

It's a holiday weekend – three days that, for many of us, symbolically mark the last gasp of summer and the movement of the wheel of the year into fall, even though summer isn't actually over for another month or so, and the weather here has been anything but “fall-like” lately. Back in the day, it used to be that the Labor Day weekend was the demarcation between summer vacation and the start of school, but that isn't true anymore, either. Many districts started classes in August, adapting to the needs of modern families and changing administrative time schedules.

Labor Day is a holiday weekend often marked with barbeques and get-togethers, time spent with family and friends in recreation or leisure; a gift to us from the New York Central Labor Union, who instituted this holiday in 1882 to honor organized labor by providing a day off for working citizens. With parades and speeches, they sought to illustrate the contributions to society of working people and the strength of labor unions. The United States Congress formalized the celebration of Labor Day in 1894, and we've been parading and picnicking ever since on the first Monday in September.

Labor unions aren't as prominent as they once were, but we continue to enjoy the fruits of their historic advocacy and struggle. Our ability to enjoy the delights of this holiday weekend, to relax and enjoy our leisure, is possible only because of the commitment of brave men and women who faced intimidation and violence to earn the right to time off from work, to weekends, vacation time, and fair pay, among other things. As Unitarian Universalists who are committed to justice, we remember those who helped earn the 8 hour work day, the 40 hour work week, paid vacations and holidays – even though here in Silicon Valley, the norms of work often seem to more resemble working conditions of the 1800s than those fought for and won by unions. We need to remember that the work of unions is still important in many sectors of the economy, and that worker rights groups are still fighting for the needs of farm workers, those in the hospitality industry, and those who provide domestic and janitorial services.

In my work life, I have, at times, been a union employee and involved in worker action. Fortunately for me and my colleagues, the strikes were short, negotiations productive. Over 20 years ago, I met a man who helped me understand the struggle that resulted in the working conditions we now enjoy; who helped me appreciate the history of Labor Day. Hearing about his experience on the front lines of worker action helped me gain a perspective on my own experience and how far things had come since the time when he'd been a labor organizer.

I met Nils when I was working for a non-profit organization that provided education and job training to seasonal and migrant farmworkers. He was a Board member and we had many opportunities to talk about his history in the labor movement. When I met him, Nils was in his late 70s, a still-powerful oak cask of a man with a shock of white hair and a serious face that could easily be coaxed into a broad, joyful smile with the merest slip of a joke. He was a bit of a character who loved to tell stories and who always wore flip-

flops, even on formal occasions. Originally from Norway, he'd come to the West Coast to work as a longshoreman on the docks of San Francisco in the 1930s. His experiences there had led him to a life-long involvement in the causes of workers, pushing for reasonable wages, adequate sanitation and safety, and fair treatment.

In the early 1930s, Nils had joined with other San Francisco dock workers to form a union. He was proud of what they had done to make positive changes in working conditions for stevedores. But the price was high in the West Coast Longshore Strike of 1934. Fights broke out along the Embarcadero. To quell pickets and control sympathizer gatherings, police first shot tear gas into the crowds, then later shotguns, to break up the protesters. People were killed. The strike lasted for several days, spreading up and down the ports of the West Coast. Eventually, the results included changes in workloads and reductions in hours for worker safety, along with expansions of protection for workers of color.

I learned from Nils that needed change doesn't always come easily or through a calm and civil process of negotiation. He helped me understand why action is important and a commitment to worker justice doesn't end when your own contract has been signed. He helped me understand the labor that went into Labor Day, the fight that created many of the work benefits we take for granted as standard operating procedure today.

On this holiday weekend, perhaps you'll be going to a gathering of some kind – a picnic or party or barbeque. Imagine that at this event, you run into people you don't know, you're introduced to new neighbors or the friends of friends. The usual greetings and small talk ensue, of course, but soon, in an effort to continue the conversation, that time-honored question will be asked, "So, what is it that you do?" It's common enough – I'm sure we've all been asked, and have asked, that or very similar questions many times in our lives. Most of us would include ourselves as a part of the larger class of working people – we who exchange our time, skill, and expertise for a paycheck. There is something that we "do" that has a job title and a set of responsibilities. Talking about what we do for work is often a strategy we use to grease the social wheels, to talk about something that is "safe," non-controversial; personal, but not too personal.

We think that what someone does for a living, or perhaps the ways in which they talk about their employment, will give us clues to who they really are. For those who are fortunate, what they do to earn money is actually a close fit with who they see themselves, at heart and soul, to be. For them, their employment is an extension of their nature and the work to which they apply themselves in life is an integral part of who they are.

But, that's certainly not true for everyone, or perhaps for any of us throughout all of the years of our lives. I'm sure all of us, at one time or another, have had a job or two that we certainly hope was NOT a true and complete representation of who we are as a human creature. Some of us would certainly hope that we are able to expend our life's energy in being more than a "wage slave," believing that there's more to life, and more to our life's work, than what we do to fill our bank account. To the extent that what we do to earn a

living is a reflection of what we do to build a life, I think issues about the role of work, in all of its various manifestations, are complex ones.

Beyond earning a living, I think we have lots of potential “work” to do during our lifetimes, only some of it for which we get paid. There is the work that we do to grow and expand our intellect and understanding, to fulfill ourselves mentally and to realize our potential or ideals. There’s the work we do in service to others, in support of the larger community and the world. There’s the work we do to achieve our biologic potential, surviving and forwarding life, rearing children, and educating and nurturing future generations. There’s the work of our spirit, seeking wisdom and understanding, potentially attaining enlightenment. There’s the work of loving and being there with and for others, to feel and to enjoy the act of living. That’s a lot of possible “work” to accomplish in a lifetime, in addition to earning a living.

Questions about life’s purpose have been a part of human consideration since time began. There is a long and extensive tradition of philosophers who have pondered the meaning of life, the purpose for which we humans have found ourselves here in this place and this time. From the ancient Greeks, we’ve inherited the view that the meaning of life is in attaining the highest form of knowledge and that our efforts in life are done with the goal of creating “good.” Our forebears in the 19th century continued to explore the meaning of life, noting the influence of pain and pleasure, the two “sovereign masters” of our existence, and the importance of working to create the “greatest happiness” as a focus for life. More recently, existentialists have posited about the role of reason, life-inspiring goals, and commitment in forming one’s life purpose. Humanist philosophers tell us that people determine human purpose, without supernatural influence, and that we are here to develop and fulfill our human potential and personality.

We know that our “work” as human in this life is the subject of religious consideration and dogma, as well. From the Buddhists, we can explore the role of suffering in life, and the path that leads to its cessation. In the faiths of the Abrahamic tradition, the purpose of life is to worship and serve God. For Hindus, the goal of life is to know that one’s soul, or atman, is identical to the Brahman, or supreme soul, in an effort to achieve liberation from the reincarnation cycle. Science has helped us explore life, from the primary function of insuring the survival of our gene pool to the development of normative behavior. Life’s great questions have inspired artists and writers and playwrights and musicians for thousands of years. And, if you ask the person on the street, you’ll hear answers that range over a wide spectrum, from realizing one’s ideals and potential, to seeking wisdom and knowledge, to attaining spiritual enlightenment, to conclusions that life or human existence ultimately has no meaning at all.

It seems that for life’s larger questions, there are as many answers as there are people to consider them. And, if you were expecting the “ultimate” answer to the question of the meaning of life from me today, I’m sorry that I will have to disappoint you. Because, after reading and thinking and wondering myself, I realize that I don’t have a definitive answer, either. All of the philosophies and religions have their point, but ultimately, we still don’t know the purpose and meaning of life, of why we are here and what it is that

we are supposed to do with the precious time we have on Earth, with unwavering certainty. And, while that may seem a bit discouraging, I've realized that, for me, it is also quite freeing, as well. If life can have so many reasons and purposes, I'm not limited to trying to be, act, think, or feel in conformation to any single principle or purpose. And, if I, therefore, don't have to spend my time thinking back on the past with regret, because I wasn't "on purpose" all of the time, or contemplate the future with anguish and anticipation, because I may not fully achieve my purpose, then I have more time to focus on being alive in this moment, right now.

And, of all of the things I don't know about life, I do believe that we are alive in order to live, fully and completely, the moments that we are given. If I don't have to spend my time worrying about whether I'm adequately fulfilling some grand scheme or larger purpose, I have the ability to explore and live my purpose in this moment, to be fully present to what is happening in my life right now, to respond to the people and circumstances that present themselves to me, and to be engaged and available to what is actually happening in life as it unfolds. That becomes my life's work, to be alive in ways that let me explore and examine my purpose, that call me to create my own meaning in the life that I've been given.

If that seems unsatisfying to you, if you perhaps are someone who has a need for a more "absolute" answer to life's "ultimate question," I give you the number "42." Those of you familiar with Douglas Adams' book *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* will recognize that this is his numeric solution in answer to "the Ultimate Question of Life, the Universe and Everything." In a world of infinite possibilities, "42" is, perhaps, as reasonable as any other answer. It is, at least, an ANSWER, in a world ultimately without many.

There are lots of ways to ask someone what they do for a job, but there are very few ways to ask someone about their life's work, their purpose. Yet, in the beloved community of our faith, these are exactly the kinds of questions we should be asking ourselves and others. One of the joys of being together is creating the space and time with each other that encourages our exploration. It's one of our Seven Principles because Unitarian Universalists believe that the search for meaning is one of life's worthy goals and that living that meaning is the ultimate purpose of the years we have.

We benefit from the gift of time, handed down to us by the many we celebrate on this Labor Day weekend, time to consider and live the life we have been given, to enjoy each other and the beauty of the world, to be renewed in hope despite tragedy and disappointment, to do the work of the world beyond the mere need to earn a living.

Find your own answer to the ultimate question – Who are you? Why are you here? And may your life be blessed as you live out the answers that you find.