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Work, Workers, Hands Labor Day -- September 6, 2010 By James L. Holly, MD Special to the *Examiner*

On Thanksgiving, we give thanks for our blessings. On birthdays, we celebrate the life of those whom we love. On Christmas, followers of Christ give thanks for His birth and others give thanks for a spirit of joy and of peace. On Memorial Day, we give thanks for those who sacrificed their lives and futures so that we might have both. On July 4th, we give thanks for liberty and personal freedom. Holidays and other special days are all about gratitude and thanksgiving.

So, on Labor Day, we give thanks for work and for workers. Giving thanks for work? Isn't that a contradiction? If you think so, ask someone who wants a job but cannot find one. And the "want" for a job is more than the need for money; it is the need for meaning and purpose in life, which we very often associate with our personal significance. Perhaps the greatest punishment of incarceration is the absence of a constructive, creative, fulfilling occupation. In a clever movie, the star ran a "temp" service; he finds temporary workers for businesses and jobs for the unemployed. In one poignant moment, the star pleads for a job for a single-parent mother and when he is successful, he puts the phone down, rejoicing, "Everybody works on a Monday."

And, if you think that the delight of work is completely based on the nature of your job, watch two people doing the same task. One moves with a spring to the step and a smile to the face. The other moves slowly and frowns at those with whom they are engaged. The fulfillment afforded by a job is not so much dictated by the nature of what you do, as it is by how you do it. One person takes an otherwise "menial" job and makes it into a calling; while another finds it boring and a burden.

Work has intrinsic value apart from compensation. I have always been arrested by a quote attributed to Mother Theresa. A wealthy, western business man spent two weeks with her caring for those whom no one else cared about. At the end of his time, he is reported to have said to Mother Theresa, "I would not do this job for a million dollars." Her answer was profound. She simply said, "Neither would I." The value of a job is not measured by what we are paid for it; it is measured by whether or not the job is done as a calling. Fulfillment is found when the quality of our work and when our commitment to our work are come from internal character and not from external pressure.

Worker

So on Labor Day, we celebrate work, but we also celebrate and give thanks for the worker. I think one reason I am particularly kind to and generous with waitresses and with waiters – you can tell my age and disposition by the fact that I don't say "waitperson" – is that my father met my mother when she was a waitress. But "service workers" – how's that for wordsmithing – are simply a place holder for all people whose work is performed in increasing the comfort of others, or in personal service to others. The worker can change the day of their customers and the one being served can change the day of the worker not so much by the quality of what they deliver as

by the spirit of their interaction. When each is grateful for the participation of the other in the act of service – of “work” -- they both win.

In healthcare, I would argue that at the root of most illness is bitterness and anger, whether by cause and effective, or by aggravation of a preexisting condition. The solution is gratitude and thanksgiving. And, the greatest motivator of mental health is "gratitude." People who are thankful and who express that thankfulness are healthier people, mentally, emotional, spiritually, and physically..

The Hands

Years ago, my brother sent me a picture of my father's hands. These hands protected us, provided for us, punished us, and petted us. They saddled horses, loaded shotguns, paddled boats, fixed windows, and cooked fish and held us when we were hurt. When my brother had appendicitis -- I was glad they didn't treat me the way they did when he had tonsillitis; he got sick and they took my tonsils out -- those hands carried my brother from the hallway where he collapsed to the bed, and then to the car and to the doctor. Those hands bought little *Golden Books* for us and labored to support us.



I love those hands, yet, as I reflect on the Psalmist's confession, "When thou saidst, Seek ye my face; my heart said unto thee, Thy face, Lord, will I seek," (Psalm 27:8), I realized that these hands are only an extension of the face and of the powerful man who was my father. And, that sun-burnt face is only a reflection of the character and heart of the man who was my father. The Psalmist also said, "Behold, as the eyes of the servants look unto the hand of their masters, and as the eyes of a maiden unto the hand of her mistress; so our eyes wait upon the Lord our God, until that He have mercy upon us." (Psalm 123:2) To please the master, the servant watched attentively so as to anticipate the desire of the one who he/she served. In some way, but not in as many as I would have liked, we were like that with our father, wanting to please him, trying to anticipate his desires.

Workers Working with Hands

We commonly associate "labor" and Labor Day with those who work with their hands. Sometimes we use other terms to express refinements of the concept of "working with the hands." We call some workers craftsman because they are particularly clever in using their hands to fashion art, wood, and other building into "things" which bring beauty, utility, or value to our lives. Some craftsmen become "artist" because of the great beauty of their work. Some take ordinary things and with their hands and creativity, they craft them into art.

Some who work with their hands are called technicians because they use their hands to operate or manipulate complex instruments or technologically complex machines. Whatever the medium of our work, as workers, what we do with our hands is the product of complex mental, intellectual and neurological processes. All of which processes, by their nature verge upon the miraculous in their complexity: electrical impulses, chemically originating from the brain, communicating to the muscles of the eye, arm, hand, fingers, and skin to organize the movements and actions which allow the worker, craftsman or artist to make useful, useable, tools and toys.

Labor Day

On this day, we give thanks for workers who through their hands bring value and goodness to our lives. Whether we know and see that worker, or we only use their products without ever knowing the craftsman, today we thank those who improve our lives with their work..

And, for those whom we do know, whether our fathers, our mothers, our brothers, our sisters, or a stranger, as we look at their hands, sometimes wrinkled, sometimes scarred, sometimes injured or crippled, we recognize their person. As we shake their hand, or hold their hand, we quietly give thanks to them for their life's meaning to us.

I love the tradition of shaking hands, for in the clasping of another's hands, firmly but not painfully, securely and not limply, we experience their strength and we interact with a significant expression of who they are. The clasping of the hands is an appropriate act of intimacy which affirms the work and the worker. It is the great equalizer for both participants in a handshake are

at that moment equals. As they grip one another's hand and simultaneously look into one another's eyes, their souls meet, affirming their mutual esteem, their judgment of one another's personal value and their reciprocal acceptance of one another.

On this Labor Day, delight in your own work and in the work of others. Embrace the ideal of a "worker," and the person of the individual worker. Look at his or her hands. Shake the hands of those who serve you and of those whom you serve, Grip their hand firmly; look into their eyes, connect with other beings that are human like you. Celebrate WORK! Celebrate WORKERS! Delight in the labor of your own hands and in the labor of the hands of others. Make Labor Day a day of thanksgiving for work, for workers, and for their hands.