

## Work Is a False Idol Aug. 22, 201

In China this April, a 31-year-old former factory worker named Luo Huazhong drew the curtains and crawled into bed. Then he posted a picture of himself there to the Chinese website Baidu along with a message: [“Lying Flat Is Justice.”](#)

“Lying flat is my sophistic movement,” [Mr. Luo wrote](#), tipping his hat to Diogenes the Cynic, a Greek philosopher who is said to have lived inside a barrel to criticize the excesses of Athenian aristocrats. On Chinese social media, Mr. Luo’s manifesto, and his assertion that he has a “right to choose a slow lifestyle” of reading, exercising and doing odd jobs to get by, quickly went viral. Sympathizers shared versions of a belief that is gaining global resonance: Work has become intolerable. Rest is resistance.

By June, American news outlets were describing the “lying flat” trend as a natural consequence of China’s hypercompetitive middle-class culture, where employees often report working [“996” weeks](#) — 9 a.m. to 9 p.m., six days a week — a lifestyle [praised by the founder](#) of the online shopping giant Alibaba, Jack Ma, and other captains of commerce.

It’s not just Chinese millennials who are figuring out that work is a false idol. I should know because I’m lying flat too, holed up in my parents’ house in West Virginia. Earlier this year I quit my job producing an NPR program in Boston, and I haven’t been able to stomach rejoining the cacophony of the 24-hour news cycle. I’m far from the only one: A recent tweet that proclaimed [“i do not want to have a career”](#) racked up over 400,000 likes. Instead, proclaimed the tweeter, [@hollabekgrl](#), “i want to sit on the porch.”

Here in the hills, the new silence of my days, deepened by the solitude of the pandemic, has allowed me to observe the state of our planet in the year 2021 — and it looks to be on fire, as our oligarchs take to space. From my view down here on the carpet, I see a system that, even if it bounces back to “normal,” I have no interest in rejoining, a system that is beginning to come undone.

The lying flat movement, or tangping as it’s known in Mandarin, is just one expression of this global unraveling. Another is the current worker shortage in the United States. As of June, there were more than [10 million job openings in the United States](#), according to the most recent figures from the Labor Department — the highest number since the government began tracking the data two decades ago. While conservatives blame juiced-up pandemic unemployment benefits, liberals counter that people do want to work, just not for the paltry wages they were making before the pandemic.

Both might be true. But if low wages were all that’s at play, we would expect to see reluctant workers at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder, and content workers at the top. Instead, there are murmurs of dissent at every rung, including from [the inner sanctums of Goldman Sachs](#), where salaries for investment bankers [start at \\$150,000](#). According to a [leaked internal survey](#), entry-level analysts at the investment bank report they’re facing “inhumane” conditions, working an average of 98 hours a week, forgoing showers and sleep. “I’ve been through foster care,” said one respondent. “This is arguably worse.”

In the United States, Black activists, writers and thinkers are among the clearest voices articulating this spiritual malaise and its solutions, perhaps because they’ve borne the brunt of capitalism more than other groups of Americans. Tricia Hersey, a performance artist and the founder of [the Nap Ministry](#), an Atlanta-based organization, is one of them. Ms. Hersey says [she discovered the power of naps](#) during a draining year of graduate school at Emory University, an experience that inspired her to bring the gospel of sleep to fellow African Americans whose enslaved and persecuted ancestors were never able to properly rest. She argues that rest is not only resistance, it is also reparation.

Ms. Hersey now leads events across the country focused on the transformative power of rest, and she has influenced other Black intellectuals, including Casey Gerald, the author of the transcendent essay [“The Black Art of Escape.”](#) In it, Mr. Gerald reflects on a year he spent in what he calls a “disappearing act,” lying flat in Texas, ignoring the calls of friends and admirers to join them in the fray of protest politics, which he’d come to view as a sure path to self-annihilation. “Claim your inheritance,” Mr. Gerald enjoins. “Miss the moment. Go mad, go missing, take a nap, take the day, drop a tab. You’re free!”

On Juneteenth this year, Mr. Gerald stayed true to his argument. “I ain’t writing nothing for Juneteenth,” he [tweeted](#). “I’m gonna be drunk on the beach in Galveston with my boyfriend. Love to the ancestors, lemme know when the reparations check arrives. Good luck! ❤️”

His words read like a wink to Audre Lorde, another queer Black writer, [whose 1978 essay](#) “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power” foreshadowed the lying flat movement and the Nap Ministry both. Ms. Lorde wrote that “when we begin to live from within outward, in touch with the power of the erotic within ourselves, and allowing that power to inform and illuminate our actions upon the world around us, then we begin to be responsible to ourselves in the deepest sense.” For Ms. Lorde, the erotic doesn’t necessarily mean sex. Maybe the erotic sounds like a banjo. Maybe the erotic tastes like cilantro. Maybe it feels like fixing the washing machine. We’ll know it, promises Ms. Lorde, by what makes us exclaim “Yes!” to ourselves.

Which brings us back to Diogenes. In his time, a Cynic was someone who eschewed money, power and fame, and instead sought to live self-sufficiently and in tune with nature. Hence, Diogenes in his barrel. Luo Huazhong in his bed. Casey Gerald on the beach.

Me, now, in the hills.

To be clear, there is immense privilege in lying flat. But it’s worth noting that Mr. Luo acknowledged the necessity of making a living, and @hollabekgrl didn’t say she never wanted to work at a job or hone a craft; she said she doesn’t want a “career,” a corporate-flavored word that conjures images of PowerPoints and power suits. While jobs are sustenance, careers are altars upon which all else is sacrificed.

In her poem [“The Summer Day,”](#) Mary Oliver asks, “Tell me, what is it you plan to do/ with your one wild and precious life?”

My reply, for now, is simple: Sit on the porch.

It’s not half-bad. For what is the porch if not a place to chat with neighbors, to marvel at the hummingbird at the feeder, to listen to the wind in the chimes? An altar for cynics, an altar for the erotic, an altar for the future.

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