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The Honor and Nobility of Labor

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Last month, I took my father for a long ride along one of our favorite routes. As we drove down Cane River Lake in Natchitoches, Louisiana, we went through Melrose and Natchez. Passing new housing developments and old cotton fields, looking at sights we had seen hundreds of times, we enjoyed the quiet of being together.

My father was recently critically ill. For days, he was not expected to live; so now, everyday with him is like a special gift. As we rode, I continued to etch his memory -- his face, his voice, his smile, his manner -- into my memory; I asked him, "What did you enjoy most about your life?"

Quickly, he responded with the words I expected to hear, "My work, because without work there is no life." In many ways, my father's words capture the spirit of Labor Day. It is the day America takes a day off from work to celebrate the nobility and dignity of work.

The history of the world has seen an ebb and flow of attitudes about work. There was a time when those who had to work for a living were looked upon as a "lower class". The "nobility" was those who did not have to work but who had others do their work for them. This attitude even extended to being able to hire people to take one's place in military service.

Privilege has always been the temptation of man. Inheritance laws once perpetuated the privilege of some not working and the prejudice against others who had to work. Antiquated terms like "entail" and "primogenitor," while of historical interest, fortunately no longer control the destinies of families, communities and individuals.

Yet, America is perilously close to cycling through another era of prejudice against work borne both of the privilege of wealth and of the prejudice that working for a living somehow means that you are not as successful as someone who does not have to work. This anti-work attitude is rooted in several aspects of our modern society.

First, the individual is no longer seen as a critical aspect of the success of a corporation. There was a time, and it was so in my father's time, that a company's employees were almost like an extended family. They cared about one another; they enjoyed one another, and the company's policies reflected this. It was such that the ultimate good was not only the "bottom line" but it was also the welfare of the workers who made the company a success. Today, individuals are almost viewed as a commodity, which are bought on the market for the lowest price and discarded as soon as an advantage for the company is found in doing so.

In the generation prior to my father's and particularly prior to his father's, labor unions grew up in America because of the abuse and the misuse of workers for the profit and

benefit of the company without regard to the welfare of the worker. Today, sadly, the value of workers has deteriorated again as laws are modified to favor companies over individuals, and once again it is imperative that organizations arise which will defend the rights of individuals in an environment which seems to promote indifference to people in deference to the esteem of property.

Second, the individual has seemed to have lost a sense of contribution and of personal satisfaction in a job well done. There was a time when men and women took great pride in their work. Their pride was both personal and collective. They identified with the quality of the product their company produced and they diligently worked to improve that product. The ultimate good was not only salary and benefits but, also, productivity and excellence.

Sadly, we seem to have lost that pride of workmanship. There are a few places where it still exists. Surprisingly, it is in such places as Harley Davidson and in other employee-owned companies like Harley. This is surprising to me because of my prejudice against motorcycles due to the danger of operating them. But, I can still recognize a quality product when I see it and this product seems to be the result of the positive interaction of labor, employer and corporate character which could re-cycle American labor into another great era similar to past ones.

Third, the definitions seem to have changed. When my father spoke of "his work," he included all aspects of his life, as his "work" was both that which he did in order to "make a living" and that which he did to "make a life." Often, that which we "get" is how we "make a living" and that which we "give" is how we "make a life." My father made a living and he made a life, the two were a seamless extension woven of the same bolt of cloth.

Everything my father did supported his company. He represented his company everywhere he went. He was known by his company affiliation and his company was known by him. And, unless you think he was the president, or CEO of a company, he was not. His official position was not "lofty," but his functional position was.

Today, our focus on "things" and "possessions" and "property" are such that everything is measured in terms of what one has, rather than who one is. My father did not have all of the trinkets and toys associated with wealth, yet he was and is one of the most respected men in his community. He was known as a man of character and of conviction. The force of his person was an asset to his company which far exceeded his position and the force of his person was a greater reward than the money he received in his paycheck.

Fourth, there seems to be little gratitude today, either on the part of the company toward the employees, or on the part of the employees toward the company. Here is a classic chicken and egg scenario. Which came first and which was lost first: the company's attitude toward the worker, or the workers attitude toward the company? It is unclear, but the solution is clear. If companies valued their employees such that, while the company must make a profit, the profit is not made at the expense of the employees and their

benefits, then employees, who are individually much more vulnerable than the corporation, could and would reciprocate that loyalty and gratitude.

Contracts are important. Union contracts are often the only way in which individuals can be protected against the power of the corporation, but ultimately the most satisfying and the most successful relationships are not built upon contracts but upon mutual respect, care and collaboration. There are examples of this in Southeast Texas today. American Valve is the best example which I know. This company spends money on the welfare of its employees beyond their paycheck. The company rewards employees for making positive decisions about their personal health. The company invests in the lives of its employees, as a result, employees rarely leave. The workplace is safer, more genial and more productive.

Finally, there seems to be a lack of passion in the work place today. Employers use their companies as a means to their personal ends and employees often do not enjoy, or like their work. Seldom does it seem that men and women awaken early, excited about their day. Fatigue is borne not of physical exertion but of boredom and purposelessness.

If this Labor Day could be different, it would be because employer and employee entered into a new collective bargaining agreement based on mutual respect out of which would grow mutual trust. Workers could produce more, which would allow companies to charge less for their products, which would allow workers pay to go farther, allowing them to accept lower wages. Now the spiral of inflation could be reset to a deflationary cycle, which could save jobs, save companies and enable everyone to “make a life” while they are “making a living.”

Then the market place – employer and employee alike – could discover what a meat packer in Chicago knows. The walls of the packing plant are covered with signs which declare, “People don’t make sausages; Sausages make people.” The owner of the plant makes a profit but a significant part of his profit is in the quality of life of the people he employs. As a result, the people he employs work hard for his success.

Labor Day reminds us that in the commercial transaction of employing others and working for another, both can and should be winners. That is the American way and that is the hope and promise of Labor Day.