There is no substitute for hard work and oftentimes anything worth doing requires a substantial amount of focused effort. In “To Be Of Use,” by Marge Piercy the speaker of the poem celebrates the work of ordinary individuals, underscoring the fact that diligent hard work along with time and effort can create the miraculous out of the mundane.

In the beginning of the poem, Piercy revels in people who engage fully in their work, celebrating the pure joy of work, itself. Piercy highlights the rhythmic lyrical nature of getting lost in one’s work through repetitive consonant sounds of those who “jump into work” without “dallying in the shallows” (lines 1-3). The repeated “l” sounds in “dallying” and “shallows” creates a musical, playful quality to those who submerge themselves in their work. She goes on to compare these industrious individuals to “black sleek head of seals” and “half-submerged balls,” again repeating the lyrical “l” sound and referencing how work, when engaged in fully, becomes play.

Piercy continues to develop the comparison between hard workers an animals, showing the strenuous, yet rewarding nature, of physical labor. Here, Piercy’s imagery changes from the aquatic to the terrestrial. Comparing human work to beasts of labor who “strain in the mud” with “massive patience,” the speaker emphasizes the physical nature of work and celebrates the simple, seemingly common elements. She idolizes those who “move things forward” (line 10). In creating a single sentence that labors under its imagery, Piercy, uses the heavy sentences as a way to patiently move her poem forward as well.

In the final two stanzas, Piercy contrasts her celebration of the common worker with those “dalliers” she mentioned in stanza one. Dismissing “parlor generals and field deserters,” Piercy rejects those who sit on the sidelines rather than those who “submerge/in the task” (lines 12-15). She celebrates work that is “common as mud,” a substance that is, it itself raw, communally shared, and unfinished. This mud, however, is then shaped into “Greek amphoras for wine or oil” or into “Hopi vases that held corn” (lines 22-23). Rather than celebrating these artifacts for their beauty, Piercy is careful to mention that, although these items “are put into museums” but they “were made to be used” (lines 23-24). The pitcher “cries for water to carry,” desiring to be of use (line 25). This alludes to the fact that it takes time and energy to turn raw materials into something useful. Piercy urges us to celebrate work, full engagement, and the strenuous effort that creates tangible fruits as a result of the effort invested. Ultimately, the work itself is what matters, and the joy is found in the doing and creating of something useful.