

Choreboy: The Wonderland of Work

by [Jeff Plude](#) (August 2020)



Workers' Holiday, Coney Island, Ralph Fasanella, 1965

When I walk into my office upstairs on a weekday morning in early summer, it's quiet and the sun has been up for about an hour, and on a clear day it's gently beaming through the double windows and dappled by the woods in the backyard. When this happens it often makes me think of the amusement park I used to work at when I was a teenager. The sunlight has the same lulling look as when I used to walk the paved paths through Storytown in the morning before it opened to the raucous crowds. I was on my way to the food department headquarters at the main restaurant, and it was calm and still fairly cool as the midmorning sun bathed the trees and grass

amid the rides and game booths and food stands. Before I started working there I rarely got out of bed in the summer before midmorning.

Coincidentally I've been reading a book by a young Oxford economist who makes the case that probably sooner than later there is likely to be no paid work for some people, and eventually none for many people. Others, mostly the happy few who minister to computers in some way, would still enjoy the privilege of performing some task in exchange for money. Retraining for new jobs will not save us as it has during past "technological unemployment," as famed British economist John Maynard Keynes first called it, like when cars replaced horses as the main source of transportation.

Meanwhile artificial intelligence will hum away in the background doing what plodding, fallible human beings used to do. In short, Hal will be running the ship, the spaceship earth, for real this time.

But there's no need to fret or fume if you're not expecting to retire or expire within the next few years, according to *A World Without Work*. It's a hopeful book, its author claims. If he and his cohorts have their way those no longer worthy of work will be dutifully supported financially by "The Big State," as one of the later chapters is titled. Under this scenario the jobless will receive a "conditional basic income," or CBI, a kind of permanent and global unemployment insurance that would be funded by a more just tax structure (which could be further enhanced by, the author says with a straight face, a professional code of conduct for accountants). Of course the beneficiaries of this public largesse may have to meet certain conditions, as the name implies, which would somehow be determined by the various societies, and which might even include being asked to perform certain duties that the community deems desirable.

Meanwhile the masses would be blessedly freed from the

drudgery and “BS jobs” they now must endure. They could pursue leisure full time. The Big State could help direct that too of course, so the layabouts don’t binge-watch themselves to death in their sweatpants.

The devil has never been more in the details.

The author even mentions that Adam was cursed for eating the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden: “In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground.” (Eve was cursed with the pain of childbirth, but now she often suffers both penalties.) In other words God proclaimed that man was now meant to work to earn a living. And while that’s certainly a curse compared to paradise, work became necessary in a fallen world, and believers know that whatever God deems necessary is ultimately beneficial for a person even if it may appear otherwise. Many unbelievers seem to sense the same thing about earning a living.

Nevertheless, I am all too aware that some jobs are pure misery. My father worked in a textile mill for four decades, from the age of sixteen until he dropped dead one morning, and he hated it (though he never complained about it; I know because I asked him about it once). But he didn’t hate it enough to quit, even though he had a thriving remodeling business for many years on the side. What he would’ve hated even more is being *given* a “basic income” by the government, even if he could otherwise do what he pleased.

There are many things we’d disagree about if he were suddenly resurrected, but this isn’t one of them. If I inherited anything good from him, it was watching him work, whether it was in his office or on the floor at the mill (I would pick him up occasionally when I used the family car) or in the garage at the radial saw.

Even lowly jobs, in my view, if done in the right spirit can be, if not quite enjoyable, at least enlightening

and empowering. The fact is that paid work provides not only money but a wealth of experience and satisfaction. And despite what *A World Without Work* argues, I don't think you can get the same quality of experience and satisfaction in any other way—not from volunteering, not from sports, not from hobbies, and certainly not from entertainment. As Fast Eddie says in *The Hustler*: “I don't care—bricklaying can be great, if a guy knows. If he knows what he's doin' and why, and he can make it come off.” Would Fast Eddie himself shoot pool if it weren't for money?

Storytown USA, as it used to be called (it's now the Great Escape, a Six Flags park), originally featured classic fairy tales as its theme. It was my first real job. I was sixteen and up until then I'd mowed lawns and worked with an uncle doing driveway sealing, but those were just odd jobs. This was a real job, forty hours a week, from 9:30 a.m. to 6 p.m. weekdays. There was even a time clock to punch, just like the one in the textile mill my father worked for. I had to wear a uniform—all white, long pants and a short-sleeve dress shirt and a paper short-order cook hat. I worked in the food department, which was appropriate because our family life centered around food and drink, and I spent the winter sacrilegiously denying myself food as a high school wrestler.

Wrestling is also relevant here because that's how I got the job to begin with. Our heavyweight's mother was the assistant manager of Storytown's food department (appropriate as well), and we were friendly with their family. So I was hired.

I finally got called in to work on the Fourth of July 1978. That set the theme: my summers were no longer free, and I would serve the masses while they pursued their happiness (though somehow I don't think this is quite what Mr. Jefferson had in mind). It was an amusement park after all, but there was no longer anything amusing about it to me. Of course I'd been to Storytown before I started working there, like most of

the kids who grew up in the Lake George region during the past sixty years.

Working here gave me a whole new perspective on amusement, American style.

It was in the high nineties on my first day as a worker of the world. There was no air conditioner where I worked, the Bavarian Beer Garden. It was a good-sized concession stand with a good-sized unshaded patio. There was no dishwasher except our own hands. I was making \$2.50 an hour—15 cents below minimum wage (which was legal for seasonal workers back then), or \$100 a week (today it would be almost \$400). But I wasn't washing dishes or pouring beer, watery draft Utica Club, which was sold in a plastic mug with the park logo on it. I was something much less glamorous. I was the "choreboy," as it said on the big assignment chart at the park's main indoor restaurant, which was the food department's headquarters.

Still I had enough money to buy my own clothes, albums, and a fairly high-end stereo system for the time, and save a little for college too. I felt like a man. I liked the feeling.

I would rotate to different food locations, but most of the time I was the choreboy at the beer garden. As choreboy, I was charged with picking up all the slop on the tables, piles of paper plates and cups not quite empty and sometimes half full of soda (the plastic beer mugs could be refilled), partly eaten knockwursts smothered with sauerkraut and mustard, spilling over the blue metal patio tables and chairs onto the pavement, which had to be swept and hosed down after we closed for the day. There were perhaps about a dozen and a half tables with several chairs each. I had a spray bottle and a white dishcloth that became a kaleidoscope of black, brown, gray, and mustard-yellow filth. People were slobs, I quickly concluded. I had to empty two garbage cans lined with huge

overflowing bags that reeked and leaked soda all over the ground and onto my white pants as I hauled them to the dumpster like diseased carcasses, as bees swarmed around my sweating head and armpits. I couldn't keep up. The cans filled up almost as fast as people could fill their faces.

After a while I retreated into the concession stand where all this gourmet food was prepared. There were big boxes of knockwursts and bratwursts frozen solid in the walk-in cooler, which were boiled and then "marked" on the grill—whoever was the cook could never keep them from splitting. There was a contraption that had a grill that worked like a conveyor belt on which the frozen pretzel dough was placed and it glided through a heating element and the pretzels came out all baked, magically, on the other side (this was also one of the choreboy's jobs, since some of the warm pretzels needed to be put in a box and walked down to Dan McGrew's Saloon in Ghost Town). The German potato salad and sauerkraut came in large cans that were opened with a large metal can opener mounted on the prep table in front of the warming bins, which were stainless steel trays with rounded sliding covers that held the salad and kraut and the knocks and brats that had been cooked but had not yet sold. Which the cook had to be careful of not doing—overcooking and underselling. Doing that too many times could be grounds for being fired.

People were regularly fired—by the chief himself, who started the park in 1954, supposedly after a visit to Knott's Berry Farm (which I also visited as a kid). His voice sounded like an evil character out of a Disney movie. His hair was short, white, and neatly combed, and stood out against the tanned skin. He was in his mid-sixties at the time but still led from the front lines. He wore a light-colored short-sleeve collar shirt and plain dark pants, that's how I always picture him in memory. He roamed the park ready to cut off the next teenager's head who wasn't in battle formation, or had

disobeyed orders or gone AWOL. He was worse than the Queen of Hearts, because there was no kindly king to stop him.

Often our direct boss, the food department manager, Phil, would arrive unexpectedly during the day to check on the four of us at the beer garden. He was probably in his late twenties, but seemed closer to my father's age (who was in his early fifties at the time) than to mine, even though Phil had a boyish face. He carried a walkie talkie on his belt, was tall and thin, wore the regulation brown dress pants and a white short-sleeved collar shirt of a department head (there was an orange sportcoat that went with it, which I only saw him wear once during a parkwide employees meeting). He was always on the move, like his own boss, scouring the park's food venues for signs of breaches. He'd pop in. He was all business. He looked stern but was never loud and never cursed at us. He'd do a quick inspection. Once he even jumped behind one of the two registers and started waiting on one of the long serpentine lines, which lasted from about 11:30 a.m. sometimes right till 5:30 p.m. when we closed for the hourlong cleanup.

I sometimes invoke my old boss's name, usually when my wife and I are in the kitchen cooking dinner—"What would Phil say?"—as we're rushing around trying to clean as we cook, just like we learned to do as food grunts at Storytown. I got her a job in the food department too during my third and last year there.

But the fact was that Phil almost didn't rehire me and my high school buddy who also ended up working at the beer garden. After our first season in the food department we went back the next spring to talk to Phil about our jobs. To our surprise, it was a somewhat formal interview: it was in his office in the park's main administrative building. We were about to graduate from high school, and were pretty sure of ourselves—we worked here last year, after all. Phil told us that every time he showed up at the beer garden we seemed to

be fooling around and the place was a mess. He wanted to know what we were going to do differently this summer. We tumbled out some answer, but I was angry and embarrassed.

My buddy was thinking the same thing I was, because when we walked out he and I just looked at each other. We immediately vowed that we were going to show Phil what we were really capable of.

We were like giant cats on a mission—we cleaned everything. All day we scrubbed the kitchen utensils and wiped the appliances down. We even cleaned the sink. We had everything in order, everything had its place. We were conscientious about ordering items ahead of time on the inventory list, and not cooking too many knockwursts or bratwursts. We developed a shorthand code for various combos ordered—2Ks with S, 1B with W (two knockwursts with sauerkraut, one bratwurst with the works). I defrosted the knockwursts, our best sellers, ahead of time, instead of shoehorning them into the pot in one tube-layered boulder.

Phil swooped into the beer garden one blistering afternoon. We'd had long lines all day—you could barely see the patio tables and chairs, which I no longer had to mop up. I was now the regular cook. My buddy was on the register. And we were really humming that day. We had a record day. And we had the place spanking clean, all the stainless steel—the warming bins, the face of the grill, the big pot to boil the knockwursts and brats, the sink—gleamed.

Phil was elated. Name any days of the week you want off, they're yours! he announced. I'd never seen him like this. He said this to me and my buddy specifically. He apparently could see that we were the ones primarily responsible for all this. My buddy and I ran the beer garden like it was our own little business. We both couldn't take off the same two days, that was the only limitation imposed. He wanted Tuesdays and Saturdays off—Tuesday, we learned by

experience, was the busiest day of the week. I wanted Saturdays and Sundays off.

When my girlfriend (now my wife) joined the food department the next year, Phil decreed that she would have weekends off too! It extended even to my girlfriend!

So our new days off were in effect for a good part of that second summer, and all the next one too for me (my buddy took another job). But even more importantly, the fact was that we had redeemed ourselves. It was an indisputable fact. Phil had given us the days off as proof.

It never dawned on me then how subtly and effectively Phil had managed us.

I have said to my wife with not a hint of irony that Phil was the best boss I ever had. If only the newspaper editors I worked for were half as skillful a manager and communicator as he was, maybe newspapers would not be on the brink of being an anachronism.

As for *A World Without Work*, it's not a prospect I look forward to, even though I'm not far from my sixth decade on earth. AI is certainly artificial, but I'm not so sure as its creators are that it's truly intelligent. The ancients did not separate brain power, which modern man considers the end-all-be-all of intelligence, from moral character. And AI is amoral at best, and may (like Hal) turn out in the end to be as ill-willed as human beings.

It seems to me that there's a point when progress (so-called) doubles back on itself and becomes its opposite. AI, I believe, is that point. Yes, it can produce impressive results, like a computer program created at Stanford to diagnose skin cancer, but do we want to live in a world in which human doctors are beside the point? What about the *art* of medicine, when an older and experienced doctor's intuition becomes as important as his clinical knowledge? Such doctors,

if not done away with altogether, will certainly be second-guessed and perhaps even chastised if they dare to cross a cousin of Hal's, just as Dave and the crew were in *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

Hal was remarkably smart, but he—or rather it—turned out to be remarkably evil. When I was visiting my father-in-law's a while back I asked Alexa, his Amazon “assistant,” as a joke: “Alexa, how's Hal doing?”

It shot back, without missing a beat: “I haven't seen him in a while.”

We all laughed, including me. But maybe it was not so funny after all.

All I can tell you is that I worked at Storytown USA when I first entered the wonderland of work, and I am much better for the experience.

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