

May We Labor In Love
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First Universalist Society of Central Square,
a Unitarian Universalist congregation

Unitarian Universalist congregations often pride themselves on their theological diversity, and on their diversity in terms of sexual orientation and affectional preference. But Unitarian Universalist congregations don't do as well when it comes to racial diversity, though there is some hope in the younger generation which contains the children of mixed race marriages and adoptions. Unitarian Universalist congregations are also often quite limited when it comes to diversity of socioeconomic class. Unitarian congregations were historically comprised of upper class well-educated professionals and their families. Universalist congregations, such as this one, were historically more agrarian, and contained community leaders as well as people working in various fields.

Often Unitarian Universalist churches would celebrate the summer holidays by closing for the whole summer, part of it, or having lay-led services during the summer. This church used to close regularly for the Labor Day weekend, when many of us would spend the weekend at camp Unirondak. The Worship Committee led this congregation in deciding to keep the church open every Sunday this year, and I'm glad we made that decision. There may not always be many people here, but it makes a statement of hospitality and welcome to have the doors open and activity inside. Hospitality and welcome are important features of this church, as it strives to reach out not only to its members, but also to those who may be seeking a place and people who offer a sense of hope in this world. This world presents enough obstacles and barriers; we don't need to contribute to them by locking our doors on Sunday mornings.

Originally I was scheduled to lead worship on August 17, but we were fortunate to have the musician and environmental activist, Jim Scott, in our pulpit that day. So I was rescheduled for today, and I'm glad I was. It is great to be able to reflect on the significance of Labor Day in the context of Unitarian Universalism with you. In my preparation for this service, I read about the history of Labor Day, two related Unitarian Universalist sermons ("Not My Father's Religion" and "Putting 'Labor' Back in Labor Day"), and a 2008 Unitarian Universalist Action of Immediate Witness, called "End Present-day Slavery in the Fields".

According to Samuel Gompers, founder and longtime president of the American Federation of Labor,

"Labor Day differs in every essential way from the other holidays of the year in any country. 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."

I would suggest that there are other holidays, like Thanksgiving and Christmas, which are not connected with conflicts and strife, but they have been connected with sect or nation. Gompers' point about celebrating the positive significance of the workers in our lives is well taken.

Labor Day, celebrated on the first Monday in September, is a creation of the labor movement and is dedicated to the social and economic achievements of American workers. It constitutes a yearly national tribute to the contributions workers have made to the strength, prosperity, and well-being of our country. It was first celebrated in 1882, in New York City, and again there in 1883, organized by the Central Labor Union. The idea spread with the growth of labor organizations, and in 1885 Labor Day was celebrated in many industrial centers of the country.

Although the holiday was first celebrated in NYC, and although the first state bill was introduced into the New York legislature, the first to actually become law was passed by Oregon on February 21, 1887. (Some things haven't changed, like the efficiency of the NYS legislature.) During that year four more states, including New York, created the Labor Day holiday by legislative enactment. Gradually, the celebration of this holiday spread to other states, and eventually it became a national 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.

As a site I found on the internet states:

"The vital force of labor added materially to the highest standard of living and the greatest production the world has ever known and has brought us closer to the realization of our traditional ideals of economic and political democracy. It is appropriate, therefore, that the nation pay tribute on Labor Day to the creator of so much of the nation's strength, freedom, and leadership — the American worker."

While this comment may be somewhat dated, as we see so many jobs being out sourced to other countries, and as we experience increasing economic hardships here at home, it is still important to take time to celebrate what we have achieved, and to honor those workers who have contributed to our economic and political well-being. As we become increasingly aware, in this age of global trade, travel, environmental and health threats, we are all living on an interconnected web in which we honor the contributions of workers here at home and throughout the world. We honor them, and feel some responsibility for ensuring that they are not oppressed by poor working conditions which threaten them and put holes in our fragile lifeboat earth.

David Breeden, a Unitarian Universalist minister, wrote in his sermon, *Putting "Labor" Back in Labor Day*:

"Just as history judges the complicity of churches with racial prejudice, history will judge liberal religions from our time according to our response to the rights of the working poor. Unitarian Universalists were on the side of justice during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. We need to clearly get on the side of justice for the civil rights issue of our time. Martin Luther King preached about a trinity of evil: racial hatred, poverty, and war. Dr. King went a long way in fighting the first of those evils. But today poverty and war are alive and thriving. It's easy to create and maintain a third world economy. It's not so easy to create a fair and equitable economy."

So, what can we do to address the issues of poverty and war in our lives today? Many of us are doing what we can to support an end to war, whether working with the Syracuse Peace Council, supporting peace marches and demonstrations, singing out for peace and justice through the Syracuse Community Choir and the Raging Grannies, working with Women Transcending Boundaries to promote greater understanding and compassion among people of different faiths, and working for political changes which will lead to greater justice.

In addition to our actions for peace and justice, each of us can determine to live our lives more peacefully, in the ways we think and approach ourselves, and in the ways we interact with each other. We can begin by making the effort, through regular spiritual practices, to be at peace within ourselves. This will enable us to be more respectful toward each other. Peace underlies everything that we do. That is why I made this digression to talk about peace. But what I really want to talk about this morning is economic justice. After all, we are celebrating Labor Day this weekend.

As Barack Obama told the Democratic National Convention, on the forty-fifth anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I have a dream" speech, "without justice, there will be no peace." The chasm between the rich and the poor in this country has grown in recent years. While there have never been so many millionaires and billionaires, ordinary working people, who have always considered themselves to be middle class, are having an increasingly difficult time keeping up with their bills. Houses are being foreclosed. Factories are closing and good jobs are being lost to downsizing or being moved to other countries. People are sometimes forced to work more than one job at minimum wage in order to feed their families, buy the medicines they require, and put gasoline in their automobiles or pay for mass transit, if it is even available. Health insurance is unattainable for many. Some people are just one pay check, or one medical crisis, away from not being able to make ends meet. More and more people, including working families with young children, are depending on local food pantries. And then we think about the need for savings to help us get through difficult times, or to prepare for a comfortable (if not prosperous) retirement. There is a need for quality education, to help lift people out of poverty and to gain a vision of hope and possibility, in which skills can be used to benefit themselves, their families, and the community.

There is so much that we can do, as concerned citizens, people who are committed to a world in which all people are believed to have inherent worth and dignity... committed to a world in which there is justice, equity and compassion in all human relations... committed to the goal of a world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all. The principles which guide us are so good, and we strive so hard to live them in our daily lives. So why aren't people clamoring to get in our doors? What else can we do to show our commitment to our principles in a way which will reach out to people who need to hear a message of hope . . . in a way which will not only nourish our spirits, but will also heal our world?

In the sermon by Unitarian Universalist Doug Muder, "Not my father's religion" he shared insights about why his father, a factory worker, was quite content in a conservative Lutheran church which taught the literal

truth of the Bible, and held that God was real, personal, and powerful. Muder shared that his father had attended a Unitarian Universalist church once when he (his son) was preaching, but he never attended again. As Muder said, "If my working-class father started attending a UU church, I'm not sure who he'd talk to." This in itself is a concern, as we try to be welcoming and hospitable to all who visit us. But are we, in fact, hospitable? Or are we cliquish, visiting with people we know, or at least others who seem to have something in common with us? Are we willing to step out of our comfort zones to meet the stranger, who is stepping out of his or her comfort zone by entering the doors of our church?

Muder also pointed out the differences in theology between the UU church and his father's church. When he attended his father's church, the sermon topic was "Resisting Temptation." He realized that many working-class people go to jobs which are dirty, dangerous, and difficult, and they go because they have to go, not because they want to go. For them, the important issue is self control, resisting temptation, and doing that which they need to do, so that they don't get fired (and they and those who count on them don't get punished). Muder also realized that for most people in UU churches, many of whom are professionals, the messages they need to hear are quite different, and deal with such things as discernment, inspiration, and the possibility of second chances. These sermon topics wouldn't necessarily speak to people who were struggling in jobs they didn't enjoy, and felt fortunate to have a first shot without the expectation of getting a second chance.

As I was thinking about the meaning of Labor Day in a Unitarian Universalist context, I realized that, like most topics, there wouldn't be just one way of seeing it. It seems like labor unions have played a significant role in helping workers to create good, well-paying jobs with safe working conditions. If one was a worker with a union job, one might support the union and its benefits. If one was a manager, one might be in conflict with the union over such issues as pay, hours, and pensions, which hurt the bottom line. If one was a manager in a plant or store that was not yet unionized, one might do everything possible (including that which was legally questionable) to prevent unionization and keep costs and prices as

low as possible. If one was in power, one probably wouldn't want to let it go. But if one was committed to social justice. . . promotion of a living wage, health insurance, healthy good working conditions, pension, and other benefits . . . one might do everything possible (and legal) to encourage unionization, empowering vulnerable workers, and shifting to a model of power-sharing. Meaning, like theology, depends upon one's experience and point of view.

Hospitality in our church must become more than just being friendly and chatting with visitors at coffee hour. It's even more than sitting with visitors during the worship service to help them feel comfortable and to assist them in understanding where we are in the order of service. It might mean listening and observing attentively, and getting to know the visitor well enough, so that we start to see the world through his or her eyes. Such hospitality is a great gift to the visitors, but is also a gift to ourselves and to our church community. May it be so.