

“Step by Step: A Labor Day Reflection”
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And in keeping yourself with labor you are in truth loving life,
And to love life through labor is to be intimate with life’s inmost secret. Kahlil
Gibran

Do I treat my workers with dignity or grow my business? That's not an either-or;
that's a both-and. Labor Secretary Tom Perez.

I haven’t seen my friend John Nelson all summer so I am so happy to reconnect
with him. We take our places at the bar and catch up while casually conversing
with the other patrons also enjoying an early supper. Conviviality is the spirit of
the evening. One of our new acquaintances shares that he was raised in New
London – the Italian neighborhood over by Ft. Trumbull – but now he lives for
most of the year in Florida and when he’s up north, in Groton. He grouses. “You
can’t make a living in business up here. It’s too liberal.” He owns a couple of
buildings in the area, he tells us. He’s trying to unload them all.

He carries on for quite awhile and when he stops to take a breath, he looks to us
for affirmation. We laugh, and I say, “We’re not the right ones to be asking about
this.” “No?” he asks. “What do you two do?”

It was one of those times when it is so particularly satisfying to say, “We’re
ministers.”

I could see him quickly reeling back the tape, reexamining all that he had said.
We all chuckle and then return to our private conversations.

But later on as John and I were getting up to leave, the man is compelled to push
away from the bar, get up off his stool, and have one last word with us.

“You know,” he says as he approaches us, “I was raised Catholic. Even though I
don’t go to church, I still live by the commandments. My father taught me right.
He taught me not to lie, steal, or cheat.”

I tell him that I am sure he’s a good man but really, what he’s described is a
pretty low bar.

The poor guy. He got more than the oysters and martinis he had bargained for at
Gaspar’s that night.

Do I treat my workers with dignity or grow my business? That's not an either-or;
that's a both-and. So said Labor Secretary Tom Perez.

Do we make effort to care for all as best we can or do we grow our economy / business / faith community?

That's not an either-or; it's a both-and.

By "dignity" let's say that we mean receiving a living wage, appropriate benefits, and reasonable job security. Let's keep it that simple for our purposes this morning.

The man at Gaspar's has a particular perspective but I'm sure that Pope Francis – his spiritual leader - would not concur. Solidarity is a relationship between love and reconciliation, the Pope says. Not to be constrained by labels that increasingly divide us, the Pope is neither liberal or Marxist – as he is often defined. Rather, he is Catholic. His concern for economic justice is rooted in his concern for the other ... that dignity and growth is not an either / or prospect.

And how about Unitarian Universalists? What's our take on these economic matters? Those of us who are in positions that determine whether workers live with dignity, are we led by our principles? Do we hold close our faith when we are sitting with those who make these decisions? Do we hold the bar high? Are we willing to speak up at the bar or in the Board room? For increasingly, economic stressors affect all workers and to make a difference many stones must make the arch.

If you're working a white collar job, and are continually living in fear that your job will be moved to Ann Arbor or Boston, for example, or eliminated all together, the stress that comes of such wondering is different than someone who is struggling to make ends meet and working three part-time jobs because employers don't want to pay for the required benefits. It is a different kind of stress but stress nevertheless. The stress of doing the work of two people because jobs have been eliminated signals a lack of dignity. It signals a greater concern for growing a business than a concern for those upon whose labor growth depends.

So, this morning we're talking about across-the-board dignity. Dignity for all workers with particular concern for those who struggle to make ends meet despite being employed. We're talking about taking care of workers and in taking care, affording dignity.

We sing, "Step by step the longest march can be won. Many stones can form an arch, singly none." So, let me tell you something about the personnel policies here at All Souls. Let me tell you a little bit about our step by step.

You may think that personnel policies are tedious. But you would be mistaken because in a quiet but important way, personnel policies reflect values. So, let me share this story with you as an example.

When two years ago the executive committee set out to update our policies we tried to do so with the commitment to behave in the way that is in line with our values. In the spirit of “Church is the place where you practice being who you really want to be.” There are two new policies about which we all can be particularly proud. First is our parenting leave policy. The draconian policies of most U.S. workplaces – for-profit and non-profit alike – do little to support families. Take a look at the policies for other developed countries and you’ll get a sense of just how unfriendly U.S. policy is. Conversely, All Souls’ policy offers 12 weeks of paid parenting leave. Church employees are not forced to use their earned sick time or their vacation time when a baby or child comes by birth or adoption. Because adjusting to and caring for a new addition to one’s family isn’t about being sick or on vacation. It’s about adjusting to ... and caring for ... it’s about parenting and getting started on secure footing.

I wish we could do more. And we could, had we the federal government as a partner in supporting families, as governments all over the world do.

You can be proud that as employers, you offer twelve weeks for a family to begin their lives together with less stress than the majority of families in the United States.

And then there’s bereavement leave. Every year I preach on the matter of grief. We talk about it in small group ministry. Caitlin and I provide countless hours of pastoral care and counseling that concerns grief. We know that every story is as unique as every circumstance and relationship. So, we have a policy that reflects this reality because we eliminated the time limit on grief. No – three days to grieve and then we’ll expect you back in the saddle malarkey. We agreed that time away in the wake of a loved one’s death would be negotiated with the staff supervisor – currently that would be me – and the employee. And we trusted that we would work it out.

You can be proud that as employers, you practice what your ministers have preached. That grief is unique and needs time – especially in the immediate wake of death.

That’s treating workers with dignity. You are employers who live in the “both-and”.

I had thought I would talk about labor inspired by Gibran’s words but the sermon coaxed me in a different direction as sermons frequently do. Nevertheless, let’s conclude with Gibran who said,

And in keeping yourself with labor you are in truth loving life,
And to love life through labor is to be intimate with life’s inmost secret.

Gibran is really talking about creativity here. Of leading a life of continual curiosity and service whether that be at a job that pays you or whether that be designing or building and planting a peace garden for your church. Or helping to build a playscape that children will climb and enjoy. Or harvesting crops for the Giving Garden. Or tending to the Community Meal. Or planning the worship arc for the season ahead. Or planning small group ministry. Or planning leadership workshops. Or learning how to do CPR so that if when you're greeting and someone is in need, you can help. Or meeting and training with fellow teachers with whom you will accompany the children and youth through their religious education this year. Or staffing a table on behalf of our congregation at the New London Pride festival. Or learning more about stewardship trends in congregations so that we might be more responsive to our congregation's needs.

In truth, you are loving life.

Wrapped up in work are themes that include justice and dignity and love, passion, and service.

Today we honor all of those who serve and recommit ourselves to building the world that we dream about where, in the words of Dr. King, all work has dignity.

Blessed be. Amen.