



## NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

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### In Labor

Rev. Dr. Jim Nelson  
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No, not that kind. That is the other minister – Hannah. And, once again, congratulations to her and Kit on their new baby boy, Pender Wells Petrie.

One of the more famous of the Psalms is number 121 which begins: 'I look towards the hills, from whence cometh my help ...' Well, for a little more than this past week, we have also been looking toward the hills, those of us here in the San Gabriel Valley and Los Angeles basin, but not with the expectation of help, but rather with a glance of hope or fear or worry or awe. The fires raging behind and above us have been awful in both senses – a number of our members have had to leave their homes, though most if not all are back home; there have been many fitful nights with people saying up keeping watch; the air has been awful and a threat to our health.

Our help has not come from the Lord but from firefighters. They have worked beyond capacity. My daughter was a firefighter for the Bureau of Land Management for two summers outside of Lee Vining on the eastern slope of the Sierras, and spent many a day exhausted in the battle to preserve life and property. The fire is moving on now and, as far as I know, no one in our congregation lost anything – other than a good bit of sleep and days at work and school. I spent a number of hours on the phone talking to those of you who live in the threatened areas; I have been told repeatedly how much it meant to some of you that so many from the church checked in with you and offered help.

We seem to be past present danger and the cooler air is wonderful, and, as these things are in our lives, the smoke and flame are beginning to retire to memory, and our lives go on, resuming most of the patterns they had before. It is remarkable to me how transitory events are, how we move on from dramatic events. Some, of course, linger; some bury themselves deeply into our sense of self and won't let go. But, mostly, we move on. We go back to work; our kids go back to school; we look up and see blue skies, and all is like it was.

We need to do this, of course. The past is always past; we are alive only in the present; we cannot breathe or act or think in the past or in the future; it is only now that we are alive, and now has its own rhythms and demands, and the world breaks in on us fresh each day. I just finished reading our own Michelle Huneven's new novel, *Blame*, and it deals in part with this – about how the past intrudes, how we carry it with us, and what happens when we no longer need to. This is not always an easy thing to do

Anyway – it was an awful week or so, and these wonderful mountains behind us were not our friends for a while.

John Hall Wheelock wrote this poem

*LIFE burns us up like fire,  
And Song goes up in flame:  
The radiant body smoulders*

...

And Gerard Manley Hopkins

*Cloud puff-ball, torn tufts, tossed pillows ' flaunt forth, then chevy on an air-  
built thoroughfare: heaven-roysterers, in gay-gangs ' they throng; they glitter in marches.  
Down roughcast, down dazzling whitewash, ' wherever an elm arches,  
Shivelights and shadowtackle in long ' lashes lace, lance, and pair.  
Delightfully the bright wind boisterous ' ropes, wrestles, beats earth bare  
Of yestertempest's creases; in pool and rut peel parches  
Squandering ooze to squeezed ' dough, crust, dust; stanches, starches*

*Squadroned masks and manmarks ' treadmire toil there  
 Footfretted in it. Million-fuelèd, ' nature's bonfire burns on.  
 But quench her bonniest, dearest ' to her, her clearest-selvèd spark  
 Man, how fast his firedint, ' his mark on mind, is gone!  
 Both are in an unfathomable, all is in an enormous dark  
 Drowned. O pity and indignation! Manshape, that shone  
 Sheer off, disseveral, a star, ' death blots black out; nor mark  
     Is any of him at all so stark  
 But vastness blurs and time ' beats level. Enough! the Resurrection,  
 A heart's-clarion! Away grief's gasping, ' joyless days, dejection.  
     Across my foundering deck shone  
 A beacon, an eternal beam. ' Flesh fade, and mortal trash  
 Fall to the residuary worm; ' world's wildfire, leave but ash:      20  
     In a flash, at a trumpet crash,  
 I am all at once what Christ is, ' since he was what I am, and  
 This Jack, joke, poor potsherd, ' patch, matchwood, immortal diamond,  
     Is immortal diamond.*

Both poets claim that in the fire, in the transitory nature of the present, is something eternal, that in the fire we can hear a song or see a diamond. The mountains are blackened – around a quarter of the Angeles National Forest is no more, but it is not dead – life is still there and will be back.

These fires are, of course, a reminder that we are mortal and that our lives always take place within a context of danger. Nothing is assured, and we have been reminded again that there are forces in the world far beyond our controlling. Fire and flood, earthquake and wind, storm and illness – we all walk on eggshells; we skate on thin ice; we live on borrowed time.

The fires are a reminder, too, of how many blessings we have – of being spared, of friends and of community, of the resilience of the earth. Over and over we heard people talk about knowing what really matters – as people packed up to evacuate, they talked about their family and their memories, not their things. Photos took precedence over electronics, art over fine clothes – meaning over things.

The fires are a reminder that we have to live with nature, and not opposed to nature. If only we lived like that more often.

Maybe, too, because fires are natural and necessary, they might be a reminder for all of us to clear away that brush and dead wood in our lives, even to let things burn down to the essence so rebirth might occur. Maybe we need to let our inner grounds be scorched and purified. As we move on into a new program year, maybe we might all think about clearing some brush so that the fires of living do not overwhelm us.

Enough metaphor about fire.

This is Labor Day weekend and here is my union card – a member of Laborer's International Union of North America, Brick Mason Helpers and Building Laborers' Local Union No 74, Washington, DC, membership book number 3894.

Here is a second, of sorts – my membership card in the Unitarian Universalists Ministers Association – not exactly a union though I wish it were more so.

How many here are current members of a Union? How many have been members? How many come from Union families? I am the only member of my family to have been in a Union. I have never and would never cross a picket line. Without unions, our country would be in far worse shape than it is now and we would be better if unions were stronger.

Child labor laws, the 40 hour week, safe work places, vacations, health care, pensions – these and other benefits now recognized as normal came about because workers organized and demanded of employers that they be treated, not as commodities, but as workers. Labor laws have insisted that people be able to enjoy the results of their labor. Many of us can remember the grape boycotts of several decades ago when Cesar Chavez organized for decent working conditions for farm laborers. Unions provided for a great middle class in the US, and honored the work of men and women. Hats off to unions.

Work, labor. Freud said that we need two things for a meaningful and satisfactory life – love and work – they are the cornerstones of our humanness he said. He was right [as Freud was about so many things!]. Love and work – relationships and usefulness. We all need to be connected in some way and we all want to believe that we are of use. When I worked with hospice, these were the two questions that weighed on people's minds at the end of their lives – they wondered about the relationships they had had and whether they had been of use.

Yes, isn't that right? Isn't that partly what people discovered this past week – that connectedness, relationships are at the heart of our humanness. This congregation, this beloved community as we call it – isn't it based on the fact that we need each other and that we want each other?

At home I have been grumbling for several weeks about the church year starting again and my summer vacation ending. Dreams of retirement dance in my head – if only I had bought that winning lottery ticket in San Gabriel worth 166.5 million dollars – but then I come to the office or come here with you and I am glad the summer is gone and I am back to work. And it is a joy.

What would we be if we did not serve some larger cause? It seems to me that work is just that – it is one part of our lives that serves something larger than ourselves. My Dad was a salesman – he served his customers and made it possible for them to live a life they found worthwhile. Teachers, doctors and lawyers, engineers and administrators, people who work at computers, fix lights or landscapes. Edit videos and set sound, tell jokes or sing, play an instrument and balance books.

Do you know what the person next to you does for work – or did? Check it out after the service

Labor Day was first celebrated on September 5, 1882 in New York, becoming a national holiday in 1884, following the Pullman Strike when over 125,000 railways workers struck the Pullman Company and federal troops were called up. It is a holiday in all 50 states. And though it is most often thought of as the end of summer and the day after which you should not wear white, Labor Day was meant to honor work and workers, labor and laborers.

Can you remember your first job? I don't mean chores at home, but a job where you had responsibility and reported to a boss other than a parent and for which you got paid? Mine was a paper route in Minneapolis. I worked in gas stations in high school, had a Fuller Brush route [that was the worst job I ever had!]. I washed dishes in college, worked construction and for a landscape company, was a substitute teacher, a graduate teaching assistant, a corn de-tassler in Iowa; I cut carpets and picked grapes in Germany. I was a community organizer in Rochester, NY, a chaplain at a psychiatric hospital, hung drywall for six months [another one of the worst jobs]. I have been a minister for 28 years.

Other than my current job, the best I think I ever had was while I was in graduate school in Iowa. I was waiting for my thesis defense – my dissertation was being typed [before computers!] and I had about six months before I would be done. I was through with classes, with all my thesis work, and I have never been very good at just sitting.

So I got a job. It was at a sheltered workshop for a large Goodwill operation in Iowa City, IA. Clients had an opportunity to learn work skills and earn a little money, and to work alongside non-handicapped workers. Our job was assembly line – putting toothbrushes in toothbrush boxes. There were two tables of about 8 each, and each table had four Goodwill clients and four from the outside, as we were known. Besides me, the other outside workers were a Vietnamese woman, a boat person, who took me mushroom hunting several times; a young man who was always stoned and had been almost constantly, he claimed, for two to three years [though he admitted he wasn't sure about the length of time] and a slightly older male [I was early 30s] who was a writer and had written one novel never published, about smuggling

marijuana from Jamaica to the US. The four clients were two with cerebral palsy and two with downs syndrome. I was paired with a young man with downs and he loved to talk about bicycles with me – I did a lot of biking in those days.

We all talked and took great pride in our work, competing with other teams to see who could fill the most toothbrush boxes. Stories went around the tables.

I loved it. Each day I accomplished something and worked with others who cared about what they did and about each other. I was not thought of more highly because I was getting my PhD – my willingness to work was the measure.

Work, labor. These are not easy times. The unemployment rate is high – especially here in California. The gap between the top and the bottom has increased significantly over the past 30 years. Households are working more and more to stay afloat. While the top earners have seen income soar, the bottom has stagnated. Far too many members of Congress resisted increasing the minimum wage – at the current minimum wage a family of four falls below the poverty line. What kind of country are we?

Benefits are squeezed – our health premiums for church employees have gone up around 25% in the last two years. More is expected of workers and I know some of you are exhausted trying to keep up, hoping your job might be more secure if you just work harder. Our kids face an uncertain future – the economic policies of the last decades have weakened us tremendously. In California, a minority in the legislature would seemingly rather see the state fail than provide benefits for the most vulnerable.

People report less satisfaction with their jobs. Homelessness is on the rise; fireman and emergency rooms in hospitals are now a primary provider of health care for more and more people.

Love and work, Freud said, are the cornerstones of our humanity. Work ennobles us; it provides opportunities for us to be useful, to give something to this world. When we lose this chance, something profound is lost – not just economically, but spiritually as well.

So on this Labor Day, pray for the worker – maybe it is you, perhaps the person next to you. Certainly pray for those who work so hard and are rewarded so little. Say a prayer of gratitude for unions – as imperfect as they are – made up of humans after all – the organization of workers had made our lives so much better. Honor the work of others - demean no one.

Again – Marge Piercy

*To be of use*

*The people I love the best  
jump into work head first  
without dallying in the shallows*

....

Amen