



# UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK  
Spirituality · Community · Justice

## From the People Who Brought You the Weekend

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

Tomorrow is Labor Day. In addition to enjoying a three-day weekend, it is important to be mindful that Labor Day is about much more than a last stretch of time off at the symbolic end of summer. The first Monday in September is also an invitation to remember and celebrate the labor movement's role in securing workers' rights in this country. In the late nineteenth century, an increasing number of states officially recognized Labor Day as a holiday, culminating in Congress declaring Labor Day a federal holiday in 1894.

It can be easy to forget how much we owe organized labor. As one bumper sticker says, **“Support Unions: from the folks who brought you the weekend.”** If we had more room than a bumper sticker allows, we could add to that list: “Support Unions: from the folks who brought you, not only weekends, but also child labor laws, overtime pay, minimum wage, injury protection, workers compensation insurance, pension security, sick leave, safer working conditions, and more!”

Historically, many people used to spend 12 (or more) hours/day working for six (or seven) days/week. But “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” ([Honnicut](#) vii). The labor movement pushed back against the exploitation of workers.

And here is another oft-forgotten twist. In the late nineteenth century, extrapolating from the successes of the labor movement, **many of the best**

economists “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, working only two hours a day (for a total of ten hours/week) would mean having time to pursue the American Dream of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” instead of returning home from work too exhausted to do anything but rest briefly before dragging oneself back to work the next day.

Labor activists helped secure a five-day workweek — and in some industries even a six-hour workday. But starting with the Great Depression in the 1930s, the trend of shortened work hours *reversed*. A new emphasis arose on growing the economy through perpetually increasing consumer demand. As a result, many of us find ourselves working increasingly long hours, with less free time to enjoy the fruits of our labors. The ubiquity of technology in recent years, especially smart phones, has exacerbated this dynamic such that **many of us have access to work — and work has access to us — 24/7/365, world without end, Amen!**

In the midst of this trend toward nonstop work, the pandemic has accelerated discontent among many people who find themselves in jobs that come with the label “essential worker,” but who are not treated with essential dignity in salary or benefits. And we are witnessing some hopeful resurgences in the labor rights movement.

To quote a *Washington Post* labor reporter: “Union activity in the U.S. is skyrocketing. As of May, petitions for union elections this fiscal year 2022 surpassed 2021 ([Lauren K. Gurley](#)).” Similarly from Secretary of Labor Robert Reich:

Unions [have] won 641 elections so far this year — the most in nearly 20 years.

The first-ever unionized Trader Joe's.

The first unionized Chipotle in the U.S.

The first unionized Amazon facility in the U.S.

230 unionized Starbucks stores.

**This is what a labor uprising looks like ([Reich](#)).**

Each of these trailblazing “firsts” also serve as models for others to emulate.

On this Labor Day Weekend, I am also holding in my heart the news that the author and activist Barbara Ehrenreich died on Thursday from a stroke at the age of 81. She was an award-winning columnist, and published 21 books, but she was best known for her 2001 memoir, *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*, based on her three-month experiment of trying to survive working minimum wage jobs.

As a waitress in Florida, she “found that it took two jobs to make ends meet. After repeating her journalistic experiment in other places as a hotel housekeeper, cleaning lady, nursing home aide and Wal-Mart associate, she still found it nearly impossible to subsist on an average of \$7 an hour. **Every job takes skill and intelligence, she concluded, and should be paid accordingly**” (The New York Times). Her book helped raise awareness that the minimum wage must be a living wage if we are to truly value what our UU First Principle calls, “The inherent worth and dignity of every person.”

I’ve preached a few previous Labor Day Weekend sermons on revitalizing the Labor Movement that are available in our sermon archive, and I will loop back to that point at the end of this sermon. But I would like to invite us to not forget to savor the fruit of what the Labor Movement has already achieved. *“From the people who brought you the weekend”*: **what are we and aren’t we doing to savor the freedom that the Labor Movement has helped us demand for workers?**

Indeed, as I was about to sit down to put the finishing touches on this sermon yesterday, I heard the following on NPR’s “Talk of the Nation”:

Priests, ministers, rabbis and imams are generally driven by a sense of duty to answer calls for help and to do the best they can to serve others. But recent research shows that in many cases, they rarely find time for themselves and as a result suffer from higher rates of depression, obesity and high blood pressure. Many clergy members simply burn out (NPR).

Let me be clear: I’m not asking you to take care of me. Although important happenings here at UUCF interrupted my vacation many more times than I would have liked this summer, I am significantly less tired than I was in mid-June, and I’ve cut back on a number of my recurring commitments starting this fall as I work toward a more sustainable schedule.

The larger point is that it is very much not just clergy who as a profession are being impacted by what some commentators have called the “Great Resignation.” In general for many professions—from health care workers, to teachers, restaurant workers, and so many more—the pandemic has made everything twice as hard and half as enjoyable. So to the extent that we can, **what might we do differently to make the most of the gifts of the people who brought us the weekend?**

Along these lines, I would like to share with you two quotes that have been touchstones for me in discerning what is and isn’t mine to do. The first quote is from the Trappist monk Thomas Merton, who was both a *contemplative* cloistered in a monastery, and an *activist*, frequently corresponding and meeting with visitors who were on the front lines of creating social change. In his book, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, he wrote a passage that may be particularly provocative for us Unitarian Universalists and other social progressives committed to building a better world with peace, liberty, and justice, not merely for some—but for *all*.

I know that we at UUCF want to help with all the ten thousand needs of the world, yet we are finite in our time and resources. In regard to this tension, Merton writes:

**There is a pervasive form of modern violence to which the idealist...most easily succumbs: activism and over-work.** The rush and pressure of modern life are a form, perhaps the most common form, of its innate violence. To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many demands, to commit oneself to too many projects, to want to help everyone in everything is to succumb to violence. **The frenzy of the activist neutralizes [their] work.... because it kills the root of inner wisdom, which makes work fruitful.** (86)

As we discern how we are called to build the better world we dream about—and how to turn our dreams into deeds—Merton cautions us that our admirable commitments to social justice can become disordered. As so many of us are learning through the work of Anti-racism, Anti-oppression, and Multiculturalism, “Intentions do not equal impact.”

Despite our best intentions, we do not always have the *impact* and get the results we imagined. And Merton warns us that activism which is too frenzied and relentless (without breaks to reflect, reorient, and recharge) can ironically cause us to be less effective: “*The frenzy of the activist neutralizes [their] work.... because it kills the root of inner wisdom, which makes work fruitful.*” That’s worth reflecting on with regard to giving yourself permission to make the most of the gifts of time we have received from the people who brought you the weekend.

The second quote that may serve us as we seek to discern what is and isn’t ours to do is from the book *Listening Hearts: Discerning Call in Community*:

Even when a need exists and we are well qualified to meet it, we are not necessarily called to respond to it. Something may seem logical for us to do, but that does not mean that we call[ed] to do it.... Simply because a task or undertaking is good to do, does it mean that we are called to do it or that we should continue doing it? **To be doing good can be the greatest obstacle to doing something even better.**

Hear that final line again: “*To be doing good can be the greatest obstacle to doing something even better.*”

A basic, foundational part of skillful discernment is learning to choose good over evil. But what about the much more subtle distinction of **discerning the “best” next right action—over something merely “good” or “better.”** None of us can do everything we’d like to do. So how do we choose, in each moment, what is most authentically *mine* and *yours* and *ours* to do, over so many other worthy priorities?

What are we called to do? And what is *not* ours to do? If we are to give a full-throated, fully embodied, fully committed “Yes!” to our calling, we must also be willing to say, “No” to where we are not called — if we are not to spread ourselves too thin, or find ourselves hooked into what Merton calls the *violence* of overwork.

So, with the end of summer upon us, where are *you*—and where are *we*—in that tension between service and self-care? Do you know in your heart, mind, body, and spirit that you need to slow down and do some contemplating and recharging? Or are you feeling a pull to charge ahead? What is the next right action for you—and for us—to take at the intersection of wisdom, compassion, and discernment? How are we each

called to answer the call of love — a call which includes, not only love and care for all sentient beings on this planet and for the Earth, but also love and care for ourselves, for our own emotions, for our own bodies?

As you ponder these questions and reflect on how we are called to support one another in the struggle, in a few moments we will be invited to sing “Solidarity Forever,” perhaps the labor movement’s most famous anthem. Before we sing, allow me to give you a little background about the significant connection of this song to UU history.

The original lyrics to “Solidarity Forever” were written in 1915 and set to the tune of “**John Brown's Body**,” a marching song written decades earlier by Union soldiers during the Civil War, about the radical abolitionist John Brown. Some of you may recall that, of the [Secret Six](#) who helped fund and supply John Brown’s 1859 raid on the federal armory at Harpers’ Ferry, *five* were Unitarians, two were Unitarian *ministers*. Among those five Unitarians was Samuel Howe, the husband of another of our Unitarian ancestors, Julia Ward Howe, who awoke in the middle of the night after visiting Civil War camps and hospitals, inspired to write new lyrics to the tune of “John Brown's Body” —verses that became the “**Battle Hymn of the Republic.**”

When the Civil War began, it was far from clear in the North whether the fight was only to preserve the union or also to end slavery. Julia’s “Battle Hymn of the Republic” was written in November 1861, more than a year *before* Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863. **Julia’s lyrics helped catalyze popular support for using the Civil War as an opportunity to end slavery once and for all** ([167](#)).

I invite you to remember some historic echoes in “John Brown’s Body” and “The Battle Hymn of the Republic.” (Note that Verse Four centers on the “Women of the Union.” If you identify as female, you are invite to sing on that verse.)

I’ll leave you with one final quote from The Rev. Dr. Susan Frederick-Gray, the President of our Unitarian Universalist Association, from a recent press release titled “Unitarian Universalists Honor Workers’ Dignity and Support the Labor Movement” that resonates deeply with Barbara Ehrenreich’s point that we explored earlier—that the minimum wage must be a living wage:

**Poverty is a policy choice.** Together we can pass legislation that honors workers' dignity, values labor, and holds the quality of every life as sacred. An economic system that produces record profits during the COVID-19 pandemic while plunging millions more people into poverty is immoral. **64% of people in the United State live paycheck to paycheck.** Working class Americans pay a higher tax rate than billionaires, are hit hardest when rising gas prices make getting to work difficult or impossible, and suffer under a political economy that prioritizes profits over people. As people of faith and conscience we rejoice in recent historic wins for workers at Starbucks and Amazon facilities.... This is the righteous work of people joining together across differences to demand dignity, safety, and justice. The basic right and ability to live, to be housed, to access healthcare and be active members of thriving communities should not be an exclusive reward for labor. **Our value and dignity is not calculated by hours we toil. It is our birthright....** To all who believe in justice and democracy in our government, our communities and in our workplaces, we join you in solidarity.