

What Makes Sammy Walk?

BABY-BOOM SLACKERS ARE LEADING US INTO A FUTURE OF EXIT STRATEGIES, "VOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY," AND THE END OF THE WORK ETHIC AS WE KNOW IT

By Randall Rothenberg

IN NORTHGATE, A SEATTLE neighborhood of sturdy homes and limitless vistas, a support group meets twice a month to help its members through the emotionally wrenching, physically demanding withdrawal from addiction. Among them tonight are an accountant, a college administrator, a computer-company founder, and a state-government employee. They are not dependent on drugs, alcohol, sexual relationships, or the other themes of twelve-step programs. These thirteen men and women are seeking release from their reliance on jobs.

"My name is Darrel," says one. He is forty-two, a compact man with neatly trimmed brown hair, dressed comfortably in a sweatshirt and jeans. "My interest is in getting out of the rat race and getting back to simplicity. I think it's a matter of time—not if but when I can do it." To prepare himself, he's deliberately stopped repairing or replacing broken household appliances. "The dryer pooped out, and we can do without the dryer," he says to approving nods.

A young woman follows. She is sitting on a couch, under a bookshelf on which newsletters with names like *The Tightwad Gazette* and *Simple Living* are neatly displayed. "My name is Laura," she says, twisting her fingers nervously. "I've decided to quit my job."

"Great!" barks the silver-haired man next to her.

Emboldened, she continues. "I'm gonna quit my job in June. It's not really that hard." For months already, she and her boyfriend have been living on one income and banking the second. "So I'm gonna quit my job," Laura repeats, trying to convince herself. "I'll get all my time back."

Finally, eyes turn to David Heitmiller. He and his wife, Jacque Blix, forty-nine and forty-five, respectively, tall, calm, and articulate, are stalwarts and stars of this group.

"My name is Dave and I'm married to Jacque, and we've been on a voluntary-simplicity track for close to four years now, and it worked out," he tells his confidants. "We went through a heavy-duty yuppie phase in the mid- to late eighties, like many people did." But after realizing their folly, they went on a rigid program to control their spending and ex-





What's the rush?
Jacquie Blix and
David Heitmiller
smile as the morning
commuters go by.

pand their savings. "We succeeded in reaching financial independence one year ago." At about the same time, U. S. West, where Dave had served in several executive jobs throughout seventeen years, offered him a buyout. Naturally, he took it.

"I haven't worked since. In a regular job, I should say. I have, very voluntarily and simplistically, rebuilt my bicycle. I did all the work myself," he says proudly, "but I got the frame for free."

DO YOU HAVE A Barnes & Noble superstore near you, one of those giant book emporiums, replete with coffee shop, easy chairs, and browsable magazine stands? Skulk around one some afternoon and check out how many of its plush settees are occupied—and by whom. "A lot of people are re-

examining," muses Jim Kirk, a Barnes & Noble vice-president. "A lot who were going a thousand miles an hour in the 1980s are now saying, 'Let's go thirty miles an hour.'"

Or perhaps you have a nouvelle coffee shop in your neighborhood—not the modern move-'em-in-and-move-'em-out kind, but one of the Parisian set-a-spell variety popping up of late. Ever notice who's pausing over that steaming latte and the morning paper in the hours before noon?

Chances are that, dotted among the expected regulars—the stroller-pushing moms, the aimless students, and the elderly—one third of the denizens are men, middle-class, middle-aged, and piddling around. Men who, in another life, were managers, financial planners, sales executives, attorneys, bankers, administrators, and account executives. White-collar men, "the interchangeable parts of the big chains of authority that bind the society together," the late sociologist C. Wright Mills called them. Men like you. Men who should be working. But aren't.

Every week, it seems, I run into an old friend, sometimes two or three—Ivy Leaguers in their late thirties or forties, comfortable but far from rich—who have departed the fast track. Whether they were pushed or not, their reactions have been strikingly similar: After a lot of soul-searching, some agony, and perhaps a tiny bit of self-loathing, they have decided to remain in the slow lane. First it was Peter, Princeton B. A. and Harvard Law Review, who went on hourly wages and then went part-time at his West Coast firm in order to study botany. Then there was Rob, who, fired by his investment bank, decided to work part-time, on contract, so that he might dally with a paintbrush several mornings a week. Al, who'd spent the years after his M. B. A. and law degree planning international real

estate ventures, forced his bank to fire him when it started withdrawing from the field. Before making any moves, he's taking at least a year off to spend time with his infant daughter, even as his wife begins her new life as a judicial clerk.

They may seem like cultural quirks—1990s versions of James Dean's causeless heretic, who've substituted loafers for leather in their rebellion against America's Organization Man ethos—but it's not merely the economically and educationally resourceful who are joining the BarcaLounger brigade. Hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, of otherwise normal men are banding together in a mass mystery that defies easy explanation. They are not turning on. They are not tuning in. But they are dropping out.

Last July, a Gallup poll found that some one third of all

Americans said they would take a 20 percent cut in income if they or their spouses could work fewer hours, an unprecedentedly high figure. Mere wishful thinking? When IBM offered employees a departure package in mid-1992, more than thirty-two thousand of the wing-tip warriors—60 percent more than management had anticipated—took the buyout.

All around us are the unmistakable signs of a shift in the American character. Instead of working harder as times get tougher, men, including the salaried shock troops that sustain the corporate world, are working less.

For several years—even as their wives and sisters have continued on the trek toward more hours for higher pay—men have been drifting away from work. At first, the departures were involuntary, forced almost solely by the continuing disappearance of factory jobs as microchips replaced muscle. In recent years, with corporate downsizing decimating the one fourth of American workers classified as managers and professionals, some experts have begun to notice a surge in deliberate departures.

“This has been going on among a core group of leading-edge boomers, and some older than the boomers, probably since the early seventies. The difference now is that it’s going mainstream,” says Gerald Celente, director of the Trends Research Institute in Rhinebeck, New York. “What’s going on now in a lot of people’s minds is, Look, I’m working longer and harder, I’m falling back, I hate my job, I don’t know if I’m going to have a job—I don’t want to do this anymore!”

In the post-Timothy Leary world, this leave-taking lifestyle is no longer referred to as dropping out. Some economists speak of “downshifting,” the pursuit and acceptance of slower days and lower pay. Others talk of a “voluntary-simplicity movement.” Still others call it a search for “exit strategies.” Inferential Focus, a respected New York trend-analysis company, says the desire “to take flight from current employment predicaments has become pandemic.”

It is evident in many varied phenomena. You can find a hint of it in the Arts and Crafts-style armchairs, lamps, coffee tables, and couches that the Rouse Company, the nation’s premier shopping-center developer, placed throughout the public spaces of Atlanta’s Perimeter Mall to make it more appealing to people with time on their hands. It’s in the baby-changing facilities Barnes & Noble has placed in the men’s restrooms of its superstores. And it’s in the proliferation of newsletters—like *Living Cheap News* of San Jose, California; *Skinflint News* of Palm Harbor, Florida; and

Simple Living of Seattle—written for folks with empty schedules and shallow wallets. (One such journal, *The Tightwad Gazette* of Leeds, Maine, has grown to fifty thousand subscribers from a mere seventeen hundred in less than five years.)

Data culled from government, industry, and think tanks point to an astonishing transformation in the nature of work, which we were raised to associate with eight-hour days at

offices or factories. The number of men in their traditional prime working years—early twenties to early sixties—who worked full-time for at least eight out of ten years fell nine percentage points from the 1970s to the 1980s. The recession that followed can only have added to their ranks, pulling the current number of “full-time full-timers” below 70 percent of American men. Of those employed, fully one fourth work on a temporary, contract, or part-time basis, according to the Economics Policy Institute in Washington, D. C. Link Resources Corporation, a technology-research company, says the total number of Americans who work at least part of the time at home, for themselves or for their employers, rose to 43.2 million in 1994 from fewer than 25 million just eight years ago.

Like it or not, man by man, modem by modem, we are becoming a freelance nation. We are insecure, sure, but we are also, as the word implies, free.

“This whole simple-living phenomenon seems to be marginal, but it’s growing. It seems to be exploding,” says Harvard economist Juliet B. Schor. The nation’s leading critic of drudgery, Schor, in her 1992 book, *The Overworked American*,

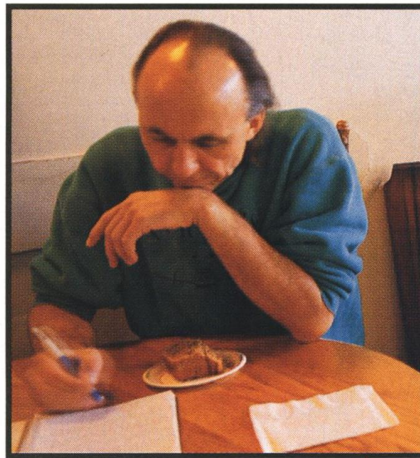
calculated that between 1969 and 1987, the average employed person put in an extra 163 hours a year on the job. It’s a telling sign that her newest study, which began in February, is designed to establish how many Americans are laying back, and why they’re doing so.

In pursuit of dropouts, Schor distributed a notice at a Massachusetts unemployment center for white-collar workers established along the Route 128 high-tech corridor. The respondents told her similar tales. “Their jobs were too stressful. They were unsatisfied. They were searching for meaning,” Schor recalls. “So they found other, lower-paying jobs, or they got themselves fired. They were no longer playing ball.

“Most had new jobs or situations that paid much less,” she continues, “but they were much happier.”

In that euphoria lies perhaps the most consequential and troubling aspect of men’s move to the sidelines. We were raised to labor—to honor sweat and revere the profit motive. For skilled, educated, and experienced people to find

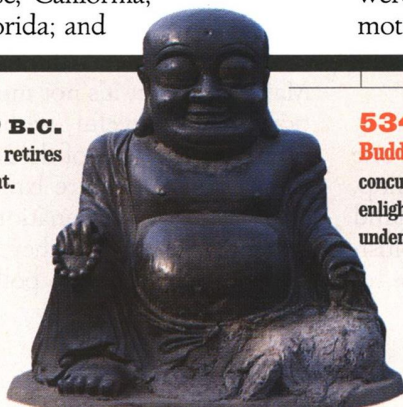
Less than 70 percent of U. S. men are now full-time year-round workers.



CAFÉ SOCIETY: Life in the espresso lane.

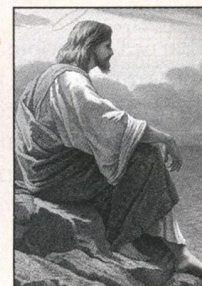
Great Moments in Prime-of-Life Slacking

1200 B.C.
Achilles retires to his tent.

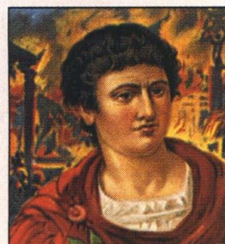


534 B.C.
Buddha leaves concubines, finds enlightenment under a tree.

Circa A.D. 25
Jesus quits carpentry, begins spiritual quest.



A.D. 64
Nero fiddles.



contentment in the absence of effort denotes a historical alteration in the meaning of work and a change in the importance of the work ethic in a nation whose willingness to toil distinguished it from the aristocracies from which our forebears fled. It also indicates an abandonment of the American dream by the people who have benefited from it the most. We are asking ourselves why we should work so hard, if forces beyond our control are determining our fate; we are answering by earning little, consuming less, and opting out.

We are becoming, in short, a nation of middle-aged slackers.

"It's going to be *the* political issue of the future," says Daniel Yankelovich, the noted public-opinion analyst. "Not Gingrichism but this."

DAVE HEITMILLER and Jacque (pronounced "Jackie") Blix make a handsome couple. Trim and robust, they reek of Seattle, with tough bodies shaped by long summer days on mountain-bike paths and introspective minds broadened by rain-soaked winters inside books.

Dave was bred to work. His father—who had inched his way up from carpenter to supervisor to estimator at a Washington military installation—endowed his son with a strong drive. "Heck, I was mowing lawns and had a paper route when I was in the ninth grade," says Dave. "I worked my way through college." After a first job that lasted seven years, he ended up, to his growing comfort, at the telephone company.

His life was not one of unmixed bounty. In 1983, his first wife died. Left with an eleven-year-old daughter, he began to rebuild his existence. Buying things—a boat, cars, sports equipment—provided some solace. But not so much as did Jacque, an easygoing woman whom he noticed at a New Year's Eve party in 1984 and married two years later.

Jacque had moved to Seattle from northern California to chase a promising career in telecommunications. The industry had already helped her through a crisis; divorced and living in a tiny apartment with her young son, she had signed on with Pacific Telephone and doubled her income.

"It was a revelation, it was wonderful, it was probably one of the best things that ever happened to me," Jacque recalls in buoyant, guileless tones. "Now I wasn't financially strapped all the time. I had a little boy. I could take care of him."

Things got even better when she married Dave. "Wow, you and Dave are going to have such a great life," her mother told her. "You're both making lots of money. This is going to be great!"

And it was. They drove a Jeep Cherokee and an Audi 5000. They swam in Hawaii, skied in Tahoe, and water-skied in the local bays. When the kids finished high school, Dave and Jacque sold their home in suburban Issaquah and purchased a four-bedroom house in the city. Dave's job provided more fulfillment. Six months after the wedding, he got his chance to move from direct client sales into a coveted product-management job. In 1989, he was promoted again

and started hobnobbing with execs from the other regional Bell companies. "Suddenly, everything was new," he says of that time. "New opportunity. I was learning new things, thinking I was happy."

Something, though, began to gnaw at Jacque. At first, it was simply the thought that maybe the job wasn't for her. Although a ready conversationalist, she didn't consider herself outgoing enough for the career in marketing and sales that the phone company was carving out for her. When she moved into the voice-data-network design group, she began to joke that for fun, her colleagues, almost all men, read *Byte* magazine. She started feeling trapped, then miserable. She dreaded going to work. "I was bound to the job because of the amount of money I was making," Jacque says. "It was an ego thing in part. I didn't want to take a step back. The bad part was, I had to do all these things that weren't me."

In the spring of 1988, she took a leave from her job to study for a Ph.D. in communications and to sort out her conflicting feelings. But the transition still wasn't enough. She started having forbidden thoughts—thoughts that made her feel guilty—about leaving her job for good. But her guilt was overwhelmed by a more powerful urge. "I wanted to do something meaningful for *me*." She had heard that a "simplicity circle," a group devoted to exploring lower-stress, lower-cost lifestyles, was starting in her neighborhood. She decided to check it out.

It was a mixed group—single men and women but mostly couples. Some were older folks who'd lived through the Depression; some were young urban professionals trying, like Jacque, to find meaning in a work-weary world. It wasn't long, though, before the conversations turned from cultural to practical matters. Jacque met couples who had managed to stop working altogether and had survived, even thrived.

Eventually, she came home one evening and told Dave, "Look, this stuff is important. You've got to come."

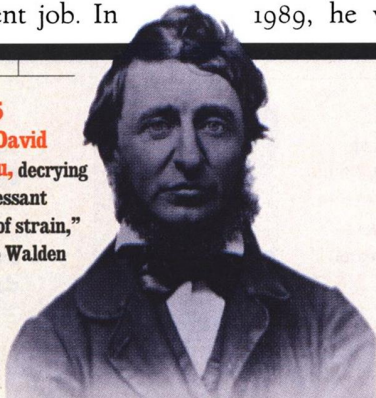
Dave was ready for the message. The comfort provided by his rise up the corporate ladder was proving to be brief. "I got to talking to people at the other Baby Bells and thinking, Hey, they're as screwed up as U. S. West is," he says. "And talking to people, everyone saw the handwriting on the wall. IBM even started laying people off. All these big corporations were going through the throes of reorganization. Where was this going?" Especially after Jacque quit her job and began contemplating a new career as a college teacher, he began to worry that his company's unpredictability might interfere with her plans. He agreed to think about other forms of employment, in order to prepare himself to follow his wife.

Soon, Dave and Jacque found the New Road Map Foundation.

The organization was started by a former New York financial analyst and an actress who had moved to Seattle and reduced their living costs to about \$7,000 a year each. The two, Joe Dominguez and Vicki Robin, had put together an audiotape series—subsequently turned into a best-selling book titled *Your Money or Your Life: Transforming Your Relationship with Money*

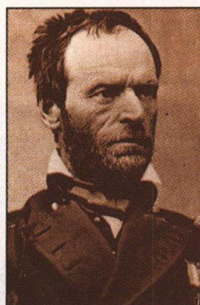
1845

Henry David Thoreau, decrying "the incessant anxiety of strain," moves to Walden Pond.



1884

William Tecumseh Sherman tells the Republican party, "If nominated, I will not run; if elected, I will not serve."



1891

Paul Gauguin leaves banking, moves to Tahiti.



1925

Wally Pipp takes day off.



and *Achieving Financial Independence*—to instruct others who similarly wanted to downshift. Their message was as seductive as it was radical. “The material progress that was supposed to free us has left us more enslaved,” they said. “For all the hype about ‘going for the gold,’ we’re so weary at the end of the day that going for the sofa is as good as it gets.” Cut back on spending, maximize existing financial resources, and, they preached, “if you choose, you may work for money for only a finite period of time.”

Perhaps in another place, Dave and Jacque would have dismissed that message as the siren call of losers. The Pacific Northwest, however, with its snowcapped mountains, scented forests, and sequestered islands, invites the overworked to indulge in escape fantasies. Indeed, “voluntary simplicity” has become such a fixture on the local scene that the Seattle Public Library even prepared a resource list for those wishing to downscale their lives—a bibliography of literary accounts, economics texts, lifestyle handbooks, spiritual tales, and historical renderings (call numbers included). Among the books available for lending: *Time Out: How to Take a Year (or More or Less) Off*, by Bonnie Miller Rubin; *How to Survive Without a Salary*, by Charles Long; *Simplify Your Life*, by Elaine St. James; *Voluntary Simplicity*, by Duane Elgin; *Streamlining Your Life*, by Stephanie Culp; *How to Get off the Fast Track*, by M. M. Kirsch; and, of course, the bible, *Your Money or Your Life*.

For Dave and Jacque, it seemed natural, guiltless, and liberating to try the New Road Map Foundation’s nine-step program. They determined their exact net worth. They recorded every expenditure in tiny notebooks. They canceled their cable-television subscription and sold their second car. Dave began taking the bus to work; Jacque started bicycling to school. They got rid of the boat. Dave even sold his beloved water skis. Then the couple moved from their 2,000-square-foot house to a 650-square-foot apartment. It was a no-brainer when U. S. West made Dave the buyout offer. They no longer needed even *one* salary.

Their relatives’ reactions have been mixed. Jacque’s parents, her father especially, believe they’ve gone temporarily insane. Dave’s daughter, now twenty-three, thinks their exit strategy is a conceit available only to the old. “You don’t have a social life anymore, and you don’t do anything, anyway,” she scolds them.

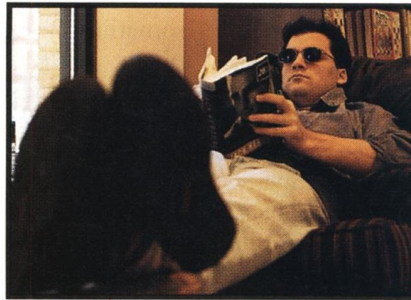
But by all appearances, they are content with their lot.

Jacque is plowing toward the completion of her doctorate. Dave spends his days cycling, read-

ing, writing, doing data entry for Jacque’s dissertation, and performing odd jobs around his parents’ house. Their income, which consists entirely of interest on a \$300,000 nest egg, is less than a third of what it was when they collectively put in more than one hundred hours a week.

“This will sound funny,” says Dave as he unapologetically pours me a glass of cheap jug wine, “but we’re actually looking forward to being in the 15 percent tax bracket for the first time in our lives.”

“You don’t have a social life,” Dave’s daughter says, “and you don’t do anything.”



THE SUPERSTORE: Sleepy in New York.

ITS LURE IS ANCIENT and tempting, the call to abjure work and drop out. Even in “this bustling nineteenth century,” Henry David Thoreau found a ready audience for his message that toil was enslaving the American mind. “Men labor under a mistake,” he wrote in *Walden Pond*. “The better part of a man is soon plowed into the soil for compost. By a seeming fate, commonly called necessity, they are employed, as it says in an old book, laying up treasures which moth and rust will corrupt and thieves break through and steal. It is a fool’s life, as they will find when they get to the end of it.”

Thoreau notwithstanding, it would be a mistake to assume that were it not for the drumbeat of commercialism and its appeals to our vanity, we would readily return to a state of nature. Thoreau exasperated his contemporaries: “To a healthy mind,” James Russell Lowell wrote of him

shortly after his death, “the world is a constant challenge.” Such critics understood that, almost from the beginning, the character of Americans was distinguished from that of our European antecedents not by a search for leisure and contemplation but by our willingness to work and seek the rewards.

“The workman,” wrote Tocqueville of his travels across this new nation, “is filled with new ambition and new desires, he is harassed by new wants. Every instant he views with longing the profits of his employer; and in order to share them, he strives to dispose of his labor at a higher rate, and he generally at length succeeds in the attempt.”

As the decades wore on, Thoreau’s message of self-reliance was blended into this obsession with acquisition and fashioned into the American dream, which could be summarized in four words: Work and get rich.

The classic expression of this reverie sat prominently on my parents’ living-room bookshelf throughout my childhood. It was a thin volume titled *Acres of Diamonds*, a reprint of a motivational lecture that was delivered more than six thousand times in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by Russell H. Conwell, a Baptist minis-



1928

Edwin Shoemaker introduces the **La-Z-Boy** recliner.

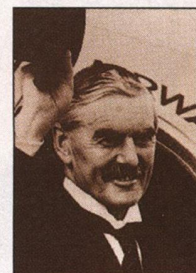
1936

Edward VIII abdicates throne for “the woman I love.”



1938

Instead of fighting, **Neville Chamberlain** yields the Sudetenland.



1956

Tired of playing “Begin the Beguine,” **Artie Shaw** scraps the clarinet.

ter and the founder of Temple University in Philadelphia.

In the speech, Conwell recounted the apocryphal story of Ali Hafed, a Persian farmer who was persuaded by a priest that fields of gemstones lay somewhere beyond the mountains of his domain. For years, Ali Hafed roamed far and wide to find the treasure, eventually selling his farm to finance the expedition, exhausting himself and dying a broke and broken man. Not long after Ali Hafed's death, the farmer who had bought his land was leading a camel across it when a gleam caught his eye. And there he discovered the acres of diamonds, right in Ali Hafed's own backyard.

Conwell meant his lesson literally. The lecture is filled with inspiring stories of entrepreneurs who searched their own environs and found fabulous wealth: the man who made \$52,000 inventing a better hatpin; the fellow who made \$90,000 developing rock candy. "I say you ought to be rich; you have no right to be poor," Conwell thundered to the multitudes. "You and I know there are some things more valuable than money. . . . Nevertheless, the man of common sense also knows that there is not any one of those things that is not greatly enhanced by the use of money. Money is power." It's no wonder that with such sentiments, *Acres of Diamonds* to this day remains a favorite motivational reference, cited in life-insurance-sales guides and at Amway conventions.

Luckily, this work ethic coincided with the needs of industrial capitalism. Competitive success required firms continually to increase their productivity—their ability to get fewer workers to turn out more goods in less time, which makes products cheaper and, therefore, more profitable. As large corporations took over the management of the American economy, the workers who made this nation the most productive the world had ever seen were rewarded with an implied social contract: higher wages and lifetime job security for more and harder work. "What makes the economy function well," Herbert Stein, the head of President Nixon's Council of Economic Advisers, once said, "is that a hundred million people get up every morning and go to work, doing the best for themselves that they can."

The bargain was a good one for America. In the fifteen years following the end of World War II, family income doubled. "Middle class," a term that applied to only a third of the nation at the start of the war, referred to two thirds by the mid-1970s.

As material comfort became a given, Americans found fulfillment in the social esteem their professions and professional accoutrements provided. "Satisfaction in work often rests upon status satisfactions," C. Wright Mills wrote in the 1950s. "Status panic," he believed, had become an essential motivation for people to work in the white-collar world. The 1980s provided vigorous support for his thesis. *Success!* shouted this magazine, an avatar of the new work ethic, on its February 1985 cover, above a photo of a young man, his red tie flying, his briefcase clutched tightly to his chest. "It is the religion of the eighties. Everyone pursues it. Only the most driven and talented

achieve it. Few know how to live with it. Or without it."

Today, it all seems so dated. Daniel Yankelovich's annual DYG Scan trend-tracking study uncovered striking disaffection from work, with employees routinely expressing grave doubts about their futures, their employers' loyalty to them, the value of accrued professional experience, and even the bedrock tenet of the American work ethic—that work can set you free from want. In less than ten years, something has happened, either in our character or our economy, to upend the work ethic.

In large part, this development has arisen because work provides workers with fewer real rewards. Even though the economy, now in its third solid year of recovery, is booming, the benefits have been manifested almost entirely in the creation of new jobs, not in the improvement of existing ones. Real wages have declined in almost every sector of the economy since 1979, according to a McKinsey analysis of Labor Department data. Benefits, too, are disappearing. Defined-benefit pensions—retirement plans that guarantee fixed payments from departure to death—covered 84 percent of workers as recently as 1982. Today, slightly more than half of all workers have their futures thus secured.

"In the aftermath of the recession, we are witnessing a gradual downward revision of expectations about accumulating material wealth to achieve success," says Yankelovich. "People are lowering their expectations about what they can get out of their jobs. They are putting their emotional investment into values and lifestyles that depend less on work and money."

Mark Baron changed his investment portfolio a few months ago, joining the two million men who the U. S. Census Bureau says are now serving as full-time fathers. I came across his name in a newsletter called *At-Home Dad*, a publication filled with supportive assertions ("at-home dads have smarter kids") and practical advice ("pet-sitting for profit").

A thirty-seven-year-old former industrial-tool salesman from Sharon, Massachusetts, Mark started talking two years ago with his wife, Andrea, about adding to their brood. They already had a three-year-old son and part-time custody of Mark's twelve-year-old son from a previous marriage. They calculated the costs, psychic and physical. He and Andrea, a rising finance-company executive, hated what Mark called "the nuttiness in the morning—packing lunches, who's gonna stay home if the kid is sick. You walk in at 6:00 P.M. and you spend the whole night doing baths, packing kids up, making lunches for the next day. Nine o'clock at night, you collapse. And when you finish paying day-care expenses, incremental expenses, buying clothing for the road, lunches on the road, dry cleaning—was it worth it?" Out of Mark's salary, then in the mid-forties, they were left with \$10,000 to \$15,000 after taxes.

Instead of sacrificing the joy of another baby, they decided to jettison Mark's job. "We asked, 'Is it worth \$10,000?' No. Forty, sure, but not for ten."

The conservatives now controlling Congress claim



1965
Harvard theologian Harvey Cox declares, "Not to decide is to decide."

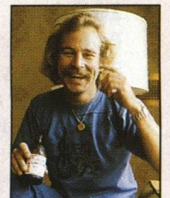
1968
Roosevelt Grier quits football, takes up needlepoint.



1972
Actor George Sanders kills himself. His note says, "I am so bored."

1972
Nolan Bushnell invents Pong.

1977
Jimmy Buffett releases "Margaritaville."



that the diminution of the work ethic is entirely an underclass problem and pin the blame on the 1960s. "The counterculture is a momentary aberration in American history that will be looked back upon as a quaint period of bohemianism brought to the national elite," says House speaker Newt Gingrich.

But the former southern New England district manager for the Ridge Tool Company—who has been staying at home with his new baby girl and her older brother and half brother for about six months now and is, obviously, neither quaint nor elite nor an aberration—sees it differently. "If this were the 1960s, I wouldn't be caught dead doing this," says Mark Baron.

In the nineties, he knows he is in good company. There is a former policeman in his neighborhood who took early retirement and now spends his days caring for his small children and selling model fire trucks out of his basement. There's also another like-situated father whom he's seen at his five-year-old's day-care center.

"I'm going to introduce myself to him," Mark says. "I need someone to talk football with."

TO THE DEGREE that it's possible for an entrepreneur to exploit such a social reversal, Cecile Andrews has done so. A lively woman in her mid-forties, Cecile was the founding influence behind the Seattle simplicity circle that lured Dave Heitmiller and Jacque Blix to their new life.

The director of continuing education at a local community college, Cecile had first tried to offer a workshop on voluntary simplicity in 1989. Only four people showed up, so the course was canceled. In early 1992, she tried again. This time, 175 men and women crowded the auditorium. "Passage of time, the zeitgeist thing," Cecile says to explain the difference three years made. "All of a sudden, a lot of people find themselves in the same boat—they're rushed, they're harried, their quality of life is going down."

The enthusiastic response led her to expand the workshop into ongoing simplicity circles. More workshops led to more circles, first in Seattle and then elsewhere in the country. Eventually, Cecile left her administrative job to become a full-time proselytizer for the simple life.

She offers to show me some people who've adopted the credo. "You'll find the middle-aged slackers at the Honey Bear Bakery," she says. She takes me to a snug, sunny bakery-cum-coffee-shop in the middle of a residential neighborhood. Its small parking lot and adjacent streets are packed with aging Subarus and Ford Explorers.

It is 11:15 A.M., too early for lunch, but the place is jammed. There are twelve women, almost all tightly and conversationally coupled, and eleven men, all but one alone. Most are reading; three tap on laptops.

Jim Bachman is one of the solitary typists. Fueled by espresso, he is working, as the bills on his table and the finance program on his screen attest.

"I own my own business," says Bachman, a neatly dressed thirty-nine-year-old with stylishly trimmed, graying hair. He is also its sole employee—the receptionist, treasurer, and chief engineer of an audio-recording studio. The Honey Bear and its buzz provide him with the human surroundings he misses within his office's walls. "I use the Internet. I do a lot of work on E-mail. But that isolates you. I like the noise here."

Sometimes it's a bit much. "About four years ago, I came in here at ten in the morning, and it was full. And as I was standing there with my coffee, looking around the room, I muttered under my breath, 'Don't any of you people have jobs?' And this guy heard me and shot back, 'Don't you?'"

Now he knows the answer. The "shiftless shift," as he calls the early crowd, includes "the people who had jobs but don't anymore and get a business card and call themselves consultants. They come here."

He eyeballs the room. "John, over in the corner, he comes in a lot. He writes custom accounting software on his own. He has a contract with the state. Started out as a microbiologist at the University of Washington, but he left."

Why? Bachman can't remember exactly. "Either it was lifestyle reasons . . . or a cutback."

Or both.

IMPLICIT IN THE LESSON of the work ethic was the idea of control—that we create our own fate, that we are solely responsible for our destiny. If *Acres of Diamonds* retains an appeal, it is in the message that, inevitably, we *will* find our fortune if we search hard enough. But Americans no longer believe in that fervently. Many of those who did believe have had their dreams dashed by the onslaught of statistics, with names and faces attached, that have coursed through American business these past few years.

At first, we dismissed it as the curse of the blue-collar class. When the five hundred largest U. S. manufacturing companies slashed payrolls by 4.7 million workers between 1980 and 1993, white-collar America sighed with relief. When the slashers came for the centurions of the "new economy"—when IBM began laying off 171,000 people be-

"I just put in a proposal to cut my hours to thirty-two a week and take a 20 percent pay cut," says a woman. "It's been accepted. I'm so happy."

1984

Paul Tsongas retires from the U. S. Senate. He explains: "Nobody on his deathbed ever said, 'I wished I had spent more time at the office.'"

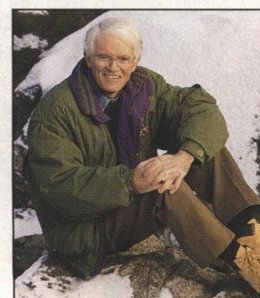


1986

Phillip Moffitt sells Esquire magazine and retires to Sausalito. His former partner develops magazines for doctors' offices, wall displays for health clubs, and a television network for high schools, and soon goes broke.

1990

Peter Lynch quits as manager of Fidelity's \$13 billion Magellan Fund at age forty-six.



tween 1986 and 1994—the middle class worried a bit but blamed Big Blue’s complacency and the recession that had sundered it. But when the recession ended, the assault continued. A week before Christmas, Mattel (a toy maker!) announced the elimination of one thousand jobs, despite record profits; a month later, on the same day it reported a 4 percent increase in fourth-quarter profits, American Home Products Corporation said it would cast off four thousand workers. It was clear the crash had come for everyone.

The villain is called downsizing, and it is demolishing the white-collar world. For the first time since the Depression, middle-aged, middle-class, college-educated men are suffering a decline in their standard of living and their prospects for employment. During the last recession, for the first time in history, says Harvard economist James Medoff, the percentage of unemployed white-collar workers grew. What’s more, men aged thirty-five to fifty-four who are pitched from their jobs are increasingly unable to find full-time employment: The ranks of those classified as “permanently unemployed” rather than “temporarily unemployed” grew by 25 percent between the 1981 recession and the slump a decade later. Indeed, Medoff labels the 1990s “the era of middle-aged-male permanent-layoff unemployment.”

The financial—not to mention emotional—impact on the wealthier, and presumably more secure, part of this cohort has been crushing. Massachusetts Institute of Technology economist Frank Levy says that men aged forty-five to fifty-four with four years of college, middle managers who were “earning their age,” saw their median earnings drop to \$41,898 in 1992 from \$48,189 just three years earlier. “This group has taken a pounding,” Levy says.

Soon, they will be as dust, if the gurus of the new economy are right. “I think there are a lot of people who will never find a job again,” Michael Hammer, coauthor of the best-seller *Re-engineering the Corporation*, said recently. “If you can’t design or sell a product, if you can’t do real work, I’d get real nervous.”

Middle-aged slacking is not a choice. It’s a necessity.

“Pretty soon, we’re all going to have to cut back anyway,” says Cecile Andrews, shrugging. “Are we going to be able to think of creative ways to live?”

AT 6:45 ON A FRIDAY evening, I go with Cecile to the Phinney Neighborhood Center, a massive brick schoolhouse in northwest Seattle, not far from the Honey Bear Bakery. Thirty-three men and women assemble in the basement auditorium for Cecile’s latest voluntary-simplicity workshop, their first stab at exploring life played at 16 rpm. A bit nervously but soon with the unforced camaraderie of a platoon under fire, they introduce themselves to one another.

“Five months ago, I left my company,” says a weary, heavysset man in his early forties. “Sixty hours a week there is normal now. Charging forward, giving customers

services they don’t even want. And I survived four downsizings so far!”

“I’m going through one now,” says the woman next to him, of similar age, who’s kept on her white anorak to ward off the chill. Her husband nods grimly.

A lithe, angular man introduces himself as a designer and a builder. His eyes are narrow slits and his skin is sallow. “I work all the time,” he tells the woman next to him. “I’ve been trying to cut back, save some money, so I can regain my time.”

“I was in secretarial work for twenty-five years,” his neighbor responds. She doesn’t give details, but somehow that career ended abruptly. “For the last three, I’ve been driving vans back and forth to the airport. It’s heavy pressure. I don’t like it. I’ve paid off my credit cards. Now I want to do what I want to do.”

“I just put in a proposal to cut my work back to thirty-two hours a week and take a 20 percent pay cut,” says a veterinary clinician. “It’s been accepted. I’m so happy.”

Corporate downsizing and its requirements—longer hours for less pay, a work environment with no security and little future—have brought us to a crossroads. The social contract between employees and their bosses has been broken. Without unions to fight for them, and with the political and social environment turned unsympathetically Darwinian, workers—especially managers and professionals with a bit of a nest egg and a sense of emotional and intellectual security—are starting to withhold the one bargaining chip they have left: their time.

Dave Heitmiller and Jacque Blix know this well. They dropped out before the economy dropped them. “Before, in the seventies, you could still maybe get a job in a factory, buy a new car. Property values were appreciating everywhere. You could still count on doing better than your folks did,” Dave says. “That’s all changed. We’re going through a dramatic change in the business world, and that’s affecting the worker bees. So some of us are saying, maybe there’s a better way.”

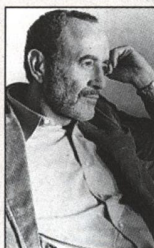
So enamored is he of that “better way” that Dave has decided to become a proselytizer, writing and perhaps speaking on behalf of the downshifted life. Like new converts to any cause, he wants to surround himself with true believers, whose presence will support his own decision to drop out. And, maybe, reassure himself that he’s not a quitter but the advance guard of the weary world order. “I’m thinking that part of my work—and I separate that in my mind from a job—is promoting the concept of simple living,” Dave says. “I’ve come to believe in it as a philosophy and not merely an economic thing.”

He remains defiant, though. This is not a career but a movement. “I’m not doing it to earn my living,” Dave wants me to know, before he and Jacque take their ’92 Nissan Sentra (bought used) over to their simplicity-circle meeting. “If I do make some extra money, fine, but that’s not the goal.”

No, the goal for him and his armchair army is to show the nation that living simply is the best revenge. ■

1990
Gemstar Corporation introduces the VCRPlus+.

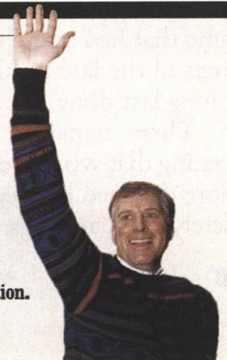
1990
For the twenty-sixth straight year, famed novelist **Harold Brodkey** does not publish his novel.



1994
Two years after winning the Pulitzer prize, **Anna Quindlen** quits *The New York Times* to write novels.

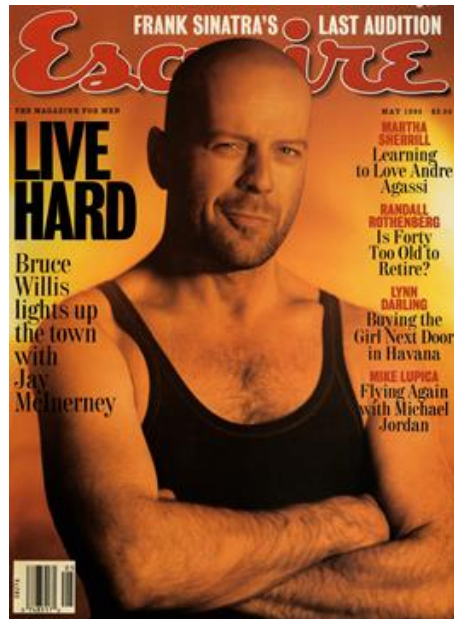


1995
Dan Quayle joins Dick Cheney, Jack Kemp, William Bennett, and Newt Gingrich in not seeking the Republican presidential nomination.



WHAT MAKES SAMMY WALK?

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