

What, then, constitutes the alienation of labor?

First, the fact that labor is external to the worker, i.e., it does not belong to his intrinsic nature; that in his work, therefore, he does not affirm himself but denies himself, does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind. The worker therefore only feels himself outside his work, and in his work feels outside himself.... His labor is therefore not voluntary, but coerced; it is forced labor. It is therefore not the satisfaction of a need; it is merely a means to satisfy needs external to it.... External labor, labor in which man alienates himself, is a labor of self-sacrifice, of mortification.

Karl Marx

I remember asking my sister what she thought it would be like out there. “I think it’d be a lot colder,” she said. “No, stupid, not just temperature. But life in general.” She didn’t know and didn’t answer, but she gave a meager kick to our mother to complain that I was annoying her again with all my questions and went back to sleep. I just couldn’t wait to get out, to explore. I needed to consume food, language, philosophy, history, and culture and experience people. I couldn’t just sit, lazing about in embryonic fluid speaking our language with my sister for the next six weeks. I was too impatient. So that day, six weeks early, I decided I was going to be born. And my sister? I guess I’d drag her along after me.

That’s at least how I imagined it went—my birth, that is. I fashioned it up from the stories my mother used to tell me about how my sister would kick her and cause her heartburn: symptoms which I attribute, not to the classic symptoms of her condition, but to the stirring of my own prenatal zealotry to learn about the world. And after I pushed myself into life, I never

looked back.

I quickly adjusted to the new sensations and delights of being an adorable, indulgent parasite. Being swaddled and squished, I discovered I was quite fond of pleasure indeed and would chase after it throughout my second decade. But I'm getting ahead of myself. In the first decade of my youth, in the quiet suburbs of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, I didn't yet hear the whistle to start "the race." I wasn't yet given a carrot to chase after, so I traversed freely over a range of interests in innocent curiosity. I remember asking my mother for a robotics kit for Christmas in fifth grade and then for a Latin textbook in sixth. Upon inspection of my room, one might even think I shed textbooks, for several would appear out of nowhere when I got in one of my moods. I spent hours in them, happily uncovering the secrets of the universe. However, this middle school passion didn't last.

The fall of my Sophomore year was the bucket of ice water that awoke me, panicked, to the pressures of achievement. I had decided to run an underground cookie catering business with my sister on top of schoolwork and sports; we called it Twins Bakes and Cakes. For all our different interests, we approached our business with the same mentality: work as hard as possible for the rest of that year—make as much money as possible for college—then focus on class rigor and college applications in junior and senior year. It was a plan that we stuck to religiously, no matter the persecution we received from suspicious teachers over why I carried two backpacks (one business, one academic). The inspired little girl in me blossomed into a successful, goal-oriented automaton, making hundreds of dollars a day. But with the added business endeavor came the equal and

opposite subtraction of free time and sleep, to the point where events started to blend together. It was during the multitude of after-school soccer practices, my alleged “breaks” from school work, when I felt this the most.

“Here! Here!” my teammate shouted as I completed a step-over at the cone and prepared to pass them the ball on the other side. It was a clean pass, and I jogged behind them to take their place in line to wait for the next pass. *Ok, get home at 5:15pm and immediately start and finish my Pre-Calculus homework. That should take me half an hour.* It was a simple, repetitive drill that allowed me to multitask. *Then make four batches of Snickerdoodle batter—we still have enough chocolate chip batter from yesterday, which will bring me to ~7:00.* “Ball!” I called, bouncing on my toes, eager to receive. I stopped it with my left foot, then dribbled off with it on my right with my breathing increasing rapidly. *While those chill in the fridge, make and eat dinner then take a shower. By then, it’ll probably be 8:00.* I passed the ball, now a little awry, but it seemed miniscule in scope of importance. *Just get through practice.* I would repeat to myself over the next ten minutes. *Survive* was my mantra. My next turn was even worse, but the practice was almost ending. We finished with a two-lap cool-down jog, and again the mechanical motion of my body allowed my mind to focus. *Ok, we’re going to prepare a full twelve dozen cookies tonight, but that’s ok because you’re going to study your psychology Quizlet while the cookies bake and do your English readings while they cool. If I can clean up fast, then I can be in bed by 12-12:30am.* The practice finished, as all of them do, with me feeling more physically and emotionally exhausted with the knowledge of just how much more work I *had* to do that day. Every moment I used to plan for the next one, never fully engaging with what I was doing. I was successful but disconnected; I couldn't figure out what was wrong.

Then after Sophomore year, taking all advanced, AP, or dual enrollment classes hit me harder. It was no surprise that after a few months of grinding away at these at the cost of sleep, friends, and sanity, my intrinsic passions were slowly eroding away. And whatever remains they had left were outweighed by my mom feeling proud of me for getting straight A's, my Soccer coach who pointed me out for my grit, and my guidance counselor who recognized all the effort I put into my clubs. There was no singular authoritarian figurehead I could attribute the origins of my workaholic mentality to, and I don't know what else could have caused it except for some societal invisible hand. But the pressure to work harder, to do better, was *real*, and it got even worse when I began to feel the eyes of college applications on my back in my senior year.

I would memorize hundreds of anatomy flashcards—not because I was interested in the subject anymore—but because I wanted the grades that would get me into a good college. Bitten by the academic grind-virus, I became an emotionless zombie throughout the school halls with the only form of consumption I allowed myself being information. My body, heavy with exhaustion after practice, would collapse into dreamless sleep night after night throughout high school. Friends became optional. Family, the background noise I lived with. The only thing that mattered was cramming as much information as possible into my head before the next exam. I would blink, take the exam, eat, go to practice, work, then repeat—never stopping long enough to notice the subtle change in my Why? Never stopping to make meaningful connections, take up new hobbies, or figure out what I really liked. I became so focused on the finish line I forgot to enjoy the race. So, when I won a full scholarship to MIT, it wasn't my body this time that collapsed into exhaustion but my mind. I had achieved my goal and could finally think about things beyond passing a test. But when I let my thoughts wander again the summer before MIT

—when I allowed myself to breathe—I didn’t love what I had to find.

I had few meaningful connections, feared I lost all my original passion, and had a limited amount of fun memories during my time in school. I was so busy with school, I told myself, I didn’t have time to idle and enjoy life. And every time I repeated this, a familiar premonition would visit me. It was me, in forty years, expended, wrinkled, and finally free to retire. She’s exclaiming, “Hoorayyyyyy, my work is finally over, and I can finally join all those clubs I wanted to! I can finally explore all my interests.” But then upon attempting any of these previous interests, she would grow too unsatisfied to continue because she had contented herself with less for the past forty years. Looking around, she saw there was no one besides her but her two cats, her ferret, and her completed linguistics papers that she wrote only because she didn’t know what else to go into after being too afraid to switch her major in her junior fall of college. She, Bitter Old Marlo, would come around every time I slipped into using work, the fear of being poor, or the fear of “letting society” down as an excuse to suppress me from doing something I really wanted. So what was I supposed to do? I had diagnosed my problem so accurately yet knew not what to prescribe myself.

I never did figure it out, especially not within the three months of summer break. There were a lot of things it could be, including what I wanted to focus on in the coming semester, how much time I wanted to allocate to others, did I still like my major, or am I going here just for the reputation? As a pupil of philosophy, I did honestly try to look for answers within the safety of a book, but the philosophers seem to spend most of their time writing about more pertinent things than what a teenage girl should major in. So I had some fieldwork ahead of me that first semester.

Baby steps of progress were definitely made. I joined a first-year learning community

called Concourse and MIT's Philosophy Club, where I met my closest friends. I went out to explore Boston a little and took up an old hobby of jump roping. I passed all of my classes, but I still felt as if I was a jellyfish getting pulled around by the current of circumstances—not actually taking authority over my life. I was forced to pass the general requirements if I wanted to graduate, and I completed those classes with the same begrudging attitude of a child forced to eat their vegetables. The joy of finishing my work simply wasn't as invigorating as it had been in the past. I was lacking a sense of connection and meaning to what I was doing. This changed, however, one month ago during IAP.

I was surrounded by my friends at a karaoke bar. The new semester was about to begin, and I was tempted by the current to max out classes and grind for the next four months. Suddenly, our waiter and some staff members came smiling through the door, holding a birthday cake with sparklers and hearts. They lined up and began singing and clapping in unison. *Remember when I worked alone, in my room late at night, and in the day, struggled to keep my eyes open in class?* I thought to myself. I know I passed 18.02, but do I remember anything from the class? I know I submitted ten physics PSETs but do I remember what was on any? My friend blew out their birthday candles and everyone began to cheer. Did I learn nothing from high school? I'm repeating the past again...quite inefficient of me actually...to have to fail a subject and relearn it. I was confronting again, this time consciously though, the decisions I made growing up. I could keep being led by society's carrot of success, or I could rekindle the remnants of my intrinsic curiosity in a subject work hadn't yet killed off. I was handed a piece of cake and "For the First Time in Forever (Reprise)" from Frozen began to play. This song was my weakness. I began singing as loudly as possible—a duet with the birthday person—and afterward, I exhaled the breath I must've been holding since I started the race.

I still had so much to learn, to consume outside of textbooks and lectures. Work and success are not the only components of life. I felt like a child again, brimming with excitement for the new semester. I could write a memoir, join the fire spinning club, become a tour guide, and get to know the lovely, talented, incredible, terrible singers before me more. I was ready to pour my soul into something meaningful, something for myself, and not simply for society or a resume. There is so much here at MIT besides grinding to get the degree, and it was time I started reconnecting with the little girl in me. It was time to rekindle my intrinsic passions.