



# UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK

## **The Promise of Summer: Free Time and the Forgotten American Dream**

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14 June 2014

Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Frederick, Maryland

[frederickuu.org](http://frederickuu.org)

Peter Rollins in his book [The Divine Magician](#) tells the following Parable of a Fisherman and a Rich Businessman:

[The businessman], while returning to work after lunch, saw a fisherman get up from the side of a river with a bucket of fish.

“Where are you going?” asked the businessman.

“To the market to sell these fish,” replied the fisherman.

“And how long did it take you to catch those?”

“A couple of hours.”

“Well, what are you going to do for the rest of the day?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” said the fisherman. “I guess I’ll just sit on the beach with my family, drink wine, and chat to passersby.”

“But if you keep fishing, you could catch enough to earn more money!” said the businessman.

“And why would I do that?”

“Well, you could buy better equipment to catch more fish. Within a few years you’ll have enough for a boat and a large net. Why eventually you might even own a fleet of boats!”

“And then what?”

“Why, then you could sit on the beach with your family, drink wine, and chat to passersby!”

I heard a related story recently from our resident labyrinth expert Irene Glasse, who said:

I had the pleasure of presenting a labyrinth workshop and facilitated walk to a lovely women's group.... The members of the group were largely retired.... One of the things I ask when I'm beginning my workshop is what drew the participants to a Labyrinth intensive — what is it they want to learn? .... This lovely group of elders — these wonderful women who have raised families, worked whole careers, survived spouses, done the American Dream to the best of their ability (and done it quite well in many cases) all mentioned the same thing. They were interested in Labyrinth work because of the meditative aspect of Labyrinth Walking. The reason? They do not know how to slow down. Retirees do not know how to slow down....

I want to invite you to consider that one reason for this phenomenon of not knowing how to slow down (even in retirement) is that our understanding of the American Dream has shifted over time. The Jeffersonian ideals in the Declaration of Independence — that this country should be a land in which all people have an opportunity to seek “Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness” — has been not only on a positive trajectory of expanding equality and opportunities to African-Americans, women, and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender citizens so that more parts of our society have access to the American Dream — but also the American Dream has been increasingly incorporating more nightmarish elements of overwork, never taking time off, and powering the economy through unceasing consumerism.

So here at the beginning of the summer — a season traditionally associated for many Americans with vacations, a lighter work load, and time with friends and family — I would like to invite us to reflect on our relationship to work, which has become perverted to the extent that many of us have forgotten how to slow down. Keep in mind as well that opening story of the Fisherman (who is already content in the *present* because he felt his family already had enough)

contrasted with the Rich Businessman (who is perpetually delaying happiness to some unknown future — a future that none of us are guaranteed).

My inspiration for this sermon is a book titled Free Time: The Forgotten American Dream by a professor of history at the University of Iowa Benjamin Honnicutt (published in 2013 from Temple University Press). As I shared with you in a sermon last month here at UUCF based on the musical *Pippin*, I've done a lot of work through the years on the topic of vocational discernment — that is, figuring out what any given person feels called to do with their life. Specifically, I shared with you three of my favorite guidelines for discerning vocation:

(1) Frederich Buechner: “The place [you are called] to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”

(2) Robert Frost, “Two Tramps in Mudtime”: “My object in living is to unite / My avocation and my vocation / As my two eyes make one in sight. / Only where love and need are one, / And work is play for mortal stakes....”

(3) Howard Thurman: “Don't ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive. And then do that. What the world needs is people that have come alive.”

There is much wisdom in those pieces of advice. And there’s one way of understanding them as saying that you should monetize your hobby. But here’s one major problem: not everyone is able to be paid well to do their dream job. Instead, to use a term from Karl Marx, the vast majority of humans earn a living through “alienated labor” — work that is not personally fulfilling but that one must do anyway to afford even a basic minimum of food and shelter.

One example of alienated labor are the immoral and inhumane factory conditions in which many people are forced to work in poorer countries to supply consumer goods for richer nations. To give another example of alienated labor, how many of you have seen the 1999 satirical film from Mike Judge titled *Office Space*? One among many hilarious scenes is when the protagonist, who is named Peter, meets with two consultants, who have been hired to make recommendations about layoffs. One of the consultants says, “We're trying to get a feel for how people spend their day at work.... Would you walk us through a typical day, for you?” Peter —

who has recently had an enlightenment experience of sorts — is shockingly honest with them. He says,

Well, I generally come in at least fifteen minutes late.... After that I just sorta space out for about an hour.... I just stare at my desk; but it looks like I'm working. I do that for probably another hour after lunch, too. I'd say **in a given week I probably only do about fifteen minutes of real, actual, work.**

One of the points that emerges from that scene is questioning the value of demanding that workers be present in an office for 8 hours/day for five days a week. **Does the forty-hour work week actually maximize productivity?** And regardless of the so-called “bottom line” of financial profit, spending half of one's waking hours in alienated labor does not increase “Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.”

Today the forty-hour work week has almost become an incontrovertible fact. But historically the conception of full-time employment has changed radically over time, a realization that can open our imaginations about how we might live into a different, more humane, and life-giving future. Many people used to commonly spend almost all their waking hours working — sometimes up to 16 hours/day. However, “Beginning in the early nineteenth century and continuing for over a hundred years, working hours in America were gradually reduced — cut in half according to most accounts” through the Labor Movement, which pushed back against the exploitation of workers by employers. And in the nineteenth century, extrapolating from the successes of the Labor Movement, many of the best economists and public intellectuals of the time “**regularly predicted that, well before the twentieth century ended, a Golden Age of Leisure would arrive, when no one would have to work more than two hours a day**” (vii). For those forced to earn a living through alienated labor, a ten-hour work week would mean that they would have time to pursue the American Dream of “Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness” instead of returning home from a work too exhausted to do anything but rest enough to be able to drag yourself out to go back to work. Instead in the early twenty-first century, many of us work not a ten-hour week, but a 10- or 12-hour *day*, building to a 50-hour, 60-hour (or more) work week (viii).

Some of you may have heard the proverb “Enough is as good as a feast.” And before the twentieth century, **“most Americans assumed that it would be possible for reasonable people to eventually satisfy their needs.”** Sure, some people would still have more than others, but conventional wisdom held that increasing technological advances would soon allow everyone to have a basic minimum, and that increased automation by machines (both in the household and in the industrial world) would mean that **humans could work less and have more free time because there would be less work to do. Ironically, we know now that technological advances — such as smart phones — have in many cases moved us rapidly in the other direction of being connected to work 24/7.**

There is an additional factor as well that “Traditionally, too much wealth, too much materialism was understood to impede human progress, leading to greed and envy, luxury, indolence, and...selfishness” (1). But perceptions around these traditional vices have shifted, turning them into alleged virtues. So, instead of remembering that, “Enough is as good as a feast,” increasingly large segments of our culture reflect the ethos of the 1987 film *Wall Street* in which the main character Gordon Gekko proclaims, “Greed is good.”

Many of the founders of our nation, however, had a much different conception of the American Dream: one that involved increasing numbers of Americans having more free time for “Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.” Consider, for example, this passage from a letter from John Adams to Abigail, his wife:

I must study Politicks and War that my sons may have liberty to study Mathematics and Philosophy. My sons ought to study Mathematics and Philosophy, Geography, natural History, Naval Architecture, navigation, Commerce and Agriculture, in order to give their Children a right to study Painting, Poetry, Musick, Architecture, Statuary, Tapestry, and Porcelain. (4)

What else might we do with more free time? Spend time at home with friends and family, read the newspaper to be an informed electorate, read books for pleasure, exercise, join sports leagues, spend time in nature, garden, visit museums, practice a musical instrument, create art, participate in community theater, learn a foreign language, take time for spiritual practices (like meditation and yoga), take lifelong learning courses, and so much more.

Rather than the best parts of our day and energy being spent on alienated labor to fuel the so-called bottom line of profit, the America Dream requires a more balanced “Triple-Bottom Line” that accounts for “People, Planet, and Profit.” Along these lines, one popular bumper sticker supporting the Labor Movement says, “**From the People that Brought You the Weekend.**” And Labor activists did help secure a five-day work week, and in some industries even a six-hour work day. But starting with the Great Depression in the 1930s, the trend of shortening work hours reversed. A new emphasis arose on the perceived need to grow the economy through perpetually increasing consumer demand. So we have to work more to buy more and more stuff. But we don’t have any free time to enjoy that stuff much less the “Higher Progress” of pursuing mental, spiritual, and community activities instead of materialism. Recall that for The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., one of the three greatest threats to building the Beloved Community (in addition to racism and militarism) is *materialism*: valuing luxury consumer goods more than human beings and the longterm sustainability of life on our planet.

Remember our opening story about the differing perspectives of the businessman and the fisherman about what was necessary in order to enjoy leisure? Again, for me a central question that is raised, is how much is enough? If the tradition wisdom that “Enough is as good as a feast” is true, then might we be content with less, and give ourselves permission to claim more free time?

There are important cultural shifts to work toward long term in reducing wealth inequality and revitalizing the Labor Movement. But beginning with ourselves, how might you feel called to practice the spirituality of summer over the next few months? Are you taking all the vacation that you are allowed this year? (If not, perhaps it’s not too late to schedule some unplugged time away with friends and family — or what can you go ahead and get on the calendar for vacation next year.) What did you love to do for hours on end as a child? What activities would cause you to get lost in the zone with hours passing with you barely noticing? How might you experiment with reclaiming some version of those activities in your life?

For now, I’ll give the closing words to the historian Benjamin Hunnicutt from the conclusion to his book Free Time: The Forgotten American Dream who writes that “Higher Progress” — growth spiritually, mentally, emotionally, communally:

will be possible once again when more of us choose freely to liberate more of our lives from the economy, making the most basic of consumer choices to forgo new spending and luxuries, as well as modern illusions about the everlasting need for more wealth and work. **Free people choosing more freedom is the best hope for the future.** (190)