



# PUBLIC JUSTICE *REVIEW*

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## ***FAITH, FAMILY, AND THE FUTURE OF WORK***

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### Cultivating a Work-Wise Family

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Eight years ago, I was a stay-at-home mom with three children, six and under. If you had told me that the ensuing years would see me publishing three books, hosting a weekly podcast and writing articles about public policy—while still spending most of my time at home—I would have dismissed you. But such is the story of the new economy and the millions of people who have leveraged the digital age to integrate career and family.

But as much as the new “gig economy” creates opportunity, it also presents dilemmas, including forcing traditional workers into freelancing and weakening the barriers between our public and private lives. While the front door of a home grants access to the outside world, it also lets the outside world *in*. If we’re not careful, the marketplace, that arena of public life governed by competition and capital, will take advantage of this opening to govern our private lives by the same dynamics. To resist this, families must become work-wise. We must cultivate values and practices that honor our more public work while preserving the unique role that home plays in the nurture and care of the next generation.

#### **I.**

**In order to protect our homes when the marketplace encroaches, work-wise families must value the work of home as legitimate work.** Colloquially, we use the language of “work” to describe labor that happens in exchange for money. When we meet someone for the first time, we ask, “Where do you work?”, meaning, “Where are you employed?” But framing work this way necessarily devalues what happens in private spaces and can’t be defined in financial terms.

As a result, we often struggle to honor the work of stay-at-home parents, caregivers and those who are unemployable due to injury or disability. As Wendell Berry notes in his 2003 essay, “Feminism, the Body, and the Machine,” such people are often “asked... and with great condescension, ‘But what do you *do*?’ ...invariably mean[ing] that there is something better to do than to make one’s marriage and household, and by better they invariably mean ‘employment outside the home.’”

This framing also means that the investing in the home will increasingly be viewed as a luxury, the privilege of only those who can afford it (Recent [data](#) reveals the cost of child in competition with, and sometimes exceeding, college tuition rates.) My husband and I faced this reality after the birth of our third child. He was working full-time, and even took on extra work after hours, but his entry-level positions could not support our family. If the marketplace were the only place of valid work, then the most obvious solution to our dilemma was for me to leave home to work in it. My staying at home was a luxury we simply couldn't afford. But what if working at home wasn't luxury? What if it was a necessity?

Ultimately, we made the counter-cultural decision to accept financial help in the form of Medicaid and food stamps. I say counter-cultural because in a society that measures work by what it contributes to the marketplace, accepting social welfare is nearly unpardonable. Not only are you *not* contributing, you are emptying the coffers. So socially stigmatizing is it that many who qualify and rightly need assistance often bypass it in favor of their dignity, sending both parents into the marketplace to provide their family's most basic needs. But what if one of our most basic needs is family?

Understanding the work of family as essential alleviates the stigma of poverty by differentiating between those who are lazy and those who are engaged in meaningful (albeit unpaid) activity. The question no longer is, "How much money do you make in the marketplace?", but, "How much good work do you?" Valuing the work of family also gives workers the justification they need to pushback when asked to sacrifice the success of their families for the success of the corporation. Rightly fearing loss income or being fired, many low-income workers feel unable to object to unpredictable work schedules or inadequate compensation—things that directly affect their ability to care for their families. But how would this change if they knew someone had their back, if public policy supported them in the work of family? How would this change if they could risk standing up for their homes?

Instead of serving the needs of the marketplace at the expense of our family, my husband and I decided to accept help; and with the financial pressure alleviated, I could focus on building and stabilizing our family, a work that was even more necessary given the long hours my husband was already working outside the home. As my children's primary caregiver, not only could I focus on their daily physical needs, I could give attention to their emotional, developmental and relational needs. I was available to take them to well checks, care for them when they became ill, teach them appropriate social behavior and support their academic and cognitive development. In short, accepting financial help instead of entering the marketplace enabled me to give my children the very things that predict their future stability.

This isn't to suggest that both parents can't choose to work in the marketplace, but families must have the choice, especially when children are young or the family in a vulnerable position. And they will only have that choice if we view the work of home as equal to the work that happens in the marketplace. They will only have that choice if we believe the poor have a right to care for their own children as much as the wealthy do.

## II.

**Work-wise families also understand that when held to proper boundaries, the marketplace can help them build their homes.** It would be easy to read the tension between the work that happens “here” and the work that happens “out there” as inherently at odds with each other. Indeed, conversations about work-life balance often proceed as if our public and private lives are hermetically-sealed spheres best isolated from each other. Scripture suggests a different understanding.

Genesis 1 frames human vocation as the call to steward creation and further God’s reign. Derived from our identity as image bearers, we are to “be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it.” (Genesis 1:28). Importing modern notions of community and calling, we could easily read “filling” and “subduing” as separate impulses which can only be at odds with each other. But a better reading of this Creation Mandate frames human vocation as holistic, with private and public spaces collaborating for the good of each and the wellbeing of all. As much as a work-wise family understands that the marketplace must not overwhelm the work of home, it also understands that the work of the home cannot succeed without the marketplace.

When my husband and I accepted public assistance, our family finances temporarily stabilized. And having escaped the pressure of putting food on the table, we could envision the long-term success of our family, including how to work with the marketplace to achieve it. In other words, because we were no longer servants to the marketplace, we could become partners with it.

It was then—while we were living with three young children in a 950-square-foot apartment on food stamps and Medicaid—that I began to pursue writing. For the next eighteen months—between naptime and potty training—I engaged in a kind of self-prescribed internship, often writing for “exposure” or experience. I built my portfolio, learned the industry and made the connections I needed to land future projects.

Soon enough, as both my children and my work matured, I needed to transition from apprentice to paid professional. But I didn’t necessarily *feel* that I could demand fair pay. After all, I worked from my kitchen table. Add to this the fact that I wrote for non-profits and religious organizations. I was often tempted (and even asked) to reduce my fees or write for free. I began to see my personal dilemma reflected in larger data about the wage gap between men and women and the fact that women were less likely to ask for raises or advocate for themselves.

But then I remembered that I wasn’t working for myself. I was working for my family.

The simple truth is that my work is not mine to give away. Every time I work for “free,” my altruism is bought off the backs of my husband, children, church family and local community. Viewing my work through the lens of these responsibilities, I quickly became something of a mama bear. If a job took me away from building my home, that job needed to compensate my home. Whereas caring for my family initially kept me from entering the marketplace, caring for my family now meant partnering with it in ways that were healthy—including expecting the marketplace to reward me fairly.

In God’s design, working for the good of our families makes for a more productive and just marketplace. Not only because it motivates us to seek fair compensation, but because it motivates us to persevere when work is difficult. Sometimes, working for the good of family may even mean

seeking a better future than the marketplace can offer us, motivating us to dream, hustle or learn a new skill. And perhaps more importantly, working for the good of our families teaches our children to value their own work and their own future families.

When a child grows up watching the marketplace take advantage of her parents, she learns to accept this as normal. She learns that the family is not a unique community with its own calling, but a collection of workers who live together and have some kind of emotional connection. Each member is actually a servant to someone outside the home. But when she sees her parents rewarded for their work outside the home, and the family directly benefitting from that work, she learns how to partner with the marketplace in healthy ways.

When I receive a paycheck for my work, it is our family's together because we have all worked to earn it. I worked explicitly, but my husband and children worked in hidden ways, covering my responsibilities at home while I venture out. Like most families, we use our earned income to pay bills, support the common good and invest in our future. But in order to make it clear to our children that their hidden work is seen, my husband and I reward them. Last spring, after a particularly busy season, we gave them each a modest sum—which to them felt like a windfall—explaining that any success we have in our individual careers is only made possible through our work as a family.

**III.**  
**Finally, work-wise families understand the importance of sabbath and find ways to pause work.** Unlike agrarian societies that have natural down time based on light and seasonal shifts, our modern context does not force periods of rest. Whereas the invention of electricity once paved the way for shift work, the constant connectivity of the digital age means that our shift never ends. Employers, customers, clients and workers can access each other via email, text and online platforms regardless of the time of day or night, or even whether they're in the same time zone.

In his 2018 study, [“Killing me softly: electronic communications monitoring and employee and significant-other well-being.”](#) William Becker, Virginia Tech associate professor of management in the Pamplin College of Business, reports that “‘flexible work boundaries’ often turn into ‘work without boundaries,’ compromising an employee’s and their family’s health and well-being.” And while both local and national governments have passed [“right to disconnect” legislation](#) to curb what employers can demand, it can’t control whether or not we choose rest. Ultimately this is up to us. For me, this means having at least one day a week that I do not check email or engage in work-related social media. It also includes anticipating the various cycles of our family life and planning for them—not the least of which include school breaks and sick days.

But even as families find ways to keep the marketplace at bay, there are a myriad of ways we can continue to engage in the work of home—including household chores, volunteerism and childrearing. And that’s nothing to speak of how childhood itself has become a place of unrelenting activity. Unlike adults who quantify our work in terms of an occupation, employment or pay check, the work of childhood hides under the guise of school, sports, music lessons and extracurricular clubs. Because these activities all seem to be “good” (and parents are told necessary to children’s future success), children can end up working longer hours than their parents do.

Fascinatingly, the Old Testament provision for Sabbath extends explicitly to children. “But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter.” It also assumes a collective Sabbath of households and communities resting together. The text continues: “...nor your male or female servant, nor your ox, your donkey or any of your animals... so that your male and female servants may rest, as you do” (Deuteronomy 5:14 NIV). Obviously, western society is not constructed to support this kind of sabbath, but we can work toward it, guided by a vision of common rest as a kind of common good. In our house, this has meant putting limits on homework, taking days off work or school, leaving chores unfinished and, once a year, leaving the household entirely to vacation together.

Of course, Sabbath is needed most by those for whom it is most out of reach—those at the bottom of the economic ladder. There’s a reason the Old Testament frames Sabbath as the opposite of slavery. Because of this, churches, non-profits and ethically-conscious employers must actively help families find ways to sabbath together. Beyond paid time off, employers might invest in time shares, making them available to employees at discounted rates. Wealthier church members might extend the use of vacation properties to fellow congregants who could never afford them. And while churches often use benevolence funds to pay electric and gas bills, they might also consider designating funds to cover lost income when struggling families take time off work for rest.

Regardless of how we sabbath, prioritizing rest runs against the grain of contemporary culture. But it’s a choice that helps keep the marketplace in its proper place and sets the stage for how the next generation will think about work and family. After all, children who do not learn to work and sabbath well when they are young will struggle to work and sabbath well when they are older, carrying the rhythms and routines of childhood into their future careers and families. In this sense, we are not raising only our children; we are raising our grandchildren.

If, however, we become work-wise families—if we learn the value of family, how to work well and how to rest even better—we have the potential to leave a legacy. And in so doing, we will reap benefit far beyond anything the marketplace could ever tempt us with. In becoming work-wise families, we discover the reward of flourishing together.

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