

“A Labor of Love”

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Unitarian Universalist Congregation Church in Meriden
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Labor Day Sunday

In the waning days of winter just 80 years ago, work was begun on what was to become an architectural icon in the sky-scape of New York City. The Empire State Building was officially under construction. Months earlier, the stock market crashed, dropping this nation into one of the worst depressions marking our economic history. It was a grim time, a grueling time; yet a few of the nation’s wealthiest men—and yes, it was all men then—determined to construct a vertical wonder, the tallest building in New York City. Their time frame? Just 18 months. Even hindsight suggests it was an impossible dream.

John Jacob Raskob was the prosperous producer of this venture. Raskob was determined to preside over the construction of the tallest building on the Manhattan skyline. His competitive resolve took on a personal character; for Raskob was in a heated race with an equally prosperous magnate who was just as determined to erect another wonder not far away that would be the tallest building on the Manhattan skyline. Again, recall that this was amid the darkest days of the Great Depression. The race was on—in what was not exactly a labor of love.

Raskob and partners had purchased land at 34th Street & 5th Avenue. First, they had to remove the building that stood there at the time, the original Waldorf Astoria, a landmark of elegance and memories. Down with it all! Its remains lie just offshore, in the depths of the Atlantic. And as for the labor, hundreds of men from 60 trades were employed at this time when men were desperate for employment. They worked in shifts around the clock to keep pace with the established timeline. And they worked for wages that just months earlier would have been unacceptable, grateful to have employment amid this time of massive unemployment. Yet Raskob and company didn’t hire them out of the goodness of their hearts.

Sweat mingled with competition and aspiration to erect the 102 stories soaring 1,250 feet into the rarified atmosphere of the skyline. It was early 20th century photographer Lewis Hine who brilliantly documented this through his lens—the saga of the work and workers who proceeded hour by hour, day by day, month by month, to make it happen. On your order of service this morning, you’ll see a moment in time during this time, a visible moment in the life of a worker whom Hine aptly titled Icarus, leaning into a cable, strengthening it as he climbed,

holding fast to his lifeline in the sky. Like the mythical Icarus, it was as if he bore wings, ignoring the counsel of his father not to fly close to the sun, for his craftsman father had made wings of wax. Giddy with flight, Icarus suffered the consequence; his wings melted and he fell into the sea. While Hine's Icarus had no wings and was not even approaching the sun, he sparred instead with the forces of time and gravity.

Was this worker simply doing his job and earning a minimal wage amid economic blight? Or was he amid a flight of sorts, aspiring also to create what had never been created, cable in hand, cable entwined, head held high, eyes surely fixed on the intensity of the task?

So many incongruities conspired to raise this marvel that still stands at 34th & 5th and was the city's tallest building when it was completed just a *year and 45 days* after it was begun. Not surprisingly, it was completed under budget given depression era wages.

But what about this worker, and what about all workers, in this country and globally, whose labor is a blend of economic need and, when fortune smiles, aspiration? There is forced work, forced labor, known as slavery and serfdom—and we honor the distinction. There is work that is barely acceptable, known as minimum wage or the work done before the minimum wage was legislated with minimal largesse. There is work done that is “Okay, I need a job.” When fortune smiles and a labor movement and other forms of justice advocacy realize fair wages and worker dignity, the consequences can be labors of love.

Fortune as family and a marvel of vocal chords smiled on the late Aretha Franklin. Her work was her song was her labor of love, a calling and a blessing for us all. Celebrated she was this past Friday in her native and beloved Detroit. It was in that same city on Labor Day, 2011 that her voice rang out with “Chain of Fools”, our prelude this morning, and that Barack Obama was the keynote speaker.

Fortune as family, misfortune as a Prisoner of War, resolve and commitment as a returned veteran and citizen, and relentless integrity, however much some of us may have resisted his stances as U.S. Senator, drove the life of the late John McCain. Celebrated he was just yesterday at the National Cathedral in Washington, DC and laid to rest in his beloved Annapolis.

Fortune as a banjo in hand, a spirit and voice that beckoned others to sing along, march along, resist oppression, and revere the natural world; and fortune as a loving intimate and extended family shined on the late Pete Seeger, whose voice we'll hear in just moments.

Life as a labor of love doesn't preclude misfortune, struggle, anguish, and loss. Love emerges from these valleys again and again.

I wonder as we celebrate these prophetic lives and the millions of workers late and living, who have toiled in the proverbial vineyard, what you might consider to be your labor of love? Hold a moment of silence if you will, and when I sound the chime, share as you will a phrase, a sentence or two, that describes your labor of love.

[Silence.....chime]

[Responses]

Perhaps this Labor Day Sunday marks a time to do all possible to transform the work that we do into a labor of love, even if it's not a labor of our liking, but labor marked by integrity and competence and caring and that does no harm. We know there is work that is destructive, work whose harvest bears the fruit of lives corrupted and scarred and vanquished even. This happens every day. So too does work that is constructive, work whose harvest bears the fruit of lives enhanced, minds expanded, souls stretched, and spirits inspired. So too does work that bears unintended consequences, work whose harvest surprisingly bears fruit that is inedible and work whose harvest surprisingly bears the most sumptuous of fruit.

Studs Terkel, in his now classic compendium of interviews with well over a hundred ordinary and extraordinary American workers, had this to say:

“[Work] is about a search... for daily meaning as well as daily bread, for recognition as well as cash, for astonishment rather than torpor; in short, for a sort of life rather than a Monday through Friday sort of dying. Perhaps immortality, too, is part of the quest. To be remembered was the wish, spoken and unspoken, of the heroes and heroines of this book.”

Together, across ages, and like those who populate Terkel's classic and Hines' photo archives, like those living and otherwise who sing out and stand for and march for, we search for meaning and perhaps for a form of immortality that comes with being recognized and remembered. May that for which we labor be done with all possible love, and may we be sustained in this community of love that calls us on to realize the gifts we are given.

So may it be and Amen.

Sources:

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