

# Chapter 28. Boundless

Genie Nicole Giaimo  
HOFSTRA UNIVERSITY

I was a young teenager when my father fell off a roof and broke several ribs. He was a construction worker who did not have insurance or paid time off. He worked “under the table” which, to a child only just entering adulthood felt mysterious and powerful. His money didn’t go to “the man” or to taxes that never really covered things in our underserved part of the city. It went right into his pocket, and, as he told me, he wanted it this way since the day he left high school to start work.

What I didn’t realize at the time was how precarious he was in his labor. Reliant on his body to do punishing construction work (like roofing), even a few days off the job could mean an emergency for our family. A few days after his fall, he was back at the job site, bandaged and medicated—but not through any effort or expense from our official healthcare system.

My parents didn’t usually fight, but I remember vividly my mother’s pleading and then insisting that he take more time off and go to the doctor. My father, ever suspicious of institutions, said he already knew what was wrong. And in his words, what were they going to do anyway? Money earned with his kind of sweat and blood wasn’t easily parted with.

My father died at the age of 41 at the entrance of a construction supply store. His enlarged heart seized, and he was dead before an ambulance was even called.

While his fall off the roof had little to do with his death a few years later, I have always seen these two events as intertwined—perhaps because both times, the owner of the construction company called and offered “under the table” payment for his, and later our, silence. No official records. No worker’s comp. No life insurance. No long-term support.

Even in a city with some of the most powerful unions in the world, my father managed to fly under the radar of so many official worker-related programs for his short adult life. And while he often talked about preferring it that way, I now think that perhaps he didn’t see any other way forward. He dropped out of high school. He had financial difficulties most of his adult life. He was always one cash wad away from defaulting.

Under circumstances like that, it is hard not to think that he was mostly just focused on moving forward and making it to the next paycheck. When you have so little and work so hard, what else can you do?

The men (and even many of the women) in my family die young, often in their 40s and 50s. And, almost always, they die while working. Again, as a child, this seemed normal to me. But, as the first person in my family to go to college, I

soon realized that there are many people out there who are blessed with long life and fewer health issues than my relatives.

I am sure here I can offer a platitude about how “work kills” blue-collar workers but, again, this all goes much deeper for me. I have not only seen how work kills but also how people live only to work. They miss track meets, parties, and weekends with family. They refrain from taking sick time (even if it is offered) or allowing their children to call in sick from school. They center everything around their jobs to the point where work subsumes both the joyous occasions and the emergencies.

Even when they are in mourning or violently ill, they work.

This is the lived reality of what I grew up with and this is likely why I have my own very toxic relationship with work. I am not sure if the factory model of writing center work is what initially appealed to my blue-collar roots—serving people, moving staff around, opening and closing sites, expanding services, cleaning, sorting, prepping, recording, doing more more more. In this sense, “counting beans” is a toxic analog to Fordist visions of labor: more cars assembled, more sprockets sorted, more burgers served than any other [enter institution here]. The neoliberal university thrives on such figurations of work because we are always expected to do more with less.

Unlike some colleagues who write with surprise at all the emotional (and often physical) labor they take on in writing centers, I never felt surprised when I was expected to expand the conception of my job outward. Crouched on the floor assembling desks felt as natural to me as comforting a student whose parent died unexpectedly. This is because the bounds of work in my family were limitless. We didn’t have job descriptions to guide us. This is another intentional element of precarious work: no clear boundaries.

Unlearning these deep cognitive and behavioral structures is hard. I hesitate to compare it to anything else (how many false comparisons do we make between different kinds of suffering?) but I want to contextualize this because perhaps we all have these unhealthy relationships to our work but we’ve never thought of them in this way.

Work is an addiction.

Work is a compulsion.

Work is a cult.

Work is a companion.

Work is a kidnapper.

Without understanding and personifying (but not individualizing) work, we fail to understand how deep these structures reach inside us and impact how we behave. Work can make us do irrational things like sacrifice our bodies and our families. It can also give us a kind of meaning and emotional high found in a few other things (at least from what I have experienced).

Work, in other words, is complicated.

In trying to contextualize how I was socialized into work, I want to talk about

how my family (and I) talked about work. Work was immutable. All other deadlines, priorities, and needs took a backseat to it. Life was centered on work because life was centered on money. This was not about greed but about survival.

I came into my first academic job with this mentality: work is survival. Growing up with such precarity (despite my family trying to shield it from me), I knew that we were a cash wad away from disaster. Everything, it seemed, centered on money: who had it, who didn't, if we had enough, and how to spend it. Every expense seemed a necessity and, at the same time, a luxury.

Academia didn't help me overcome such precarity or change my relationship with work because I circulated in precarious spaces. I worked in a community college where students like me were only one paycheck away from disaster. There, I worked on weekends, in the evenings, and whenever I was told I was needed. And I did this for a 50,000-dollar salary (before taxes) offered by one of the largest college systems in one of the most expensive States with one of the highest tax rates in the country. But, back then, the money felt like a windfall after living well below the poverty line in graduate school in one of the most expensive cities in the country.

So, for working class academics, graduate school feels less like a temporary setback than it does a dress rehearsal for what's to come because it signals what has already come to pass. We are already socialized into expecting less and living with less. When we leave graduate school, we accept less and continue to live with less even as we work more because we are dedicated to the "mission" of our work.

Not everyone I graduated with ended up in this situation but among those who grew up first gen., poorer, BIPOC, perhaps internationally, it seems we just fared worse in the academic job market. We don't own houses. We don't have children. We earn less and live with less because the constant state didn't really change from childhood to now. This isn't by happenstance.

Why and how does this relate to writing center work? It seems like writing centers are havens for the dispossessed. We are drawn to this special helping space because we want to work with writers who need and want support (whatever that looks like) and if we have lived with precarity ourselves it is likely we are willing to always go that extra mile. To always make our relationship to our work boundless.

Precarity—in more ways than one—compels us to work beyond our means for less which, in turn, causes us to live less.

It's been 20 years since my father died. In that time, I promised myself I would go to school, take a job that didn't break my body or refuse me access to basic necessities like healthcare and worker's comp. Since then, I have lived in five different states and had multiple academic jobs, some of which were better and some of which were worse for my well-being.

But the thing that I have only come to grapple with in the past few years is what structures of work ethos, attitude, and socialization I need to unlearn in order to live more.

Time is a precious commodity as the pandemic has shown us. And I am not so willing anymore to exploit myself for work. I mean, work structures are already yearning to exploit us so why give them a boost?