

## All the Livelong Day

Amanda Udis-Kessler, High Plains Church UU, September 2, 2018; updated June 13, 2022

Those of you who have heard me preach before know that I love to start with a story. And my best work story is from when I was a street vendor in New York City during the summers between my college years. I sold fruit and hot dogs, but mostly I sold ices and Dove Bars back before we knew how many calories those things had. A Dove Bar is a big square of rich ice cream covered by a thick layer of rich dark chocolate. One day, a woman who looked exactly like the singer Carly Simon came up to buy a Dove Bar. I asked whether she was Carly Simon and she said no. I said that was a shame because I thought Carly Simon was just a marvelous singer and songwriter and I had always wanted to meet her.

Now, the folks who owned the Dove Bar warehouse trained us to set up the Dove Bars quickly in order to guarantee the sale. We had to pull out a Dove Bar in its individual wrapper then pull out a bent piece of paper with a slit in the middle that functioned to catch pieces of Dove Bar if they fell off, just the way you would have wax paper around the bottom of a candle to keep it from dripping onto your hands. We called these bent pieces of paper “boats” because that’s what they looked like. So we got out the Dove Bar and the boat, unwrapped the Dove Bar and stuck the stick at the bottom of it through the slit in the boat. We had to do all of this in under a minute and while never touching the Dove Bar itself after it was unwrapped, because who would buy one if the vendor’s fingerprints were all over it?

Back to the woman who looked like Carly Simon. As I said, we were supposed to make these sales quickly. Well, I have to tell you, I was so enamored of the possibility that I was actually talking to Carly Simon that I made about the slowest Dove Bar sale in the history of street vending. I kept dragging out the conversation, mechanically unwrapping the Dove Bar and putting it into its boat. Finally, after a few more exchanges, she gave me an exasperated look and said, “Alright. I *am* Carly Simon. Now can I please have my Dove Bar?” I had actually forgotten all about the Dove Bar by that time and had put it back into my cart, fully set up and all. I pulled it out, handed it to her, and watched her walk away. To this day, I could not tell you whether she paid for that Dove Bar or not. I’m guessing not.

While this story is amusing it took place in the context of summers of hard work. We picked our full Dove Bar carts up way over on the west side of midtown Manhattan and often had to walk for a mile uphill or more before we found a place to park that would draw enough people passing by to make decent sales. If we parked in front of certain fancy stores, they would call the police to chase us away. The work involved endless boredom, summer heat, humidity, and the occasional thunderstorm. I was a good enough vendor to get a spot at the 1976 Bicentennial celebration, during which I worked for 12 hours with no bathroom break, sold \$500 worth of Dove Bars, and went home with \$125 and clothing stained through with chocolate and ice cream. Selling hot dogs meant dealing with boiling water; selling ices meant dealing with hundreds of bees and selling fruit meant dealing with endlessly frustrated customers who felt up all the fruit before deciding to buy nothing. No wonder the Carly Simon story still captivates me. Even jobs that are mostly a mix of physical effort and boredom need some kind of meaning because we human beings are meaning-making people. And Labor Day gives us an opportunity to reflect on

our labor, our work, physical and mental, paid and unpaid, from stories to the social systems that shape our work in all its joy and heartbreak.

Oddly, despite Labor Day's history as a celebration of the work we do and a movement for work justice, it has turned into something else over time. Watch commercials during Labor Day weekend and you'll see families watching sports, grilling food, having a picnic and preparing the kids for school. But nothing about the work we do, or seek out, all the livelong day.

And that's a true shame because work is far more than a source of amusing stories, even if I did start with one today. Our work literally keeps society going. It pays our bills. It gives our lives meaning. It gives us something to do. It helps us understand who we are and who we are not. It helps us feel safe and locates us in a society in which it is still often true that the first thing someone asks us when they meet us is what we do, by which they mean what we do for work. Freud famously said that if our work lives and our love lives are going well, we are basically okay. Work can be how we make a difference in the world; it can be the way we "get out of bed and get a hammer and a nail," as the Indigo Girls sing. Work is a big deal. From a Unitarian Universalist perspective, we might even say that labor should be a venue where our inherent dignity and worth is confirmed, not the only place where we all treat each other as we wish to be treated but the only such place where we spend so many continuous waking hours in a day. At its best work is something for which we give thanks: for labor well done and for barns that are heaped, for craft and the strength in the work of our hands, for the beauty our artists and poets have wrought (since creativity is an aspect of some kinds of work). When we sing our thanks and praise for all that is our life, we include work and its rewards as well as hours of rest and love,

But of course, many of us, and many other people, have much less positive work experiences. Our work may not pay our bills, and if we are "housewives" our work doesn't pay at all. Our work may be demeaning rather than meaning-giving. We may feel enslaved by our jobs, trapped in bad circumstances because we need the money desperately. Anthropologist David Graeber has a book that discusses at length what he calls bullshit jobs, kinds of work so meaningless and useless that they should not exist at all. Graeber also discusses what he calls shit jobs, which are necessary for society but which are socially devalued and wildly underpaid, including work we sometimes refer to as menial labor. Far too many of us have either bullshit jobs or shit jobs and neither type of job helps us or society flourish because of the way such jobs are structured.

Or we may not find work in the first place, for reasons ranging from our personal situations to the way capitalism is set up at any given moment. If we have changed jobs frequently or have ever been laid off from a job for any reason, the capacity of work to help us understand who we are can take on a strongly negative hue. And in a society without any kind of guaranteed income or decent healthcare across the board, if we don't have work or we don't have enough work or we have profoundly demeaning work, we won't feel safe.

If, per Freud, one way we know we are okay is that our work life is okay, plenty of us may be painfully aware that in fact we are not okay. Our work life may be dissatisfying, disgusting, dangerous, or alienating. We may be one paycheck away from an economic disaster. We may participate in work that, far from making a positive difference in the world, actually makes the world a more unequal, more dangerous, and less loving place. If it is hard for us to honor our

own inherent dignity and worth and the inherent dignity and worth of others in other parts of our lives, it can be even harder in the workplace. This is so for two reasons: first, we are dependent on others for our very livelihood and second, we may not have much control to set the terms of our experiences.

The good news is that for a long time, work has also been a site of social change, a place where people of liberal faith have allied with others to improve work for everyone. Work justice movements have focused on ending sweatshop and child labor, supporting equal pay for women and people of color, requiring decent working conditions, demanding living wages, forcing companies to permit union organization so that workers and not only owners have a voice, and setting a cap on the number of hours people must work each week. While our government today is strongly on the side of corporations and the richest Americans, plenty of other Americans are striving to make work safe, ethical, and well-paid for all of us, so that work is both a place where we flourish and a locus of resources so that we can flourish in our off-hours as well.

Moreover, progressive people of faith are once again articulating the core truth about humanity that we recognize as our First Principle as a way of supporting the struggle for decent working opportunities and conditions. We can bring our Unitarian Universalist prophetic witness to the arena of work as surely as we bring it to equal marriage rights, the lives of people of color, or the well-being of undocumented immigrants. But if we are to do so, we need to understand something about how today's society devalues and minimizes our identity as workers. And to do that we have to bracket our individualistic ways of thinking and become sociologists for a moment.

Consider Wal-Mart, the giant corporation that offers "low prices every day" but doesn't want us to think about its "low wages every day." Wal-Mart is able to exploit its employees because of a much larger facet of our society: the way we are encouraged to view ourselves largely as consumers, not as producers or workers. We struggle through the workweek and the reward is that we then get to enjoy the weekend, the time when we are theoretically not working. Work provides the money that in turn allows us to buy things that are supposed to make us cool, sexy, and happy. As long as society directs us away from our identities as workers and toward our identities as consumers, we will be inwardly focused and less inclined to think about the interdependence of work and consumption, let alone the interdependence between our comfort and the labor of people who are never comfortable because they are underpaid, underrepresented, and unsafe at work. And in this sense the historical trajectory of Labor Day is particularly unfortunate. Its shift from being a celebration of the labor movement to being an opportunity to buy stuff to grill on the barby along with back-to-school supplies for the kids has made Labor Day just another day of consumption, not a day to reflect on work and how to make it better for all of us.

Here's another telling example of how our society has changed in its cultural focus. How many commonly read newspapers have business sections? Quite a few, right? How many of those newspapers have labor sections? Pretty much none, right? The only media that routinely have labor sections are left-leaning newspapers, radio shows and blogs. However this may have come about historically it is a brilliant way to train us to identify ourselves with "business" rather than with "labor." If we read a newspaper with a business section daily, even if we don't read the

business section, we assume that what is happening in the business world is meaningful for all of us, or that section wouldn't be there. But actually, far more of us labor in the broadest sense of having or seeking jobs than participate in the business world. So while the ubiquitous business section and the absent labor section make labor seem like a special interest and business like something of immediate import in all of our lives, this is a fascinating but disturbing twist on how most of us really live. In fact, the history of unions over the past fifty years or so supports this claim: through the work of certain politicians and their strategists, "labor" has been weakened and turned into a special interest group rather than a collectivity that should ideally include all of us. Whatever you think of unions in particular or of capitalism more generally, the odds are that you are a laborer, and if you are not, you would be if you could find work. If we are all laborers or would-be laborers, we should live in a society that prioritizes the well-being of labor – all labor – over the virtually unlimited power and status of corporations and the one percent.

We can all be forgiven for just accepting these patterns as the way things are, since many of us grew up with them, and they pervade our society almost completely. But if we are willing to think of ourselves as workers, as laborers, and therefore as sharing something important with all the other laborers out there, we have an opportunity to join others in making work an experience in which the First Principle is lifted up for everyone.

So let me ask you, as Labor Day rolls around again: Are your interests as a worker, as a laborer, being well-tended? And if not, what can you do about it? Or, better, what can we do about it? Even better: what will we do about it? What work will we take up to make our work lives safe, sane, and meaning-giving even if we cannot sell Carly Simon a Dove Bar?

Happy Labor Day.