

A Transformative Labor Day

Although Labor Day holiday was first hinted at as early as 1882, it became a holiday of sorts in a backward kind of way in 1894. In 1886, in a newly industrialized America, an America at the dawn of the age of the robber barons and exploited workers, labor unions began to develop. In the fight for an 8 hour workday, several of these unions ordered a general work stoppage to be held beginning on May 1. They went with the slogan "An 8-hr day with no cut in pay." On May 3 strikers in Chicago confronted police-protected replacement workers at the McCormick Harvesting Machine Company. Two strikers were killed.

The following day a rally was held in their honor in a commercial center of Chicago, Haymarket Square. After several hours of peaceful, yet tense, assembly, city police, marching in formation, attempted to break up the rally. A homemade bomb was thrown at the police immediately killing one officer. A riot ensued and seven officers and four workers were killed. Four men, deemed responsible for the assembly and the bombing were later hanged.

Although not really his idea, and as a concession of sorts to workers, President Grover Cleveland then authorized Labor Day as an official holiday the following year in 1887.

Then the Pullman Strike took place in 1894. This strike, held in response to across the board wage cuts of Pullman railcar employees, stopped railroad traffic throughout much the country. President Cleveland, citing the unconstitutionality of the strike as it resulted in the stoppage of mail, ordered US Marshals and US Army to break the strike. In the process, thirty workers were killed.

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Six days after the suppression of the Pullman Strike, President Cleveland again, as a concession of sorts to workers, designated the official Labor Day holiday to be an official federal holiday.

Our economic system is by no means perfect. Although labor made great strides for perhaps three quarter of the 20th century, since that time, labor's gains have receded and attempts at revitalization have been difficult. In an era of globalization and outsourcing to less developed countries, it seems like a new age of robber barons and exploited workers worldwide, is upon us.

Although the cards at times seem to be stacked to favor the select few, and the rules made to favor people like me; straight, white, college-educated males; America still is a land of opportunity – maybe not equal opportunity, but a land of opportunity where many have the opportunity to at least attempt to pursue their dreams, whatever those dreams may be.

What is very interesting is the understanding of how labor is involved in the dream. For instance, how many times have you asked a recent high school graduate who soon would be going off to college, “Why are you majoring in (fill in the blank)?” and their response is “Well, those that graduate with that major make a lot of money.” Now I don't hear this all the time, and I don't hear it often from our UU youth and young adults, I do hear this regularly; and I'm surprised each time as it does reveal something about their orientation.

Now I don't mean to be critical of this orientation because many people have grown up with the pain of living hand to mouth, paycheck to paycheck, looking for loose change lost in the seat cushions of the couch or under front seat of the car. They've been oriented towards money for survival's sake and if given the opportunity to get a college

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education and get a job, they're going to get one that makes money – that makes money to eliminate the pain they've gone through of not having it. I can understand this as a consequence of one's past.

I am not going to say that this is the healthiest of orientations however. I am not going to say that labor's worth is simply as a means to an end; that labor is simply a tool that has no value in and of itself aside from its role of obtaining something else.

Might not labor, for its own sake, and under the best of circumstances, be its own reward? Nineteenth century Universalist minister Hosea Ballou alluded to this saying, "But when the labor itself is all the enjoyment, and the whole object of [one's] obedience, the laborer will not wish the time short or the duty small; no, eternity is none too long for the soul to contemplate laboring in [such] endless delights.... (Hosea Ballou, "Treatise On Atonement")."

In a modern voice, artist Ran Ortner puts it this way:

You must work hard, but great art should look as if it's just fallen from the sky. The true way is without difficulty, but you have to approach your work as if it were a matter of life and death. If you don't need it with every fiber of your being, it's going to be passive, trite entertainment. It doesn't become great until it's the stuff of your last breath, the fullness of who you are. (Ran Ortner; The Sun, June 2012 p.12)

...and we've all heard others say things similar to this.... Maybe this is idealistic but that doesn't make it wrong.

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When it comes to our labors, how does it reflect, or not reflect, our theology or personal philosophy of living? Is our labor, how we earn our living, consistent with our UU principles, or any moral or ethical principles to which we subscribe? Part of the 8-Fold Path of Buddhism is Right Livelihood which maintains that one should labor in such a way that brings no harm to others.

Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hahn writes that

“to practice Right Livelihood, you have to find a way to earn your living without transgressing your ideals of love and compassion. The way you support yourself can be an expression of your deepest self, or it can be a source of suffering for you and others....Our vocation can nourish our understanding and compassion, or erode them. We should be awake to the consequences, far and near, of the way we earn our living (“The Heart of Buddha’s Teaching”, p113).”

No occupation is without its negative consequences. We might work at a place that does much good for people, yet we leave a large carbon footprint while doing so. Our work may have the best of intentions, yet our efforts may hurt others in ways we never expected. Many people fail to see such negative consequences or worse yet, seem not to care when they are seen. Unfortunately, many go to church on Sunday yet are more than happy to leave their morals and ethical principles at home when they go off to work on Monday morning.

What’s truly interesting, and surprising, about the Buddhist principle of “Right Livelihood” though is that it is inherently communal in nature. Many of us in the west often don’t get this – and many of us highly individualistic UUs don’t get this either. We tend to think of Right Livelihood in individualistic terms. My job good – your job bad; yet it’s never as simple as this.

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Thich Nhat Hahn again says:

Suppose I am a schoolteacher and I believe that nurturing love and understanding in children is a beautiful occupation. I would object if someone were to ask me to stop teaching and become, for example, a butcher. But when I meditate on the interrelatedness of things, I see that the butcher is not the only person responsible for killing animals. We may think the butcher's livelihood is wrong and ours is right, but if we didn't eat meat, he would not have to kill. Right Livelihood is a collective matter. The livelihood of each person affects everyone else. The butcher's children might benefit from my teaching, while my children, because they eat meat, share some responsibility for the butcher's livelihood. ("The Heart of Buddha's Teaching", p115)

He then goes on to say that the butcher may actually approach his work with great compassion and he may take great care to minimize the suffering of the animals while I as a teacher may not do my job well and may be disrespectful and domineering to my students. Who in this case is truly practicing Right Livelihood?

For example, unless I'm living completely off the grid, maybe I shouldn't pass judgment on those who work in the energy industry. Since renewable sources of energy, as presently developed account for only between 6-10% of the nation's electricity generation, and the methods currently in place to generate renewable energy are highly inefficient, if I don't wish to curtail my electricity demands and I say no to fracking am I essentially saying yes to coal? Or if I say no to fracking and no to coal, am I essentially saying yes to nuclear? If I say no to fracking, coal and nuclear am I essentially saying "Take me off the grid?"

Ah, yes....right livelihood...it's communal...and it can make for some strange bedfellows!

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So, this morning, we've talked briefly about the history of Labor Day, some of the reasons for our labor (i.e. money, passion) as well as the consequences of our efforts. And although we've also discussed the interrelated nature of our efforts, most of us, most of the time, carry out our efforts, our labor, our work on behalf of ourselves. And there is nothing really wrong with this. We all need to take care of ourselves.

Although I would hope that Labor Day continues to honor those who stood up to the robber barons of yesteryear, organized themselves into a powerful voice for those who had no voice, might a reorientation of Labor Day be in order? A reorientation where the efforts we celebrate are those put forth on behalf of others, those that lightened the load of others, those that shouldered the burdens of others?

One of the five pillars of Islam is Zakat which involves concerns for and almsgiving to the needy. Yearly, they give 2.5%...not 2.5% of their income but 2.5% of everything – their entire net worth.

What would that look like as a time commitment in labor on behalf of others? 2.5% of a year comes out to be about nine days a year (219 hours). Could you dedicate nine days a year to be of service to others? It sounds like a lot – but count everything you can: at the church here count teaching RE, doing committee work, board work. You could also count other things outside of church that you do; caring for a sick loved one, an elderly parent. That's real work!

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When counting just this, many of you may already spend more than 9 full days in service to others, but for most of us, myself included, we likely fall far short.

But think about it - what if every person over the age of say, sixteen, were required to do nine full days of service at a homeless shelter, food pantry, neighborhood cleanup, humane society or whatever moves you? What kind of community could we create? What kind of world could we create? One beautiful thing that I know would happen would be that in addition to helping another person, we ourselves would be changed. We'd see things in a new way. We'd think differently. We'd be writing a new narrative for our society – a new narrative where nine days of service was the norm. It was expected – the status quo. We could have conversations about it in our break rooms and during our time of coffee and conversation.... "Where did you do your community service?"

Jewish rabbi and theologian Leo Baeck said, "To seek God is to strive for the good; to find God is to do good. Leo Baeck, "Gates of Repentance - The New Union Prayerbook," p230)"

From our hymnal:

For needs which others serve
For services we give
For work and its rewards
For hours of rest and love
We come with praise and thanks
For all that is our life

- Bruce Findlow

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With such a reorientation, with such a transformation, maybe Labor Day would come to be known as a day where we honor our service to others; to honor the labors we've done throughout the year on another's behalf. It could be a beautiful thing. Maybe we could make that happen.