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Labor Day: The Celebration of our Heroes Fathers and Mothers Who Labor for a Better Future for their Children By James L. Holly September 1, 2011

Since September, 1998, *The Examiner* has invited me to think about the significance of the day we designate as “Labor Day”. This fourteenth year brings us to the point of considering the “heroes” of our lives. For almost all of us, those heroes are the mothers and the fathers who worked hard, often at multiple jobs, so that we could have opportunities which they never had.

I thought about my heroes recently when I saw one of my favorite movies again. It is titled *October Sky* and like ever really great movie, it is a true story. It is the story of Homer Hickam who grew up in Coalwood, West Virginia. His father was the coal-mine manager and expected his son to follow in his steps, but Homer had different ideas. An interesting footnote to this story is that the movie is based on Homer’s book *Rocket Boys* which was published in 1998. The movie title is an anagram of the book title so that if you move the letters of *Rocket Boys* around, you make the movie name *October Sky*.

The themes in the movie which relate to Labor Day are:

1. Workers’ Safety
2. Corporate Indifference to worker welfare
3. Black Lung Disease
4. The Tension between a father and a son
5. The declaration, “You are my hero”

The story is of four boys who wanted to build a rocket. The subtext is about the dangers of mining coal, which dangers were accentuated by the cost-cutting shortcuts taken by the owners of the mines resulting in injury, death and disease in the workers. True to the real life experience, at one point Homer’s father is injured saving the lives of others in a mine accident. Homer’s father’s injuries were serious and included a skull fracture.

Corporate Indifference to Worker Welfare

Care was not available in Coalwood so the father was carried to the nearest large town. With no transportation, his wife could not accompany her husband and only later in the day found out the seriousness of the injuries. At the same time, she found out that the company would not cover all of the cost of his care. The first time I saw this movie, I was shocked and each successive viewing reminds me of the outrage I felt when I realized that this was the plight of many workers for many years. Today, few people would think that it was right or acceptable for a worker not to have his or her cost of care covered in its entirety for an on-the-job injury. Yet, we are reminded that what we now take for granted was once a rare occurrence.

And, unless we think the job is completely done both in this country and in the world, remember the 33 Chile copper mine workers who were trapped for 63 days. When they realized that the

mine was collapsing, they ran to the room which had been prepared for their survival only to discover that there was food and water for only a couple of days. The safety equipment had not been maintained. Rules and regulators, if not enforced and reviewed will often be neglected. And, now with health consequences remaining from their ordeal, these mine workers are being told, find yourself another job.

Worker Safety

How often have many of us been aggravated by the seemingly intrusive nature of safety regulations while forgetting that the right to a safe working environment and the right that your job should not adversely affect your health have been hard-won and they are rights which should not be compromised through our failure to remember from whence we have come. Many companies fret over OSHA audits and inspections not remembering that employee safety has not always been a mandated responsibility of employers.

With the Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970, Congress created the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) to ensure safe and healthful working conditions for working men and women by setting and enforcing standards and by providing training, outreach, education and assistance. OSHA is part of the United States Department of Labor. The administrator for OSHA is the Assistant Secretary of Labor for Occupational Safety and Health. OSHA's administrator answers to the Secretary of Labor, who is a member of the cabinet of the President of the United States. As I watched *October Sky*, I was consciously thankful that there is a national mandate in the United States for worker safety and health. I am also conscious that human nature being what it is, if there is no inspection and review of safety issues, we can lose what we have gained and the progress which is still needed will also be lost.

Pneumoconiosis

At one point in the movie, Homer's father tells Homer, "I am not afraid of a little coal dust." He should have been; he died in 1989 of complications of Black Lung disease. Black Lung is one of a group of diseases call "pneumoconiosis." These are diseases of the lungs caused by chronic inhalation of especially mineral or metallic dust.

Pneumoconiosis causes inflammation of the lungs. The lung tissue in normal people is very elastic. This allows it to expand and contract while breathing. In the common types of pneumoconiosis, fibrous tissue gets deposited in the lungs, the condition being called fibrosis. Fibrosis tends to stiffen the lung tissue and restrict its expansion. The affected person may develop breathing problems, cancer, and may even die due to the condition. It is important to diagnose the condition early, as the patient must be removed from the environment at the earliest. Also, preventive measures should be taken to protect other workers from the disease.

Deaths due to silicosis (asbestosis) and coal worker's pneumoconiosis in the United States have reduced during the past few years. Death due to asbestosis increased from 0.49 per million

persons in 1970 to 6.73 per million persons in 2000 and then slowly declined. However, these conditions continue to affect the health of a large number of workers.

Our Heroes

Homer became interested in rocketry by reading the stories of Werner von Braun and NASA. He had written Von Braun who sent him an autographed picture. In 1960, when he qualified to enter the state science fair, Homer's entry was awarded the top prize. Leaving the stage, he was asked by a reporter, "What did you think about meeting Von Braun? What did he say to you?" Homer turned to see and Von Braun had already disappeared in the crowd. Homer later showed medal to his father, who showed little interest. As Homer walked away, his father shouted to him, "I hear you met your hero and didn't even know it." Homer's father's attention was arrested and he was speechless when Homer responded, "I admire Von Braun and I want to do what he does, but YOU are my hero and always have been."

How many of us who chose different careers and life journeys than our fathers have had the opportunity to affirm to our fathers that while we are different and our interests are different, our fathers are still our heroes. As millions of sons, I loved to go to work with my father. I loved to watch him do things which I could and would never do. As he strapped on this "climbing hooks" and carried tools for repairing a line to the top of a pole, I marveled. I was always afraid of heights, but he would climb to the top of a an eighty-foot pole which was spliced to the top of a seventy-foot pole and work with both hands as the pole swayed back and forth.

My father never cared much about books but he taught me my love for books. For a year or more, when I was very young, my father worked in another town seventy miles away. He came home every Friday night and spent the weekend with us. He always brought my brother and me a Little Golden Book. I loved the stories and I really loved the illustrations. Books were all I ever really cared about. My love for books was not a rejection of my father; they were, in fact, an embracing of him. I don't know that he ever totally understood that but he did know that I adored him and that he was and is my hero.

There are so many things which I am absolutely incapable of doing or even of conceiving of others doing. Many are things which we associate with labor – carpentry, electricity, plumbing, and others. I deeply admire men and women who can create and build. My hero was a man who did not love the things, I loved. My hero was not a man who was famous or wealthy, but he was a man who I admired, respected, honored and loved above ALL men I have ever known. He was a man who was and who is "my hero" – my Father.

As we enjoy a day off from work, let us not forget why we celebrate Labor Day. Let us not squander the heritage we have received from those earned us the right to expect safety and health in the work place and let us never forget that our heroes are still those who labored for us.