

Labor and Love
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As you may remember, in addition to my work with this congregation, I have a day job at Amherst College. Most of the time I am able to successfully balance my work and still have time for play. I set my intention to be a fully integrated person, with my spiritual and faith life feeding me. I know intellectually that taking time for feeding my spirit will help me in all aspects of my life, that attention to the spirit is like filling a well for when I am under stress or struggling. I know that taking time for reflection in my work, and in my day to day will help me to feel better, make better choices, live the life I want to live, to be a more whole person. Sometimes though, when things are hopping along quickly in too many aspects of my life, my stress level rises beyond what I am able to manage and I hit a tipping point. I start to feel behind in everything. I forget to go to the spiritual well. Last week I was trying to balance extra things I needed to do for both my jobs, I was helping the kids pack to move out, and prepping our apartment for an inspection, scheduled the day after the kids' move. It was all a little too much, and I started not sleeping well, which made it harder to do a good job at anything. Stress takes a huge toll on our bodies and can push us into negative cycles. For me, when I am super busy, I get so tired that I don't cook good food, or I eat as I am working or driving, so I feel cruddy, and struggle to get through things. I feel exhausted. I feel disconnected, and I forget the well exists. All this increases my stress and the cycle worsens. It is decidedly not fun. Anyone else ever been in that place?

What breaks that cycle? For me, there are a few things. When I am stuck like that, I need spiritual broccoli. I sometimes use a visualization of spirit flowing through me like the blood in my veins and that grounds me back, connecting me to my resources. Sometimes I sing. Sometimes I need a friend to tell me it is going to be okay if I don't get everything done, or to lend me a hand. Sometimes I take a hard look at my calendar and triage the stuff that I know is not going to happen in a given week. Sometimes I have to go back to what an old boss once wrote in huge letters on our white boards. "This is *not* an ICU." Now, that doesn't apply if the stressor actually *is* a life or death problem, but for most of us, our choices and tasks, while important, and *contributing* to issues of life and death, are not so immediate. We have some flexibility, we have some time and choices.

The *Tao te Ching* focuses on balance and understanding the Way, which to my western brain I interpret as getting out of my own way to see the flow of the universe. The *Tao* has lots of language about leading by not leading, succeeding by not trying to succeed. In our reading from Chapter 34 today, the sage writes,

The great Tao floods and flows in every direction.

Everything in existence depends on it, and it doesn't deny them.

It accomplishes its work without naming or making claims for itself.

Everything in existence is clothed and nourished by it, but it doesn't lord over anything. Aimless, ambitionless, it might be called "small."

Everything in existence returns to it, and still it doesn't lord over anything.
Thus it might also be called "great."
Because it has no desire to be great, it can achieve greatness.

The *Tao* says that if we hold on too tightly to what we want, we won't get it. When we get overtired, or stressed, it can be hard to remember this. For folks who are living paycheck to paycheck, or not making it to the next paycheck, the stress can push people away from attention to spiritual and physical needs, and from the potential support and grounding that spiritual care and attention can offer. For so many folks struggling in low wage jobs, it can be hard to hold life loosely. For those who may be making a much more comfortable living, but are working tons of unpaid overtime or dealing with stressful choices, it can be hard to hold their spiritual selves together. We can forget about the well.

You know that old saying, "do what you love and you will never work a day in your life." Well, sometimes we are lucky enough to be in that position, and sometimes are not. The idea of a desk job to some people is their nightmare, and for others, having to be outside in the heat or cold would be incredibly hard. Sometimes even our perfect job can be really hard to face. Sometimes we want to just go back to bed, and not be responsible adults. It is easier to hold on to our personal and spiritual selves in our work when we are not stressed out, or in crisis. But that is when we most need support, when we need each other, and our spiritual well. For those worrying about hunger, life and death, and who are pushing their bodies to the limit in their work, spiritual reflection may not be a big part of their day. This helps perpetuate the cycle of stress and the physical toll on the body. What might we do differently as a society?

Our work is important—both what we do to earn a living, and what we do with our lives in total. How do we live out our values through our work? When we have the opportunity to make choices, how do we decide? Whether we see our work as a calling, as something we love, a service to others, or as a paycheck, any work we are able to do with attention and intention has meaning. There is the potential to make choices about who we are, and how we will treat each other and the earth. No matter what our work, we have the opportunity to learn more about ourselves and other people and be shaped by our experience. Sometimes our jobs are structured so that we don't have many choices. For those working on a factory line, uniformity is key. However, how we treat our co-workers, what we stand up for, how we share of ourselves with others, that is part of our work as well. Our work shapes us, but it does not define us. My grandfather worked many low-wage jobs along with being a farmer. When he retired from the local gas station he still brought a thermos of coffee down and hung out with the guys in the shop for years. They were some of his most cherished relationships.

When our spiritual life supports us in our work life, when we don't hold them separate, we can live a more integrated life, we can better manage our stressors, and have greater support for our whole lives. When we are attentive, we can more easily connect with our spiritual centers, and with other people who can support us. We can also have greater perspective on success and happiness and what they really mean for us. We might better hear the words of the *Tao*, and of other sages who share their experience of work and what is most important to them.

Connecting our work and our spirit, being attentive and intentional is personal work for each of us. But some of it is the work of our society. Unitarian Universalists around the country are organizing on issues of fair and living wages for all workers. As part of our call to

compassion, freedom, and the inherent worth and dignity of all, many of our fellow UUs, including some in this room, have advocated and petitioned for more fair wages and tax laws. Labor Day celebrates the organizing of workers who brought us things like a 40 hour work week, weekends, overtime pay, and benefits. We can strive as a society to value the work of all in such a way that people are not working two full-time jobs just to subsist. We can do better as a society and each of us, whether in our own day to day, or in our work for justice can be reminded of the spiritual well we have to support us, here, every Sunday, and hopefully, every day.

So may it be. Amen.