

Labor of Belonging
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The three-day Labor Day weekend celebrates the economic and social contributions of workers. We honor and celebrate: Labor. Labor is one of those words that has sounds and sensations associated with it that are tangible: sweat, pain, exhaustion, punishment, endurance. It is not a word we associate with pleasure.

The bible tells us it is because we sinned by eating from the tree of knowledge that we are made to labor. After the fall, women would be required to labor in childbirth, bringing children forth in pain. According to Genesis, men would toil all the days of their lives. "By the sweat of your face, you shall eat bread" (Genesis 3:17-19).

Labor was a punishment; proof God's disappointment was real. We had sinned and labor was one of the payments for our sins.

Rabbi Lawrence Kushner in [Eyes Remade for Wonder](#) has another interpretation of these words from Genesis. He writes that God knew we had to leave home sooner or later so Yaweh put that tree there to help us on our way. Ever since, we have been longing to return home but in fact, returning requires that we labor, that we consciously work toward attaining paradise on earth.

By doing so, we remake the garden of eden and once again enjoy the pleasure of living in harmony with ourselves and others.

I like the idea that it is through our conscious efforts, through our unified work to make the world a better place, that the ease and peace of the garden of eden are returned to us. Still, this interpretation of labor is not a popular one. Mostly we think of labor as something to get away from, something we want to be done with, retire early from, do with as little effort and sweat as possible so that we might rest, enjoy the good life, breathe a little.

Researching the history of Labor Day, I came upon an interesting piece by UU minister Rev. Garmon. He writes about the work that we outsource in our country, saying that labor and its demands have long been something that we seek to give to another, to avoid, to make as painless, as cheap in that sense that it costs us little economically and personally, as we can.

Garmon writes, "We outsource factory labor and telephoning labor. We even outsource the childbirth labor. Someone creates an embryo in a lab, ships it abroad for gestation in a stranger's body, then takes possession again after birth. Overseas labor – of both kinds – is cheaper. Farmed-out childbirth is an industry in India, turning the rural poor into wombs for hire."

The West has learned to cast off many burdens by delegating these burdens to others. Clearly the Genesis writer did not take this into account when deciding on how to distribute burdens for having sinned.

The history of how Labor Day was begun is a difficult one. The stock market crash of 1893 brought a depression in which 150 railroads closed and unemployment was massive. George Pullman cut his workers' wages by 25 percent, but did not reduce rents in the town of Pullman at all.

The next year, 1894, 4,000 Pullman employees went on a strike. Soon 100,000 railroad workers across the country were refusing to handle trains with Pullman cars. The strike shut down much of the nation's freight and passenger traffic west of Detroit. Various sympathy strikers prevented transportation of goods by walking off the job, obstructing railroad tracks. At its peak, the strike involved 250,000 workers in 27 states. Pullman called up his friend and fellow railroad director, United States Attorney General Richard Olney and with President Grover Cleveland's backing, troops were sent to Chicago.

The federal government secured a federal court injunction against the union, and the top leaders ordered them to stop interfering with trains. They refused. The Army moved in to stop the strikers from obstructing the trains. Violence broke out in a number of cities: the result was millions of dollars in damages and the death of 30 people.

Strikers went to prison for violating a court order. The railroads fired and black-listed all the employees who had supported the strike. As soon as the strike was over and the trains were running, President Cleveland and Congress moved quickly to make some conciliations to organized labor.

Six days after the 1894 Pullman strike ended, legislation was pushed through Congress declaring that the first Monday of September was a Federal holiday, Labor Day. It was a bone to try to head off further conflict. And they put it in September, instead of giving official recognition to the more widely known International Workers Day on May 1, because they wanted to pull attention away from the more radical labor movements.

The story of George Pullman is of particular interest to us as Unitarian Universalists. This is our story, quite specifically. George Pullman was a Universalist: born, raised, and lifelong. George's father, raised a Baptist, and his mother, raised Presbyterian, converted to Universalism, drawn to the "God is Love" message. Universalism's most important claim is that we are all worthy of God's love and always will be, no matter what, so there can simply be no hell. Pullman's actions remind us that how easy it is to pervert our most deeply held values when we are afraid of losing something we have decided we cannot live without.

Labor Day is a holiday and holiday comes from the middle English word: haligdeag, which means holy day.

Labor as something that is not punishment for eating of the tree of knowledge nor even the cost of returning home but as something holy is a concept worth exploring. For me that which is holy returns me to myself and to the world. It reminds me to ask in prayer and meditation, from where do I come and to whom do I belong?

And that ole holiness, it has another question: when and how do you act not in accordance with your own values? Me, it happens when I buy something from Amazon when I know what the footprint is, when I know I could live without it, when I know I could wait til I am off island and covid dread of dread, enter a store.

There are a bunch of other times of course, there always are. We all do it. We all have a part of our lives where we justify that which we know we should not if we were living by our values...but we want what we want when we want it.

Where do I come from and to whom do I belong? Haligdeag: Holy Day, it wants to know.

I think one of the first answers for me is from the earth (and thus the carbon footprint thought) and that I belong to those who are working to be accountable to themselves and others, no matter where they start or how far they get.

I belong there, to those people, which is where my call to ministry came from, from all of you, from your seeking and asking and response and longing and hope. You called me here. You called me here and that call was with me for many years before I knew how to answer.

Halgideag, Holy Day, what calls you my beloved people? How do you know if it is a call that should be answered or let go of? The calls I try to answer, the calls that belong to me and I to them, make me more accountable to myself and others. You have all increased that capacity in me.

I read a Harvard Study recently that postulates that people with and I quote “high moral character”¹ live longer. They define this high moral character as belonging to those who “act in a way which contributes to the good of oneself and others.” That’s it. All those scientists and this is what they came to: acting in a way which contributes to the good of oneself and others contributes to the increase of one’s lifespan. Well, maybe science will have a better shot than Unitarians and Universalists in getting that message through!

Dear ones, may this Labor Day be a holy day of reflection and action in which you do something good for yourself and so extend the ability to imagine that goodness is possible and so bring a slice of that garden of eden to earth.

¹ [https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2022/08/the-health-benefits-of-character/?utm_source=SilverpopMailing&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Daily%20Gazette%2020220831%20\(1\)](https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2022/08/the-health-benefits-of-character/?utm_source=SilverpopMailing&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Daily%20Gazette%2020220831%20(1))

What else are holy days for if not to give us some time to live into our hearts?

Thank you for calling me here. This ministry, my first and last, that we have fashioned together, will be part of who I am always. Thank you for the holiness you offer me. Thank you for being who you are.

Amen.