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Labor Day: The Promise of a Simpler Time

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There was a simpler time in America when young men and women went to work for a company out of high school, or college and retired from that company years later. In that time, co-laborers became like family. Employees took care of the company and the company took care of them. My father lived in such a time and he lived such a life. It is possible to dismiss these observations as maudlin sentimentality, or nostalgia about a different time, a different culture and perhaps what now even seems like a different world. Yet, the economic reality which was the foundation of that time is possible today, but, that economic reality is not based on profit and loss, labor costs, or global markets.

That foundation was based on contentment and commitment. That simple foundation is celebrated in the melody of Edgar A. Guest's poem, "I Hear American Singing," which recalls that time and our longing for its return:

"I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear,
Those of mechanics, each one singing his as it should be blithe and strong,
The carpenter singing his as he measures his plank or beam,
The brick mason singing his as he makes ready for work, or leaves off work,
The boatman singing what belongs to him in his boat, the deckhand singing on the
steamboat deck,
The shoemaker singing as he sits on his bench, the hatter singing as he stands,
The woodcutter's song, the ploughboy's on his way in the morning, or at noon
intermission or at sundown,
The delicious singing of the mother, or of the young wife at work, or of the girl sewing or
washing,
Each singing what belongs to him or her and to none else,
The day what belongs to the day-at night the party of young fellows, robust, friendly,
Singing with open mouths their strong melodious songs."

Whether vocalized in song, or expressed in the joyful rhythm of our daily task; whether perceived in the harmonious cadence of the student off to his work in the classroom, or of the worker arriving for a day of industry, plying a trade from which he or she derives personal satisfaction, these individual melodies coalesce into an anthem which celebrates the majesty of work.

But, what of contentment and commitment, how do they contribute to this national anthem celebrating the combined efforts of employer and employee? It was in my father that I first observed the power of contentment. At his death, I realized that I did not remember anything that he ever wanted. It was not that he was without ambition, or that

he was passive about life, but he was fulfilled within himself and he did not need “things” in order to define who he was. The melody and the cadence of his life were defined by this contentment, not the frenetic desire for more and more. It was in his relationship to his employer that I learned the commitment which a company can have to those who are making it a success. Louisiana Power & Light, always a part of Middle South Utilities and now a part of Entergy, fulfilled the social contract that it had with the work force which powered the company through good times and bad.

Tragically, our society has become the victim of its own success. The economic foundation of contentment and commitment has been replaced by the insatiable desire for this or that, and always by the desire for more. The idea is that if you just get “this,” you will be fulfilled and you will be happy and the ideal is that you should do whatever is necessary to “get it.” This new and unstable foundation is defined as an “insatiable desire” for it is a desire which can never be satisfied. The economic engine is driven by the incessant presentation of another “toy” or another “trinket” or another “item,” without which you cannot be content. On the one hand this creates discontent in the employee who wants to make more and more, and it creates disloyalty on the part of the employer who wants to keep more and more for himself. The economic engine is driven by this artificial but universal greed as employer and employee chase the same illusive dream.

Happiness is now defined by the type of clothes you wear, or by the make of automobile you drive, or the neighborhood in which you live. In fact, this treadmill accelerates until the speed rips the wheels off of the economic engine and the promise of personal fulfillment becomes an illusion. This simple truth was forgotten and thus is not remembered, “If you are not content with what you have; you will never be happy with what you want.” Emulated by employee and employer alike, this simple truth would restore contentment to the employee and employer and commitment to both, as well.

Like the arms race, there is a solution but it requires unilateral action. It requires one party or the other reestablishing the personal foundation of contentment and commitment. Followed by another and another, the infectious nature of this “life style” will cross from employee to employer and back again. It will be discovered that the foundation of the life of my father’s generation did not require that they demand to be treated fairly. The imperative for equity between employer and employee and visa versa was that it was impossible to take advantage of those who are looking out for your interest above their own. Mutual respect and loyalty drove this relationship and it can again.

If however, our ideals continue to be lotteries, hedge funds, leveraged buy-outs, outsourcing, etc.; if our mantra, whether employer or employee is, “I want to get as much as I can for as little as I can for as long as I can from as many as I can,” we will continue to reap the whirlwind that our lusts and greed have generated, and we will continue to be the victim of our success. The solution to our need is not to get even or to get “my share,” the solution is contentment and commitment. The risk of the social experiment based on this simple formula is not insignificant, but the guarantee of our current course is disaster for certain.

On this Labor Day, I wish for each laborer a passion for life which is driven by contentment and I wish for each employer the satisfaction of a business model founded on commitment to everyone who works for him or her. Out of that wish – really out of that prayer – will come a good life for all.