

WORKERS OF THE WORLD...WHAT NOW?
Sermon by Audette Fulbright
Sunday, September 2, 2018
All Souls Church, New York City

“Calling Him Back from Layoff,” (Bob Hickok)

I called a man today. After he said
hello and I said hello came a pause
during which it would have been
confusing to say hello again so I said
how are you doing and guess what, he said
fine and wondered aloud how I was
and it turns out I'm OK. He
was on the couch watching cars
painted with ads for Budweiser follow cars
painted with ads for Tide around an oval
that's a metaphor for life because
most of us run out of gas and settle
for getting drunk in the stands
and shouting at someone in a t-shirt
we want kraut on our dog. I said
he could have his job back and during
the pause that followed his whiskers
scrubbed the mouthpiece clean
and his breath passed in and out
in the tidal fashion popular
with mammals until he broke through
with the words *how soon thank you*
ohmyGod which crossed his lips and drove
through the wires on the backs of ions
as one long word as one hard prayer
of relief meant to be heard
by the sky. When he began to cry I tried
with the shape of my silence to say
I understood but each confession
of fear and poverty was more awkward
than what you learn in the shower.
After he hung up I went outside and sat
with one hand in the bower of the other
and thought if I turn my head to the left
it changes the song of the oriole
and if I give a job to one stomach other
forks are naked and if tonight a steak
sizzles in his kitchen do the seven
other people staring at their phones
hear?'

It's hard to begin a sermon about Labor day, the labor movement, and the issues we face around labor without at least risking a lot of glazed eyes, but we're going to try it today. We do need to

set the scene first. Here's where we are today, in a nutshell: "Income disparities have become so pronounced that America's top 10 percent now average nearly nine times as much income as the bottom 90 percent. Americans in the top 1 percent tower stunningly higher. They average over 38 times more income than the bottom 90 percent. But that gap pales in comparison to the divide between the nation's top 0.1 percent and everyone else. Americans at this lofty level are taking in over 184 times the income of the bottom 90 percent." (<http://inequality.org/income-inequality/>)

The U.S. has had much worse economic times than the current, to be sure - though only such levels of inequality at the most devastating time. Let's take a moment to look at 1893. This was the year of a great financial panic, one that would turn out to be signaling the Great Depression which was soon to follow. Trouble in the agricultural fields of the Midwest contributed, but a big problem was in the railroads. Let's go there to a particular story. It's one that touches on the inter-related nature of the issues that always face us.

Many of you have probably heard of George Pullman - a railroad magnate, whose company built the Pullman cars for rail. What you may not know is that Pullman was a Universalist. His story - and the story of those who worked for him - is interesting. So, Pullman did some things that leaned toward justice: he hired ex-slaves, for example, and young women. Pullman hired them - but he paid them far less in wages and gave them the most menial jobs. He built a town for his workers, trying to make it a "model community." The historic record notes: "Built between 1880 and 1884, the town had landscaped open space, a beautiful church, and a retail arcade that included a restaurant, bank, post office, theater and shops. Everything was within walking distance of the factory complex. A grand hotel was built and named Florence after Pullman's daughter. His rooms there were used to entertain dignitaries of the day.

"Everyone came to Pullman," ... "It was the Epcot of the 1880s."

The only thing residents lacked was a sense of control. By 1893, the population had reached 12,000. There was no local government. A town agent managed the community. The company decided which stores could locate in the town, which books would be stocked in the library, and which performances could be staged at the local playhouse.

Worker discontent was expressed in an often-quoted saying: "We are born in a Pullman house, fed from the Pullman shops, taught in the Pullman school, catechized in the Pullman Church, and when we die we shall go to the Pullman Hell."

(http://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/uniontrib/20050515/news_1h15pullman.html)

But much worse was to come. In 1893, when financial stress on the railroad began with a slowdown in investment, Pullman cut wages for his workers - but did not reduce rent, food costs, or any other necessary expenses in his town. His job, he stated openly, was to make sure that his stockholders continued to make their profits.

This all led to one of the worst and most famous strikes in US history: The Pullman Strike. Figures like Eugene Debs and Clarence Darrow would become part of this legacy, as would the violence of the state against the workers when federal troops fired on workers.

How could a Universalist be at the center of what is widely understood as a deeply unjust situation?

“UU historians note that Pullman really didn’t see much difference among any of the different faith traditions of the time [which means he wasn’t looking closely at those traditions, to put it mildly, AF]—and he also believed that he was the person who would be instrumental in his workers’ universal salvation. He saw church attendance as his moral duty, but felt that it didn’t apply to his personal ethics and interpersonal interactions.” (Pam Garn Nunn, “Unitarian Universalism and the Labor Movement”)

Pullman’s story stands in sharp contrast to the many other UUs who, historically and in our own time, stand with laborers, who work for the simple goal that each person should have their basic needs met, and that no worker should live in poverty or work in unsafe conditions.

I share Pullman’s tale to note that our faith, taken as a matter of habit, without reflection, and most of all, without implementation - our faith, when it does not change our heart, mind, and actions - is dead.

The labor movement, which was hard-fought and bloody, brought us the eight hour workday, the weekend, an end to child labor, safety regulations, the minimum wage, benefits. This is how far we’ve come. But we who inherit the gifts of those who came before us must do our part both to retain those gifts, and to make a better world for those who will come after us. Each of us has to decide if we will have a “Pullman faith,” one that we give nod to but do not allow it to transform us or the decisions we make, or a genuine faith of the free, whereby we will be known by our “deeds, not creeds.”

This is not academic in any way to us as UUs, collectively or individually. In our own faith, the last two years in particular have been roiled by stress and dismay, as bias in hiring practices, and the unique challenges to faith leaders of color in UU communities which are majority-white have been laid bare. Our former President, Peter Morales, left - as did Don Southworth, who was head of the UU Ministers’ Association. Since Don, Peter and I were all in the same seminary class at Starr King, it felt close to home. But others left, too -- other white men, whose presence at the top of our UUA hierarchy had replicated itself too comfortably over the many years, in a faith tradition that was majority female, and which had repeatedly overlooked candidates of color.

Ours is a faith tradition which tries to look at what the world can be - a world of justice, a world where people are seen as whole and welcome, as fully human and whose experience and perspective are valued. I was reminded of this in an odd way this week. The current President said, at a state dinner for evangelical leaders, if the Democrats win this November, they will “overturn everything quickly and violently.” Noted non-Trump supporter Bette Midler tweeted, “Now Trump’s saying Democrats are going to be “violent” if they win big in November? What are we going to do? Throw our PBS tote bags at them?”

Throw “our” PBS tote bags at him. That’s such a UU kind of joke. The longtime trope was that UUs were NPR devotees; indeed, the most common place for any UU church to advertise has been public radio. The common assumptions and culture, the norms around hiring and ministry and behavior and yes, worship, too have all been normed around whiteness, and middle to upper class educated whiteness, specifically.

Because we are human, there’s no one right way to be a UU. Having said that, as employers and employees and people creating a shared system of values and a way of living our faith in the world, we must remain vigilant in our pursuit of justice in our own areas of responsibility. We are employers, and we have workers. Are we paying a living wage? Are we norming to white

supremacy, to variations on the Good 'Ol Boys networks, are we aware of how we create accessibility to all, or throw up our hands and say "we can't make room for everyone, so some will simply have to accept second-class status?"

So often, paying attention or even just becoming aware of the ways in which we can - and should - make changes, open our circle wider, adapt and respond to experiences that are different from our own just feels stressful, and onerous - - or we feel guilty and ashamed of not already knowing what we just didn't know. But what if we were to take history seriously, and realize it has always just demanded one thing: that we understand that change is constant, and it often leads us forward into a more beautiful, a more abundant, and more compassionate and creative way of being? The more wisdom at the table, the more insight we can share. The less we are certain of everything, the less we cling to the past and the more we embrace wonder and curiosity, the more likely we are to be supple and vital, alive and ready for a changing future. THIS is what a faith of the free calls us to be. This is how we equip ourselves for our children's world. A world where 1% of the world's wealth is not equal to the bottom 99% - an unsustainable situation for all. Our living tradition expects us to be the dreamers and the doers. It asks that we seek more to be just than to be comfortable. It has always called us forward to be the progressive religious leaders of our age, and history remembers those who answered its call. Think of it as our Unitarian genius Gene Roddenberry, creator of Star Trek did - that we are called "to boldly go where no one has gone before."

The Pullman story, the story of our recent UUA leadership struggles - these remind us that in every age, we strive for justice and fall short. Yet we cannot abandon the struggle. This Labor day, as we celebrate a long weekend brought to us by those who fought and bled, starved and watched their children go hungry, those who sang and struggled for basic human dignity for workers and then basic necessities - we need to remember that there are hugely important labor fights in our age: a living wage, health care as a basic right, a renewed fight for the right to collective action and bargaining, workplace safety and dignity for LGB and especially trans folk and the incredibly critical issue of prison labor, about which the largest US strike is ongoing at this moment...the work continues on. Let us honor this time not so much with sales and parties and vacations, but rather, with a renewed spiritual commitment to staying open to the creative possibilities of a better world, personal engagement, and the change that makes it all possible. Amen, ashe, blessed be.