

New Work, New Culture

Technology and the shrinking job market could liberate us from meaningless work and allow us to do things we care deeply about.

An interview with Frithjof Bergmann, by Sarah van Gelder

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According to philosopher and community catalyst Frithjof Bergmann, we are less free than we think, surrounded as we are by endless trivial choices. We will only really be free when we have the option of doing things with our lives that we care deeply about.

The current job crisis, in which thousands find themselves unable to work in their fields, is forcing many people to reconsider what they want to do with their lives. Frithjof Bergmann started New Work to encourage that exploration at the deepest levels and to teach the skills that will enable people to make their dreams a reality. If many people were empowered to make these kinds of choices, the ripple effects would be felt throughout the culture.

*Frithjof Bergmann has worked with individuals and communities in the US, Canada, and Germany on developing positive strategies for dealing with the changing nature of work. He is also a professor of philosophy at the University of Michigan, author of *On Being Free* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1988) and founder of the Center for New Work., 2200 Fuller Road, Suite 1204B, Ann Arbor, MI 48105.*

Sarah: *Can you tell me how the idea of New Work got started?*

Frithjof: General Motors had announced that they would automate in an extraordinarily thorough fashion the plant in Flint. We opened the Center for New Work there in 1984, and the first major proposal we advanced was that, instead of splitting Flint - half of it becoming unemployed and the other half of it working overtime - why not let everyone work six months in the factories? During the other six months, make it possible for the workers to do something that they passionately wanted to do.

This was our first opportunity to work with unions and management to see if the idea of New Work could be turned into practice. While we weren't able to do all we had hoped to do, we did speak to thousands of people individually to help them discover what they seriously wanted to do. In the end, some started small business, some went back to school, some decided they wanted more time with their children. In one case, a woman came to realize how much she enjoyed working with wood and went on to become a carpenter.

Sarah: *How do you define New Work?*

Frithjof: There are two answers: New Work represents the effort to redirect the use of technology so that it isn't used simply to speed up the work and in the process ruin the

world - turning rivers into sewers and rain into acid.

The purpose of technology should be to reduce the oppressive, spirit-breaking, demoting power of work - to use machines to do the work that is boring and repetitive. Then human beings can do the creative, imaginative, uplifting work.

So New Work is simply the attempt to allow people, for at least some of their time, to do something they passionately want to do, something they deeply believe in.

The other definition comes from the editorial page of *The New York Times*: "The way Americans work has to be rethought from the ground up." We need a wholesale, integrated, organic, new construction of work, with new instruments to make up for the shortage of jobs and to assist in the redistribution of wealth.

Sarah: *That's a pretty tall order!*

Frithjof: Most people assume that the job system we have today has existed since the Stone Age, and that it is therefore unthinkable that we could suddenly run out of jobs. But our job system is actually only 200 years old!

The current job system is based on the idea that jobs redistribute wealth: capitalists made profits, the profit was distributed when workers got paid, and the workers again helped the capitalists to amass wealth. So it was like rain: the profits rose to the top, but then they came down like rain in the form of wages.

This is now no longer the case in the same way as it was before. It is very possible now for people to make very large sums of money without employing anybody, either by buying whole companies in leveraged buy-outs and piecing them out like a butchered cow, or by having factories that employ very, very few people.

One of the really frightful aspects of this situation is that we have something like a third of the population working at an utterly insane pace, and on the other side, close to half of the population is obviously underemployed. It's crazy.

Sarah: *What you're talking about goes way beyond the traditional progressive goals of "full employment." You're talking about making work itself a wonderful meaningful experience.*

Frithjof: Not only should wonderful things occur in work, but maybe I would even put it more provocatively and say that the very best things occur *only* in work! As examples, I'd start with people like Toni Morrison or Martha Graham or Einstein of course, or Stravinsky, or any number of other people, who, at 90 were still wonderfully vital and intense and clearly performing their work with an astounding capacity.

When one is working in a similar way to these people, it's quite common to feel that people neglect even their intimate relationships and their children precisely because

their work is so fascinating, so absorbing, so consuming, and so exciting; now this is what work can be at its best.

Sarah: *The examples you mentioned are of people who have excelled at the very top of their fields, and in many cases these are very creative fields. Can work be as exciting for people who have more ordinary types of jobs?*

Frithjof: My example of course is elitist, and intentionally so, almost to the point of wanting to irritate people so that one can then ask, "How does work become like that for everybody?"

In the great floods in Iowa this fall, there were descriptions of people who worked with an amazing intensity all night long, lugging sandbags, in order to stop the Mississippi and protect this or that village. This shows that a very repetitive task, a very humble task, namely lugging sandbags around, can become work that people do with the same enthusiasm with which Kepler worked on his Laws - if the context is right.

Sarah: *What is it that creates that level of enthusiasm?*

Frithjof: Purpose is the decisive criteria. If you feel that the work you do serves some powerful, interesting, and inspiring purpose, then it becomes quite easy to do.

For many car workers, for example, what makes their work a kind of affliction is precisely that they experience it as so utterly pointless, or even worse, as doing something that is adding to a disease. The cars they are making are not of first-rate quality, the exhaust will poison the air, and there is a sense that people don't really need the cars - all of that has much more to do with making work painful than the sheer monotony of it.

One of the most exhilarating experiences of my life was to come to the realization that if you persist in asking people what they really want, and if you create real alternatives, people choose to do work that helps other people, that makes a contribution.

The fact that people, when given a choice, want to do work with a purpose represents a source of social energy that is the equivalent of the steam engine. You can rethink the economy and much else about our culture if that turns out to be true.

Sarah: *What changes will be needed to get us to the point where people could do the work they feel passionate about?*

Frithjof: First, I prefer to think in evolutionary terms. Although automation and the elimination of labor have taken on epidemic proportions, I don't think that jobs will end. Instead, the present job structure will slowly contract as a new structure and a new culture will gradually emerge.

Given that, the first major step toward a New Work culture is for people to become what

we call intelligently self-providing. This approach harks back to the sense of independence and self-reliance that was typical of farmers, but with important differences.

The old way of being self-providing involved back-breaking work. Actually, the idea of high-tech self-providing grew out of my own experience growing all of my own food and living virtually without cash. I realized that was not what I wanted, although sometimes I think if I had had a chain saw, I would never have gone back to teaching.

An example of the idea of *high-tech* self-providing is that you participate in the building of your apartment house.

There are quite a good number of projects that I am associated with, particularly in Detroit, in which welfare mothers, inner-city African-Americans, and any number of people contribute their labor to upgrading and maintaining the apartment houses in which they live. There are different arrangements, but the upshot is that people put a certain amount of sweat equity into the houses and in return they get part ownership.

Along those lines, one of the ideas I've made into a kind of a symbol is roof gardens. There is no excuse whatever for not having each roof in a large city be a gorgeous, sumptuous garden with trees and flowers and berries and fruit. The air would improve, and food would be more immediately available.

Sarah: *What else is different about the self-providing you're describing compared with what we normally think of as self-reliance?*

Frithjof: We are teaching the skills people need to function in modern society - for example, how to do your shopping in a high-tech, intelligent way.

We envision a counseling environment in which people would be asked to stop and think about their buying habits. Do you really want this? Are you just buying that because you've been hypnotized into wanting that, or are you buying it out of frustration?

My experience working 10 years with auto workers is that they get so frustrated in their jobs that once every four months, in a rage, they go off to the nearest mall and fill up their pick-up truck with anything they can find.

For the things people really do want to buy, we want to offer an opportunity for someone sitting at a computer with minimal computer skills to be able to answer questions about where one can buy cheaper split peas, or a couch, or a tricycle.

And, we are working on ways of transporting people to those cheap sources of goods.

Sarah: *You're working on alternative modes of transportation as well?*

Frithjof: Yes. I participated in an endeavor in Kassel, Germany, in which a group of people together used a fleet of very diverse vehicles from trucks to small electric cars to motorcycles. When someone wanted to use a vehicle, he or she would schedule it via electronic mail.

I'm also very interested in automobiles with alternative energy sources. What many people aren't aware of is that electric cars could be an example of self-providing. One could make one's own electricity on one's rooftop.

That helps to spell out what we are thinking of as intelligent self-providing: technology, properly used, could make people extraordinarily independent.

Sarah: *So if someone is that independent, then when they work, they work out of choice.*

Frithjof: That's part of it. It makes all the difference in the world to feel that one is not chained to the money economy. Many people get ulcers, even if they have a reasonably good income, because they feel perpetually threatened. The only way not to feel threatened is to feel that, if need be, you can make it on your own.

Sarah: *What would it take for New Work to become a reality?*

Frithjof: There are several parts to this. One thing we're actively working on is to make the connection between the talent and the information that's available in universities and the need to expand entrepreneurship in a city context. We want to get away from bake-sale entrepreneurship. Instead, we want to get people who have ideas to put those ideas into the service of new city-based businesses that could then be cutting edge and world class.

Second, foundations could be more accessible, more dispersed and local, so there's one every few blocks where people could present their ideas and get funded.

We now have very expensive programs that try to address the extremes of human misery: from welfare programs to job training programs. We could do much better simply by making it possible for people who urgently and often quite desperately want to do something for their own communities, to do it! We could get the jobs that need doing done much cheaper and on a scale that we so far haven't even imagined.

A third area is to help people individually to discover what it is that they really want to do and then to help them to get their project financed. Many people need support for that because they often don't know what they want to do.

Restructuring institutions is not enough. The wonderful thing that technology could do for us is to liberate enough human energy so that we could work with each other on an individual basis and not just an institutional basis.

Sarah: *Where would the money come from for all this?*

Frithjof: One source is to insist that, when layoffs occur, money be provided by the union and by the company cooperatively to make New Work possible for those who lose their jobs. The money could be used to help workers to start up businesses, for stipends, fellowships, training, all manner of things.

As it is, the money is a kind of war chest; it's blown on the battle between the workers who want to hang on to their jobs and the company who wants to get rid of them.

The other way to pay for this type of New Work is through a gradual movement towards a more equitable system of pay in which people are paid in accordance with their contribution.

Sarah: *Why have you chosen to do so much work with young people?*

Frithjof: It was a conscious decision, growing out of my work with the town of Kenosha, Wisconsin, where a plant closed. I came to realize that car workers with 20 years seniority, even if they are laid off, are in incomparably better positions than 18-year-olds who have never done any work and for whom no work is available.

We have now reached a point where a whole generation will grow up and find the door shut in their faces. I feel a horrible sense of anguish and rage about that.

My sense of it is that we face the prospect of a rapid increase in violence and terrorism - of which we already have plenty - that could easily escalate toward permanent guerrilla warfare or even toward some sort of apocalyptic war between rich and poor.

Sarah: *What can New Work offer to these young people?*

Frithjof: I feel that it is urgent for young people to recognize that there is an alternative to unemployment; that we needn't be victims of a malfunctioning job system; that we can create together an alternative work construction.

Sarah: *You've mentioned a number of areas in which your approach and your concerns overlap those of environmentalists. But I gather there are also some areas of difference.*

Frithjof: I feel that the environmental movement is in retreat, in part because there is frequently an impasse between the desire to, for example, save certain trees and the need people have for the work of cutting them down.

You have to come to terms with the fact that jobs have become precious to the point where people will fight for them. If you're a serious environmentalist, you've got to do something about work.

I've worked with lumberjacks, and usually it turns out that there are things that they

would rather do than cut down trees. Once one has discovered that - and it takes patience and it takes time - then one can make efforts to find those alternative sorts of work and to make them pay.

If New Work becomes a reality, the engine that drives us into the destruction of nature could finally be throttled and made to stop. Otherwise, as the job crisis intensifies, the animosity towards ecological thinking will increase. We think that all other efforts short of the complete re-construction of work are, frankly, futile.

Sarah: *Your work implies a broad cultural shift, not only a change in work. Can you describe the changes you see emerging in a New Work culture?*

Frithjof: A far greater number of people would be working at more creative, more inventive, more autonomous work in every respect. We would bring in technology wherever it's intelligent, economical, and sustainable in order to free up people to do more inventive work.

This would, we think, result in abundance. We are close to abundance now, but keep fighting it because abundance threatens the job system. If we weren't worried about jobs, we could automate all sorts of production and all sorts of services; goods could become phenomenally inexpensive.

The consumer frenzy would pale and lose its force and its addictive power, and some kind of calm and dignity would return. If you have a chance to do something you really want to do, that already has some effect. But if you have learned to decide what you really want, then you don't get onto this treadmill where you work at something you hate in order to buy something you loathe!

Right now, so much social energy is tied up in an unnecessary way. If all that energy were freed, we could address the mega-social and ecological problems, from poverty to AIDS to education to race and gender.

There's an African proverb that says, "It takes a whole tribe to educate a single child." We could have a situation in which, from the time you are five weeks old until you died, you could be accompanied by a hive of mentors, by people who understand you, and people who talk to you. The result would be a culture that is more humane, vastly more intelligent, more cheerful, more sensuous, and more flamboyant.

What's Happening With New Work?

Frithjof Bergmann's New Work approach is being tried in towns and cities ranging from the former East German town of Muehlhausen to inner-city Detroit, to Vancouver, British Columbia.

At the moment, Detroit is a major center of activity for advocates of New Work. From

January 17th through 31st, WTVS, the Detroit public television station, is airing a series of documentaries and forums on work options. Frithjof was a chief consultant for the series and appears in a number of the segments.

Next, WTVS, in conjunction with Frithjof and other New Work advocates, will produce a video-print curriculum to be distributed in high schools throughout Michigan. The curriculum is aimed at helping young people prepare for the work crisis by developing resourcefulness, entrepreneurship, self-providing skills, and a capacity to look for their own calling. The curriculum - including video segments - should be completed by spring.

Other plans call for the creation of a center for New Work at a Detroit inner-city high school. The nuts and bolts of New Work and self-providing will be taught in a dome, which the students will help to build.

The group is also linking up with Detroit churches and community groups to give the kids a role in helping their community while further developing their skills.

In British Columbia, meanwhile, a group called New Work Associates has been giving workshops on New Work for some years. The group has developed a study guide based on Frithjof's approach and is working on translating the concepts into comic book form.

For more information on the Detroit projects and the videos contact Fritz Williams at RD1 Box 920, Shermans Dale, PA 17090 or WTVS 7441 2nd Blvd., Detroit, MI 48202. Contact Anne Ironside of the New Work Associates at RR 1 U-30, Bowen Island, British Columbia, Canada, V0N 1G0, for more information on their study guide, workshops, or comic book.

- Sarah van Gelder