2012-2013 Common Context Theme: The Meaning of Work

Work is a central fact of human experience. Certainly, this university (which includes the phrase “to work skillfully” in its mission statement) and the student population whom we teach are preoccupied with work. Work is said to ennoble our lives, particularly if understood as vocation, as Dorothy Sayers argues in her essay, "Why Work?"; at other times work is also said to degrade, alienate, and render our lives absurd, as in the television series “The Office.”

Indeed, ideas concerning work are so pervasive as to be almost invisible; it is difficult to name a work of fiction that could not be understood as in some way being “about” work. Classic texts abound: *Hard Times*, *Moby-Dick*, *The Jungle*, *Life in the Iron Mills*, *As I Lay Dying*, to name just a few. Contemporary popular fiction is full of novels about work: *The Virtuous Woman*, *Life of Pi*, *What's Eating Gilbert Grape*, *The Kite Runner*, *Typical American*, etc. Plays are also numerous: *Fences*, *Raisin in the Sun*, and *Glengarry Glen Ross* come to mind; not to mention Arthur Miller’s classic *Death of a Salesman*. Poets have also taken up the theme: B. H. Fairchild’s *Local Knowledge* and Phillip Levine’s *What Work Is* are two that readily come to mind. Last but not least, there are any number of contemporary memoirs about work: one of the big books of 2009 was Matthew Crawford’s *Shop Class as Soul Craft: An Inquiry into the Value of Work* and we might remember the lively discussions begun by Barbara Ehrenreich’s *Nickel and Dimed* when that was selected as a common text a few years ago. From a Catholic perspective, it is also worth exploring Pope Leo XIII’s encyclical on capital and labor, *Rerum Novarum* (1891).

Using the meaning of work as a common context would present multiple opportunities to cross disciplines, functioning quite well with perspectives from such disciplines as history, economics, sociology, philosophy and theology, to name just a few, and would invite students to reflect on a key life issue involving many layers of significance.

Fall 2012 Events

**Thursday, October 4th**
Lecture: "Work, Race, and Masculinity in the Jim Crow Era: The Case of the Black Musician"
3pm, OSF Library--Room 108

In an American culture preoccupied with the ideal of the "self-made man," hard work has been an essential requirement of manhood. However, not all groups of Americans have agreed as to what counts as "work" in the first place. By comparing Jim Crow era vagrancy laws with ideas expressed by black musicians, Dr. Robert Hawkins of Bradley University demonstrates how different definitions of work have produced distinct versions of masculinity. These competing masculinities, in turn, were crucial factors in struggles over racial equality and economic justice. *This event is co-sponsored by the American Culture and Difference program.*

**Tuesday, October 9th**
Performance: The Mill
3pm, OSF Library--Room 108

Dr. Amy Kritzer directs a student reading of Duluth playwright Jeannine Coulombe's play based on real-life events that took place in 1989 in International Falls, MN. Faced with the Boise Cascade paper mill's attempts to undermine the power of their local union, workers must decide between accepting the company's terms or taking action that might ultimately destroy their town. This heated conflict boils over into a violent confrontation and one local family is irrevocably drawn into the fray. *The Mill* is a powerful drama about work, workers, immigration, race, and resistance. Jeannine Coulombe will be on hand to speak to students following the reading.
Wednesday, October 10th
Film: *The Harvest / La Cosecha*
7pm, JRC 126 Auditorium
From award-winning filmmaker, photographer, and activist U. Roberto Romano and executive producer Eva Longoria, this acclaimed documentary provides a startling, heartbreaking, and inspiring look into the lives of Zulema, Perla, and Victor--three children who "struggle to dream while working 12-14 hours a day, 7 days a week to feed America." *Co-sponsored by UST Libraries.*

Thursday, October 11th
Lecture from Annie Baxter of National Public Radio
Noon, Anderson Student Center–James B. Woulfe Alumni Hall
Annie Baxter, of Minnesota Public Radio, and more recently, National Public Radio, will speak about her reporting on work, unemployment, and the economy in Minnesota. She'll also talk about the work of being a journalist and what it takes to tell the stories of the community you live in. *Co-sponsored by the Department of Communication and Journalism.*