

Involuntary Servitude

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Involuntary servitude is a slightly academic, legalistic, or perhaps bureaucratic synonym for a more direct, blunt word — *slavery*. Like so much in human experience, it is more than a little paradoxical. On the one hand, almost no one likes the idea of being enslaved, unless some perverse psychology makes it attractive (as in dominant/submissive role-playing). On the other hand, slavery has been a mainstay of civilization since its beginnings so many millennia ago, and it continues in one form or another to this day.

Mostly, modern civilization has moved away from chattel slavery — outright ownership of some people by others through legal denial of their humanity in favor of their reduced status as property. Outlawing chattel slavery took a long time, however, and didn't banish involuntary servitude. We've changed the form without eradicating the content.

The general rule throughout history has been that we don't enslave "us," only "them," but even that apparent truism breaks down quite often. Even among people who are presumably equal, dominance and submission have always played a significant role in human relationships, and I think that probably hasn't changed much, even in the modern world.

The master-slave dynamic revolves around power and control, which is to say power *over* and control *of* others. For many humans, dominance over others is preferable to the daunting discipline of achieving self-control. That kind of mastery through detachment from the many illusions of selfhood is a primary goal in many spiritual traditions, but it's no wonder that so many humans are not drawn to try. They would rather act out their urge for control by imposing their power on others.

I don't have a problem with power, *per se*, as it is the natural complement to love — in my working definitions, love is the recognition of perfection and power is the ability to alter an environment. Each is important on its own. To be effective, however, love and power are both necessary. They go together naturally in tandem, through co-operation, with love providing the value that shapes and guides the use of power. When both are present in balance, mutuality, and cooperation, reality flowers and bears fruit. One hand washes the other.

When either is lacking, however, the other suffers. Without love, power is chaos and violence. Those who are rich in power but poor in love can and do change reality, but the result is never an improved reality or better world. Without power, love is suffering and despair. Those who are rich in love but poor in power can easily imagine the ideal state, but they have no way to move reality in that direction.

Another related dichotomy is that of the tangible versus the intangible — the marketplace versus the monastery. When we focus only on the tangible (the marketplace of real life in the material world, which can be reduced to the term “economics”), then all life becomes commoditized into goods, assets, or things. Everything is reduced to liabilities versus benefits. We seek to minimize the costs of doing business while maximizing the profits. When that is done too broadly, as an overall way of living, our humanity evaporates. The bulk of the world is reduced to lifeless resources to be identified, extracted, and used.

In this diminished understanding of life, people are reduced to things, which opens the door to slavery or involuntary servitude. We no longer experience relatedness with other humans or vital interdependence with life in general. Instead, we see others (including all living beings) merely as another form of resource. We want people’s labor to produce whatever we’re selling, and we seek to employ them as cheaply as possible. That’s because they are not really people to us, but merely another cost of doing business. If we could pay our workers nothing, we would. Inhumane working conditions don’t really matter to the owners, because they see their employees as replaceable machines, not as people like themselves.

On the other hand, if we focus *only* on the intangible (the emotional, the transcendent, the ethereal, all of which can be encompassed under the general heading of “spirituality”), then all life becomes sacred and thus precious. The problem that ensues, however, is that we don’t build much. If everything is sacred, darned little gets accomplished, and nothing on a mass scale, because we have no “material resources” to use. If trees are sacred, then the only way to get wood to build a house is to find a tree that has died. Heck, you can’t create a lumber industry based on that. The whole “thanking-the-spirit-of-a-rabbit-we-just-killed-before-eating-it” is very noble and sensitive, but it’s not a practice that lends itself to a global economy.

I’m drawing terribly rough equivalencies here: Love sort of equals the intangible, which sort of equals spirituality. Power sort of equals the tangible, which sort of equals economics. Now, I understand that the three respective elements of each equivalency are not *truly* equal. They are not totally or technically the same. Instead, these dual trinities share certain resonances that are poetically or tonally similar. Love *leans toward* the intangible and *feels* somehow spiritual. Power *leans toward* the material and is *naturally relevant to* economics.

As I see it, the problem I'm looking at in this commentary (namely, involuntary servitude and the suffering it causes) is not that the world contains too little love or insufficient power. No, the problem is that these necessary components of life are usually relegated to mutually exclusive realms that do not interact. In modern civilization, love and power are typically separated rather than being combined. The intangible isn't allowed to dance with the tangible. The material is excluded from the spiritual, so that the rules of the marketplace are completely different from the zeitgeist of the monastery.

Slavery and involuntary servitude are based entirely on power and not at all on love. They are all stomach and no heart, all marketplace economics and no transcendent humanity. They are also about *Us versus Them*. We do not enslave anyone we consider as "Us." Those we force into involuntary servitude are invariably "Them." (The one exception I can think of here is when someone places a beloved into a difficult position as a "learning experience" about the harshness of the big world, such as a parent imposing an unpleasant situation on a child to encourage the development of discipline and strength. I regard that as perverse, however, and an exception to the Us-versus-Them rule.)

The final dichotomy I want to add here is that of *business versus family*. Business is akin to power; family is akin to love. Although businesses have often been run by families — i.e., the "family business" — the way each operates tends to be very different. The harsh truth is the neither business nor family works as well as it should most of the time. Business, which by rights ought to provide as much happiness and satisfaction as the material world can provide, too often doesn't. Families, which should foster the fullest expression of love and togetherness, too often don't.

Let me offer one example (among many) where the disconnect between love and power, business and family, the material and the spiritual are painfully obvious and particularly acute. My example is *Call Centers for Customer Service*.

Who among us has not faced the aggravation and indignity of having to call Customer Service for problems with products or services? We dial a toll-free number to get help, and we are greeted with a recorded voice: "*Thank you for calling X (some business or organization). We value your patronage. Please listen to and select from the following options, since our menu items have changed.*"

From that bullshit opening, we then have to run a gauntlet of "options" by pressing numbers on our phone's real or virtual keypad: "*If you're calling about ABC, please press 1. For help with DEF, press 2.*" And so on. For each number we press, we are then subjected to another submenu of options. Listening to the entire menu of pre-recorded options may take a minute or two, but it feels like hours of torture. And after all that, if we've hung in there and are lucky, we

finally reach the option that says, "*For any other concern, or to speak to a Customer Service Representative, press 0.*"

Which we do. Then we hear: "*Thank you for calling. All our Customer Service Representatives are currently working with other callers. Current estimated wait time is X minutes.*" This is followed by ersatz "waiting room muzak," which is low fidelity crap that often crackles with static and is interrupted every 30 seconds with ads — spoken come-ons — for stuff we don't want.

After what seems another eternity, the music stops and, following five seconds of silence where we wonder if our call has been dropped, we hear a live human voice: "*Hello, thank you for calling ABC, my name is ----- . How can I help you?*"

There's much more story to be told, but this is enough to make my point. Why do corporations and organizations subject customers to this horror? In the mid-20th century America of my birth, businesses had live operators at switchboards answering calls. These real people — usually women — routed customers to the proper department to get the help they needed. In the early days of the tech revolution, though, automated phone systems appeared. Why did business stop using live operators and universally adopt the absolute friggin' nightmare of automated phone systems? Because as a cost of doing business, automation is cheaper and increases profits for businesses. And that's what they care about. It is, in fact, ALL they care about (despite endless Public Relations bullshit to the contrary).

On the one hand, the "indentured servants" are the workers employed by the Call Center. I mean, God knows, being a Customer Service rep at a Call Center is something less than a dream job. These employees aren't making enough money to buy a home or put their kids through college. So, they're the slaves. On the other hand, the "indentured servants" are US — the customers calling for help. I feel confident in asserting that *everyone* hates these goddamned automated phone systems. EVERYONE.

Want to change the world for the better? One way to do it is for businesses to become more like healthy families *for real* (rather than just in fake public relations lip service).

There was a brief period in American history in the 1930s and 1940s when corporations served not just their owners (i.e., *shareholders*), but their *stakeholders* as well. Stakeholders are people who don't possess ownership shares, but whose lives are affected by what the business does. This starts with employees and radiates out into the marketplace to embrace customers and others. From a limited perspective, stakeholders include every person in the local community where the business operates. From an enlarged perspective, stakeholders include every organism that lives and breathes on the earth — human and otherwise.

For the past 50 years, all major corporations and most smaller businesses have conducted their operations as if they had no stakeholders. They've made all their decisions about how to do business based solely on presumed benefits to their stockholders (the owners). As far as I know, that dictate has even been enshrined into law. The policy has wreaked havoc at every level — within the individual businesses, out into the communities, throughout society, and for civilization as a whole.

It's probably too late to save ourselves from the many interconnected disasters that are now bearing down on humanity. That said, until we change the ways that business operates, we are doomed for sure.

Rebalancing love and power, the intangible and the tangible, the spiritual and the material, the monastery and the marketplace, and family and business may be challenging, difficult, and complicated, but it's not rocket science. Yes, doing this would require us to oppose the Monsters by shrugging off our hypnotized trance and restoring a kind of sanity we've never possessed collectively. That would mean lowering the importance of economics and money while elevating the importance of the sacred in our interactions with each other and the world. And yes, we'd need to give love a fighting chance by expanding our hearts to include many more people as "Us," and many fewer people as "Them."

From where I sit, it doesn't appear that we're even willing to try.