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Abstract

"Something about the way we practice Labor Day itself suggests we're not all that sincere about valuing labor or at least valuing *all* labor."

Posting about attitudes about work from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

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Labor Day, the Side-Eye Holiday

Howard Schaap

I can't help but think of Labor Day as the side-eye holiday—as in, it's the holiday to which we give the side-eye. We distrust it, or don't quite know what to do with it. This is not true everywhere, of course, but on the whole, Labor Day is the holiday we're most ill-at-ease with here in the US.

Consider the other major US patriotic holidays and how we celebrate them: Memorial Day, a.k.a. Decoration Day, when we remember those we have lost and decorate their graves; Independence Day, when we maybe watch a parade and definitely grill out and watch fireworks that simulate the “bombs bursting in air” of the national anthem; even Veteran's Day, when we go to—or could go to—a program at the local high school with presentation of flags, a speech, and a song.

But Labor Day? Maybe there's one last barbecue in the hopper, a trip to the local state fair, or one last trip to the lake, but as for collective rituals or large communal get-togethers—nada.

Why is this?

The answers to this question are complex because our attitudes about work—“labor”—are complex.

First, there's the history of Labor Day itself. Labor Day was the creation of early labor unions, seeking such rights for workers as a six-day work week (as in, down from seven days) and an eight-hour work day. In New York City, workers from trade unions created the first Labor Day by all going on strike on the first Monday of September. On that first

Labor Day, workers from multiple trades marched in a parade and then picnicked in the park while listening to political speeches.

So if we were to create larger Labor Day traditions, that's probably where we would start: workers with the tools of their trade marching in solidarity with each other, and afterwards, picnics and political speakers.

However, that recipe—marching, picnicking, politicking—is a recipe for side-eye and more, at least from the point of view of official institutions, because it's stereotypically a recipe for violence or even revolution.

The *other* day notorious for workers marching and protesting is May 1, International Workers Day, which hits something deep down in our American DNA. We arguably distrust getting workers together out of a deep set fear of Communism. May Day is still a day known for its protests around the world, and we want no part of that.

Seriously, just try marching a group of workers down the street toward a political rally and see what kind of attention that gets.

Of course, it's not too hard to imagine this kind of march happening. Ironically, if we were to pair a workers' parade with the recent 4th of July military parade held in Washington, D.C., we'd have created a very interesting spectacle: the US of A, leader of Western democratic capitalism, *also* keeping alive old communist traditions.

Cold War nostalgia aside, there's the very name of the holiday: *Labor* Day.

Merriam-Webster defines labor as “expenditure of physical or mental effort especially when difficult or compulsory.” Difficult. Compulsory. Nuff said. Yes, we'll celebrate *Dirty Jobs* along with Mike Rowe, and we'll tell our own stories about dead-end, bore-you-to-tears jobs, but almost always these are cautionary tales about what can happen if you don't get on the train to bigger and better and more acceptable jobs.

Which takes us to part B of Merriam-Webster's definition of “Labor”: “Human activity that provides the goods or services in an economy...as distinguished from those rendered by entrepreneurs for profits.”

We live in an entrepreneurial economy. We look up to entrepreneurs, we want to be them, and therefore we keep conditions favorable to create them. This entrepreneur-fascination of ours probably could be a zero-sum game, but in recent history it has not been. Just check out the **wage gap** between workers and CEOs since the 1950s. Where our money is, there our heart is also.

More than any other US holiday, Labor Day is a holiday to consider justice, and justice always makes us blush. In addition to how far we've come, Labor Day should probably remind us of where we've been and how far we still have to go in terms of fair compensation for fair labor, for safe working conditions and equality, and we'd rather not think about all these things.

In fact, something about the way we practice Labor Day itself suggests we're not all that sincere about valuing labor or at least valuing *all* labor. It turns out Labor Day is a one of the biggest retail days of the year. We expect goods and services on Labor Day, so we expect a fair amount of people to work on Labor Day. One might think Labor Day had become like every other holiday, a reason to shop as opposed to reason to truly honor laborers.

Of course, some of our awkwardness with Labor Day also comes from an understanding of work as fundamental and honorable. For many people, work is not something you need to be thanked for—work is its own reward. You do it because there's one way to do work and it's the right way. Thus, some of the hardest of workers look at Labor Day and are sort of embarrassed by it.

There's the side-eye again.

I suspect that all of our ambivalence for Labor Day comes from deeper roots. Some of us consider work a curse. Some of us are tied to work like a millstone while others are addicted to it. Likewise, some of us are addicted to leisure. Some of us see work and leisure as flipsides of the same coin in a kind of schizophrenia. Some of us see work as the all-important thing and a certain kind of worker as expendable. Many of us serve the god Mammon, which disfigures both work and fair compensation for work—in both directions, too much compensation for some and too little for others. All of us are complicit in injustice in some way.

Even scripture is complicated when it comes to work. Yes, Ecclesiastes sets out enjoying your work as one of the greatest blessings of life, but that proviso comes in the midst of a profoundly skeptical book in which “everything is meaningless” (1:2). Paul says that our “labor in the Lord is not in vain” (I Corinthians 15:58), which often leads toward another dualism, valuing church or spiritual work over regular tasks. It's hard to imagine Paul saying this line about sweatshop labor, for instance—and dangerous to give that slogan to the captains of industry.

So what's the solution for understanding work and leisure? On the one hand, there's not a one-size-fits-all solution. Even the Sabbath, Paul tells us, might be a different day for

some. Then again, the Sabbath principle remains: set aside one day out of seven, maybe two days out of fourteen for a slightly different work schedule, for rest and worship.

There's also the answer of seasonality, another one of Ecclesiastes' broad answers—there's a season for everything under heaven (Ecclesiastes 3:1). Working out this seasonal balance between work and rest takes, well, work.

Recently, a young farmer told me about his breaking point when it came to work. Faced with the day-in, day-out mountain of work before him, he became so overwhelmed by it all that he just slumped down in the alley of his hog confinement. He needed the wonderful freedom that is Sabbath: finding a way to set aside work and worry for rest and worship.

However, farming offers another illustration of how work and leisure can go together—when work and leisure become part of the same fabric. Some farmers I've known get very uncomfortable with a "day off." This discomfort can be a distortion—when a person comes to be so defined by their work that they cannot imagine anything but that work can mean a kind of blindness. But it can also mean that work and leisure are integrated so closely in a person's life that the person doesn't need to chase after exotic experiences to hang above the mantle. Rather, they find peace and leisure right where they are. When work and leisure work together this closely, it is a beautiful thing to behold. Another biblical concept arises when this wholeness is the case: contentment.

I work in education, a notorious whipping boy for the seasonality of work. It's true that the academic schedule creates feast or famine in terms of work and leisure. It's filled with periods of incredible intensity followed by bouts of downtime. Both can literally drive you mad. August is an anxious month for me; May is a white-knuckled, hold-on-at-all-costs month; June is an adrift at sea month. Ecclesiastes' ideas about seasonality, understanding the rise and fall of work and leisure, become very important.

"Do your work and I shall know you," says Emerson in his essay "Self-Reliance." Even that line is a double-edged sword. Meaningful work is a wonderful expression of humanity. Then again, I have always found the saying "We are human beings, not human doings" convincing for the opposite reason. I am not my work.

So where does that leave us? With complexity, as with all things under heaven. Labor Day is a side-eye holiday because it's a human holiday, one that begs hard questions about just what it means to be human. And a Christian's celebration of Labor Day will likewise be complex because it will consider things like work, leisure, and justice.

So this Labor Day, let us be thankful for good work, let us work and pray for justice, and let us examine our own sense of what it means to work, play, study, rest, worship, all in their proper seasons, and so be more fully human.