

Threads of the Self: An affective account of academic work

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Abstract

This hybrid poetic-reflective piece explores the affective textures of academic work and the search for meaningfulness within university life. Combining a framing text with a poem, it examines how academic work is lived through the entanglement of multiple selves that move across professional and personal domains. Rather than treating work as bounded within formal roles, outputs, or institutional metrics, the piece attends to quieter dimensions of organizational life: attentiveness, relationality, emotional labor, and the ongoing search for coherence within conditions of productivity and performance.

Drawing on conversations in organization studies around affect, sensemaking, and care, the poem does not seek to explain organizational life analytically, but to remain close to its lived textures. Poetic form is used not simply as a representation, but as a practice of attentiveness to ambiguity, multiplicity, and embodied experience. While grounded in academic labor, the concerns explored extend more broadly to questions of meaning, identity, and affect across organizational settings.

Work rarely begins at the moment it is formally recognized. It gathers earlier, in gestures, dispositions, and ways of engaging that are carried across contexts. Yet much organizational work is treated as bounded: located within roles, stabilized through identities, and assessed through visible outputs. Such accounts often overlook the more diffuse, affective dimensions through which work is lived and sustained.

This piece begins from a simple premise: that organizational life is not only structured but felt, and that meaningful work emerges through the ongoing entanglement of multiple selves. These selves are not easily separated into domains such as professional and personal. Rather, they move across contexts, shaping how work is enacted in ways that are subtle, embodied, and often difficult to articulate.

The poem that follows is grounded in lived experience of academic work, particularly in the intertwined practices of teaching, research, and collegial life within academic institutions. It does not seek to offer explanation or critique in a conventional sense. Instead, it stays close to the ordinary textures of academic work: classrooms, conversations with students and colleagues, unfinished manuscripts, and moments of return. These are not treated as peripheral details but as sites where meaning is quietly made and sustained. This is especially visible in teaching, where the work extends beyond curriculum delivery into forms of attentiveness, care, and responsiveness that are rarely formalized but deeply consequential.

In attending to these textures, this account resonates with a growing recognition within organization studies that work is deeply affective. Emotional life is not external to organizational processes but constitutive of them (Hochschild, 1983; Gabriel, 1999, 2013). Similarly, identities at work are not fixed or singular but continuously assembled through interaction and sensemaking (Weick, 1995). What appears here, however, is not an attempt to extend these ideas analytically, but to remain with their lived implications.

Affective experience, in this sense, does not simply accompany work; it is part of how work becomes meaningful, endurable, and at times sustaining. This is particularly visible in forms of labor that involve care, attentiveness, and relational engagement, dimensions long emphasized in feminist scholarship (Tronto, 2020). Yet these dimensions often remain undervalued within academic contexts increasingly organized through publication metrics, rankings, and other performance indicators.

The poem resists this narrowing by turning toward what is less easily captured. Meaningful work does not appear as a stable achievement or clearly defined category. It emerges intermittently, often quietly, in moments of connection, continuity, and recognition. These moments are

often fragile, yet they play a central role in sustaining engagement with work overtime.

Multiplicity is central to this account. The self at work is not singular but composed of different ways of being that coexist, overlap, and sometimes conflict. Rather than resolving this multiplicity, the poem allows it to remain present. In doing so, it gestures toward a form of coherence that is not based on unity or consistency, but on the capacity to hold together different strands of experience without requiring their full integration.

The use of poetic form is integral to this approach. Poetry allows for pauses, repetition, and openness that resist closure. It creates space for ambiguity and partiality, acknowledging the necessarily incomplete and situated nature of experience, enabling the text to remain close to experience without reducing it to explanation (Law, 2004; Richardson, 2003). In this sense, the poem is not a representation of organizational life but an attempt to stay with its textures.

I invite readers not to interpret the poem as an object of analysis, but to engage it as a mode of attunement to the textures and affective resonances of organizational life. It asks what becomes visible when organizational life is approached through affect, and what forms of meaning emerge when we attend to what is often overlooked. While grounded in academic work, the concerns it raises extend more broadly to how work is lived across organizational settings. The poem is offered, then, as a space of recognition rather than resolution, and as a way of thinking about work that remains grounded in its lived complexity.

Threads of the Self

My working life has many rooms,
some lined with quiet questions
and chairs pulled close for listening,
spaces shaped by attention,
where I learned to sit with the ache and courage of human hearts.

That room is still with me.
I carry it into this one,
a lecture hall, a blank page,
a corridor echoing with students' laughter and worries.

My voice in the classroom carries older ways of being,
a learned attentiveness,
pauses shaped by listening,
a care for what is not yet said,
and the quiet invitation to find one's own way forward.

Motherhood, too, spills into my work,
its endless reservoir of patience and vigilance,
the instinct to nurture without counting cost.

So many selves arrive with me each morning.
They slip beneath my nameplate,
seep into my research questions,
infuse my words when I sit with colleagues,
co-authors, students.

Meaningful work does not wear a tidy label,
nor live inside a spreadsheet
or an index measuring citations or stars.

It breathes in the quiet joy of shaping ideas that might ripple outward,
one student inspired,
one mind opened,
one life nudged gently toward something truer.

It rests in the congruence of what I do and who I am,
in the quiet pull that brings me back each day,
to the sentence half-finished,
to the slides still blank,
to the spark of curiosity refusing to die.

Not every dawn arrives wrapped in blazing purpose,
but most days, there's a light inside me nudging me forward,
reminding me that this work matters.

And so I gather the threads of all my selves,
the listener,
the mother,
the teacher,
the seeker,
not to separate them,
but to let them remain entangled,
woven into the everyday labor
of making sense,
of staying present,
of calling this imperfect coherence
meaningful work.

Closing Reflection

The account offered here does not resolve the tensions it evokes. Academic work remains shaped by demands that exceed individual control, increasingly organized through expectations of productivity, visibility, and measurable output. Yet within these conditions, moments of meaning continue to surface - quietly, intermittently, and without guarantee.

What the poem foregrounds is not the achievement of meaningful work as a stable state, but the ongoing effort of sustaining a relation to academic work that feels, however partially, coherent. This coherence does not arise from clarity or alignment, but from the capacity to remain present with multiplicity, to carry different selves - teacher, researcher, mentor, parent - without fully separating them.

In this sense, meaningful work is less an outcome than a practice, one that unfolds through attention and small acts of persistence. It is found not only in what is accomplished, but in how work is inhabited: in the pauses, the hesitations, the gestures of care that rarely enter formal accounts.

If this piece leaves anything open, it is this: how such moments might be recognized, sustained, or shared within academic life, without being reduced to the very metrics that risk obscuring them.

References

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