

# SALON

NEWS | POLITICS | ENTERTAINMENT | LIFE | TECH | OPEN

## I worked hard for no pay — and I dug it

When I lived on a commune, I learned that some kinds of labor yield their own, non-monetary rewards

BY RACHEL MONROE



TOPICS: CLUSTER MAG, ESSAYS, COMMUNAL LIFE, WORK, GARDENING, FARMING, AGRICULTURE, LIFE NEWS



(Credit: Flickr user Pennsouthnoise)

This article originally appeared on [Cluster Mag](#).

We all know people who like to work. They are squares or money addicts, people who can't think of any worthier way to spend their time. They are mean dads in movies and your brother's boring girlfriend. They wear work clothes and go to after-work happy hours where they gossip about work with their work friends. Some of the most interesting people I know seem not to do any work at all. They are busy doing other things, like art and drugs.



And so I have long been ashamed to admit that, well, I love working. I love working! I love the transcendent pleasure of creating something that didn't exist before, the tidy accumulation of hours, the inflating sense of having Done A Good Job. Completed tasks! Schedules! Productivity! My favorite courtship is the dairy farm workplace romance in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. How dreamy to be wooed, as Tess is, "in undertones like that of the purling milk—at the cow's side, at skimmings, at butter-makings, at cheese-makings, among broody poultry, and among farrowing pigs"?

It was a few years ago now that I was at Twin Oaks, but I think about it often. The Virginia commune sits on 450 acres in Louisa County, not too far from the flannel-and-khaki university town of Charlottesville. Forty-odd years ago, when the community was founded, Twin Oaks consisted of an old barn and a few outbuildings near a tobacco field. By the time I first visited, in 2010, the property comprised seven group houses, a large kitchen/dining room/gathering hall, a swimming hole, a graveyard, a woodshop, a tofu production facility, a hospice building, a dairy, a hammock workshop, several greenhouses, and an extensive garden. Though the population is in constant flux—the communal type turns out to be equal parts roving and committed—Twin Oaks has been at, or over, capacity in recent years. Its approximately 100 residents include a three year old with princess hair, a high school track star, a former USC a capella singer, several polyamory advocates, a Buddhist who studies Latin for fun, a small crew of pagans, and the guy from *They Might Be Giants*' older brother.

Twin Oaks was settled in 1967, at the height of the hippie commune movement, by a group of eight people who were, at best, wary of the shiftless tendencies of some of their peers. ("WE ARE DISCOVERED BY THE HIPPIES" proclaims an early community newsletter headline. But don't worry: "Hippies are, it turns out, only people," the article decides. "When [a hippie] begins to wash dishes and split wood, we don't think of him as a hippie anymore; he's just a member with long hair.")

Of the thousands of similar communal experiments forged throughout the '60s and '70s, Twin Oaks is one of only a handful to have survived, as other utopian experiments collapsed under the pressure of self-sustainability and interpersonal drama. The famous image of city kids ignorantly planting wheat during the wrong season in *Easy Rider* captures these early failures all too well. But for Kat Kincade, one of the community's founders and its most prolific chronicler, the main difference was that some countercultural types abhorred two things that Twin Oakers held dear: work and structure. Even today, people joke that Twin Oaks is a home for Type-A hippies, the sort of nonconformists who chafe at too much idleness.

These ideas about work and structure are codified in the Twin Oaks labor credit system, which has its origins in the ideas of B.F. Skinner, the Harvard social scientist who championed radical behaviorism. Skinner's 1948 utopian novel, *Walden Two*, depicted a society so hyperfunctional that each person worked no more than four hours a day, all goods and services were free, and everyone had plenty of time for friendly tennis matches. In a rational, egalitarian labor system, Skinner theorized, all work would be considered equal, and no one would have to do anything she didn't feel like doing. Removing the distorting influence of money

---

from a labor system would result in work for work's sake, harmonious social relations, and a comfortable surplus of necessary goods.

Skinner would later grouse about his ideas being distorted by "the Maharishi and whatnot," but the hippies took him to heart in a way that the scientific community never quite did—so much so, that some uprooted their lives to try and put his ideas into action. Twin Oaks grew out of a *Walden Two* conference, and the commune's earliest residents used the novel as a model, going so far as to set aside \$100 of community funds to build an air crib, a Skinner-devised "temperature-controlled, glassed-in unit that takes the place of crib and playpen, and which protects young babies from diseases and excess noise." The crib, which hung from the ceiling, was at that time an "absurd expense" according to Kincade, and "the biggest plus by far was being able to take visitors into the nursery room to point to it." Like other early *Walden Two*-ish behavior modification experiments (a currency called BITS, or Behavior Improvement Token System, psychology classes, and hand-drawn graphs tracking temper tantrums), the crib was soon dismantled and forgotten.

Within a few years, the community had dropped the WWBFSD1 ethos, and judging from my own random sampling, most of the community's current members don't have much to say about their home's behaviorist origins. That's in part because so much time at Twin Oaks is dedicated to the daily business of work. You could even argue, as some Twin Oakers have, that work is the closest thing the secular community has to a god. "We have our high priestesses/priests—the labor assigners. We each carry fetishes (in the anthropological sense) around with us in the form of our labor sheets. Also, members often derive a lot of their sense of identity from the work they do," long-time Twin Oaker Valerie told me. It's this central focus on labor that has enabled this particular commune to keep adding new members, building new structures, and developing new industries when the vast majority of its '60s-era counterparts couldn't survive.

Here's roughly how it works: each community member is responsible for an equal share of community labor, roughly equivalent to forty hours of labor per week. (Members can bank hours by, say, working hard in the garden all summer, then devoting the winter to travel or contemplation or sleep; labor hours are kept in a running tally, and going above or below quota for a week or a month is normal, as long as it all evens out in the end.) An hour of cooking is considered equal to an hour of milling lumber or an hour of office work, and no one is forced to do anything she doesn't want to do. There are plenty of complex modifications (including policies concerning children, the elderly, the sick, and the slacking-off), but that's the gist of it. And it has worked, more or less, for over 40 years. With enough members, there's generally someone who's interested in any given job. (The one exception is washing dishes, the only required job; early on, the community found that if dishwashing wasn't mandated, no one would opt to do it.) Either that, or someone feels guilty or martyr-ish enough to volunteer. Occasionally, of course, this means that some things just don't get done, such as when the beekeeping program went dormant for a while because no one cared to pick it up. But by community standards, that's okay, too.

In exchange for meeting labor quota, members get fed, clothed, housed, insured, and granted equal access to community resources (bikes, a carpentry shop, shared cars, etc). Theoretically, a person could walk down Twin Oaks' gravel driveway with nothing but the clothes on her back and, if accepted for membership, end up with a room, three mostly-organic meals a day, and health care. If this hypothetical stranger didn't even have clothes on her back, the community could provide some from its communal closet (which more closely resembles a thrift store where everything is free). A visitor can spend three weeks playing around at working to see if the communal life agrees with her.

\*\*\*

"Things that have value here," I wrote after my first full day at Twin Oaks. "Dietary restrictions. Eating fruit off the tree. Weird relationship models. Going barefoot. Lyme disease paranoia. Swimming naked. Schedules." If anything, my account downplayed the importance of schedules in Twin Oaks' communal world. Twin Oakers live by their labor sheets, which resemble a page torn from a weekly planner blocked off in hourly increments. The easiest way to locate someone at Twin Oaks is to pull their labor sheet and see where they're supposed to be at any given hour. The labor assigners are also notorious for using their power to try out matchmaking schemes.

Members can assign their own schedules, for the most part (six hours in the tofu hut, two hours building chairs, a morning in the garden, a day off to go into town), but we visitors had our schedules mapped out for us by the labor assigners. In the weekendless world of Twin Oaks, 40 hours of labor turns out to not take up that much of the week at all. I was assigned a bunch of garden hours, some time in the hammock shop, some kitchen prep, and a Sunday morning shift helping a woman named Rain cook brunch. (Visitors, many of whom are prospective members, also have to attend a good seven to eight hours of weekly meetings and orientations, all of which count toward labor quota.)

One unscheduled Thursday, I spent the morning drinking tea and reading old newspapers, not sure of how to deal with the chunk of taskless time in front of me. After lunch, I stretched out in a rainbow hammock and propped my book on my chest, but it was hard to concentrate. Other people walked by, presumably on their way to or from shifts of childcare or planting or cow-milking. They had the satisfied posture of people with purpose. It turns out that being busy means something different in a world where most of your work goes toward feeding, clothing, housing, and healing your friends and neighbors, instead of enriching anonymous corporations. And so, for a place with so many hammocks, Twin Oaks does not exactly cultivate a lounging atmosphere. It's home to the kind of people who will tell you that their work is fun. And, since they get to more or less choose when, where, how, and with whom they work, that may well be the case.

\*\*\*

In his 1966 essay "Buddhist Economics," radical economist E.F. Schumacher imagines a labor system which, in some ways, aligns nicely with that of Twin Oaks. Schumacher's theoretical economy is founded on the ideal of "Right Livelihood," one of the requirements of the Buddha's Noble Eightfold Path. Work is good, Schumacher argues (on behalf of the Buddha), because it teaches us new skills, humbles us, and enables us to join with others on a common task. "To strive for leisure as an alternative to work would be considered a complete misunderstanding of one of the basic truths of human existence," he writes.

Twin Oakers often cite the option to engage in multiple kinds of work as one of the things they find "nourishing and enlivening," to use Schumacher's terms, about the community's labor system. Valerie was in her early twenties, a self-described "skinny young woman," when she moved to Twin Oaks in 1992. She decided she wanted to work on the community's forestry program, where she would cut down trees and mill lumber, even though she had no experience with that kind of work. "It's not that I couldn't have done this work out in the mainstream," she recalls, "but it would have been unusual, and I would have had to have dealt with a lot of crap, attitude, etc. Here it was just, okay, great, you're on the crew. The crew was a lot of men at that time, though not all, and there was no condescension or patronizing when they were instructing me—just, this is how you do it. I was amazed and deeply appreciative of this culture."

Since then, Valerie has made quota in various ways: cooking lunch, weaving hammock chairs, teaching yoga, sewing pillows, homeschooling children, making tofu, doing community errands in town, and organizing the annual communities conference and women's gathering. She has also served as a planner, been a member of the health and mental health teams, managed the community's outreach program and its woodsplitting needs, "plus lots of random stuff." (As with many long-term Twin Oakers, the list of the jobs she hasn't done—including milking cows, indexing books, and serving on the membership team—is much shorter than the list of ones she has.) She appreciates being able to balance physically and mentally strenuous work. Perl, a member whose daughter was born at the community a couple of years ago, considers the community "a kind of trade school or apprenticeship in old timey utilities that are appropriated easily for a greener world." Some of his current and past work for the community includes splitting firewood, making cheese, building chairs, repairing bikes, welding, and childcare.

Overall, Twin Oakers can decide when they want to work and under what conditions to a much greater extent than in nearly any other workplace. (While I was there, I kept hearing rumors about a member named Van Halen who made quota by weaving hammocks from sunset to sunrise every night.) Unsurprisingly, the flexible work arrangements are popular with new parents, who can also get labor credits for tending their own children. The domestic/wage-earning divide is essentially

---

erased by the labor credit system.

Which is not to say that the way labor functions at Twin Oaks is frictionless. People get competitive, ranking up hours way above quota and taking on more than they should. Other people lean hard on the system, rounding up hours generously or outright lying about how they've spent their time. Hard workers resent lazy or inefficient workers. And even in an egalitarian system, there is high-status work and low-status work—the latter including “anything dealing with compost or tofu whey,” according to Valerie.

In recent years, a minor rift has opened up in the community between the tofu and hammock factions. Twin Oaks has been making and selling high-quality rope hammocks since the 1960s, but the work has always had a low profit-per-labor-credit ratio. Much more recently, Twin Oaks bought equipment to manufacture tofu, an enterprise that's much more lucrative, but much harder work. While hammock-weaving is social, mellow, and kind of mindless, producing tofu is essentially factory labor, involving elbow-length yellow plastic gloves, boiling water, and loud machinery.

In the imaginary Buddhist economy, hammocks would almost certainly win out; for Schumacher, industrial labor edges precariously close to “shifting the emphasis from the worker to the product of work, that is, from the human to the subhuman,” which he considers in no uncertain terms “a surrender to the forces of evil.” But human beings are put together in complicated ways, and the very things that make some Twin Oakers hate working in the tofu hut—the work's physical toll, the noise, the industrial process—has inspired devotion and solidarity among another group, many of them the community's younger and newer members. That's the thing about work: sometimes it's fun because it's hard. In 2010, the community voted to spend more than \$500,000 of its own savings on upgrading the tofu equipment, a clear (if contentious) endorsement of the tofu faction.

\*\*\*

For most of us, most of the time, work is a necessary evil. To the employer, labor is just another cost to be minimized; for the worker, it's time spent in thrall to someone else's needs or desires, with money as compensation for that sacrifice. “Hence the ideal from the point of view of the employer is to have output without employees,” Schumacher writes, “and the ideal from the point of view of the employee is to have income without employment.”

When writer J.C. Hallman participated in Twin Oaks' three-week visitor program in 2007, it was the leisure—specifically, a post-skinny dipping outdoor nap, the “intricate pleasure of the sun's warmth on genitals”—that seemed most revelatory to him. It was different for me.

If the utopian exists not in order to display perfection, but instead to extend our conceptions of what's possible, then the most truly utopian thing about Twin Oaks—a place with its share of in-fighting and mold smells and unpredictable pockets of small-mindedness—is how they have reimagined the ways work might fit into living, and the fact that they have been surprisingly successful at doing so. The downside of this is that a three-week stint at Twin Oaks isn't really a vacation at all, at least not if you take the place's survival seriously.

It turns out that hanging out at a work-obsessed commune is not unlike being a freelancer, minus the dry eyes and hunched shoulders that come after too much computer time. The work is often intermittent and project-based; it's up to each individual to schedule her own hours; and it's easy to fall behind, if you're not careful. I adapted easily to the Twin Oaks mode of life because I'm used to making obsessive schedules and to-do lists. When it's not all plotted out for you in advance, work has a way of getting into your head, of ticker-taping across your idle brain: what have you done today? What are you going to do next?

The big difference is that for us freelance/adjunct/part-time workers, work is fundamentally precarious. Flexibility exists in opposition to stability. If you don't have a career, you can wear your pajamas all day—but you can't expect to get health insurance, or peace of mind. These things seem axiomatic and unmovable. You pick your side of the bargain, hunker down, and make do. It's how life feels to me now, at least; I'm not ready to move to a farm, to share a kitchen with a dozen other people, to depend so thoroughly on the good will and good works of others. But sometimes I think about the May morning at Twin Oaks when I stood between the car-repair shop and the garden, guarding the road, trying to keep the neighbor's emu from terrorizing the cows. A low mist hung over the strawberry patch. No one but the milker and I seemed to be awake. The cows made nervous noises somewhere in their field, and I tried to remember if emus were violent. I was working and I was at home. I was working, and for a moment I could be still.