**Marge Piercy Module**

**Reading**

Marge Piercy, “To Be of Use,” in *The Art of Blessing the Day: Poems with a Jewish Theme* (New York: Knopf, 1999) 73-74. Included, with permission, in Mark R. Schwehn and Dorothy C. Bass (eds.), *Leading Lives that Matter: What We Should Do and Who We Should Be*, second edition (Eerdmans, 2020), 212-13.

**About the Author**

Marge Piercy was born in 1936 in a working-class neighborhood in Detroit, Michigan. She was raised a Jew by her mother and her maternal grandmother, who had been born in a Lithuanian stetl, the daughter of a rabbi. At age seventeen, Marge won a scholarship to the University of Michigan and thus became the first person in her family to go to college. After completing her B.A., she went on to earn an M.A. from Northwestern.

She was determined to pursue her vocation as a writer, but she had to endure some very difficult, impoverished times in order to do so. During a long period in Chicago, for example, she supported herself at a variety of part-time jobs—secretary, switchboard operator, department store clerk, and artists’ model. She understood the nature of various kinds of work and their effects upon the worker.

Her experiences in the labor market led her to a life of political activism in addition to her writing. Her grandfather had been murdered while organizing bakery workers, so her identification with laboring men and women was both deep and enduring. In Chicago, she became heavily involved with the civil rights movement. She would later become very active in student protests against the Vietnam War, as a member of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) during the 1960’s. During the 1970’s and afterwards, she was very active in the feminist movement.

Always a writer, she was only able to devote herself full time to her writing for extended periods when she finally settled on Cape Cod after moving back and forth across the country and living in several places on both the east and west coasts. She has been enormously productive, having written seventeen novels and nineteen collections of poetry. She is perhaps best known for her novels *Gone to Soldiers* (1987)*, Braided Lives* (1982)*,* and *The Longings of Women* (1994). Her most recent and widely acclaimed poetry collection is *Hunger Moon: New and Selected Poems, 1980-2010* (2011)*.* She also wrote a very well-reviewed memoir, *Sleeping with Cats* (1986).

**Commentary**

There are many ways to understand the relationship between our work and our identity. For example, most people simply “work in order to live,” finding the primary sources of their sense of self in family, friendship, ethnicity, country of origin, or religion. Others “live in order to work.” Their identity is inseparable from their work. They are primarily what they do, whether through paid employment or through parenting or in some other consuming endeavor.

Marge Piercy’s poem “To Be of Use” invites us to consider a richer variety of ways to think about the relationship between who we are and what we do than the stark alternatives just posed. The “people [the speaker of the poem] likes best” seem to become wholly immersed in their work to the point that they merge with it. The people in the second stanza exert great and sustained effort to do something, but they do not altogether disappear into their task. The last two stanzas present steadily more complex images of people at their work and in their work.

The very last stanza includes a line from which the title of the poem was taken. Speaking of Greek amphoras and Hopi vases, the speaker of the poem observes that “they were made to be used.” This should lead us to wonder whether we were made to be used. And if so, how and for what purpose?

**Discussion Questions**

Start your discussion by having someone read the poem aloud. As everyone listens, each person should notice if a certain phrase or line stands out for them. Share these phrases or lines with one another, briefly explaining why they speak to you. Then read the poem aloud again before discussing it further.

What kind of work does the speaker mostly have in mind in the poem? Craftsmanship? Manual labor? Domestic work? Skilled, professional work? Do you think all of these kinds of work are equal in dignity and usefulness?

Think of the work that you do. Do you find meaning in the work itself, or do you view it primarily as a way to sustain your life and/or you family’s life?

Consider the people in the poem: those who merge with their work, those who are harnessed to it, those who are submerged in it, and those who are shaped by it. Might they all consider their work as a calling? Some more than others? Why?

How important is it to you that your work is “of use”? Of use to whom?

Does the speaker of this poem admire and love one kind of worker more than the others? Which one? Why?

Someone once said, “Anything worth doing is worth doing well.” The speaker of the poem says almost the same thing in the last stanza. So which is more important, what we do or how well we do it?

The poem seems to be about individual work, individual vocations. But congregations have a common work called “liturgy,” the work of the people. Do you lose yourself in that work? Or are you separate from it and somehow harnessed to it, if only as a spectator? How else might you describe the relationship between you and liturgical practice?