

James L. Holly, M.D.

Labor Day – 2008
The Intrinsic Worth of the Laborer
By James L. Holly
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Annually, the first Monday of September is set aside for the celebration of Labor Day. It is on this day that the United States of America recognizes that the backbone of this country is formed by the men and women who labor daily to provide a living for their families and who in doing so not only make a life for the family but also provide the support for the growth and success of our nation.

The greatness of a nation is established by how workers are valued and cared for by society. While the rich, famous and powerful are heralded as the captains of capitalism; while the entrepreneurs, speculators and often what could be called “manipulators” are rewarded financially, it is the laborers who sustain the nation. It is those who quietly nurture their families, leading them to obey the law, to follow the rules, to work hard and to be true to their faith, who are the real heroes of our society.

On Labor Day, we focus upon a different view of the work of those whom we praise on Mother’s Day and Father’s Day. How often do we consciously remember that those with whom we work, or for whom we work, or that those who work for us, are also Fathers, Mothers, brothers and sisters, sons and daughters? On Labor Day, we should remember that the nurse who works in our hospital is the mother of a child who looks upon her as we do upon our own mother. We should remember that the person whom we see as an employee is entrusted with the nurturing of children and families as precious and dear to them as ours are to us. As we do, we will truly value the laborer and let them know that we value them by how we respond to them personally.

The promise of Labor Day is that each person who works in a store, a restaurant, a plant, indeed, in any job, will be treated with the dignity, respect and appreciation with which we would want our father, mother, brother, sister, son or daughter to be treated. It is on this special day that a society, which is so envious of and which so desires to be like the rich and famous, joins hands with all of those who are just like all of us and celebrates the reality that we – the laborers of the world – are the spring from which all power, wealth and value comes. When each worker is esteemed, not as a cog in a wheel, replaceable and interchangeable, but as an essential and unique contributor to the integrity of the wheel, we will rediscover the real meaning of Labor Day!

It is when we acknowledge the personhood of others that we can and do recognize their true value in the work force. When the waitress is not a faceless, non-person who meets your needs but when he or she is an individual with intrinsic value and unique identify, you will celebrate Labor Day every day. You will celebrate Labor Day every day, as you address the waitress as a person, rewarding her or him, not only with your monetary gift, which we call a “tip,” but with your smile, with your greeting, with your appreciation of the task they do for you, through which they provide for their needs and the needs of their family. You fulfill the promise of Labor Day when you contribute to the sending of that

waitress home to his or her family with the satisfaction that they have interacted with people who cared for them and who valued their person.

When the clerk is harried and rushed by the press of busy shoppers, and when we smile at them and greet them with an appreciative word, we affirm their intrinsic value, as they meet our needs. They may go home tired and with hurting feet, but their heart can be gay and joyful because they have been treated like a person and their Labor has been celebrated that Day, as a kind patron practices the promise of Labor Day every day.

Much of the social, political and economic theory upon which this country is founded can be traced to the works of John Locke, a British philosopher (1632-1704). His concept of “utility” was the basis on which value was added to an object or an activity by labor. If you owned a tree, that tree possessed utility for which you could expect a value to be given if someone desired to use that tree. If someone cut that tree down for the purpose of building a home, he act of cutting it down added utility to the tree, for which “utility,” the laborer could expect value. If another saw the tree into planks and planed them into boards, utility was added.

The great promise of Labor Day is that value – utility – did not only attach to objects but also to the person who performed an act which added utility to the object. Labor Day is the day in which we celebrate the laborer, not his labor. Labor Day is the day in which we acknowledge the intrinsic worth of the person of the laborer. It is actually the day in which we see the great leveling of society as we see that we are all essentially laborers, individuals who are adding value and utility to objections and activities. While society may rightly or wrongly reward one activity more than another, Labor Day allows us to remember that the value of the individual is not based on the size of the reward associated with their activity, but the value of the individual is associated with the intrinsic worth of every laborer regardless of the task they perform or the reward associated with it.

The evolution of our society required the activity of Labor Unions who forced society to remember that laborers were intrinsically valuable and not just for what they did. It was the labor movement who reminded society that laborers were mothers and father, sons and daughters, husbands and wives. It is the Labor Unions which re-introduced ethics and morals into the economic equations of capitalism. It was the labor movement which reminded society that every day is laborer’s day. Every day is the day in which we should express our appreciation to those who add value and utility to our lives.

And, when we stop to thank our Mothers and our Fathers on the days set aside for them, we not only thank the individuals whom we call Mom and Dad, but all individuals who labor daily to make a life for their family as they work to make a living for them. Happy Labor Day, Mom and Dad, whose ever Mom and Dad you are.

James L. Holly, MD
CEO, SETMA, LLP