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# Work and Jobs

“**W**ork is the fundamental condition of human existence,” said Karl Marx. In punch-the-clock and briefcase societies no less than in agricultural or hunting and gathering societies, it is the organization of work that makes life in communities possible. Individual life as well as social life is closely tied to work. In wage labor societies, and perhaps in every other as well, much of an individual’s identity is tied to his or her job. To be engaged in a task that the community says is useful is the principal way one earns a living and becomes a valued member of that community. For most of us, then, jobs are a principal source of both independence and connectedness to others. It should come as no surprise that, in the work force or out, work and jobs are important themes in the lives of homeless women.\*

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\*DIRECTOR: *Honestly, I felt that the women’s looking for work, wanting work, and needing work was one of the most ordinary things about them. In a different environment, they [would be] no different from my own circle of friends.*

There are women who want to work and do, and women who want to work and do not. There are women who cannot work and others who should not work and still others who do not want to work. Some work regularly, some intermittently; some work part-time, some full-time; and there are even those who work two jobs. At any given moment, there is a lot of job-searching, job-losing, job-changing, and job avoidance. Within months or even weeks, these may all appear in the same person. Values and behavior around jobs and work are awash in ambivalence, contradiction, and paradox.

Underlying this apparently capricious behavior, however, one sees over time a steady and serious concern with work. When homeless women speak about themselves in relation to work, they almost always identify themselves as working, as looking for work, or as one who would work if she could. They often characterize other women as wanting to work (good) or not wanting to work (bad).<sup>\*</sup> The most talked-about value of work has to do with its presumed relationship to homelessness. "A job is the way out of homelessness," the women often tell one another, just as they are told by service providers, social workers, volunteers, casual passers-by on the street, and everyone else they meet. At any given moment, perhaps half the women are working or looking for work, and even those who cannot work often go through the motions of looking for a job.

For homeless people, the road to looking for, finding, and keeping a job is strewn with obstacles. Having no telephone where a prospective employer or employment agency can reach you during working hours is, by itself, enough to discourage some women from looking for anything at all other than the most menial walk-in-off-the-street job. Reciprocally, having no telephone is often reason enough to discourage prospective employers and

<sup>\*</sup>DIRECTOR: *The older women who lived at the shelter were anxious or angry when the younger women in their 20s were languishing without jobs. It was as if they understood their own joblessness, but felt there were fewer excuses for young and healthy women. Their loss of self-esteem was clear to me when Kathy said, "Why are you here with us? You could have a job. You could be somebody."*

agencies from wanting to hire you. It is not simply that communication is difficult, but rather that the person who confesses to having no telephone of one's own, or even access to one, is suspect. From the employer or agency point of view, such a person is probably a bad risk. He or she might even be homeless.

The process is almost routine. A homeless woman registers with an employment agency. Since there is no way for them to call her when a job comes up, she calls them—three, four times a day. By the third day, they usually tell her, in the best tradition of employers, agencies, and casting directors, "Don't call us, we'll call you." If she confesses there's no way to reach her, they lose interest.

The telephone problem has been somewhat alleviated since 1985 when the day shelter opened. Here the women are allowed to make and receive calls on the staff phone. To make a call, you give the number to a staff member to dial. And the call—not unreasonable since there is only one phone—has to be related to job, housing, health, or a personal matter of some urgency. But the day shelter is open only from 2:00 to 6:30, and not all the women go to the day shelter. Moreover, to give the shelter telephone number as one's own is, in effect, to announce that one is homeless: staff at the day shelter answer the phone with "Mainline Church Day Shelter for Women."

Shirley protested that she could never get a job so long as shelter staff answered the phone that way. "Everybody knows that homeless women are prostitutes or alcoholics coming off a toot," she said, and suggested that staff answer the phone with a simple "Hello." Staff refused to change the procedure. They were under orders from the shelter board of directors, they said.

Several women reported losing jobs or the opportunity to get them when their homelessness became known. Carolyn sneered, "An employment clerk marked my application 'No suitable jobs available' because 'We don't refer bag-carrying applicants to interviews.'" Kim had been working as a receptionist in a doctor's office for several weeks when the doctor learned

she was living in a shelter and fired her. "If I had known you lived in a shelter," Kim said the doctor told her, "I would never have hired you. Shelters are places of disease." "No," said Kim. "Doctors' offices are places of disease."

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Most job applications ask at least for name, address, telephone number, Social Security number, last job, and one or two references. An arrest record can cause problems. Kim returned to the shelter one evening barely able to contain herself. Earlier that day, she had filled out an application form at an employment agency, admitting to having been arrested once for assault and battery, another time for disturbing the peace. The agency told her they could not process her application because of her police record. Kim was shocked at the agency's squeamishness. "How can you get to be 32 years old without ever getting arrested?" she asked, appealing to the audience around her with upturned palms. "I don't even *know* anyone over 20 who's never been arrested." And everyone laughed, as Kim surely intended them to.

The woman who somehow surmounts these initial difficulties may then get a job as a stock clerk, a cashier, or a counter worker in a fast food place. But for all these jobs, as well as for more menial ones such as pulling trash, being a messenger, or photocopying, one must make a minimally decent and unremarkable appearance—be clean, neat, and free of body odor. For most women living in shelters this may require a special effort, but it is not a particularly onerous task because most

<sup>1</sup>GRACE: *Those of us who worked had to keep "our secret" [homelessness]. I had been dismissed from a job because my co-workers found out I lived in a shelter. This happened at several different temporary jobs. Many people wondered why my clothing was hung in the back of my car and assumed that I was moving all the time. At one agency, when I told them I lived in a shelter, jobs were no longer made available to me, although I had worked for this same agency for the past nine years when living in my townhouse as a "normal" person.*

women's shelters have showers, a washing machine and dryer, and an iron and ironing board.<sup>1</sup>

The bare minimum of presentability will not do, however, for those women seeking to get or keep a job as a receptionist or other office worker, or as a salesperson in a department store. To meet this higher standard while living out of bags and boxes calls for an extraordinary level of discipline, organization, and physical effort.

Nevertheless, some women do manage to get and keep jobs that require a good appearance. Grace is one of them, but she has the advantage of being able to use her automobile as a clothes closet.<sup>2</sup> She hangs her blouses, jackets, and skirts on a crossbar. Underwear and accessories are piled neatly in a tattered suitcase on the front seat. Each item is tagged and coded so that she can pull out a matching outfit with relative ease. Elsie, too, uses her car in this way, but tags and coding notwithstanding, entropy soon takes over. What was order quickly becomes disorder, and full-scale reorganization is required with disheartening frequency.

<sup>1</sup>For homeless women living on the street or in automobiles, however, even this level of presentability requires enormous effort and ingenuity. Of course, the more classic bag ladies in shelters or on the street would, almost by definition, fail to meet this minimum standard, but they are less likely to be in the job market.

For men and women in some of the worst shelters, looking minimally presentable is beyond their reach. Here is a partial description of the Pierce and Blair shelters for men run by the D.C. government: "[Both shelters] are . . . infested with roaches, mice, rats, lice and scabies . . . overcrowded. . . Blankets were washed on only one occasion [in a six-month period]. . . There is a cold water hose but only on occasion are the men provided with soap. The men are not provided with towels . . . urine water spreading onto the floor where the men are sitting. . . The men frequently sit in . . . contaminated water. The stench of urine pervades both shelters. Many men refuse to use the bathrooms." Sister Veronica Daniels. *Affidavit (V) in Support of Plaintiffs' Memorandum* . . . , pp. 2-3.

<sup>2</sup>Public (paid) storage bins were also used occasionally as closets and dressing rooms, but they were usually too distant and inaccessible to be of much practical use on a daily basis. Some women, Louise among them, even tried sleeping in their storage lockers, but eventually they were discovered and evicted.

Beryl is a handsome black woman in her 40s. She has no car and lives entirely within the resource limitations of the shelter, yet she works as a full-time saleswoman at the Woodward and Lothrop department store in Crystal Lake Mall and also has a part-time job in a specialty shop. Like the other women, Beryl is awakened every morning at 5:30. She gets up from her cot, lines up to wash, pulls some clothing from a bag or box, maybe irons something quickly, has some coffee, perhaps also toast or cold cereal on the run, does some things with a curling iron, lipstick, and eye makeup, and in an hour or less she is ready to meet with discriminating co-workers, a boss, and a public. Whatever she wears, she looks almost elegant when she leaves the shelter, often in an earth-colored woolen skirt and coordinated blouse and scarf, her hair, nails, and makeup impeccable. The transformation is nothing short of magic.

Beryl and Grace are exceptional but by no means unique. There are others who also manage to look like middle-class career women. But the exceptionality of Beryl and Grace and a handful of others must be emphasized. Not only do they have the clothes (Grace makes her own), but they also have the planning and organizing skills that are everywhere scarce, especially among a largely impoverished and sometimes demoralized population.

Keeping a job could be as difficult as finding one. Keeping a job might mean having to suppress an awareness of one's real-life situation. Gwen struggled against that awareness. Once, when she had to go to her salesclerk job the next day, she was trying very hard not to be discouraged and not to worry about the fact that The Refuge would close the next week.<sup>3</sup> "You've got to have a clear head on a job," she said. "If your mind is on your troubles, you can't do your job. Customers want you to pay attention to them, and that's what your boss wants you to do, too."

<sup>3</sup>To staff people and others. Gwen's apparent lack of concern about the imminent closing of The Refuge was further evidence of something wrong with the women "up here," further evidence that they couldn't deal with reality.

<sup>4</sup>GRACE: *The most serious reason for homeless people not working has to do with the fact that the mind will not function the way you want it to. You can't think*

Having found jobs, the women often left them. It is difficult to know whether their explanations were reasons or excuses, mainly because the explanations were usually plausible. Inadequate or costly transportation to a job was sometimes cited as a deterrent to taking or keeping a job. When Abigail asked for more hours at the County Donut Shop (located in a light industrial area), they offered her very early morning and late night hours, which she had to refuse because there was no public transportation between the donut shop and the shelter at those times. Carol had to refuse a similar counter job on weekends for the same reason. When Kim was fired as the doctor's receptionist in downtown Washington, she wasn't too upset: public transportation was costing her two hours and \$5.50 a day.

Difficult or expensive access to certain jobs did not always prevent women from taking and keeping them. Even lousy jobs were important. When Vicky finally landed a (menial) job in another county, she complained bitterly that she seemed to be spending her life riding buses or waiting for them in lousy weather, but after four months she was still on the same job. The women thought Jennifer was dumb or crazy for taking an office cleaning job in D.C., spending most of her life and most of her earnings on buses and subways, but Jennifer had her reasons.<sup>4</sup>

It is also likely that the limits of public transportation directed women toward lower-status, lower-paying jobs, since these tend to be the jobs best served by public transportation.

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*through the questions and problems that come up in a job. . . . You cannot think clearly, cannot hold an intelligent conversation, your mind wanders, you have difficulty following directions, difficulty remembering, and an attitude of despair, depression, and eventually bitterness sets in. These [homeless women] are not lazy people, but products of abuse in the broad sense of the word.*

<sup>4</sup>Jennifer is in her early 30s. She is very quiet, very shy, and very slow, but those around her who are interested and patient with her are rewarded with straight and thoughtful talk. In the spring of 1986, Jennifer worked for a print shop and cut her hand. The boss fired her when she filed a workmen's compensation claim. Jennifer had a small car given her by her parents, and she used it in her next job with the Fast Buck Delivery Service. One evening she returned to the shelter disconsolate. "What's the matter?" "I totaled my car." "What did you hit?" "The Jefferson Hotel." A week later she found the office

Those sleek, stand-alone buildings around the Washington Beltway, for example—so rich a source of better-paying office and clerical jobs—were far less accessible by public transportation than were lower-paying jobs in fast food and retail establishments stretched out along main arteries in the downtown areas.

Typically, better-paying jobs with big firms required new employees to wait as long as a month or more to get a first check. Grace worked out of a temporaries agency and got many receptionist, switchboard, and secretarial jobs at places such as IBM, Raytheon, and other IBM clones around the Beltway.<sup>5</sup> One such place was looking for people to do telephone surveys for \$4.75 an hour. When Grace told Kim, Kim applied, and was immediately offered a job, which she rejected when she learned that her first paycheck would be more than a month in coming.<sup>6</sup> Kim was living on the edge. Her debts—mainly her monthly storage bills—would not wait, she said, and she continued with her \$3.75-an-hour job as a cashier at Bradlee's.<sup>7</sup>

cleaning job—the kind of job, she explained, where she needed neither a car nor a bicycle.

Incidentally, whenever a woman used her car on a job—such as a messenger or delivery service—she was not hired as an employee but as a self-employed contractor. In this way, the employer was free of any liability and free, too, of paying for insurance, Social Security, or any other usual employee benefits.

<sup>5</sup>But not for IBM or any of the others. Increasingly, corporations and governments contract out their need for janitors, typists, clerks, secretaries, and even higher-level personnel. These workers are employed by labor contractors, not by the corporations or governments where they do their work. These temporary and technically self-employed workers have no benefits and are subject to immediate dismissal. It sometimes seems that we are on our way to becoming a nation of part-time workers and self-employed or independent contractors—workers but not regular employees—without benefits, health coverage, or job security. See also p. 65, n. 13.

<sup>6</sup>The women themselves were often one another's best source for jobs. They told each other about jobs and often worked together. At one point, a Dart Drug Store employed five women living in the shelters.

<sup>7</sup>In late October, Kim walked in off the street and was hired at Bradlee's (a discount department store chain) for the holiday season. After Christmas, she was invited to stay on as a permanent employee. In February, she was named Cashier of the Month.

A variation of this delay-in-pay is what threw Jane into her present spell of homelessness. While working for the Two Hearts Dating Service in nearby Barryville as a telephone solicitor, she was living in an apartment in Tolltown, paying \$400 a month rent; but she could not make the utility payments and had to do without heat, light, and refrigeration. When her automobile insurance lapsed, she was afraid to do all that driving and quit the job. It was a mistake taking it in the first place, she said. It was all straight commission, and on that kind of job, you fall too far behind before you can start producing enough to live on. She swears she would never take another straight commission job selling an unfamiliar product or service.

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Only infrequently do the women admit to leaving a job because it was too difficult. Suzy quit her McDonald's job because she was assigned the drive-in window station. Counter work is OK, she said, because slack periods allow you to recover from the mealtime rushes. But the drive-in window! Run, run, run! No stopping! She just couldn't do it, so she quit. No, she didn't ask to go back to the counter. She just quit.

Sherry started out behind the counter at Roy Rogers. She couldn't move as fast as they wanted her to, so they transferred her to mopping floors in the eating area. She worked hard at this, but some patrons complained that her mop hit their shoes and she was reprimanded. She tried again, with the same results. It was impossible, she said. There was just no way to mop the floor while people were there and stay out of their way, so she quit.

Many of the women who quit jobs because they were "too hard" were involved in housework or personal care of some sort. Many of these women, in fact, place themselves somewhere along a continuum that ranges from housecleaning or maid at the low end, through housekeeper, live-in housekeeper, companion, nurse's aid, practical nurse, all the way to registered nurse. Cora is, indeed, an RN; Martha, an LPN. Rose was

a live-in housekeeper for 18 years, Carlotta for four or five, Sheila for two, and Regina intermittently for several years.

Work as a domestic is sometimes too difficult to sustain, however, even for women who are good at it. Shortly after Grace arrived at the shelter, a staff member recommended her to an acquaintance for a housekeeping job that involved taking care of a (six months) pregnant woman, her husband, and three children, six years, four years, and fifteen months old.

Grace started work on Monday. By Tuesday evening she talked about trying to stick it out until Friday so she could get at least a full week's paycheck. She was finding the work harder in one day than a whole week of office work, she said, and the pay was working out to be less than \$3.50 an hour. On Friday evening she announced that this had been her last day. She had done more than 20 loads of wash during the week, and had starched and ironed God knows how many shirts. And much like most domestic work situations, it was always, "Can you do this too, or a little of that? It won't take you long!" And everything always took longer and was more exhausting than you expected. But the worst thing about the job was being watched by the woman she was supposed to be caring for and by the mother-in-law as well, who had come down from Baltimore to make certain that "the new maid" didn't steal anything or rest too often. No, she hadn't told them she would not be coming back. She'd probably call tomorrow.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup>Because this job came through a personal recommendation by a staff person, Grace felt a special obligation to let them know she was quitting. After all, she said, the woman *was* very pregnant, and there *were* three little children. But she really hated making calls like that and would I call them for her? Tell them she got sick or found a better job or something? After a second heartrending appeal, I called the house and reported Grace's non-return. The man who answered was angry and said he wanted to hear this from Grace herself. (He never did.) The following week he called the staff person who had recommended her to say that Grace was "magnificent," extraordinarily productive and efficient at both housekeeping and childcare and they would "do anything to get her back." Grace wasn't impressed.

Betty got a job as companion to an elderly woman in a wheelchair. She quit after three days, saying the work was too hard and the woman too unreasonable and demanding.

Live-in jobs as housekeepers or companions, however, are special jobs. They are special because they are both the highest- and the lowest-paying jobs within reach of many of the women. They are especially high-risk jobs because the live-in housekeeper is thrown into such close and constant contact with her employers or charges that she has to please them at a very personal level as well as in terms of objective job performance. Most important, live-in jobs are special because they can lead directly into or out of homelessness. To get such a job is to get a place to live. To lose such a job is to lose one's place to live. That was the path into homelessness taken by Shirley, Rose, Sheila, Carlotta, and Regina. And that was the path out of homelessness for all of them (with the possible exception of Shirley) and for June as well.

Shirley lost her job as "a residential nurse" taking care of an old sick man when the man's daughter, against Shirley's and the doctor's advice, put her father in a nursing home. Rose lost her job as a live-in housekeeper after seven years with the same family when she "took a few tastes(drinks) too many and let my mouth run a little bit." They gave her until 10 o'clock the next morning to move herself and her things out of the house.

After a long career as a bank teller interspersed with periods of physical and mental illness, Sheila got a job as a live-in housekeeper/companion to an elderly, mentally ill, occasionally violent woman. Sheila and her charge lived on the top floor of a "very nice" house in Takoma Park, Maryland. Sheila shopped, cooked, and kept house for the two of them. The woman's children and grandchildren lived on the two lower floors. Sheila was very pleased with her living and working conditions. She had a beautiful bedroom and a private bath. Every day, from 1:00 to 4:00, she and the woman watched soap operas on ABC, never changing the channel. Sheila even learned to use a few

words of Serbian to help the woman understand what was going on.

Sheila's wages increased from \$5 a month during the first year to \$10 a month by the end of the second. When the family decided to move to Detroit, Sheila was given two weeks' notice and no severance pay. She arrived at The Refuge with a suitcase, several plastic bags, and \$3.70 in her purse.

When Louise and Martha expressed shock and disbelief at Sheila's wages, she assured them that many of the houses in that area had live-in housekeepers/companions for elderly persons and that \$5 to \$10 a month was the going rate. The other housekeepers were foreigners, she said. Most were Spanish-speaking women from South America.<sup>9</sup>

After a few months in the shelter, Sheila gave up looking for bank teller jobs (she had 27 years' experience) and looked for another live-in job. After a personal interview, she was offered a job caring for an old woman, wheelchair-bound, who was about to leave the hospital. Sheila told the woman's daughter that she wanted at least \$25 and preferably \$50 a month. Friday night the daughter called the shelter. Her mother was coming out of the hospital tomorrow. Could Sheila start to work this weekend? For \$125 a month? Sheila was radiant all evening. She said she would need some ballast to keep from floating away.

The next evening, I drove Sheila and her suitcase and plastic bags to an old frame house in an old neighborhood in Alexandria, Virginia. The house was large and elegant. We put Sheila's belongings in the hall and I talked with the daughter as Sheila got acquainted with her new charge. They took an instant

<sup>9</sup>These workers were almost certainly illegal aliens, and Sheila didn't seem to know (or mind) that the wages were largely determined by the fears and desperation of the workers rather than by the market value of their labor. It is also likely, however, that if the wage scale were much higher than room and board and \$10 a month, these same families, no matter how great their need, could not have afforded Sheila's services. Takoma Park is not a particularly affluent community.

liking to one another. The daughter beamed as her mother and Sheila chatted away.<sup>10</sup>

The better-paying live-in jobs often come with strings attached. Carlotta's experiences over a two-year period have often been tangled in these strings. Carlotta came to the shelter (several times) by way of live-in jobs and left the shelter (several times) by the same route. On one occasion, she moved out of the shelter on Tuesday and moved back in on Friday. She quit the job because it was too hard for her, she said, too hard for any one person. She was expected to do cleaning, laundry, and cooking with an eight-month-old infant on her hip. "Didn't they tell you they had a child?" I asked. "Yes, but I didn't know it was an infant."<sup>11</sup>

Later that month Carlotta found another live-in job (\$150 a week) with a working couple and their three young sons, ages nine, seven, and five. I drove Carlotta and her belongings to her new job. To her surprise and mine, it was a two-bedroom apartment. The woman escorted us to the living room and motioned to Carlotta to put her belongings on the floor next to the sleep-sofa, which was to be Carlotta's. To her credit, the woman showed no surprise when Carlotta picked up her things and said she didn't think this arrangement would work out. "I told my husband this wouldn't work," the woman said, mainly to herself.

On still another live-in job, which Carlotta kept for a few weeks, she was not permitted to remain in the house on her day and a half off—Saturday afternoon to Monday morning. She had

<sup>10</sup>That was in March 1985, the last time I saw or heard about Sheila.

<sup>11</sup>Carlotta tried to get the job back a few days later, but she had already been replaced. Living on the street and in the shelter is very hard, she explained, and the employment agencies for live-in help wanted \$100 every 15 days for six months if one got a placement through them. Carlotta put her own ad in the local county newspaper (\$16 for four lines for five days), and a foreign couple offered her \$50 a week plus room and board, but Carlotta turned them down. "I'm worth the going rate," she said, "and that's \$150 a week" (January 1986).

to roam the streets on the weekend and sleep in the shelter on Saturday and Sunday nights. And on still another job, Carlotta felt she just could not keep up with the incessant demands made on her. When she told her employer she was quitting, the woman threatened to call the police if Carlotta didn't show up for work in the morning. Carlotta was bewildered and scared. "What does she mean? Can she really force me to work? Does she mean she will charge me with stealing or something?"<sup>12</sup>

Regina came to the shelter when she lost her job as a live-in housekeeper. A misunderstanding with her employer over the amount of money she spent for groceries for the two of them quickly escalated out of control, and Regina's things were put on the street by the sheriff's deputies.

Regina almost made it out of the shelter a few weeks later when she was offered \$300 a week to take care of an old, sick man with a urinary catheter and other tubes elsewhere, all of which he was constantly trying to pull out. Regina would have had to be on duty 24 hours a day, six days a week. The women in the shelter cautioned Regina that she'd "earn every penny." Apprehensive of the responsibility and the confinement, Regina took the job but lost it on the first day when the man had to be hospitalized. The man's daughter told Regina that she could resume the job when her father left the hospital, but Regina thought this job wasn't right for her just then. It was too isolated, too confining, too lonely. Maybe she'd be better off with a regular day job in a drugstore or something.

Shortly before Christmas Regina took a full-time job at People's Drug Store. She was mainly a stock clerk, but she said she wanted to be a pharmacist's assistant and she was assured she could quickly work her way up to that position. But New

<sup>12</sup>Carlotta was small and dark and spoke with a heavy Spanish (Colombian) accent. My guess is that her employer assumed she was an illegal alien and was threatening to report her to the authorities as a way to force her to remain on the job. I suggested that she mail the woman her house key and forget the whole thing.

Year's Eve, Regina was laid off, along with three other recently hired employees.

"Is it anything personal?" she said she asked the manager, and he said no, it was just that business was slow and the four of them were just not needed. Then why, she asked, did he have a part-time help wanted sign in the window? "He shrugged his shoulders and walked away."<sup>13</sup>

Perhaps because most women were committed to defining themselves as working or looking for work, they did not talk easily or often about reasons for not looking for a job or not keeping one. Sometimes the reasons were more or less self-evident. Sometimes I had to guess at them.

At a very general level of unexamined beliefs, most women accepted the proposition that a job is the way out of homelessness. But when they confronted their own concrete situations, they knew this was not true for most of them. At best, it was only a small and partial truth. It may have been true, for example, for those few women like Lisa, smart and competent, who aced a standardized test and got a good job with the Post Office, or Grace and a few others, who could command jobs paying \$7 or more an hour. And it was true, too, for those few who got live-in jobs at any wage. Night work, which usually came with premium pay and might have been easier to get than day jobs, was ruled out because the women had no place to sleep during the day.

For most homeless women, then, jobs by themselves were not a way out of homelessness, even if one discounted the large number of women who were too old, too sick, or otherwise too

<sup>13</sup>Regina was in tears at what she took to be another personal failure. I tried to explain to her that part-time and temporary help was a lot cheaper for an employer than permanent, full-time employees, but Regina was sure the blame lay with her. That same week, the Reagan administration urged federal agencies to hire more temporary workers. Temporaries receive no benefits, no credit for length of service, and no eligibility for pensions. They have none of the usual job protection and may be laid off at any time. See Spencer Rich, "Federal Offices Urged to Hire Temporaries," *Washington Post*, January 3, 1985, p. A3.

disabled to work. There were many working women who earned anywhere from \$3.50 an hour to \$5 or even \$6 an hour. These women, often poorly educated, in desperate want, living under pressures that strained their judgment and even sanity, would have found it almost impossible to become self-sufficient on such wages even if they possessed extraordinary money management skills, which most of them did not. In the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area, in the mid-1980s, efficiencies and one-bedroom apartments started at \$450 or \$500 a month (with \$1,000—security deposit and one month's rent—required up front); a room in someone else's two-bedroom apartment (with few or no kitchen privileges) cost \$350 (if you could find someone who would take you in); fare for a one-way ride on the subway during rush hour (which was defined to include seven hours of the day) ran from \$.80 to \$2.40; coffee was \$.60 at Roy Rogers and a pack of cigarettes \$1.50 at 7-Eleven.

Gwen's situation was typical. "I try to support myself. I work hard and I want to pay rent, but how can I pay \$100 a week when I earn \$4 an hour [as a salesclerk at McCrory's 5&10]?"<sup>14</sup> The result was that most women worked at jobs that paid so poorly

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*KIM: But the #1 reason why a job is not the way out of homelessness is discrimination in housing. We may have the money to rent an apartment, but the "minimum income requirement" is out of reach for many of us. Apartment management companies require an established positive credit history and recent rental references that homeless persons, due to circumstances and situation, very often do not have. Rental policy restricting the number of persons per apartment directly prevents poverty-level wage earners from obtaining housing.*

*GRACE: A job does not get you out of being homeless. I worked every day for 11 months, missing only one day out of all my temporary jobs. I used a lot of money on the public phones trying to stay in contact with my other four agencies. I made just enough to get by and continue to repair my 12-year-old car. I worked to feed my car. That darn thing kept breaking down. All my money went to keep that thing running. A car was my survival. I was living in this "prison." The only way I could escape was to drive my car. I would have died without it. I drove to the place [townhouse she used to live in] that meant the most to me. Finally, my ex-husband let me see my children, the youngest two. I took them to the movies, I went to synagogue and church. But mostly, I went to work.*

<sup>14</sup>Kim reached \$3.90 as a cashier at Bradlee's. Lisa received \$3.50 for the same job at the same place. That's what County Donuts paid, too. Luana received \$4.11 an hour for working as a maid at a nearby nursing home. Beverly

that, without some kind of assistance, one could work at them for 20 years and still remain homeless. This did not prevent the women from looking for work or keeping their jobs, but it often served to take the heart out of work-life, to render the job search somewhat less diligent than it might otherwise have been, and to render attachment to one's job as something less than fierce and tenacious.

Another deterrent to job seeking was the fact that, in strict economic terms, low-pay jobs were not clearly superior to public assistance, which itself was nothing to write home about. To the woman on public assistance, for example, the cost of taking a job could be substantial, even if the cash wage was as much or even more than the cash payout of public assistance.

To leave public assistance usually means to forfeit food stamps and medical assistance as well. Permanent full-time jobs at a fast food place or in retailing or other entry-level positions typically offer health coverage only after a probationary period of anywhere from two to six months, but such coverage is prohibitively costly and most employees decline it. Typically, there are no fringe benefits for part-time or temporary workers. Kelly Girls and other temporary workers hired out of employment agencies are, in fact, employees of the agencies rather than of the firms to which they are assigned. And here, too, health coverage is optional, very expensive, and routinely declined.

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received \$3.35 (minimum wage) for bussing dishes at Horn and Horn. Abigail received \$3.70 as a file clerk for a collection agency in D.C. Better-paying office jobs were not usually available to most of the women.

*DIRECTOR: Women who had jobs when they came to us, or who were just recently unemployed, were the most successful in being re-employed and leaving The Refuge permanently. . . . It is my observation that mental illness or fragile mental health interfered with the ability of most of the women to get a job and to keep a job. In the shelter journal, volunteers were quick to register their anger or disbelief when a woman who had obtained a job would work for two or three days, and then simply decide not to go back. To the question of why, the response was often, "I have to visit a friend this morning," or "I have an appointment this morning."*

If one cashes out the dollar value of public assistance and its associated benefits—especially health care—and compares the total with the net return of an entry-level job, it is surprising that so many women who were probably eligible for assistance chose jobs instead. Indeed, it was not unknown for a woman to quit a job that offered no health coverage when she knew she was about to incur medical expenses. Thus, Kim was working as a GS-3 Temporary for the federal government when she decided the time was right for elective surgery. With an eye toward getting medical assistance from Social Services—not available so long as she was employed or unemployed voluntarily—Kim set about getting herself fired.

Other times, the women's reasons for not taking jobs or keeping them could only be guessed at, especially if they involved things like fear of failure, embarrassment, or other risks to one's self-image. Much of what appeared to be nonrational job behavior could be traced to a subtle but powerful social class hierarchy and class consciousness that permeates the universe of work.<sup>15</sup>

Consider this exchange. Ranji was talking about her problems in getting public assistance and casually mentioned that Giant Foods was her last employer. Brenda was obviously impressed. "You worked for Giant?" she asked, and Ranji said yes, for three months.

Why was Brenda impressed? What was so special about working in a supermarket? Events surrounding the closing of a discount department store chain suggest an answer. In 1988,

<sup>15</sup>It is difficult for middle-class observers to imagine the reluctance, if not the terror, of some lower- or working-class persons as they contemplate entering a middle-class work setting. And when class combines with race, as in the case of many minority ghetto youths, reluctances and fears are multiplied, sometimes to an almost paralyzing intensity. "When an opportunity like . . . a better job opens up that will erase some disability felt before, society seems suddenly to make itself invisible, leaving the individual to grapple with class change as though his personal strength must suffice for all he faces." Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb. *The Hidden Injuries of Class*, p. 183. Many parts of Sennett and Cobb's book deal directly and insightfully with some of the issues suggested here.

Bradlee's announced the closing of 33 of its department stores, nine of which were in the Washington metropolitan area; several hundred employees were to be let go. In most respects, Bradlee's was much like K mart and Zayre's, but unlike them, it was unionized. Giant Foods, Safeway, and Woodward and Lothrop (a department store chain with an image of a middle-class clientele) were also organized by the same union. All three of these firms needed trained cashiers, stock clerks, and other workers, and asked the union to help them recruit new hires from among the Bradlee's employees.

To everyone's astonishment, most Bradlee's employees declined the offer, despite starting salaries of \$5.75 an hour at Giant and Safeway (far above their current wage levels), with increases to \$10.65 an hour after 24 months. From their discussions with Bradlee's employees, union officials concluded that the employees feared that the work at Giant and Safeway might be too hard, too fast-paced, and too high-pressured. As for Woodward and Lothrop—well, maybe Bradlee's employees felt the same way about Woodies, too.<sup>16</sup>

However tempting it might be to cite these refusals as evidence that some people really do not want to work hard (sometimes true), or that some people do not want to "better themselves" (sometimes true), or that some people are irresponsible and downright lazy (also, perhaps, sometimes true), these characteristics are surely not the principal dynamic at work here. The cashiers at Bradlee's were already working just as hard under the pressure of impatient customers lined up at each check-out counter as the checkers at Giant and Safeway, and probably harder and under more pressure than most Woodward and Lothrop employees.

But at Giant and Safeway, where the pay is much higher, your fellow employees are likely to be better educated than you, the Bradlee's cashier, and they're likely to be smarter, better spo-

<sup>16</sup>Interview with Ermaun L. Joe, Director, Central Virginia Division, United Food and Commercial Workers Union Local 400, District of Columbia, Maryland, and Virginia.

ken, and better dressed, and less likely to be foreign-born or black or other minority, and your supervisor would probably expect you to perform at their level, which you surely can't do. Moreover, the customers would be not only working people like yourself but middle-class and even rich people who can make you feel like dirt without even meaning to.

Surely, social class considerations such as these played a large part in the Bradlee's employees' decisions to turn down the Giant/Safeway/Woodward and Lothrop job offers. In the same way and for the same reasons, they probably also explain why Brenda was so impressed by Ranji's having worked for Giant. Fear of not measuring up, fear of embarrassment, fear of being snubbed or disdained by one's social betters—these are always and everywhere at work, and especially among those at the bottom.\*

Some of the women were particularly vulnerable to such feelings. Crushing work experiences had deprived them of their self-confidence, and they feared the threats that further job exposure would pose. It is for this reason, I believe, that a few of the women made job hunting a somewhat casual and desultory enterprise. For these few, the danger in looking seriously for a job was that they might find one.

One job strategy that was more talked about than pursued was to get trained for higher-paying jobs. Michelle knew that any job she qualified for would not lift her out of homelessness. That is why she was taking a course in computer programming three nights a week and working at any job she could get during the day.<sup>17</sup> And that is why Elsie turned down a cashier's job at a car wash in favor of a year-long live-in training program in

\*Kim: *I do not believe that the distance we feel when dealing with customers/co-workers of a higher social class is (necessarily) a matter of intimidation. More likely, it is a matter of us just not being able to relate to them.*

<sup>17</sup>She said she was doing well in her course work and enjoying it. Her one disappointment was learning that computer programmers don't actually work with computers. Michelle's tuition was paid for through the Federal Student Loan Program.

typing, word-processing, and hospital record-keeping at the state's Vocational Rehabilitation Center. Martha, who was usually in control of her alcoholism and depression, had serious neck and back problems and guessed she would not be able to continue much longer as an LPN, but she was confident that she could work her way out of homelessness. "I'll be OK with office retraining," she said.

This strategy had its problems, however. Not many homeless women had the educational background, the talent, the ambition, or the self-discipline necessary to train for the kind of jobs that might lead to self-sufficiency. Or so it appeared. Perhaps many of the women had these things but lacked only—only!—the opportunity. Crucially, they lacked the economic and social supports for such a sustained undertaking.

For those who were eligible, another major strategy was to work at a low-paying job and wait (one year? two years? longer?) for housing assistance to come through.<sup>18</sup> Most housing assistance programs required that the recipient pay about one-third of her gross income for rent, with the program picking up the balance. Even a low-paying job or public assistance, when coupled with a housing subsidy, could enable the women to move out of the shelter and into independent living. Indeed, the housing subsidy was the principal avenue of escape from homelessness.

Another strategy was to work more than one job. A few women attempted this, though even fewer were successful. Jane always knew she would need two jobs, but it took her some time to find two that could go together. She finally made it out of the shelter when she put an evening-and-weekend job as telephone solicitor together with a full-time day job as a clerk with an insurance company. Grace combined a \$7.50-an-hour data entry job with an evening-and-weekend job as a model-home hostess in a new housing development. Kim combined a weekend donut shop job with whatever full-time job she could find.

<sup>18</sup>See Appendix D, "Social Service Programs."

A variation of the two-jobs strategy was to substitute welfare for one of the jobs—that is, to become a “welfare cheater” by receiving income from a job while also receiving public assistance. That was the only way out of homelessness that Martha could see for herself when she first went on public assistance. She thought she could get a place to live by tripling up with two other women, which would leave her with \$30 from her monthly assistance check of \$180. By moonlighting on weekends as a practical nurse, she guessed she could get by. Martha said she couldn’t give up her public assistance because she needed the medical assistance that went with it. Her pain-killing prescription drugs cost \$16 a week and the doctor had told her she’d almost certainly need surgery for her disc problem.

Cheating on welfare, however, can be dangerous. It can lead into homelessness as well as out of it. So did it for Bessie, who was drawing a welfare check while working as a monitor/aide on a school bus. Her deception discovered, she was removed from the welfare rolls and quickly found herself jobless and homeless, without food stamps and without medical assistance. Other women on public assistance who also held jobs were smarter than Bessie. They took their jobs in the relatively safe “irregular economy”—small businesses and personal services where payment is “off the books.”

Even if one could not work one’s way out of homelessness, there were other reasons for working. One was that “Jobs are for money.” Many women took hard, low-paying jobs simply because it was better to have money than not to have it, even if one must remain homeless. Terry spoke eloquently on the subject. “How do you like your job?” she was asked.

“I love every penny of it,” she said. Another time, however, while she was actually on the job in a local discount drug store, she was careful to discriminate between the idea of work as a generalized good and its particularization in a cashier’s job as a specific evil. “I hate my job,” she said, “but I love working. And I love the money.”

Elsie, too, put a high value on the money-producing potential of a job. On her first day of workfare, Elsie was assigned to assist a regular county employee. Together, they cleaned the 18 toilets in the local high school. With ammonia, soap, a toilet mop, and a floor mop, they did it all between 7:30 A.M. and noon. After lunch, they washed down the tables and floors of the cafeteria, then moved on to other rooms for more cleaning until they finished their work at 4:30.

Elsie’s workmate liked Elsie and her work. She herself was going into the hospital, she said, and a replacement would be needed for a month or so. She would recommend Elsie as her replacement if Elsie were willing. The job paid \$9 an hour. “I’d clean toilets day and night, seven days a week, for \$9 an hour,” said Elsie, but she heard no more about it.

Like Terry and many others, then, Elsie would sometimes have you believe that a job is only or mainly for money. Other times, however, the importance of working, or simply having a job, was so taken for granted that a woman might forget, for the moment, why she wanted or needed a job. Once, when Elsie applied for a job as a cashier in a hardware store, she returned to the shelter at night to report that the interview had gone well. The work hours were not good, she said, but that was not so important.

“How much does it pay?” Grace asked.

Elsie clapped her hands to her temples. “I forgot to ask!” she said. “I completely forgot to ask!”

It is possible that Elsie forgot to ask because most jobs pay pretty much the same thing—somewhere between \$3.50 and \$4.50 or \$4.75 an hour. Had this been the reason, however, Elsie would not have been so surprised at her own forgetfulness. Certainly she didn’t “forget to ask” for lack of caring about the job. On Sunday, her pastor invited the members of the congregation to go on a three-day fast if they wanted a special favor from God. In vain, Elsie fasted. She wanted that job “sooooo bad.”

When Hilda moved into a subsidized apartment, she got a part-time job in a cafeteria. She wasn’t working for the money,

she said. After rent, Social Security, and taxes, she was left with \$45 a month for food, clothing, and everything else. The real value of the job, she said, was that it allowed her to build up a work history.

The importance of having a job is sometimes measured in pleasure and pain. Sometimes one wants or keeps a job for the sheer pleasure of working, without bothering to analyze it any further. One evening in the shelter, the women had just finished dinner when Kathleen stretched her arms toward the ceiling and threw back her head. "I feel great!" she announced to the world, and explained that this was her second day on a new job and the doctor had also cut her anxiety-reducing medication. She went on to compare her current feelings with those of the previous week, when she was awakened in the middle of the night by a terrible stomach pain. "What's the matter with me?" she wondered, and then she realized that she was jobless and that was why she had this pain in the pit of her stomach.

Job pain can work both ways. Jane recalls her first job in Washington in the 1950s. She was working as an analyst at the National Security Agency, and during all the months she worked there she suffered from migraine headaches. It was not until many years later that Jane came to realize that she had never had such headaches before or after, and that it must have been the job itself that caused the headaches. Now, however, she works mainly as a telephone solicitor and there are no migraines.

When Jane broke her arm, she had to keep it in a cast and sling and it still hurt quite a bit. The doctor suggested she not go to work for a day or two, but Jane thought it would be better to go to work and lose herself in her telephone solicitation job than to walk the streets all day and feel the pain.

Martha was sometimes called to work as the only night nurse for a D.C. government-operated ward of mentally ill persons. She returned to the shelter feeling miserable because she was "spread so thin" she couldn't be of any real help to any of her patients. "I leave those jobs feeling like there was a cross on my soul" (for failing her patients and God).

Kim gave up her office job with a construction company to deal with a love affair that was crumbling all around her. She was so despondent that she tried to kill herself with a handgun, but the gun misfired. Weeks passed and she could not bring herself to look for a job, she said, because her pain was too great and because she was so absorbed in her own situation that she couldn't perform on a job anyway. But then she saw an advertisement for the job she used to have with an animal rights group. Kim applied for the job because, she said, this was the only job she could handle right now—a job in which she would be confronted by the suffering of animals all over the world, a suffering much greater than her own. "I can drench myself in their pain and suffering," she said, and this would help her put her own suffering in some perspective.

Not everyone, of course, was enthusiastic about working, and at times some women found it difficult to find any positive value in a job. Pam worked only because it was better than the alternative, and only grudgingly conceded that "working is better than walking around."

Betty was only modestly more enthusiastic, but Betty had reasons. She said that if she was turned down for SSI again, she'd take a live-in job somewhere, anywhere. Sure, the doctor told her she shouldn't work, but she'd rather die working than stay here in the shelter over another summer and die of boredom and the stress of being homeless. Betty often presented herself as the passive subject of a tug-of-war between go-to-work and don't-go-to-work forces. She herself wanted to work, she insisted, and that's what the Department of Social Services and shelter staff were pushing her to do, under threat of withdrawing all assistance. But her doctor told her that she must not work.

At the day shelter, after she had just been turned down for the second time for SSI, Betty went stage front and proclaimed her dilemma for everyone there. "Society says, 'You must work.' My medical doctor says, 'You must not work.' Let's get together, OK?"

Like Betty, some women are too old, too sick, or too crazy to work, and again like Betty, most of them are working-class or lower-class women who have no special job skills other than housework, if that. Even most of the nonworking women, however, strove mightily to identify themselves as being in the work force and seeking work, laying claim to being housekeepers or nurse's aides or companions or practical nurses. It was as if, to them, these jobs were simply occupational labels for the domestic skills that most of them learned as daughters or wives or mothers. Thus, almost anyone could lay plausible claim to be looking for such jobs—plausible to the listener and, more important, perhaps, even convincing to the claimant as well.

Brenda and Dorothy were talking about jobs. Dorothy says she has recently applied for two restaurant jobs but didn't get either of them. Brenda asks Dorothy if she can do housework. Dorothy laughs. Who hasn't done housework?" she says. Brenda, with great seriousness, assures Dorothy that she, too can do housework. Of course you can, Dorothy agrees reassuringly, and Brenda, as if to prove her point, adds that she has worked as a nurse's aide in a couple of nursing homes in the area, and as a dietitian's assistant, too, in a nursing home kitchen.<sup>19</sup>

Even those who were not working or looking for work sometimes traced their failure to the very importance of work in their lives. After Judy had just turned down a job at County Donuts, she explained, "I can't take the stress of working."

"Maybe not the donut shop, but how about another data entry job like the one you had last fall? I thought you enjoyed that."

"I did. But when they fired me, they destroyed me."

A woman's determination to see herself as a worker and to present herself as a worker was not always self-serving and may

<sup>19</sup>*KIM: This chapter could leave the reader with the false impression that homeless women are less job-skilled than the general population. Plenty of people are of this opinion, including people in charge of the money.*

<sup>19</sup>She did, in fact, get such jobs, but she couldn't hold them. She says her biggest problem was that she did not move fast enough to please her bosses.

even have worked to her severe disadvantage. Louise had just been dropped from the workfare rolls (GPA-E—General Public Assistance, Employable) as unemployable after failing at several workfare assignments because of her various compulsions and anxieties. She went back to taking voluminous notes on the want ads in several papers but somehow was never able to follow up on any of the leads she read or heard about. A staff person at the shelter suggested she apply for ordinary welfare (GPA—General Public Assistance), noting that the \$200 a month would take care of her storage bills and leave her with some spending money.

Louise was livid at the suggestion. "I'm not eligible for public assistance," she said. "I'm employable. I've worked before and I can work now. Can't you understand that?"

Nor would she agree to check her eligibility for public assistance with Social Services or allow anyone else to check with her caseworker on her behalf. In her head, her heart, her bones, she was a worker and wanted nothing to do with welfare.

One doesn't have to be crazy to want to dissociate oneself from public assistance. Vicki isn't crazy. Vicki has a withered arm but a clear eye. "I don't want that welfare bullshit. I want a real job. At Navy, I liked the work and the people, and they liked me."

Because of her disability, Vicki has never been able to realize herself fully as the self-sufficient worker she desperately wants to be. "I've never gotten a job on my own, through an interview. Personnel people all seem to be cheerleader types, and they hire cheerleader types. If you're aggressive and verbal, you get the job even if you don't have the experience or a good job history. But I'm like a turtle: it takes me a long time to come out. . . . I got my CETA (Comprehensive Employment and Training Act) job because there were 10 of us, equally qualified, and the personnel officer said she'd break the tie by hiring the one who'd been unemployed the longest. That was me . . . I worked at the Naval Medical Hospital for two summers as a GS-2. That was through their program for the handicapped."

Another time, over lunch at Big Boy's, Vicki took aim at the Department of Vocational Rehabilitation. "DVR is shit. They don't need to train people to make allowances for handicaps and they shouldn't pay so much attention to disabilities. That's not the issue. The issue is, can I do the job and do it on time, and can I get along with the people I work with? Will I blow up if someone calls me a cripple or will I go on and do the job?"<sup>20</sup>

And when Connie told Vicki about a live-in job (room and board, no pay), Vicki was offended by the implication she couldn't do better. "I can do a real job," she told Connie, "and I'm going to get a real job." Indeed, whenever Vicki talked about work and jobs, which was often, anything like supported work or workfare, anything other than "a real job," was, to her, "bullshit."

. . .

The energy the homeless women put into working and looking for work is in part a measure of their determination to leave the streets, in part a measure of the (limited) economic rewards of work, and in part a measure of the noneconomic rewards of work. The women value work over and above its economic returns for much the same reasons that other people do—because it is through work that we engage the world and become a part of it, and through work that we lay claim to membership in the larger community and, in getting paid for our work, have that membership confirmed by others. For most people, including Vicki and Elsie and others, this social value of work is experienced, at the individual level, as a principal source of independence and self-respect.

<sup>20</sup>Once, in a discussion of disabilities, I told Vicki I thought there was more prejudice against persons with mental problems than those with physical problems. Vicki conceded the point but noted that, unlike physically handicapped persons, those who are mentally ill can hide their problems. "Adolph Hitler could have gotten a million jobs in this country, but I can't even get one."

*KIM: Money is poured into job training programs, job-seeking workshops, interviewing/resume-writing seminars. Whatever these programs are they are not about results or solutions. They point their fingers at the homeless. They do not address the vital issue of discrimination. In its extreme manifestation, discrimination threatens the homeless person with institutionalization or incarceration.*

In looking at the homeless women, however, I suspect that work also has a more primitive, pre-social value that is most clearly seen (or sensed) in some of the deeply troubled women in the shelter. As one watches them go through the motions of looking for work, one senses an extraordinary urgency and intensity that cannot be accounted for by traditional social and psychological values of work. Louise defiantly proclaims her employability as she struggles with the terrible demons of obsession and fear that render her unemployable. And Dorothy continues to go job hunting, even as the ever-changing bus destination and street signs prevent her from getting where she is trying to go. There are others, too, who cannot work but continue, mindlessly, instinctively, to go through the motions of looking for jobs.

Theirs is certainly not a struggle for the economic rewards of work, nor even for the social or psychological rewards. Their needs are pre-social, elemental. They know they are in deep trouble, in danger of losing their sanity and their humanity, and they are struggling to hold on. It is as if the Louises and Dorothys believe with Freud that "work is man's principal tie to reality," and they feel that tie slipping away.

In summary, at the heart of the contradictions and ambivalences that characterize the women's approach to the world of work is a simple fact: with some notable exceptions, the jobs they can get do not pay enough to enable them to support themselves. On one hand, the women desperately want and need the money, the independence, and the self-respect that most of us have come to expect from a job. On the other hand, to get a job and keep it, the women must run an obstacle course at the end of which is a low-pay, low-status job that offers little more than they have without it.

In this situation, the women—perfectly socialized to the values of work—continue to value work for what they know their jobs cannot provide. Hence the ambivalence, the starts and stops, and the periodic surrenders to a workless shelter life.