

## **Called To Be More**

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When did the labor movement begin? We generally use the industrial revolution as the starting point, when daytime became clock time and the needs of factories overshadowed the needs of individuals, when people were transformed into cogs in a vast unfeeling machine, working twelve, fourteen, and even eighteen hour days.

Did it begin with the myriad protests and strikes against these new working conditions, whether by Luddites, Saboteurs, or the Tolpuddle Martyrs of Dorset?

Did it begin with Marx and Engel's "Communist Manifesto" of 1848, lifting the cry of, "Workers of the world, unite! You have nothing to lose but your chains."

Or did it begin with the massive strike for workers rights that produced the Paris Commune of 1871?

The labor movement certainly got a great boost with the founding of America's May Day Movement in 1884 with the proclamation: "Resolved by the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions the United States and Canada, that eight hours shall constitute legal day's labor from May first, 1886..."

And the labor movement gained both momentum and gravitas in 1891, when Pope Leo XIII issued his "*Rerum Novarum*, on the conditions of the working class," demanding amelioration for "the misery and wretchedness pressing so unjustly on the majority of the working class." This moved the labor movement from the fringes of populist frenzy to the center of humane advocacy and had a tremendous impact on the its progress.

But I place the beginning of the labor movement somewhat earlier, around the year 1500 BCE when a bunch of slaves, called Hebrews, escaped from Egypt, where it was believed that slaves could be treated like beasts of burden, whipped, beaten, starved or worked to death at the whim of their masters. Only Egypt's

kings, the Pharaohs, were thought to be worth-while because they were gods, and everyone else was considered expendable.

These Hebrews came up with some audacious ideas to justify their actions. They said that they were created “in the image and likeness of God,” that everyone had an inherent worth instilled in them by their creator. Everyone had a right to the kind of dignity that previously had been accorded only to kings. This was an astoundingly revolutionary idea at the time – the belief that people were inherently worthwhile – the original humanism.

My understanding of the revolutionary nature of the Hebrew’s accomplishment deepened a couple of years ago when I attended a lecture by a Jewish bible scholar. He said those who considered themselves to be creationists, who believed that the story told in the first chapter of Genesis about how God created the universe was the literal truth, had gotten things exactly wrong. That wasn’t what the story was about at all. He said that the only reason for the story about God creating the world in seven days was to create a justification for the Sabbath, for taking one day off from work every week. This was a radical affirmation of workers’ rights! In those days when people weren’t considered important, you needed to justify a change like that as the edict of a god.

I know you’ve probably heard this text from the twentieth chapter of Exodus before, but I invite you to hear it anew this morning: “Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. For six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work – you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested on the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it.”

In 1500 BCE the claim that no one – not even slaves or aliens – should work more than six days a week was an incredible advancement for workers’ rights brought about by a people who had been slaves and knew firsthand what it was like to cry out for rest.

The domination of the powerless by the powerful isn't limited to politics, economics, or labor, though. There's a way in which it is an inseparable element of the human condition: childhood.

We are all born powerless. Our very lives depend on the nurture and protection of those who care for us, usually our parents. Children are evolutionarily disposed to trust their parents, to seek their affection and approval as though their lives depended on it – because they do.

The transition from powerlessness to power is rarely a smooth one. As a child develops a sense of itself, the first revolt against parental authority usually takes the form of what we call “the terrible twos,” as youngsters use their nascent sense of power to resist every wish or command they encounter.

How this transition is handled has a huge impact on how the child develops. If the parents interpret this as a power struggle that they need to win, the child's development is often thwarted in a way that can lead to either a lifelong resentment of authority, a deep feeling of personal powerlessness, or both.

There's some interesting research on this topic, on what is called “learned helplessness.” Martin Seligman and Steve Maier conducted an experiment at the University of Pennsylvania in 1967. In part one of the experiment, groups of dogs were placed in harnesses, yoked side by side. In these pairs, one dog would be subjected to painful electric shocks, which the dog could end by pressing a lever. The other dog received the same shocks in parallel, but its lever didn't stop them. For these other dogs, the shock seemed random, because it was the first dog's action that caused them to stop – the shocks were apparently inescapable. The dogs whose actions stopped the shocks quickly recovered from the experiment but the others learned to be helpless and exhibited symptoms similar to chronic depression.

They then took the group of dogs who had learned to be helpless and placed them in an apparatus where the dogs could escape electrical shocks by jumping over a low partition. For the most part, they simply lay down passively and whined. Even though they easily could have escaped, they didn't even try.

One very interesting thing about this is that about one in three of the dogs did not become helpless and depressed, but managed to find a way out of their unpleasant situation. It's been suggested that this correlates with the human characteristic of optimism, that the ability to maintain hope in the face of evidence to the contrary could be a useful survival adaptation rather than an unrealistic fantasy.

Struggles to achieve progressive reform are often reenactments of the conflict between the optimists and the helpless. One amazing thing about how the conflict is characterized is that the helpless tend to call the optimists, "pessimists," for claiming that there is a problem at all. One way the helpless adapt to their situation is by convincing themselves that it is normal.

I am one of nature's optimists. I remember a time when I was about five years old. I was a quiet child, given to daydreaming. For various reasons, I had little sense of my own power, and so lived in a rather helpless world where I was subject to the authority of my parents and older siblings.

I was walking down my neighborhood street one sunny spring day when everyone old enough was at school when I came upon a teenage boy in jeans and a t-shirt, bouncing a basketball in the driveway. He greeted me and invited me into his garage to "show me something," and immediately locked the door so I couldn't escape. He then spent several hours terrorizing me. It was a strange sort of abuse. He didn't touch me but he yelled at me, vilifying and demeaning me. He repeatedly threw his basketball at me with incredible force, barely missing me but shaking the walls with the force of its impact.

He eventually let me go. I wandered home in shock, my helplessness reinforced by his cruelty. It never even occurred to me to tell anyone.

But, although I wasn't really aware of it at the time, my behavior changed. Though I was still prone to passivity and daydream, I began to act out for attention. In our home movies, I could be seen jumping and waving frantically. I became a clown, singing and joking, entertaining and amusing my family.

I believe that my native optimist decided that survival depended on my being seen. Instead of becoming like the helpless dogs, I became an agent of my

own destiny, seizing my little bit of power as the power to entertain, the power to be seen by and gain the favor of the powerful people in my life.

I believe that it is the impulses of the optimists that start the revolutions. Maintaining the status quo is often a commitment to inertia – a sign of learned helplessness. And much of the training we receive in early life teaches us to be helpless, to bow to the authority of the powerful.

It's an aspect of the incredible adaptability of the human species that we are born with so little programming. We've got hungers for food, faith, hope, and love, but we have to learn how to satisfy them. Our parents teach us, and they do it by injecting their wills into us, colonizing the undeveloped countries of our souls with their values, ideas and assumptions.

One of the hallmarks of maturity is the ability to delay the gratification of our desires by developing a personality strong enough to resist our impulses. But when we learn to endure pain, deny our own happiness, and distrust others' motives, that very teaching can pervert our basic impulses toward faith, hope and love by turning them upside down.

It takes a certain amount of modification to turn an unfettered, naïve and carefree child into a disciplined student. Faith has to bind to obedience, hope has to bind to achievement, and love has to bind to approval. Each step forward in life can bring another set of modifications grafted on the original programming of the human spirit. Layer upon layer can accumulate, so that by the time one enters the workplace, there may be little of the optimist left. The rewards of the workplace often have little to do with faith, hope, or love.

The workplace itself can be a place of colonization. We have to accept a set of artificial inducements, rewards and punishments in order to adapt to the workplace. And because humans are designed to survive in a wide variety of situations – including incredible adversity – we have the capability to accept harsh and hurtful working conditions as normal.

When we Unitarian Universalists promote the use of reason to guard against idolatries of the mind and spirit, we need to be careful to examine our most basic beliefs to see if they are in harmony with our deepest innate potential. Some of the most harmful idolatries can stand the test of reason once you've

accepted their assumptions. We need to feel clearly with our hearts as well as think clearly with our minds if we are going to nurture the faith, hope, love and fulfillment that is our birthright.

On this May Day weekend, it seems appropriate to recall times when people have struggled to throw off demeaning and hurtful beliefs about what it means to do work. The Hebrews' escape from slavery in Egypt is an enduring symbol of the triumph of the human spirit over economic subjugation. Another time was the emergence of the American union movement. There was a growing outrage over the hours, pay and conditions as people realized that they were sacrificing their lives to economic interests the goals of which did not include their well-being.

In 1909, women and children in the garment industry could be expected work 14 hours a day and 12 on Saturday in crowded, dangerous conditions for little pay and no overtime. The International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union went on strike for better pay, shorter hours, and safer working conditions. The strike was supported, not only by labor and the Socialist Party, but by the wealthy women of New York who saw the issue in terms of feminism and justice. The conscience of society was aroused, but the owners were not convinced. They eventually granted a minor compromise in pay and working hours but insisted that they had the right to run their businesses as they saw fit.

Then, just over one hundred years ago on March 25, 1911, New York City experienced the worst factory fire in its history at the Triangle Shirtwaist Company. Five hundred women were employed there, mostly Jewish immigrants between the ages of thirteen and twenty-three. The exits had been locked to keep the women at their sewing machines and prevent theft, and the foreman with the key fled for safety without unlocking the doors. The fire, fed by tons of fabric, spread rapidly. Panicked workers rushed to the stairs, the freight elevator, and the fire escape. 146 workers died, some trapped where they worked, many in burnt heaps by the exit doors, others falling to their deaths as the one exterior fire escape collapsed under the weight.

The public outcry was overwhelming. 80,000 people marched in a funeral procession for the women who died. But even in the public revulsion and anger

over the conditions that had led to the fire, many still defended the right of shop owners to resist government safety regulations. The fire led to the establishment of the New York Bureau of Fire Investigation, which gave the fire department authority over factory safety.

The 1911 fire wasn't only a catalyst for fire safety regulation. It also boosted the union movement in general, as it sought to lift up the rights and dignity of working women and men, asserting that people had inherent worth and dignity that went beyond their economic usefulness, and that people should be able to live and work in ways that permitted happiness and fulfillment as well as mere survival.

80 years later, on the morning of September 4, 1991, a 25-foot long fryer vat burst into flames in the Imperial chicken processing plant in Hamlet, North Carolina. Workers normally subjected to intense heat and long hours without adequate rest periods suddenly found themselves trapped in a burning building. Cries of "Let me out! Let me out!" were heard as they tried to kick open fire doors that had been locked to prevent vandalism and theft. 25 people died that morning, and another 49 were injured. Due to a shortage of safety inspectors, the plant had never been inspected. The aftermath of this fire led to increased diligence in state inspections, but the fire was perceived as an isolated criminal act rather than a logical consequence of beliefs about the nature of work that are held by many, workers and employers alike. And so it goes. The job of the Garment Workers' strike is still not yet done.

One of the activists in the strike of 1909, Rose Schneiderman, explained that better pay was not enough, that working women needed enough free time and security to enjoy life as well. She used flowers to symbolize the finer things that even a common life can enjoy saying, "The worker must have bread, but she must have roses too."

Our closing hymn today was inspired by those words. Written in the aftermath of the Triangle Shirtwaist fire, it became a battle hymn for the women's union movement, sung by tens of thousands who joined in the fight for human worth and dignity.

