

**WHEN WORK IS
OUR RELIGION**



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Workism Is Making Americans Miserable

For the college-educated elite, work has morphed into a religious identity—promising transcendence and community, but failing to deliver.

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IN HIS 1930 ESSAY “Economic Possibilities for Our Grandchildren,” the economist John Maynard Keynes predicted a 15-hour workweek in the 21st century, creating the equivalent of a five-day weekend. “For the first time since his creation man will be faced with his real, his permanent problem,” Keynes wrote, “how to occupy the leisure.”

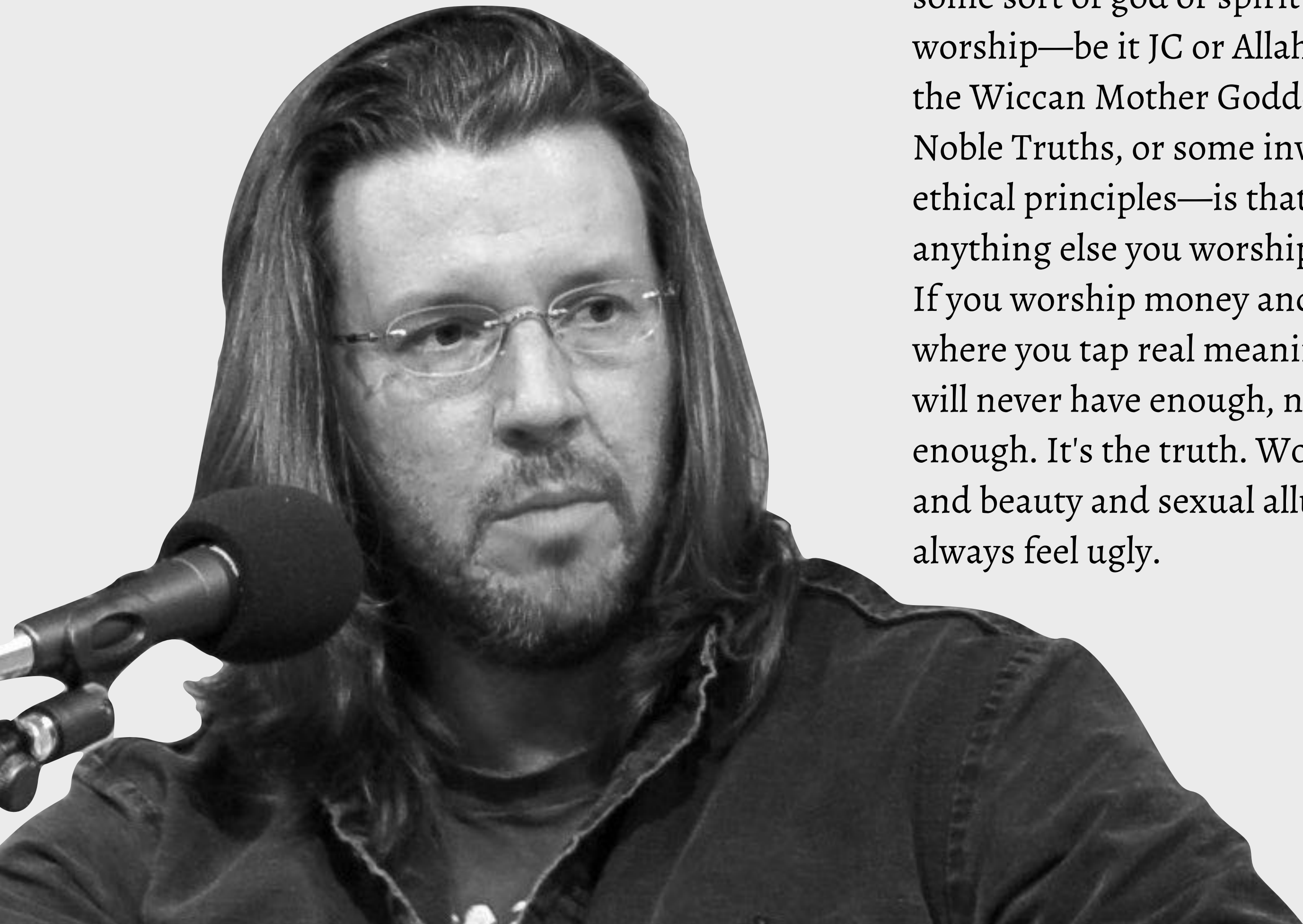
This became a popular view. In a 1957 [article](#) in *The New York Times*, the writer Erik Barnouw predicted that, as work became easier, our identity would be defined by our hobbies, or our family life. “The increasingly automatic nature of many jobs, coupled with the shortening work week [leads] an increasing number of workers to look not to work but to leisure for satisfaction, meaning, expression.”

The Rise of Workism

The decline of traditional faith in America has coincided with an explosion of new atheisms. Some people worship beauty, some worship political identities, and others worship their children. But everybody worships something. And workism is among the most potent of the new religions competing for congregants.

What is workism? It is the belief that work is not only necessary to economic production, but also the centerpiece of one's identity and life's purpose; and the belief that any policy to promote human welfare must *always* encourage more work.

This Is Water
David Foster Wallace
2005 Kenyon College
commencement address



Because here's something else that's weird but true: in the day-to day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship. And the compelling reason for maybe choosing some sort of god or spiritual-type thing to worship—be it JC or Allah, be it YHWH or the Wiccan Mother Goddess, or the Four Noble Truths, or some inviolable set of ethical principles—is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive. If you worship money and things, if they are where you tap real meaning in life, then you will never have enough, never feel you have enough. It's the truth. Worship your body and beauty and sexual allure and you will always feel ugly.

And when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before they finally grieve you. On one level, we all know this stuff already. It's been codified as myths, proverbs, clichés, epigrams, parables; the skeleton of every great story. The whole trick is keeping the truth up front in daily consciousness.

Worship power, you will end up feeling weak and afraid, and you will need ever more power over others to numb you to your own fear. Worship your intellect, being seen as smart, you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out. But the insidious thing about these forms of worship is not that they're evil or sinful, it's that they're unconscious. They are default settings.

They're the kind of worship you just gradually slip into, day after day, getting more and more selective about what you see and how you measure value without ever being fully aware that that's what you're doing.

The Workist Creed

- In the past century, the American conception of work has shifted from *jobs* to *careers* to *callings*—from necessity to status to meaning.
- The upshot is that for today's workists, anything short of finding one's vocational soul mate means a wasted life.
- Since the physical world leaves few traces of achievement, today's workers turn to social media to make manifest their accomplishments.
- Among Millennial workers, it seems, overwork and “burnout” are outwardly celebrated (even if, one suspects, they're inwardly mourned).
- The problem with this gospel—*Your dream job is out there, so never stop hustling*—is that it's a blueprint for spiritual and physical exhaustion.
- But maintaining the purity of internal motivations is harder in a world where social media and mass media are so adamant about externalizing all markers of success.
- One solution to this epidemic of disengagement would be to make work less awful. But maybe the better prescription is to make work less *central*.



Pushing Back

One way to avoid replacing faith with work is to start applying our faith to our work.