

Work: Labor or a Labor of Love

A Lay-Led service of Sharing

The Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden - August 31st 2014

Note: This Lay-Led service featured perspectives on the theme of meaningful work from four members of the Congregation. These are the contributions of each.

Andy Bean:

I always knew I wanted to be doing “meaningful work” when I grew up.

My beliefs about what constitutes “meaningful work” originate in the faith of my childhood. I grew up Catholic, and attended Catholic schools and a Catholic youth group for many years. Our youth group spent a lot of time exploring the Catholic Social Teachings. We explored topics such as immigration reform, environmental stewardship, and the rights of the poor and disadvantaged in society, through a progressive Catholic lens. This was great, although after a time, I could no longer reconcile many aspects of the Catholic faith.

I am now a regional field director at the Connecticut Democratic Party. I work with a staff of 7 to help facilitate the volunteer efforts of progressives in Waterbury, Cheshire, Wolcott, Cromwell, Portland, Wallingford, Durham, Middlefield, Middletown, Southington, Berlin, and Meriden. I have not always worked for the CDP – in fact CT is the 7th state I’ve worked in. Countless images on Pinterest will tell you “if you do what you love, you’ll never work a day in your life.” I do not always love what I do, but I always find it meaningful. You see, I have worked for the Liberty Tree Foundation battling the slash-and-burn politics of WI Governor Scott Walker. I have worked for Environment Montana, pushing to ban new oil and gas drilling in the federal lands just outside of Glacier National Park. I worked to reelect President Barack Obama and most recently before moving to Connecticut, I worked for the Sierra Club. I worked a 6 month contract for them, successfully ending a 9 year battle against a \$2.8 billion coal-gasification plant. I have not always enjoyed this work. Organizing in the progressive movement can often be emotionally and physically exhausting. I often work about 90 hours a week. 90 long hours. 90 long hours away from my beautiful partner, Samantha. The pay is not great and there is no job security. If I do a lousy job, and voter participation is at an all-time low in my towns, I get laid off in November. If I do an amazing job, more voters turn out in my towns than have ever in their history, I will be laid off in November.

What keeps me going is the knowledge that I am doing meaningful work. As a UU, I believe in the 5th Principle - I ‘affirm the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large.’ But while the Roman Catholic Church and I have differing opinions of a wide array of topics these days I think they make the point better: “We believe people have a right *and a duty* to participate in society, seeking together

the common good and well-being of all, especially the poor and vulnerable.” “*a duty to participate in society, seeking together the common good and well-being of all*”

Nancy Burton:

My name is Nancy Burton, I have been a Unitarian Universalist for 14 years. I have been a nurse-midwife 38 years and a nurse for 42 years. I really don't identify much as a nurse. I identify as a midwife and being a midwife has been a very big part of my identity and who I am.

Midwifery is definitely a calling for me. I didn't know there was anything called nurse-midwifery until I was in nursing school but when I heard learned of this profession it felt like an immediate fit. I truly believe I was born to be a midwife.

It has always been easy to fit midwifery into my UU values. We say in our affirmation that service is our prayer. I never considered anything but a service profession and I know with this profession I am truly performing a service. I don't think anything can put you more in touch with our UU values of respect for the interdependent web of life and honoring the inherent worth and dignity of all people than assisting new life into this world and a new family to be born. It is also the respect for the inherent worth and dignity of all life that has led to my long struggle with the issue of abortion. As a feminist and a progressive political person people might expect that I would be out there marching for abortion rights. But I can't do this. I truly do believe that life begins at conception. However, I also know that women need to have control over their own destinies. I certainly do not want to return to the era of back street coat hanger abortions. So I have somewhat come to terms with the fact that I will never reach a comfortable place on this issue. I do not, however, share my struggle with my patients because it is my job to support them on what ever journey they choose to take.

Midwifery is sort of a glamor profession. When I am with a group of people and I say that I am a midwife all other conversation tends to come to a stop for a moment and all attention gets focused on me for a bit. And yes there is something glamorous about assisting a new life to be born. But it is also a hard profession. It is not easy to work 36 hours without sleep. It is not easy to be awoken from a deep sleep at 3 AM to go to work. It is not easy to wonder if you will miss Christmas or Thanksgiving with your family. There were many times that I had a love/hate relationship with my profession. But I never had to wonder if what I did had worth. I know that my work is worthwhile and that I am making a contribution.

Midwifery is not just about birthing. We spend a larger part of our time giving outpatient obstetric and gynecologic care to women and really I like that part even better because that is where you really form a relationship with the women that you are caring for, and sometimes make a real difference in their lives.

Being a mid level practitioner in health care, a nurse-midwife, nurse practitioner, or physician's assistant, can be frustrating and difficult at times. You are never at the top of the heap, you often have to answer to people who are younger and less experienced than you, and you don't always agree with what they want to do. I had to make a conscious decision that what I was contributing and what I was getting back from my work was worth the sacrifices and frustrations. I thought seriously about medical school before I went to midwifery school, but I knew I didn't want to be a doctor, I wanted to be a nurse-midwife. And I know I made the right decision.

My UU values and my tendency to activism also make it hard to be in health care today. A business ethic has taken over in a way that I have never seen before. It makes me glad that I am closing in on retirement age and that I will soon be leaving a profession I have truly loved. I am frustrated that practitioners in health care are letting this happen. I really think we have the power to change things if we all said--"Stop. We are not going to work this way. We have a higher calling." But most of my colleagues do not see this as part of their responsibility. I keep asking myself and sometimes out loud, "When are we going to be part of the solution?" I am convinced that the solution to our broken health care system will not come from within. It needs to come from without. I am hoping that someday this country changes its ways, and changes its priorities, and figures out what is really important—in my case giving care to people who need care.

Sharlene Kerelejza:

I had already spent some time as a social work student in a rape crisis center before I learned the cliché, "We can only give what we have to give." Perhaps you've heard it as "You can't fill a glass from an empty well." Or maybe, "You can only love someone else as much as you love yourself."

However it's spoken, the message is the same. "Healer, first heal thy self." I was backwards, a nineteen year old survivor of violence, suffering through, trying to find meaning in it all. If I could give to others what I never had, but a compassion I was just finding, perhaps I could heal that insatiably wounded and empty place. In social work, we call it the "wounded healer." Typically, it is not a compliment. Yet, far too often, it's how we find our way into this field. We land here for a reason. The particulars may vary, but undoubtedly it's to right a wrong, balance a scale, give back, or pay it forward.

However it happens, I have learned that it comes from a deep soul place that yearns to love ourselves.

It's hard, however. It's hard to work in a field of mending when our culture continues to blame those who've been hurt. One day, I may be the first person to offer a family who fled violence the night before a meal, even though it's nearly 4pm. The next day, I may be begging a potential funder to open their hearts and stop asking women why they stay, instead of opening their checkbook to keep women and children alive.

There is a myth that when we find work we love it doesn't feel like work; and for this Labor Day reflection, that's the myth I'd like to challenge. I am a social worker and a non-profit administrator. I am a teacher and leader. I am a "CT Working Moms blogger" and a "Record-Journal columnist". I am a wife, a mom, a daughter, a friend.

I am tired. It all feels like work. Yet, I love what I do.

I work after the kids go to bed. I exercise on my lunch breaks. I go to therapy to purge the -stories of atrocities experienced and retold by those I serve. I hold a staff who hears more than I do. I negotiate to offer them salary increases even though we haven't seen an increases in a contract dollar amounts. I cultivate donors, teach men to embrace an image of masculinity that's healthy, and attend far too many meetings that make far too little progress. It is true labor. It is exhausting, time-intensive, and often without glory. It's a life-saving business without flash, especially when I have to convince folks that these are lives worth saving. There are moments. Like last week, when a struggling but determined student finally gets to hear me say "you're hired;" When a family of three is told "yes, we have warm, safe beds." When I hear from a client of 4 years ago, telling me the greatest gift in being safe and free is watching her son's face when he can invite a friend over to play outside, without fear. One of the most humbling conversations I had was with a mom, before she left our services, "I got a job!" "It's a little job", she added, as if mine was so big and important in comparison.

"I'm a part-time lunch lady. But it pays for our food, and it pays our rent, and I'm home for my son when he gets off the bus. I love the kids: every day I get to pass on smiles and kindness to all these kids over lunch, right when they're hungry."

Is her job any less worthy than mine? When we labor IN love, it doesn't matter what we're doing. We can love the grass we cut or the earth we're helping to clean. We can love smiling at customers and making their day in the drive thru line. I can love those I serve and my staff who serve them. I can love a community who can't decide whether they really believe that EVERY life is equally valuable. Perhaps what I've learned most of all is this. Love is not simply a feeling, but a choice. We can choose to labor IN love over and again, as we wake up each morning and center ourselves for the day. Today, let's choose love.

Douglas Peary:

Prior to 1935, during the depression and earlier, violence in the work place and suffering of men, women and children was very common as shown in movies like the 1919 "No God, No Master."

Congress enacted the National Labor Relations Act in 1935 to protect the rights of employees, Unions and Employers, to encourage collective bargaining, and to curtail violence.

I was raised as a Fundamentalist Christian, worked at limited jobs and studied to be a Fundamentalist Minister in the 1960's. I went to College and UU Seminary in the 1970's. By the time I graduated and was ordained as a UU Minister and certified as a Humanist Celebrant in 1979, I realized I was studying to learn what I could believe.

I searched for work as a Labor Relations specialist for an Employer to try to make a difference. I discovered the position of Field Examiner, for the National Labor Relations Board, which investigates private Employers, their employees and Unions. Other Agencies investigate railroads and airlines, and Federal and State Agencies.

I spent 30 years of my life with the NLRB. I worked in California in the early 1980's covering Central California and Northern Nevada. I worked in Connecticut from 1985 to 2010, with a couple of elections at the Bath Iron Works Ship yard in Maine. I was on the investigation team of the only case in Connecticut to go to the Supreme Court of the United States, and I was on the team in the biggest Settlement case in Connecticut, \$16,000,000.00. I held and copied a check for \$10,000,000.00, which we posted in the office.

Agents of the NLRB must remain neutral in law toward all parties but the majority of Agents believed that employees should gain their rights with the help of Unions if they wanted. Usually the five, ever changing, members of the NLRB in Washington seemed to favor Employers, and employee's rights were curbed.

While I worked for the NLRB I also wrote and published about the lives and beliefs of Humanist Heroes. One of my Heroes is Labor Attorney Clarence Darrow. He said at a trial about Labor Unions in 1909, "Let me tell you, gentlemen, if you destroy the labor unions in this country, you destroy liberty when you strike the blow, and you ... leave the poor bound ... and helpless, to do the bidding of the rich. It would take this country back to the time when there were masters and slaves. I don't mean ... that labor organizations do no wrong. ... They do wrong often, and sometimes brutally; they are sometimes cruel; ... unjust; ... corrupt. But in a great cause these labor organizations, ... have stood for the poor, the weak, for human law. They stood for human life, for the father .. the wife, threatened to be taken from the home, the little child ... taken to work in their places that the rich could grow richer still. ... I don't care how many wrongs they committed, I don't care how many crimes these ... rugged, unlettered men ... who find themselves bound ... and impaired whichever way they turn. ... I don't care ... how many brutalities they are guilty of. I know their cause is just.

I, Douglas Peary also know that many Employers are still brutal or uncaring and richer than ever. They often do wrong and they are sometimes ... unjust and corrupt. Unfortunately Union leaders now are sometimes more educated but also may be corrupt and abuse employees. ... Without the Unions the only good that comes to employees would not happen.

Professor James A. Gross of Cornell University, wrote a three volume text book of the National Labor Relations policy, and in 1996 Published a book titled "Broken Promise, the subversion of U.S. Labor Relations Policy, 1947 to 1994," which explains how the U.S. Government failed the working people of America.

More recently, in March 2009, "The Employee Free Choice Act" was introduced to Congress, which would have helped employees. Congress voted it down.

I agree with Darrow and Gross because, thanks to Congress, most of the rich still tread on employees and overwhelmingly influence the laws of this country.