

## **James L. Holly, M.D.**

**The Dignity of Labor**  
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What brings the greater satisfaction to a man or woman: winning the lottery or having a job which gives meaning and purpose to life? When I was a child, there was a wonderful television show entitled, "The Millionaire." Each week the agent of an eccentric and reclusive millionaire, John Beresford Tipton, would give a total stranger one million dollars. By the way, in those days, a million dollars was a lot of money! The program would then report the impact of this windfall on the life of the recipient. Often, the money brought tragedy, occasionally triumph. Today, reports are regularly published of the tragic impact of sudden wealth on a family unit. Yet, no one has ever reported devastation to a family from the impact of a meaningful, creative job. As our society increasingly exalts leisure, pleasure and toys, as measures of success, we tend to diminish the nobility of labor.

Monday, we celebrate Labor Day. Set aside to celebrate and honor working people, this day has come to symbolize the beneficial results of the organized labor movement in America. But, Labor Day has much deeper roots in history and in man's nature. The Knights of Labor inaugurated Labor Day in 1882, and it is now a legal holiday, observed on the first Monday in September in the United States, Puerto Rico, and Canada. In Europe, the day on which the history and accomplishments of labor are celebrated is May 1, and it is called "May Day."

Man, created in the image of the Creator God, was created to work. To be fulfilling man's work has to be creative, which means that a person's contribution must not be simply a cog in the wheel, but it must be significant and important. Purposeful, satisfying, creative work is the basis of man or woman's contentment with his/her daily life. In an agrarian society, the cycles of the seasons and of planting, tilling and harvesting of crops gave a great sense of accomplishment to the labor of man. However, industrialization not only removed man from the land, but also subtly changed his focus to leisure rather than work. Often, in order to enhance one's own leisure, pleasure or profit, the welfare of others was sacrificed, thus the advent of the labor movement. Justice for the voiceless was made possible by the uniting of the labor force, which could then speak with one voice, which voice could not be ignored.

The Labor movement addressed issues of safety, satisfaction, and salaries, all of which had the effect of restoring dignity and creativeness to work. In *The Brothers Kamarazov*, Russian author Fyodor Dostoyevsky commented on the need of man for creative and satisfying work; he said: “To crush, to annihilate a man utterly, to inflict on him the most terrible of punishments so that the most ferocious murderer would shudder at it and dread it beforehand, one need only give him work of an absolutely, completely useless and irrational character.” Here is the greatest curse. It is not the absence of leisure or pleasure; it is the absence of meaning in one’s work.

In *The Fifth Discipline*, Peter Senge said, “Early on...we recognized that there is a burning need for people to feel part of an ennobling mission.” If you want to kill a man, take away his work. Who has not known a person who withers and dies soon after retirement from his life’s work? Senge adds the comment, “Having no work at all is a terrible problem...(Man’s) deep spiritual need (is) for fruitful work, for the genuine employment of his talents and energies...Human beings are creative by nature, and are goal seekers and problem solvers. Every human being needs to be an originator of ideas and a creator of structures.”

Born of an age which gave birth to the labor movement, President Theodore Roosevelt said, “Far and away the best prize that life offers is the chance to work hard at work worth doing.” Without work “worth doing,” man finds life hardly worth living. Are there exceptions to this principle? Probably not.

If you look for the population which has the least hope in the world, it would probably be residents of death row. In *The Fifth Discipline*, Senge reports the ennobling effect of work on death row inmates. He said: “The most surprising account...of the spiritual need for usefulness being met comes out of the Texas State Penitentiary at Huntsville, where the inmates on death row have been allowed to leave their cells and go to work making uniforms for the prison guards.” Noting the positive benefit which work had on the conduct, cooperation and attitudes of death row inmates, Senge concluded, “The same force that can bring death-row prisoners positive morale can certainly build positive corporate spirit in our businesses.”

The lottery can provide money, but it cannot provide meaning and purpose in life, only meaningful and creative labor can do that. As we celebrate Labor Day, let us celebrate our nature – given to us by God -- through which we can find ennobling and enriching activities for our lives. And, and let us celebrate the heritage, given to us by the labor movement, which has given the voiceless the right and capacity to speak!