, they would believe it's possible to do other things.

They really needed a victory. They had lost over and over again, day after day. So I got together twenty, thirty people I saw as leaders. I said, "Let's get that park." They said, "We can't." I said, "We can. If we let all the big wheels around the country know—the National Council of Churches and everybody start calling up, writing, and hounding Bethlehem, they'll have to give us the park." That's exactly what happened. Bethlehem thought; This is getting to be a pain in the ass. We'll give them the park and they'll shut up about strip mining. We haven't shut up on strip mining, but we got the park. Four thousand people for Pike County drove up and watched those bulldozers grading down that park. It was an incredible victory.

Twenty or thirty people realized we could win. Four thousand people understood there was a victory. They didn't know how it happened, but a few of 'em got curious. The twenty or thirty are now in their own communities trying to turn people on. We're trying to link up people in other parts of the state—Lexington, Louisville, Covington, Bowling Green—and their local issues and, hopefully, binding them together in some kind of larger thing.

When you start talking to middle-class people in Lexington, the words are different, but it's the same script. It's like talking to a poor person in Pike County or Mississippi. The schools are bad. Okay, they're bad for different reasons—but the schools are bad.

The middle class is fighting powerlessness too. Middle-class women, who are in the Lexington fight, are more alienated than lower-class women. The poor woman knows she's essential for the family. The middle-class woman thinks, If I die tomorrow, my old man can hire himself a maid to do everything I do. The white-collar guy is scared he may be replaced by the computer. The schoolteacher is asked not to teach but to baby-sit. God help you if you teach. The minister is trapped by the congregation that's out of touch with him. He spends his life violating the credo that led him into the ministry. The policeman

has no relationship to the people he's supposed to protect. So he oppresses. The fireman who wants to fight fires ends up fighting a war.

People become afraid of each other. They're convinced there's not a damn thing they can do. I think we have it inside us to change things. We need the courage. It's a scary thing. Because we've been told from the time we were born that what we have inside us is bad and useless. What's true is what we have inside us is good and useful. "In Mississippi, our group got the first black guy elected in a hundred years. In San Francisco, our organization licked the development agency there. We tied up two hundred million dollars of its money for two years, until the bastards finally came to an agreement with the community people. The guy I started with was an alcoholic pimp in the black ghetto. He is now a Presbyterian minister and very highly respected." I work all the way from two in the morning until two the next morning seven days a week. (Laughs.) I'm not a martyr. I'm one of the few people I know who was lucky in life to find out what he really wanted to do. I'm just havin' a ball, the time of my life. I feel sorry for all these people I run across all the time who aren't doing what they want to do. Their lives are hell. I think everybody ought to quit their job and do what they want to do. You've got one life. You've got, say, sixty-five years. How on earth can you blow forty-five years of that doing something you hate?

I have a wife and three children. I've managed to support them for six years doing this kind of work. We don't live fat. I have enough money to buy books and records. The kids have as good an education as anybody in this country. Their range of friends runs from millionaires in San Francisco to black prostitutes in Lexington. They're comfortable with all these people. My kids know the name of the game: living your life up to the end.

All human recorded history is about five thousand years old. How many people in all that time have made an overwhelming difference? Twenty? Thirty? Most of us spend our lives trying to achieve some things. But we're not going to make an overwhelming difference. We do the best we can. That's enough.

The problem with history is that it's written by college professors about great men. That's not what history is. History's a hell of a lot of little people getting together and deciding they want a better life for themselves and their kids.

I have a goal. I want to end my life in a home for the aged that's run by the state—organizing people to fight 'em because they're not running it right. (Laughs.)