

From songwriter Joe Hill, a member of the International Workers of the World:

Workers of the world awaken! Rise in all your splendid might.  
Take the wealth that you are making, it belongs to you by right.  
No one will for bread be crying, we'll have freedom, love, and health.  
When the grand red flag is flying, in the Worker's Commonwealth.

Happy May Day. May 1<sup>st</sup> is Workers' Day, or the International Day of Labor, is a celebration of the international labor movement, and left-wing organizations, including socialists, anarchists, and anti-globalization activists, trade unionists, and social action groups. In Toronto today, in Christie Pits Park, there is a rally to support the "struggle of millions of working people around the world to demand social justice and peace for all." The fight started in the 1880s, when the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions initially advocated for the 8 hour work day, and called for general strikes to achieve this goal. In the face of indifference and violent hostility, including the injury and death of many, these brave workers held on until their goals were achieved.

I know that Labour Day is actually on September 5<sup>th</sup>, a long holiday weekend that, at least informally, marks the end of summer holidays and the beginning of school, the church year, and so forth. It's a time often celebrated with barbeques and get-togethers. Labor Day is actually a gift to us from the New York Central Labor Union, who instituted this holiday in 1882 to honor organized labor by providing a day off for working citizens. They sought to illustrate the contributions to society of working people and the strength of labor unions. Canada, of course, has its own rich history of labor organizing, and the first Monday in September was declared Labour Day in 1894 by Prime Minister John Thompson. The United States Congress formalized the celebration of Labor Day in 1894, as well.

Labor unions aren't as prominent as they once were, but we continue to enjoy the fruits of their historic advocacy and struggle. Our ability to enjoy the delights of holiday weekends, to relax and enjoy our leisure, is possible only because of the commitment of brave men and women who faced intimidation and violence to earn the right to time off from work, to weekends, vacation time, and fair pay, among other things. Just this week, there were at least two articles in *The Spectator* – one about workplace safety and one about farm-workers losing their union rights as a result of a Supreme Court decision.

As Unitarian Universalists who are committed to justice, we remember those who helped earn the 8 hour work day, the 40 hour work week, paid vacations and holidays – even though at times, in our modern lives, the norms of work often seem to more resemble working conditions of the 1800s than those fought for and won by unions.

We need to remember that the work of unions is still important in many sectors of the economy, and that worker rights groups are still fighting for the needs of farm workers, those in the hospitality industry, and those who provide domestic and janitorial services.

It's important, I believe, as Canadians go to the polls tomorrow, to remember what we've inherited from those who went before, who struggled and fought for precious

freedoms and rights which we now enjoy. It's important to consider their legacy as we make choices and decisions that will affect us and the lives of our children and children's children.

In my work life, I have, at times, been a union employee and involved in worker action. Fortunately for me and my colleagues, the strikes were short, negotiations productive. Over 20 years ago, I met a man who helped me better understand the importance of unions. Hearing about his experience on the front lines of worker action helped me gain a perspective on how far things had come since the time when he'd been a labor organizer.

I met Nils when I was working for a non-profit organization that provided education and job training to seasonal and migrant farmworkers. He was a Board member and we had many opportunities to talk about his history in the labor movement. When I met him, Nils was in his late 70s, a still-powerful oak cask of a man with a shock of white hair and a serious face that could easily be coaxed into a broad, joyful smile with the merest slip of a joke. He was a bit of a character who loved to tell stories and who always wore flip-flops, even on formal occasions. Originally from Norway, he'd come to the West Coast to work as a longshoreman on the docks of San Francisco in the 1930s. His experiences there led him to a life-long involvement in the causes of workers, pushing for reasonable wages, adequate sanitation and safety, and fair treatment.

In the early 1930s, Nils had joined with other San Francisco dock workers to form a union. He was proud of what they had done to make positive changes in working conditions for stevedores. But the price was high in the West Coast Longshore Strike of 1934. Fights broke out along the Embarcadero. To quell pickets and control sympathizer gatherings, police first shot tear gas into the crowds, then later shotguns, to break up the protesters. People were killed. The strike lasted for several days, spreading up and down the ports of the West Coast. Eventually, the results included changes in workloads and reductions in hours for worker safety, along with expansions of protection for workers of color.

I learned from Nils that needed change doesn't always come easily or through a calm and civil process of negotiation. He helped me understand why action is important and a commitment to worker justice doesn't end when your own contract has been signed. He helped me understand the labor that went into Labor Day.

Summer is coming, they say, and as the holidays arrive, perhaps you'll be going to a gathering of some kind. Imagine that at this event, you run into people you don't know, you're introduced to new neighbors or the friends of friends. The usual greetings and small talk ensue, of course, but soon, in an effort to continue the conversation, that time-honored question will be asked, "So, what is it that you do?" It's common enough and most of us would include ourselves as a part of the larger class of working people – we who exchange our time, skill, and expertise for a paycheck. There is something that we "do" that has a job title and a set of responsibilities.

We think that what someone does for a living, or perhaps the ways in which they talk about their employment, will give us clues to who they really are. For those who are fortunate, what they do to earn money is actually a close fit with who they see themselves, at heart and soul, to be. For them, their employment is an extension of their nature and the work to which they apply themselves in life is an integral part of who they are.

But, that's certainly not true for everyone, or perhaps for any of us throughout all of the years of our lives. I'm sure all of us, at one time or another, have had a job or two that we certainly hope was NOT a true and complete representation of who we are as a human creature. Some of us would certainly hope that we are able to expend our life's energy in being more than a "wage slave," believing that there's more to life, and more to our life's work, than what we do to fill our bank account. To the extent that what we do to earn a living is a reflection of what we do to build a life, I think issues about the role of work, in all of its various manifestations, are complex ones.

Beyond earning a living, I think we have lots of potential "work" to do during our lifetimes, only some of it for which we get paid. There is the work that we do to grow and expand our intellect and understanding, to fulfill ourselves mentally and to realize our potential or ideals. There's the work we do in service to others, in support of the larger community and the world. There's the work we do to achieve our biologic potential, surviving and forwarding life, rearing children, and educating and nurturing future generations. There's the work of our spirit, seeking wisdom and understanding, potentially attaining enlightenment. There's the work of loving and being there with and for others, to feel and to enjoy the act of living. That's a lot of possible "work" to accomplish in a lifetime, in addition to earning a living.

Questions about life's purpose have a long and extensive tradition. Philosophers have pondered the meaning of life. From the ancient Greeks, we've inherited the view that the meaning of life is in attaining the highest form of knowledge and that our efforts in life have the goal of creating "good." Our forebears in the 19<sup>th</sup> century continued to explore the meaning of life, noting the influence of pain and pleasure, the two "sovereign masters" of our existence, and the importance of working to create the "greatest happiness" as a focus for life. More recently, existentialists have posited about the role of reason, life-inspiring goals, and commitment in forming one's life purpose. Humanist philosophers tell us that people determine human purpose, without supernatural influence, and that we are here to develop and fulfill our human potential and personality.

We know that our "work" as human in this life is the subject of religious consideration and dogma, as well. From the Buddhists, we can explore the role of suffering in life, and the path that leads to its cessation. In the faiths of the Abrahamic tradition, the purpose of life is to worship and serve God. For Hindus, the goal of life is to know that one's soul, or atman, is identical to the Brahman, or supreme soul, in an effort to achieve liberation from the reincarnation cycle. Science has helped us explore life, from the primary function of insuring the survival of our gene pool to the development of normative behavior. Life's great questions have inspired artists and writers and playwrights and musicians for thousands of years. And, if you ask the person on the street, you'll hear answers that range over a wide spectrum, from realizing one's ideals and potential, to seeking wisdom and knowledge, to attaining spiritual enlightenment, to conclusions that life or human existence ultimately has no meaning at all.

It seems that for life's larger questions, there are as many answers as there are people to consider them. All of the philosophies and religions have their point, but ultimately, we still don't know the purpose and meaning of life, with unwavering certainty. And, while that may seem a bit discouraging, I've realized that, for me, it is

also quite freeing, as well. If life can have so many reasons and purposes, I'm not limited to trying to be, act, think, or feel in conformation to any single principle or purpose.

And, of all of the things I don't know about life, I do believe that we are alive in order to live, fully and completely, the moments that we are given. If I don't have to spend my time worrying about whether I'm adequately fulfilling some grand scheme or larger purpose, I have the ability to explore and live my purpose in this moment, to be fully present to what is happening in my life right now, to respond to the people and circumstances that present themselves to me, and to be engaged and available to what is actually happening in life as it unfolds. That becomes my life's work, to be alive in ways that let me explore and examine my purpose, that call me to create my own meaning in the life that I've been given, whatever I may do for a living.

There are lots of ways to ask someone what they do for a job, but there are very few ways to ask someone about their life's work, their purpose. Yet, in the beloved community of our faith, these are exactly the kinds of questions we should be asking ourselves and others. One of the joys of being together is creating the space and time with each other that encourages our exploration. It's one of our Seven Principles because Unitarian Universalists believe that the search for meaning is one of life's worthy goals and that living that meaning is the ultimate purpose of the years we have.

We benefit from the gift of time, handed down to us by the many we celebrate on May Day, the international day of labor; time to consider and live the life we have been given, to enjoy each other and the beauty of the world, to be renewed in hope despite tragedy and disappointment, to do the work of the world beyond the mere need to earn a living.

Find your own answer to the ultimate questions – Who are you? Why are you here? What do you owe the world? What will you do?

And may your life be blessed as you live out the answers that you find. Amen.