



Life Work

Donald Hall

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Distinguished poet Donald Hall reflects on the meaning of work, solitude, and love

"The best new book I have read this year, of extraordinary nobility and wisdom. It will remain with me always."—Louis Begley, *The New York Times*

"A sustained meditation on work as the key to personal happiness. . . . *Life Work* reads most of all like a first-person psychological novel with a poet named Donald Hall as its protagonist. . . . Hall's particular talents ultimately [are] for the memoir, a genre in which he has few living equals. In his hands the memoir is only partially an autobiographical genre. He pours both his full critical intelligence and poetic sensibility into the form."—Dana Gioia, *Los Angeles Times*

"Hall . . . here offers a meditative look at his life as a writer in a spare and beautifully crafted memoir. Devoted to his art, Hall can barely wait for the sun to rise each morning so that he can begin the task of shaping words."—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

"I [am] delighted and moved by Donald Hall's *Life Work*, his autobiographical tribute to sheer work--as distinguished from labor--as the most satisfying and ennobling of activities, whether one is writing, canning vegetables or playing a dung fork on a New Hampshire farm."—Paul Fussell, *The Boston Globe*

"Donald Hall's *Life Work* has been strangely gripping, what with his daily to do lists, his ruminations on the sublimating power of work. Hall has written so much about that house in New Hampshire where he lives that I'm beginning to think of it less as a place than a state of mind. I find it odd that a creative mind can work with such Spartan organization (he describes waiting for the alarm to go off at 4:45 AM, so eager is he to get to his desk) at such a mysterious activity (making a poem work) without getting in the way of itself."—John Freeman's blog (National Book Critics Circle Board President)

Life Work Details

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From Reader Review Life Work for online ebook

Madeleine says

Life Work is one long rumination on what it means to be dedicated to and consumed by one's professional choice. The author focuses mainly on artistic vocations (his own as a writer and those of his painter, sculpture and other creative friends), comparing it to the manual labor of his ancestors. Donald Hall goes on ad nauseum about his accomplishments, devoting pages and pages of this short book to his daily rituals and the lists he keeps and crosses off. The stories of his grandparents, although highly romanticized and not all that new, are vastly preferable to Hall's smug diary of a genius sections.

I will give it two stars for the beautiful and poetic writing -- and because it was mercifully short.

Ivan says

Not sure how I learned of this book, but I randomly picked it up. It is a reflection on work over the course of three months in the life of this writer. At times, it seems overly self-indulgent, but I was still drawn to this real-time meditation of a writer's life. I love the concept of absorbedness—or what Cal Newport has called “deep work.”

“It is always the *paradox* of contentment—of happiness and joy—that to remain at its pitch it must include no consciousness of itself; you are only content when you have no notion of contentment.”

Stephen says

I read this for an MFA course called "The Writing Life". There are a handful of useful quotes in the book about dedication to work and such. But it's mostly memoir and recounts of other people's lives of hard labor. Overall, there were only a few passages of useful information and a few moments of inspiration. I get so much more from listening to the "Writing Excuses" podcast and reading blog posts by writers.

Waverly Fitzgerald says

What a lovely book. It could be called Work Life as well as Life Work because the two are synonymous for Donald Hall, although his life work is writing. So reassuring for someone like me who is also work-focused. When I went into the hospital at the age of 39, having almost died from a pulmonary embolism, my thought was not: I should spend more time with friends and family. My thought was, I need to write more. Hall also has this reaction to his illness although he acknowledges the pivotal effect of emotional life events (his divorce, his wife's illness) on his writing life, and the fallow periods caused by loss and grief and depression. He's a listmaker and he uses a Daytimer to keep track of his many projects: essays, reviews, articles, children's books, poems, etc.. Every day he makes a list of projects and lines them out when done, puts a wavy line through them if postponed. He averages four books a year, including revised editions of previous books.

He writes about the work life of his ancestors and also examines the work life of other artists, including Henry Moore and Hemingway.

Yeats read Zane Grey at night, Eliot read Agatha Christie. Hall needs some way to shut off his brain and does it by watching sports.

Barry Moser illustrates his children's books. Moser's schedule up between six and seven, make coffee, feed dogs cats and occasionally the granddaughter. at drawing table by eight, beings work designing, drawing, painting, engraving or doing calligraphy. works until 11:30 or so, then fetches the mail, grabs a sandwich, does shopping for evening meal, runs errands, back at drawing table by one. work until the sun goes down, somewhere between five and seven in the evening. This is seven day schedule for fifty or so weeks out of the year.

Freud's schedule: to bed at one, rose at seven, saw patients from 8 to 12, dined with family at 1, walking in the city (bought cigars, delivered proof), saw patients again from 3 until late at night, then supper, maybe a card game, maybe a walk with his wife to a cafe, then reading and writing and editing. His weekends varied but "remained thick with work. He lectured every Saturday from five to seven, then played cards with a friend. Sunday mornings he visited his mother; Sunday afternoons he wrote letters." p 92

He mentions his grandmother's desire to become a doctor and go on a mission (

By this time we understand that missions--those medicines of largesse and martyrdom--were wicked tools of empire and oppression; Kate lacked our wisdom).

He gives a long, detailed analysis of his "best day:" wake early, leaps out of bed at four thirty, feeds the cat, lets the dog out, starts the coffee, dresses, drives two mibles fot he Globe, carris a cup of coffee to Jane, reads the paper while eating a blueberry bagel, finishes breakfast with skim milk, an apple and a small peanut butter sandwich. "I feel work-excitement building, joy-pressure mounting--until I need resist it no more but sit at the desk and open the folder that holds the day's beginning, its desire and its hope."

He writes about becoming absorbed. Hours, minutes or days go by. Any moment a poem does not completely absorb him he moves on. Interrupts work with a chore. Carrying logs. for instance, makes another cup of coffee or takes the mail to to the box. After a sufficient blank space after poetry-time, he moves to prose. does another draft, writes a book review. works on an essay, makes a new draft of a proposal for a local art agency.

Gets tired around 10 am, and the rest of the day is gravy. "I cannot fake it in the afternoon; if I push too hard, I become impatient and do bad work." p42

He quotes Hemingway, who started by reading what he had written and, "as you always stop when you know what is going to happen next, you go on from there. You write until you come to a place where you still have your juice and know what will happen next and you stop and try to live through until the next day when you hit it again. " "When you stop you are as empty, and at the same time never empty but filling; as when you have make love to someone you love." "It is the wit until the next day that is hard to get through."

At ten he dictates the changes he's made, adds a tape of letters he did while watching tv the night before and delivers them to his typist. He shaves, reads a mss by a friend, and proofreads the index of the book coming out next.

Eleven and time for lunch: cheese, bread, V8 and raisins. Take a nap with Jane who has been doing her own work all morning without speaking. Her work while he works spurs him on. When she is gone he works at half speed.

Wake up from naps and make love. Walk the dogs for twenty minutes. Brings in the mail and reads it. Low energy, not sleepy but slow-witted. Tidies a little, Reads for a half hour. Maybe he invents an errand. Drinks a cup o decaf. Reads a mss for a friend or for a publisher. Then at 4 energy comes back and he writes 800 words on Life Work. Between 5 and 6 the Concord Monitor arrives and he read the newspaper. Looks at a magazine until dinner. She cooks, he clears and puts the dishes in the dishwasher. Sets out his clothes for the next day near the heater, fixes the morning coffe, brushes his teeth. At seven thirty he starts watching sports and reads through the letters he dictated the night before. He does other things, flosses teeth, looks through the QPBC catalog. writes postcards and brief letters. Then picks up his day-timer and lists things for

tomorrow.
poems
prose
call Philippa about Friday
call about eye appointment
Celtics tickets with Andrew
New London, shop and pick up camera
Life Work

Bruddy says

Donald Hall was a life-long committed craftsman to the trade of writing, whether be it poetry or prose. This short memoir offers a look at the joy Hall found in the daily work of a writer, the family roots of his upbringing in New Hampshire, and his struggle with the onset of cancer during the writing of the book. Ironically, Hall who at the time believed himself to be quickly approaching the end of his life, survived his cancer, but lost his beloved and much younger wife to the disease shortly afterward. Hall wrote poems, plays, essays, magazine articles, children's books and any other type of writing that allowed him to remain at his craft full-time. I remember in college making use of his book on expository writing, which I found much more useful than similar books I'd come across.

I enjoyed this book beyond the insightful reflections on life and work Hall offers; it also revealed a bygone era of New Hampshire with its daily ritual of work and the meaningfulness such work brought to people's lives. Although he chose not to be a farmer like some of his forebears, Hall continued their commitment to achieving emotional, spiritual and financial sustenance through the labor of each day. He died recently at his family's farm in New Hampshire, having produced over fifty books, including 22 volumes of poetry.

Benjamin says

The subject of “work” has been something of great anxiety and confusion for me. Perhaps not the meaning itself but the teleology and the ethics of work. What is the aim of work? How ought I properly relate to work? What ought I expect or demand of work? What is my work?

The tension only compounds in a society that champions, what often presents itself to be diametrically opposed qualities, existential fulfillment and economic self-sufficiency. One might wholeheartedly pursue a trade that gives fulfillment but provides minimum wages. Of course, the creative endeavors are the pronounced form of this phenomena but it is not limited. The carpenter, the shop mechanic, the furniture maker, the welder, farmers, the cook, etc. For those that were dealt the dreadful hand of desiring an economically unfavorable trade, they bear the burden of cherishing a practice that the market values for pennies on the dollar.

On the other hand, the majority of westerners inhabiting the post-industrial world, find themselves on the other side of the isle -- they have forfeited desire for security. They secure self-sufficiency but it costs them dearly on an existential level. This leads to the alienation of labor so well-defined by Marx. Where our Self (in the psychological sense) is encumbered or diminished by the mechanistic production of goods and

services. The crown jewel of this phenomenon is the factory line. But I would, however, venture to speculate that this might often be most pronounced among CEOs, accountants, medical professionals, teachers, lawyers, and the like. The trades that get paid the most often demand the most from its practitioners. And in this demand, they lose themselves.

Christianity does, in some ways, provide a middle road by displacing the locus of actualization from work to the Kingdom of God. It sterilizes the tendency of modern men and women to implicitly hope for eternity into their work. But, while it removes the modern narrative of occupational slavery, I have been unable to substitute it.

Donald Hall's book, *Life Work*, has not so much solved this riddle as he has intensified it.

His work is fairly directionless. It's a free-floating reflection on death, work, writing, and the meaning of such things. All in all, it feels breezy. Hall recounts stories of his kin and their work. He reflects on his own work, his complicated relationship with it, and his dying hopes of what it could be. The overall arch of the work lends to a belief that work is a non-religious sanctification. Work is movement in the world defined by presence and action.

The book is compelling in the most non-philosophic way. The image that comes to my mind is that it's not so much a medicine to cure the anxiety of work, but a shot of whiskey celebrating its power.

Kristen says

I love everything I've ever read by Hall - from his poetry to his essays to his children's books - and this short memoir was no exception. His work here was affected (I'd say enhanced) by his confrontation with mortality as he wrote it. I really liked reading about the way he structured his days and the glimpses into his relationship with his wife, the poet Jane Kenyon.

Barbara says

I flat out adore the soulfulness of Hall's writing. Memoir or poetry, poetry and memoir, they all enthrall me.

Sue says

"Repetitive, indulgent, hackneyed, lazy": my notes on this book.

I read *Life Work* after reading *Essays at Eighty*. Critics fawn over these books and the apparent legend that is Donald Hall. Me: I find myself with little to no patience for this enterprise.

A book titled *Life Work*, written by a poet, promises of deep reflection on the meaning of work against the whole of living. Or perhaps the balance of working and living. Or perhaps the whole of one's working as a contribution to living a complete life. No.

This book describes work as a list of tasks to be done (write poems for self, write essays for contract, write children's story for contract, write 20 pages this book for contract, dictate letters for reputation). Is that what work is rather than undertaking a series of tasks that contribute to a life story? That contribute to knowing one's self more intimately? That contribute to the discipline or the world? Hall says, "It is easier, and it remains pleasant, to undertake short endeavors which absorb me as much as any work can." Maybe that's the luxury of self-employment, or maybe I'm missing something and reaching "absorbedness" (what we today call "flow") while in engaging tasks is as good as it gets?

Hall delivers a marked lack of introspection about the writing life and creativity. Where does inspiration come? What sustains through revisiting? How can one, without a hint of humility, compare oneself to the world's great (male) artists? Why no self-doubt? Compare this book against Sheila Heti's *How Should a Person Be?* and know how unsatisfying Hall is in describing a life's work in creativity.

Essays at Eighty recovers much of the ground in *Life Work* deepening my exacerbation. Hall to me perpetuates a sentimentality and romanticism of (male) ancestors and their working lives and barely-there interest in "women's work" (Hall's words) and how the work of women sustains the men and children in families. Hall is one of those guys he says how much he admires and respects the women in his life, yet shows he does not by, for example, giving over more words to describing the work men and failing to be honest with how women support him in his work.

It surprises me I never read Hall in my academic life; I know him as Jane Kenyon's husband. (Kenyon I've read a very little.) Hall has a literary "reputation" (or had one 20-40 years ago?); it's really difficult for me to not see his reputation supported by the same literary clique and academic patriarchy that suppressed diverse voices throughout much of the 20th century.

Linda says

I love Donald Hall's poetry and prose--it all reads like poetry to me. I especially love his recollections of his family history and the places that are dear to him.

Tommy Grooms says

I picked *Life Work* up on a whim as I cope with disappointed vocational aspirations. It is part memoir, part meditation, with work as the theme. It meanders, expounding on everything from cultural views of work, a perfect work day, the work of Hall's progenitors, differences in artistic/intellectual versus physical labor, and work in the face of the likelihood of imminent death. Hall's prose is engaging and the book's loose structure made for good, short bedtime reading sessions over a long period of time.

Tiffany Reisz says

The book I needed but didn't know I needed.

Donald Hall wrote this book about his love of writing, how it was his calling and his vocation. Then halfway

through writing it, his cancer returned. He details his recover from cancer surgery in the second half. The tragic irony of the story is that it was written in 1992 and he says he knows if he starts a thought today he won't finish it in 1995. He was that certain of his own death.

But in 1995 his wife, poet Jane Kenyon, died. And he is still alive and writing today. He was right to fear death but it came for someone else in his house. Reading about the marriage between two writers will never not be relevant to me (I'm married to a writer). Now I know to keep writing. Death will come eventually but I can leave my work behind, and my work is more important than I am.

Elizabeth says

As a career counselor, I found Hall's literary meditations on work really fascinating (I'd make this required reading for career-counselors-in-training), but the books transcends its subject, veering into topics not just of the meaning of work but life itself. By the end, Hall is seriously grappling with his own mortality. I appreciate his deft ability to weave together disparate narratives into a lyrical whole.

Nick Klagge says

I enjoyed Hall's "Eagle Pond," but this one didn't do it for me so much. I enjoyed, again, the descriptions of rural New Hampshire life, but I had "heard that one before."

"Life Work" is divided into two parts, and after the first part, I thought that I really didn't like the book. The main theme of the first part seems to be, "Check me out, I work super hard, but it ain't no thing cuz I love what I do; also, I know some famous people!" This didn't feel really compelling to me. I also felt uneasy all along at the implicit equation Hall makes between his "hard work" as a writer and his ancestors' "hard work" as New England dirt farmers. Maybe it's my own insecurity as someone who does white collar work in a field that interests me, but it just feels like it's not accurate to compare the two. Is that which makes someone work hard at the former the same as that which makes someone work hard at the latter? Anyway, especially living in a New York City culture that makes a fetish out of being a workaholic, I don't feel like the world needs an(other) ode to hard work.

I liked the second half of the book better, mostly because Hall complicates the picture by bringing his own illness into the picture as well as by discussing his father's terrible work life. But after finishing the book, I had the feeling that Hall wrote it because he felt like writing something about work, rather than because he felt that he had something to say about work. I have no problem with a "slice of life," but a slice of just one highly unusual life doesn't feel like enough for a book. I'll take Terkel's "Working," which Hall mentions a couple of times, over LW any day.

Heather says

The first half is a way too detailed account of what this man does for a living. Utterly boring. Seriously? You've published, and presumably been paid for, a book which is half filled with your daily routine and details about your to-do lists.

The second half is a little more lively. Ironic, since he's convinced he's about to die through most of it.

You know it's bad when talk about his great and grandparents' work on their farms in the late 1800's to mid 1900's livens things up.

Terrible.
