

UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST COMMUNITY CHURCH, AUGUSTA, MAINE
THREE FACES OF LABOR DAY

Rev. Helen Zidowecki <>> August 31, 2008

MUSIC FOR CENTERING – Hannah Faulkner

WELCOME and ANNOUNCEMENTS

***OLD HUNDRETH**

Let those who live in every land
Declare that fear and war are done ---
Joined by labor of mind and hand,
In love and understanding one.

Adapted from Kenneth Patton 1980, # 378 *Singing the Living Tradition*

OPENING WORDS

Come in celebration of all that we contribute to the common good.
Gather to reflect on the passions that give meaning to our lives.
Come in recognition of the balance between work and play.
Gather together this morning

LIGHTING THE CHALICE

UNISON AFFIRMATION From #502

Now is the accepted time, not tomorrow, not some more convenient season.
It is today that our best work can be done and not some future day or future year.
It is today that we fit ourselves for the greater usefulness of tomorrow.
Today is the seed time, now are the hours of work, and tomorrow comes the harvest and the
playtime.

W.E.B. DuBois, #502 *Singing the Living Tradition*

FIRST FACE OF LABOR DAY: Issues of Labor

I invite you to join me in exploring three faces – or facets – of Labor Day: Labor, Passion,
Recreation. Let us start by singing the first hymn.

***HYMN #109** “As We Come Marching, Marching”

*Please rise in body or spirit.

NOTES: The slogan "**Bread and Roses**" is from a by James Oppenheim, published in *American Magazine* in December 1911, which is commonly associated with a textile strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts, January-March 1912, which united dozens of immigrant communities under the leadership of the Industrial Workers of the World. The strike was led to a large extent by women. The strike was settled on March 14, 1912, on terms generally favorable to the workers: pay increases, time-and-a-quarter pay for overtime, and a promise of no discrimination against strikers. The strikers are credited with inventing the moving picket line (so that they would not be arrested for loitering).

READING: Labor Day: Notes from History

"Labor Day differs in every essential way from the other holidays of the year in any country," said Samuel Gompers, founder and longtime president of the American Federation of Labor. "All other holidays are in a more or less degree connected with conflicts and battles of man's prowess over man, of strife and discord for greed and power, of glories achieved by one nation over another. Labor Day...is devoted to no man, living or dead, to no sect, race, or nation."

The first Labor Day holiday was celebrated on Tuesday, September 5, 1882, in New York City, organized by the Central Labor Union. On the first Monday in September 1884 the Central Labor Union urged organizations in other cities to follow the example of New York and celebrate a "workingmen's holiday". The idea spread with the growth of labor organizations, and [Congress](#) made Labor Day a federal holiday in 1894. All fifty states have made Labor Day a state holiday.

By a resolution of the American Federation of Labor convention of 1909, the Sunday preceding Labor Day was adopted as Labor Sunday and dedicated to the spiritual and educational aspects of the [labor movement](#). So we are here today to consider labor and Unitarian Universalism!

Another historical note connects labor history with a Universalist family. Pullman, Illinois was a company town, founded in 1880 by George Pullman, president of the railroad sleeping car company. Pullman designed and built the town to stand as a utopian workers' community insulated from the moral (and political) seductions of nearby Chicago. The town was strictly, almost feudally, organized: row houses for the assembly and craft workers; modest Victorians for the managers; and a luxurious hotel where Pullman himself lived and where visiting customers, suppliers, and salesman would lodge while in town.

In 1893, the Pullman company was caught in the nationwide economic depression. Orders for railroad sleeping cars declined, and George Pullman was forced to lay off hundreds of employees. Those who remained endured wage cuts, even while rents in Pullman remained consistent. Take-home paychecks plummeted.

And so the employees walked out, demanding lower rents and higher pay. Railroad workers across the nation boycotted trains carrying Pullman cars. Rioting, pillaging, and burning of railroad cars soon ensued; mobs of non-union workers joined in. The strike instantly became a national issue. President Grover Cleveland, faced with nervous railroad executives and interrupted mail trains, declared the strike a federal crime and deployed 12,000 troops to break the strike. Violence erupted, and two men were killed when U.S. deputy marshals fired on protesters in Kensington, near Chicago, but the strike was doomed. On August 3, 1894, the strike was declared over. The American Railway Union was disbanded, and Pullman employees signed a pledge that they would never again unionize. Industrial workers' unions were effectively stamped out and remained so until the Great Depression.

George Pullman was the third of ten children of James Lewis Pullman and Emily Caroline Pullman, who lived in Albion, near Buffalo. George decided to go to Chicago –hence, the story that I just read. Throughout the years he maintained early friendships with people of the Albion area where he grew up. In 1890 – a few years before the strike -- a friend of long standing suggested to George M. Pullman that a need existed for a Universalist Church in Albion. George put up matching funding for the Pullman Memorial Church. The complete story in Dictionary of UU Biography on the website of the UU Historical Society notes his accomplishments, but faults him on keeping the rents high while cutting wages.

In looking into history, we will find Universalists and Unitarians on all sides of issues. The First Unitarian Church of Los Angeles included a number of labor songs in its book of songs, *How Can I Keep From Singing*, published in 1976. To help us get in touch with the labor movement and issues, I invite you to listen to some music.

MUSIC You are welcome to sing along or reflect.

“Solidarity Forever” to Tune: Battle Hymn, *How Can I Keep From Singing*, p.114

When the union’s inspiration through the worker’s blood shall run,
There can be no power greater anywhere beneath the sun;
Yet what force on earth is weaker than the feeble strength of one?
But the union makes us strong.

CHORUS: Solidarity forever! Solidarity forever!
Solidarity forever! For the union makes us strong.

It is we who ploughed the prairies, built the cities where they trade,
Dug the mines and build the workshops, endless miles of railroad laid;
Now we stand outcast and starving ‘mid the wonders we have made
But the union makes us strong. (Chorus)

They have taken untold millions that they never toiled to earn,
But without our brain and muscle not a single wheel can turn;
We can break their haughty power, gain our freedom when we learn
That the union makes us strong. (Chorus)

In our hands is placed a power greater than their hoarded gold,
Greater than the might of atoms magnified a thousand fold;
We can bring to birth a new world from the ashes of the old,
For the union makes us strong (chorus)

“Which Side Are You On?” to Loyalty Oath Song, *How Can I Keep From Singing*, p. 6

Come all of you good workers, good news to you I tell,
Of how the good old union has come in here to dwell.

CHORUS: Which side are you on?
Which side are you on? (repeat)

Don’t scab for the bosses, don’t listen to their lies,
Us poor folks haven’t got a chance, unless we organize. (Chorus)

They say in Harlan County, there are no neutrals there,
You’ll either be a union man, or a thug for J.H.Blair. (Chorus)

Oh, workers, can you stand it? Oh tell me how you can.
Will you be a lousy scab, or will you be a man? (Chorus)

My daddy was a miner, and I’m a miner’s son,
And I’ll stick with the union, till every battle’s won. (Chorus)

REFLECTION

More and more I am using the concept of a continuum to look at issues and situations. Continuums have defined end points that are essentially opposite, and there are many other points between. Value judgment is not the issue, although there may be implied value. Continuums are used with youth and in various workshop settings. People are asked to place themselves along a line in response to a question, as simple as organizing selves by month of birth or as complex as feelings about race, or immigration or labor issues. Then people may to

say why they chose to stand where they did. For example, where would you place yourself along a labor involvement continuum, from

- Belong/have belonged to a blue collar or “working class” union →
- belong/have belonged to a union of professional or service workers...→
- have not felt the need to belong to a union...→..
- or have been in management position in opposition to a union.

Listen to the terms that I just used: “working class”, “professional”, and I could have included “skilled” and “unskilled”. These descriptions in a continuum are just that – descriptions. All parts are needed.

How do we look at issues of labor from our place on the continuum? What prejudices and assumptions are radiate from our position? And what is our role, as Unitarian Universalists in addressing social inequities?

Meredith Guest delivered a sermon on September 2, 2007, in which she states:

“My operating assumption is that as religious liberals we are inclined to be supportive and sympathetic to the immigrants and much less concerned that they are here in violation of immigration laws; that they are here illegally. I’m also aware that, being mostly members of the professional class, should Congress pass a law legalizing the 12-14 million immigrants currently in this country illegally, you members of the professional class will have little reason to fear for your jobs. In fact, you have quite a bit to gain.

“For much of the working class, however, it’s quite a different story. For instance, there is a chronic shortage of bus drivers. (She drove school buses.) ...At \$20 an hour with great benefits and lots of opportunities for easy overtime, I’m guessing quite a few of those newly legalized 12-14 million workers might think that’s not such a bad deal, especially since back in Mexico they were lucky if they made \$10 a day with the only benefits being a few shots of tequila at the end of a 12 hour day to help kill the aches and pains. And besides that, they speak Spanish, which, on most of the routes is the language of choice, since most of the anglo kids are chauffeured to school, or else, have their own cars.” She continues, presenting other dilemmas and ways of considering issues, concluding with “I’m hoping this creates a moral dilemma for you....”.

And let’s just look at a few of the resolutions passed at the General Assembly since 1960 that relate to labor:

- *Raise the Federal Minimum Wage to \$10 in 2010 (2008 Action of Immediate Witness)
- *End Present-day Slavery in the Fields (2008 Action of Immediate Witness)
- *Actions of Conscience to End Sweatshop Abuses (1997 Action of Immediate Witness)
- *Farm Worker Initiatives (1976 General Resolution)
- *Lettuce Boycott (1972 General Resolution)
- *Agricultural Employment (1966 General Resolution)
- *Migratory Workers (1961 General Resolution)

How many of us are familiar with these resolutions? The actions of the UUA?

How well do we hide within our own world.....how well we use words as shields, protection against needing to become more engaged. Let us recommit ourselves to understanding the issues that relate to all of us. Each year, material comes from the UUA inviting congregations to consider what resolutions should come before the General Assembly. It has been many, many years since I have heard a discussion in this congregation or a vote on what issues are key. It is so easy to let others make that decision. I challenge each of us to look at multiple sides of labor

issues, to engage in conversation, using nonviolent communication and deep listening, and to allow ourselves to be changed by the struggles.

I had also begun reviewing the books published by Beacon Press, the UUA Press of non-fiction works, but was unable to find a listing. However, one book that was on the shelves of All Souls Unitarian Church was *Sweatshops in the Sun: Child Labor on the Farm*, by Ronald B. Taylor, Beacon Press, 1973.

“This book is dedicated to child farm laborers in the hope that one day soon they may find there is more to childhood than toil. Poverty, and tears.”

Realizing that there is still much to be done, let us pause in our service to take the morning offering, for the work of this congregation and it’s wider mission.

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OFFERING for the Work of this Congregation and its wider concerns

JOYS AND SORROWS

This is the time in the service that we set aside to share our joys and sorrows with this community. Please speak from you seat, and give your name as you speak.

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SECOND FACE OF LABOR DAY: Passion?

RESPONSIVE READING # 567 To Be of Use

REFLECTION

Beyond the job title that defines you, what do you really want to spend your energy on? What is your “labor of love”? My thought was to discuss the need to have a passion that gives meaning to life, beyond the job title. I had not considered this a class issue until I read the article, “Not My Father’s Religion” by Doug Muder in the *UU World*, Fall 2007. I was struck – literally -- with the notion that having a passion or work of love is a classist distinction. Listen to excerpts of his article.

“Unitarian Universalism has a class problem. We rarely discuss it, and when we do, we often focus on the very poor: the homeless, panhandlers, people on welfare. But we also have a problem with the working class, particularly the ones suffering from what Marx called alienation. If you’re a skilled craftsperson and like to work with your hands, you might be a UU. But if you make a living by renting your muscles and selling your time—permanently, not just until your novel gets published—you probably aren’t.

Unitarian Universalism has a class problem.

The primary spiritual challenge of the professional class is *discernment*. There are so many good things we could do with our lives. How do we choose?

That’s the kind of issue a UU sermon talks about.

But I don’t think discernment was Dad’s issue. Because the factory was not a competing Good. It was a necessary Evil. When he was pitching me tennis balls in the front yard, I don’t believe that any part of him actually *wanted* to go off to that dirty, hot, noisy, dangerous factory. He went because if he didn’t something bad would happen. He’d be punished. And in the long run, if he lost his job, I’d be punished, too.

Dad didn't need help discerning what to do. He just needed to make himself do it.

And that's working-class life in a nutshell. You're not following your bliss. You're not pursuing your calling. You're selling your time for money. . . . Here's what sums it up to me: When professionals retire, we keep dabbling. The retired newspaper editor in my hometown still writes. When the professor retires, he'll keep reading journals and going to talks. . . . When you retire from Wal-Mart, you don't set up a bar-code scanner in the basement, just to stay busy. You do that stuff for money, and when they stop paying you, you never, ever do it again.

UU churches also help with the second major spiritual challenge of the professional class: *inspiration*. The whole point of discernment is to find a consistently inspiring path through life. The ideal profession is a calling, and inspiration is how you work those 12-hour days without burning out. Inspired people bounce out of bed in the morning with ideas and ambitions. They stay late because there's always one more thing they want to try. Those are the people who really make it in the professions. If you have to push yourself, and you're competing with somebody who's inspired, you're at a huge disadvantage.

That's why professionals tell their children: Find something you love, so that you'll be brilliant and creative and energetic. You'll run rings around the guys who are just doing what they have to do.

Let's put these pieces together: Imagine yourself deep in the maze, standing between two churches. One church tells you there's Good and there's Evil. And because somebody has done something incredibly generous, you get a chance to choose Good. One chance. You get it wrong, you go to hell forever.

The other church tells you there are a lot of ways to be good. And if the good you pick doesn't turn out to be the best good, pick again. It'll work out.

Which church is talking about the world you live in? Which message do you want your kids to hear? Which one gives you the mind-set you need to get out?

So this is what the question comes down to for me: Does Unitarian Universalism say something about life or just about life in the professional class? Can we speak in words that make sense everywhere, from the high place to the darkest, trickiest passages of the maze? Can we teach *both* subtle discernment *and* making yourself do the obvious hard thing? Inspiration *and* self-control?

I hope so. Because otherwise we're a boutique religion. Otherwise we've surrendered the working class to conservative religion. My hunch, my faith—or maybe just what I need to believe to do what I do—is that we can find such a message, that there can be a truth that encompasses all situations, a wisdom big enough for all people.”

*HYMN #128 “For All That Is Our Life

*Please rise in body or spirit.

MEDITATION followed by Music

I invite you into a period of silent meditation to reflect on the words that have been spoken this morning.

THIRD FACE OF LABOR DAY: Recreation

We do need to remember that one of the major reasons behind Labor Day is a time of rest and recreation for 'working people'. It calls to mind the need to balance work and play. I would like to note two stories related to this balance. I would like to share with you the wisdom of Dr. Seuss and to note that one of our Unitarian Universalist conference centers was originally build for pleasure.

The King's Stilts by Dr. Seuss, 1939
Selected reading.

Story of Ferry Beach. How many of you have been to Ferry Beach Park Association in Saco, ME? It had been built by Boston and Maine Railroad as a recreation place for its workers and their families. There was even a 'dummy' train to bring people from the Old Orchard station to Ferry Beach. (Dummy means that it could only go one direction, so had to back up to Old Orchard.) This was a fairly elaborate place, with a big hotel called Ferry Beach Hotel, a large pavilion and bowling alley, among other things. The hotel is now called Quillen, after Quillen Shinn, a Universalist minister and organizer of Universalist summer meetings. In 1901 Dr. Shinn located Ferry Beach site. The twentieth annual meeting summer meeting of Universalists was held at Ferry Beach as guests of the Boston and Maine Railroad. Fundraising efforts begun to make purchase of the property possible. And the annual meeting of Ferry Beach Park Association is held this weekend.....maybe we have learned to mix 'fun in the sun' with the harder issues of life.

***HYMN # 157 "Step By Step The Longest March"**

CLOSING

POSTLUDE