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Labor Day: Stories of Work

James C. Schaap

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Labor Day: Stories of Work

Abstract

"Covid has forced us to honor people who've never made more than minimum wage yet suddenly have become irreplaceable."

Posting about the value of 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.

<https://inallthings.org/labor-day-stories-of-work/>

Keywords

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Disciplines

Christianity | Labor History

Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt University](#).

in things

September 7, 2020

Labor Day: Stories of Work

James Calvin Schaap

She remembers sitting up on the wagon and hearing the cobs bang, remembers horses going up the field pretty much on their own as Ma and Pa picked ears and flung 'em off the bang board. Remembers, she says, how the sharp edges of a thousand corn leaves could cut up your arm real good.

She remembers bringing a load home from the field at night in the dark. She was just a girl, but she remembers one winter when they finished picking corn on New Year's Day! Believe it?

She remembers coming into the yard, tending horses, unhitching them from the wagon, following them to the barn; remembers how they'd roll around in barnyard dust; remembers hanging up halters just so, so that the next day, when, once again, you went back to work in early morning darkness, it didn't take you half a day to untangle 'em.

All of that she remembers in a memoir she wrote describing her life on a farm, a childhood in sweat and dirt and manure that reads a bit nostalgically because she delivers all those memories with a homey gaiety. Handpicking corn was hard work; that's what she wants her children to know once she goes. But it was noble, honorable. That's true too, and they ought to understand as much.

She remembers that first single-row corn picker, a blessing that freed the whole bunch of them from having to spend fall and half the winter trudging through wet and cold to get it all out. My goodness, how things moved faster with that miracle-worker. Finally, they could retire those husking gloves in the barn with other tools mechanization made obsolete, a museum left happily behind.

She remembers all of that as if those were “the good old days,” but she knows better than to say it. She’s doing what most every old gent and missus ends up doing in the face of change they’d rather not make, telling her children that way back when, Grandpa’s life—and Grandma’s too—had lots more dignity than she has today, alone, over there in the Home.

She’s bringing back what’s no longer retrievable, an era no one hopes ever returns because today you’d be out of your mind to pick forty acres of corn by hand. No fool would.

The worst, she says, was having to go back to that full wagon after chores, after milking, after taking care of the horses, after supper. It was nighttime, she says in this spiral-bound book she wrote, but all that corn had to be shoveled off the wagon. Hard, hard work. Shoulders ached too, don’t you know?

That’s what she remembers, and that’s what she remembers fondly, not because it was fun, not because it was a joy, but because finally, dead tired, you could lay yourself down, flop out on your bed, and fall to sleep in a flash *because* the job got done.

There’s no other way to describe it, I guess—even though, she remembers, you start the whole back-breaking job again the next day, and it’s not over until it’s over. You’re back at it before the sun rises.

All of that she told me. All of that is in the xeroxed, spiral-bound book she gave me, the book she wrote herself. She wanted her children to know what life was like way back when she was a child.

Covid-19 has taught us to honor Labor Day in a new way—or it should. A whole new assembly line of workers now seem suddenly perfectly essential: meat-packers, grocery store clerks, mechanics, hospital dishwashers. It’s never been a problem to thank police and fire fighters, nurses and doctors, and all kinds of first responders; but Covid has forced us to honor people who’ve never made more than minimum wage yet suddenly have become irreplaceable—nurses aides in old folks’ homes. And now, teachers.

How we’ve worked has changed immensely in the last century, but Covid has forced us to see an arsenal of ordinary people with whom, literally, we couldn’t live without.

Thank you. This year—this day—Labor Day, is all yours.

There's more to the story. There are things I'm not telling you.

After chapel in the Home, we used to have coffee with the woman who wrote out her whole life story. There she'd sit along with a table full of other seniors, most of them older.

When I returned her book, I told her I really liked it—and I did. “What a great thing to do,” I told her, “to write that book and leave it here behind for the kids.”

She waved her hand as if slapping off a bug. “Ach, they don't care,” she said.

“C'mon,” I said.

“Don't come see me neither,” she told me, “none of my kids. They don't bother.”

It wasn't the first time that bitterness showed its face on hers.

“They live here?” I asked. I didn't know her family.

“Couple of 'em,” she said, “but they don't come by. They don't care. They're too darn busy.” Shrugged her shoulders. “It's about all they do is work, all of them.”

She caught me with that line.

None of the 90+ year-olds around the table were quite as free to say how anxious she was to leave this life, and she was the only one who still lived in independent living. Every week she'd remind us.

I don't think Max Weber was entirely out of line when he claimed capitalism had its origins in a Calvinist mind. He created a phrase that may well be more precious to Siouxlanders than silver and gold—“a Protestant Work Ethic”— which is to say, ours. We've got it, and we're not afraid to admit it, or even flaunt it.

But then there's this:

We love free stuff, the more the merrier; but it's passing strange that the one thing in life that's offered freely is something we want so badly to work for and to earn—salvation.

That line isn't mine, but I've used it often because of the catchy irony that traps most of us when we hear it unrolled.

It's Labor Day all right, a holiday meant to celebrate work and those who do it, because such things need to be celebrated.

Psalm 90 means different things when you're thirty or when you're seventy, but the truth of the gem from verse 17 seems ever rich. It starts this way in the King James: "Let the beauty of the Lord be upon us." First, the beauty of the Lord, and then, resultingly, "establish the work of our hands."

It's a new school year too, an extraordinary year which will make demands no one has imagined. What better time to say, on this Labor Day, no matter if you're teaching Max Weber or picking corn, "establish the work of our hands," and again, "yea, the work of our hands establish thou it."