

Labor of Belonging  
Rev. Linda Simmons  
September 1, 2013

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. I wonder how children would have been born in the Garden of Eden? 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 He 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, 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.

This last bit of information is stunning. We ship white, fertilized embryos to India, they are inserted into an Indian woman's body who takes leave of her family for 9 months and lives in a controlled environment, and then births a white child. What this changes and

how it changes us as human beings are things we will not know for sometime. One can hope that this contributes to the understanding that we are all interconnected, irrevocably.

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

The Borowitz Report, a satirical column in The New Yorker, ran this piece about Labor:

Labor Day, one of America's most beloved and longest-celebrated holidays, has been officially moved to China, U.S. officials confirmed today. The Labor Day celebrations are expected to kick off Monday afternoon in Beijing with a barbeque attended by over seven million people. The transfer of Labor Day to China represents the first time in American history that an entire holiday has been outsourced, experts said....Meanwhile, U.S. officials said it was looking 'more and more likely' that Thanksgiving would be relocated this year to India. 'At the very least, Americans will still be able to celebrate Thanksgiving by phone,' one official said. 'But they should listen closely because some menu options have changed.'"

### **The Origins of Labor Day**

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. 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 that carried mail cars. 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.

The Army broke the strike. 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 conciliation 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. So we have Labor Day as a consolation prize after the Feds sent in troops to protect corporate

interests and break up a strike. 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 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 of the Universalist minister Thomas Eaton.

There were other Universalists who were on the side of labor. Carroll D. Wright, the US Commissioner of Labor was a universalist and pro-labor as was Henry Clay Ledyard and Lucius Hamilton Garner who became a successful labor mediator and was an early gentile opponent of Nazism.

Universalism's most important claim is that God is love and would not create a hell for his children to suffer in. It is also that we are all worthy of God's love. 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 of where I come and to whom I belong.

I think we come, each of us, from the seeds of all humanity, from the dreams dreamed by each dreamer and the wishes wished by each longing heart and that we belong to each other, deeply, permanently, wholly. The only concept that I have ever heard that touches on this, that stirs this up in a way that makes sense to me, was in a class I took on Karl Marx. Now, don't worry, I am not a Marxist, but the man had some interesting philosophical ideas.

When I was receiving my undergraduate degree in economics and philosophy, I studied Karl Marx some. He is a fascinating man to read. Brilliant mind. Some of it I grasped, and some of it was too heady for me. But the one thing I remember from those days was Marx' notion of Species Being. For Marx, we all have this essential beingness within us, this species being, that has certain needs. Going back to the idea of Labor as A Path Home, Marx believed that we all had a fundamental desire to create and to share our creations with each other. For instance, I could make hats and you might need one and you might produce milk by raising cows, and I might need that.

And when we exchanged these hats and milk, something in both of us would be deeply satisfied. We would be seen and validated as human beings contributing to the world around us. Our place in the world would be confirmed. These gifts could also be non-tangible as our reading from Clarissa Pinkola Estes reminded us: “finding one’s voice, loving someone well, finding a shapely word.”

Labor becomes our path home then, when home is the place where I knew who I was and others knew who I was and it was good enough. That sounds as close to heaven as I can imagine getting!

With the advent of the industrial revolution, this thing called labor, which was once an expression of my species being, my soul perhaps, became something that had nothing to do with me. I worked in a factory line screwing a screw into a car door, over and over again, and could never afford to buy that car at the end of the production line nor could I see my work in that car. This produced what Marx called alienation. There was no home left, no way to return to self. The species became lost.

I believe there is still a way home to this connected, species satisfied self.

What are your gifts? Does your life express them now? I do not mean only what you are good at, but also what you know little about but your heart and soul long to express somehow. What would you have to change to allow this expression in your life and how might this meeting house be a place in which the need to have our gifts seen, valued, wanted, worthy of barter could be expressed?

A friend told me the other day that though she paid adequately, no one ever thanks her for her work and she was thinking of leaving this job that took her years to get. I imagined that her species being was lonely. She needed to know that what she had to give made a difference, influenced others in some way, impacted their lives.

It is true that many of us never get to know this. But I wonder if this meeting house might be a remedy to that. Could we start a group here practicing what we love and offering it to each other? Maybe something we love that we just never had the time to really explore. We would not have to be experts. We could just share our dreams with each other and maybe inspire each other to begin in some small way to bring them into the world.

As you go about your day tomorrow, on Labor Day, this day given as a bone to the workers who could no longer tolerate less than a human wage, notice every one whose work touches your life and thank them. Maybe even ask a question about where someone is from who is checking out our groceries in Stop N Shop, longing to be recognized as whole, as worthy, as giving us something that we need to go on. And they are. Ask the farmers how the season has been, what their worries are, how long their days are and when they will be able to rest. Tell them what you made with their vegetables and how good it made you feel.

You see, the gifts of our soul, the expressions of our lives, are sacred. I would like to reclaim labor as that which offers us ourselves, that which gives shape to our shapeless humanity, that which allows us to make visible that which is invisible, our hearts, our minds, our spirits. When we are able to express this, and others are able to witness this, express their gratitude for what the fruits our labors add to their lives, we are allowed to rest in our humanity, fully human, fully alive, fully connected.

I think the genesis writers feared this, feared humanity when it could satisfy its longing for peace and wholeness without needing to be punished or forgiven by God first for sinning. A human being who can participate in the divine without needing to suffer first and always, without needing to repent, without needing to offer themselves up as a sacrifice to something greater than they are, was thought of as a dangerous animal, is thought of still as a dangerous animal by many. But I think this is because these thinkers and writers missed something important. We cannot thrive without each other. We cannot labor and be satisfied without each other, we cannot create. We cannot give and not be received. This human being is not dangerous without a disappointed God to appease. We need each other so deeply to survive, to thrive, to know ourselves and express ourselves that we need no god looking down from on high to keep us going straight. It is you, your witness, your love, your feedback and life itself that let me know who I am, where I could grow, what is worthy in me, and what needs more light. Together, we have the possibility of being fulfilled, of thriving, of offering ever more authentic labor to the world.

This labor day, thrive. Offer your gift to the world. Celebrate the gifts that others offer to us. Thank all of those you meet who labor for us: the teller at stop n shop, the waiters, the garbage collectors, the house cleaners and mail folk and farmers and farmers and contractors and the people here too. We labor for each other. We work on committees, make music, docent, clean this great building, manage finances, attend to the well-being of children and each other when we are in need.

Let the work you do be what you love. Let love lead you to each other. Let each other be the source of our humanity. Let your labor be a labor of belonging.

Amen