



Sermon

When asked to preach on Labor Day I have to admit, my first thought about this holiday was that it is rather ironic that we celebrate work by not working. In fact, the cultural conflicts of identity surrounding work are many, and the issues complex. How we work, why we work, and what role work plays in our lives are all issues with theological components, components worth questioning.

Since becoming a Unitarian Universalist, I have asked questions daily. What is the issue at hand, why is it important, and what do UU Principles and Sources offer as wisdom for acting on the subject? Work, in our American society, is more than just the physical or mental labor in which a person engages. Work is important because, in our culture, it is who you are. We judge people by whether they are "white-collar" or "blue-collar", by the size of their paychecks, by subtleties like whether or not they have a website or business card. Many people suffer from intense depression when they cannot work, and many retirees struggle with questions of personal identity after leaving the workplace. Whether you live to work or work to live, work-as-identity is a prevalent part of American culture. Work, in this context, means for pay and outside the home. Work is defined as the exchange of time, energy, and training for money. Activity that does not produce a paycheck is not work, and therefore not seen as a primary function. **American culture believes that the only true work is work for money.**

How we value work says a lot about our cultural values; values that our UU faith is both in conflict and in cahoots with. For example, we value hard work over easy work; mental work over physical work; financially-rewarding work over any other kind of work. Women fought hard for equal rights in the workplace. Today, being a stay-at-home spouse, even if there are no financial issues, is frowned upon. It is 'odd' to be a stay-at-home spouse, unless you have young kids. Even then, the parents worry about being able to "return to work". I have helped raise children, and let me tell you, babies are work! So why do we insist that only paychecks matter?

For many Americans, working for pay is what we do to keep a roof over our heads and food on our table; and while we may or may not love what we do, we do it day in and day out because we feel we have to in order to survive. Work has become what we spend the majority of our time doing so we can be comfortable in the time we have left. Yet this "work as a paycheck" attitude creates a system in which very, very few people are truly happy, and creativity is stifled. Individuals are ground down by the systems of their workplaces, and

truly horrible things are done in the name of maximizing profit- the BP spill being one incident recently. There is a sense of desperation in the American workforce as a whole: on the one hand people are scared they will lose their jobs, but on the other hand they hate the jobs they have. Joseph Campbell, notable religion scholar, said “the person who takes a job in order to live, that is to say for the money, has turned himself into a slave”.¹

Is this the meaning of work? Making money, being enslaved to the idea that our identity is found in what we do, even when we hate it? Can our faith help us change the workforce, or does it just prop up the systems in existence? These questions were buzzing around in my mind as I wrote this sermon, and while I do not claim to have all the answers, I can offer a few insights to start the conversation.

For this conversation to bear fruit, we need to have a healthy definition of work. Work is the exchange of time, energy, and resources for a given goal; that goal is often money, but it can also be social justice, compassion, personal growth, and so on. *Work, in this context, can be seen as what you do to change the world for the better.* Can you imagine if at a party, instead of asking “so what do you do?” you asked “how do you change the world for the better?” Reorienting ourselves and focusing on positive change, rather than financial status, as an indicator for success is no easy task, since America has a long love affair with wealth, but it is a change that is affirmed by our Principles, especially the first. Nancy referred to this today in her testimony, her lifelong struggle to affirm value as creating meaning, not creating paychecks.

Another issue with the system as it stands is the fact that personal identity should be more than work. This is a systemic problem in America, one of the first questions we ask a person we meet is “what do you do?” implying that their work is a core indicator of their value. Our Minister has preached many times on the fear-shame dynamic that causes so many problems in America today, and there is a lot of shame that goes into that question. People evade the question if they are not employed for pay (“oh, I’m in transition at the moment”, “I am looking for the right opportunity”), they inflate their job if they perceive you as above them on the scale (“I am a customer service representative for a national hospitality chain” instead of “I’m a cashier at Best Western”), and they depreciate their job if they think it would make you uncomfortable (“oh, I work for a big company downtown but I’m just a nobody, really”). The fear-shame paradigm is in play for two reasons. First, people seek to avoid the discomfort caused by socio-economic imbalances; and second, because they are not secure in their identity outside of work. For the first, we need to seriously admit that in America we have major, major issues around class and socio-economic status. Even those terms are indicators of educational privilege, opportunity, and wealth. Growing up I would have just said that there was a “big gap between rich folk and us poor ones”. Now I pretty up the gap between poor and rich with terms like “socio-economic status” .

Krista recently preached on immigration and what a new definition of nation could look like. Today, I am going to stretch that even farther by saying that the issue is far more complicated than either side will tell you. On the one hand, conservatives are screaming that illegal immigration is bankrupting America. On the other, liberals get all up in arms at laws designed to stop it. Neither side is looking past the individual to the systems, and neither side is changing the systemic imposition of poverty on those persons by the wealthy. When we allow an immigrant to be here illegally, they are subject to wage theft, unsafe working conditions, and poor treatment by their employers. By not paying taxes on those employees, companies are stealing billions from the very systems that new immigrants need to become established in America. Yet neither liberal nor conservative groups want to take on corporations and American systems, instead the focus is on the individual immigrants.

I grew up in poverty and I can tell you I do not blame anyone for trying to escape it. Yes, I think we need to work within the laws but yet I know how oppressive those laws can be, how dehumanizing and demoralizing for the individual seeking change. We claim that everyone has inherent worth and dignity, but by failing to see that the individual is part of systems that are oppressive, we fail to see the changes that need to be made. I believe that until corporations are held accountable, nothing will change. Work as profit is a systemic mindset that justifies abuse- abuse of people like migrant workers, and abuse of the planet like BP. When profit is understood in a solely financial way, everyone suffers. People are reduced to assets or liabilities; objectified into abstracts that it is very, very easy not to care about. The greater the poverty, the less anyone cares. To bring that home, when was the last time you thought about the cashier at the Quik-Trip? Asked them about their life and family, their interests and hobbies? We shame those who do not have high-paying careers, we fear being those people ourselves. We objectify workers and reduce people to numbers on a balance sheet, even as we fear that happening to us.

This happens even here at Emerson. Although I guarantee that nobody here, least of all our hard-working Board, wants to dehumanize anyone, around budget time I am reduced to a "pledge unit" instead of Claudia, a person full of hopes and dreams, needs and wants, life and love. Is that all I am? A "pledge unit"? Even here, in the heart of liberal, life-affirming spirituality we fight the systemic objectification of people...and sometimes we lose.

So what can our faith do to speak out against these oppressive systems that dehumanize in the name of profit? How can we reclaim the inherent worth and dignity of all persons, regardless of paycheck? Speaking out on the subject is a first step, one that Krista has been taking on from the pulpit with her series on the various ways we label and objectify others. Developing awareness of the ways in which we participate in dehumanizing systems is a second step, one that our faith encourages us to engage in, especially when it makes us

uncomfortable. That very discomfort is a sign we have growing to do. The growth cannot stop there, however, we must engage in challenging the systems, actively and vocally, and lovingly, helping the places we work to see individuals as human beings of value and worth. This is both an inner work, learning for ourselves not to dehumanize and objectify ourselves and others; and it is an outer work, as we advocate against systems of oppression and dehumanization. It is an inner work here at Emerson, as we seek to be lovingly uncomfortable with each other in order to grow together in covenant, seeing each other not as units of any kind, but as people of worth and dignity; it is an outer work as we leave this place and go into the places we engage daily with this life-affirming message: people have value, and work should be about making the world a better place, not just dollars in a bank account. Profit at any cost is harmful and wrong, and must be tempered with respect for human dignity, and with respect for the planet.

This is not easy work, and I daresay we will go back-and-forth for centuries to come, sometimes better and sometimes worse, but our faith gives us a bedrock ideal to measure the progress of both our personal lives and the systems we live in. May the affirmation of inherent worth and dignity, as well as the other Principles we affirm, become a reality both here at Emerson, and the places we impact. Amen, and Blessed Be.

i Joseph Campbell, quoted at http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/j/joseph_campbell.html
A note about this font-face (Century Gothic), it may reduce ink usage by about 30%.