

Simone Stolzoff:

Toni Morrison held many titles in her lifetime: author, Nobel Prize winner, professor, jazz lover. In addition to writing, though, she always had a job. She worked on textbooks, taught English, and edited fiction. One of her first jobs was as a cleaning lady in her hometown of Lorain, Ohio.

One day, Morrison was complaining to her father about cleaning rich people's houses when her dad put down his coffee and said, "Listen. You don't live there. You live here. With your people. Go to work. Get your money. And come on home."

Morrison later wrote about the impact of her father's words in *The New Yorker*. "Since that conversation with my father I have never considered the level of labor to be the measure of myself," she recalled. "I have never placed the security of a job above the value of home."¹

Morrison's work was important, but it was her livelihood, not her life. When I think about what it means to have a good enough job, I think about Morrison's father's wisdom: Go to work. Get your money. Come on home.

The summer I spent power-washing other people's decks in high school taught me more than any of my classes the following semester. My first job in advertising taught me when to voice my opinion and when to shut up. Tech taught me pragmatism. Design taught me optimism. And journalism taught me to give a shit.

Through work, I've found meaning and purpose and lifelong friends. But the most important thing work has given me—the thing I need it to give to me—is enough money to live. At the end of the day, a job is an economic contract. It's an exchange of labor for money. The more clear-eyed we can be about that, the better.

Speaking about a job as a transaction may seem crass. We're told jobs are meant to be callings and vocations and passions, not mere paychecks. But companies already treat work transactionally. They hire employees who add value and fire employees who do not. Losing sight of this creates the conditions for exploitation.

I don't say this as a cynic. Rather, I think a more transactional approach to work liberates both

employers and employees. It frees employers to focus on setting clear expectations for what good work looks like. It frees employees to advocate for fair compensation, rather than to assume that talking about money somehow undermines the company's best interest. Most importantly, it frees employees to treat work as a living and not as the entirety of their lives.

To be clear, I don't believe a more transactional approach to work needs to come at the expense of caring about your job or doing great work. There is nothing wrong with aligning your work with your interests or working hard to refine your craft. Rather, I'm advocating for a collective reorientation of our expectations. Much as it is unrealistic to expect a spouse to fulfill our every social, emotional, and intellectual need, it is unrealistic to expect a job to be our sole method of self-actualization. That's a burden our jobs are not designed to bear.

ⁱ 000 **"Since that conversation"**: Toni Morrison, "The Work You Do, the Person You Are," *New Yorker*, May 29, 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/06/05/the-work-you-do-the-person-you-are>.