

Introduction: Laura Kemper

As many of us prepare to enjoy a day off from school or from our jobs tomorrow, it seems appropriate to wonder how the original purpose of this holiday relates to us today. Obviously, all of us are workers in many arenas, and we love the idea of a day out of the usual routine with time to relax and enjoy our families and friends. But do we share anything in common with the people for whom the holiday was originally meant?

The early Labor Day parades and demonstrations were seeking higher wages and more humane working conditions for the men and women who were building-- literally stone by stone and stitch by stitch--the ever-more prosperous America of the late 19th century,. The first Labor Day parade was called by early union workers themselves for Sept. 5, 1882 in New York City. The 10,000 or more working people who marched from City Hall to Union Square holding protest signs that day had to take a day off without pay to participate!

But those marches were about something beyond bare physical survival. The workers were also demanding to be respected for the importance of the often menial and physically taxing work they were doing. And they wanted to be acknowledged for their right to a better quality of life. To quote our hymn this morning, "Our life shall not be sweated from birth until life closes, hearts starve as well as bodies, give us bread, but give us roses!"

The initial idea for this service admittedly grew out of my upset that some of our most courageous public servants-- firefighters, police officers, teachers, and others -- were being accused by politicians of gluttonously feeding at the public trough. I won't expand on that topic now! But the struggle for respect in these fields is one I happen to be familiar with. Try mentioning at a party that you are an elementary school teacher and watch the conversation come to a dead halt!! Unless, of course, you get the standard response of "What a great job -- you are done at 3, you get summers off -- what a deal!" Really??

In preparing this service, I was looking for a way to honor those workers which, of course, led me to a broader truth.

Even if most of us are lucky enough today not to need protection from horrible physical working conditions in our jobs, I believe that we all share with the unionists a desire for work that provides the "roses." In our service today, we hope to acknowledge the universal need that each of us has to find meaning in our work and to get respect-- both from ourselves and from others--for the jobs that we have and the way that we do them.

We hope that our sharings this morning will inspire you to look beyond the job titles of the people presented to the deeper meaning, humanity and satisfaction

they find in their work. In our preparations, we have asked ourselves, do we see the importance of another's job the same way they do? Do we judge them – and ourselves – by the pay or status they command? Can we see the real contributions we each make to the lives of others through our work?

First Sharing: Toby Short

Hearts Starve As Well As Bodies

Laura asked me to testify this Labor Day Sunday as a representative of those who have toiled at jobs that are especially hard to value. Our work is an important part of who we are. In order to respect each other we need to respect each other's work. Money is one token of respect, but there is more to it than that. "Hearts starve as well as bodies, give us bread but give us roses!"

Sanitation worker, social worker, farmer, dishwasher, wait staff... There is a long list of important jobs that people think they know about, claim to value, and maybe feel vaguely guilty about underpaying for.

But when we encounter these people, do we make the effort to really understand and appreciate their work?

My first point today is just an extension of the story Laura read to the kids this morning. It's the job of a kid to be a kid. We all were kids once so we know all about what it's like, right? The truth is, we don't really have a clue.

As another example consider teaching. The value of teachers shouldn't be a hard sell in this community. But, as Laura already noted, self-identifying as a school teacher or librarian rarely generates lively cocktail chatter. After all, we've all been to school. We all have a pretty good idea of what that's all about. End of conversation.

A few days ago my friend Rod called me. (Rod works at Penn State, including teaching classes occasionally.) "Rod! How are you?" "To be honest with you Toby, if I ever get married again I would not marry a school teacher. If I was not married to a teacher I would say, 'It's just a bunch of little kids! Second grade - how hard can it be?'"

We don't really have a clue. We need to get beyond our preconceptions and stereotypes.

I am a regular volunteer teacher at Friends School now, but that is a recent transition. I have come to the end of over 20 years of service in a job I still don't have a name for. House husband? ...daddy-mommy? ...stay-at-home-parent? ("What do you do?" "I... stay at home.") When I go to parties with "full professors" and "named chairs" and fancy titles I usually tell people, "I manage the family investments in consumer durables." Sometimes I say that I am a self-employed applied philosopher. (I have to add "self-employed" or I get a bunch of questions about working at Penn State.)

Once, when my nephews were visiting, I was casting about for a young-adult conversational topic. I fell back on the familiar "What do you plan to do when you grow up?" Sprawled out on the living room couch they countered, "Just what is it that YOU do?"

I didn't know where to begin. I swept my hand over my son and daughter's heads to the kitchen, dining area and living room and said, "Look around. Everything you see. That's what I do."

What I saw was cooking, cleaning, restocking, painting, entertaining, educating, nagging, purchasing, replacing, plumbing... What they saw was a full refrigerator, soft couch, hi-fi-stereo, stacks of CDs, wide screen TV and video games.
"Sweet."

In order to respect each other's jobs we need to get beyond job titles and stereotypes. We need to see other people's work days thru their eyes. "What do you do?" Is just a start. How about following up with, "What do you consider a productive day? What are your joys? What are your struggles?"

Here is my second point... Trust is another dimension to respect. This works two ways - of course we honor our jobs and the people we work for by doing our best. In turn those we work for must empower us, not only with resources, but by stepping aside and trusting us to do our job.

When we help somebody, work for "the boss," or sort and price electronics for the rummage sale - we know that doing a good job is a gesture of respect. But how about when we employ people, take care of kids, or lead a church committee? Do we show the kids we care for, or the people we work with, respect by giving them the space and trust to do their thing, on their terms, their way?

Pam trusted me to be the primary caretaker of our children. This is exceptional because it transcends traditional archetypes. Men who love children, especially small children, are suspect at best. And women who focus on labor outside the

home can feel as if they are failing their biological imperative. Pam does not subscribe to either stereotype.

Her trust also requires some amount of courage. Consider that my idea of an after-school project could not only involve crayons and modeling clay but also a blow torch and table saw. Worse, essential to the craft will be teaching the children how to use all the dangerous tools.

(She says that it helps that she wasn't around to know most of what was going on at home...)

So the moral of this sharing is: To appreciate each other's inherent worth and dignity, we have to let ourselves out of the boxes of preconceptions. We have to make the effort to ask about things we think we already know.

And - the interconnections of the web of existence go both ways. As workers, we need to do our jobs well. But also, in our work, and in our lives, we need to empower others - with trust and space to do *their* jobs well.

Even if it means coming home after a hard day at the office and be greeted at the door with an anxious chorus of "Don't worry mommy, we can clean it up!"

Second Sharing: Pam Short

Mike the Mailman

I walked up to the counter and said, "I'd like to send this first-class, please." The clerk took my package and put it on the scale. "Ok, that'll be six dollars and seventy-five cents." After I handed him a 5 and two 1's, he reached into his cash drawer for a quarter... And twirled it

all...the...way...across...the...counter...and into my hand!

I was flabbergasted. He was grinning. "What's your name? I don't think I've seen you here before," he said.

"My name's Pam. I'm a new professor in Health Policy and Administration. My office is next door in the Henderson Building. What's your name?"

"Mike. Welcome to Penn State. You're gonna love it here." Then, to my surprise, he reached to ring a little bell. With his other hand, he held up a cardboard sign that said, "Nice sneakers." And everyone in the post office turned to look at a girl who had just walked in, wearing a pair of bright pink beauties.

On my way out, I stopped to admire a hand-lettered poster that said, "Ten Freshman Things to Do."

- Number One. Don't let your mom make your bed when you move in.

- Number Two. Say goodbye to your mom with a big kiss, and tell her that you love her.
- Number Three. Bake cookies for the mailman.

[There were lots of other pearls of wisdom in the list, but I noticed one repeat.]

- Number Eight. Bake cookies for the mailman.

That was my introduction to Mike the Mailman. In the years that followed, I looked forward to mailing packages and buying stamps. I became one of Mike's many friends.

Then one morning I read in the Centre Daily Times, "Federal Postal Inspectors Cite University Post Office for Violating Rules." An outside inspection team had visited Mike's post office and threw the book at him for all the things that we customers loved:

- His necktie, which was not regulation, but was made out of a fabric printed with brightly colored stamps
- The homemade posters, pictures, and Penn State memorabilia that decorated the walls
- His ink stamp with the lion paw prints. that he regularly offered to use to decorate packages.
- And lots of other stuff. Lot and lots of "problems" [air quotes] that violated postal regulations and policies.

We were afraid that Mike was going to lose his job. Toby and I marched in a big demonstration from the Old Main Lawn to the main Post Office on Frazier Street. The main Post Office is the headquarters of the State College Post Mistress-- Mike's boss. Graham Spanier wrote a public letter of support. In the end, the authorities tore down all the posters in the post office, painted the walls a sterile beige, and put up those boring posters that sell stamps or tell you how to wrap a package. Mike was sent away for two weeks of reprogramming, but I don't think he paid much attention to his remedial training in postal policies and procedures. After a while, the boring posters disappeared. And there was lots of good stuff on the walls again.

A few years later, on another visit to the post office, Mike invited me to sign up for his bar tour. The tour is an annual spring tradition that happens between final exams and graduation. It's traditional for groups of seniors to go on all-night tours of State College drinking establishments, so Mike leads a bunch of seniors and other friends on his own tour. After he assured me that it was OK to bring Toby for peer support, I signed up. The tour was quite the cross-cultural

experience. Toby and I tried out Monkey Boys at The Saloon. And sloshed through the beer on the dance floor of Shandygaff. Everyone on the tour wore matching T-shirts, in keeping with collegiate tradition.

What was most fun was just walking the streets of State College with a star like Mike the Mailman. He's in his 60's, tall, a little stoop-shouldered, and kind of gawky. But the college girls throw themselves at him. "Oh, look. There's Mike the Mailman. Mike, Mike, can I get a picture with you?!?!"

He's too modest to think of himself as an inspiration, but Mike Herr IS an inspiration. If he can have that much fun being a postal clerk, then how can the rest of us complain that our jobs are meaningless or boring? If he can connect with tens of thousands of people over the years, standing in line to buy stamps and mail packages, then how can we NOT take the time or make the effort to build relationships with our co-workers or customers? If he can become a Penn State legend, then how can there be any limit to the possibilities we see in ourselves or other people?

I believe in... Mike the Mailman.

Third Sharing: Peter Kemper

Meaning in the Job of Caregiving

As some of you know, my job has been teaching and conducting research at Penn State. My area of interest is long term care, by which I mean, providing services and supports to people who need help with their own personal care due to a long term disability. The person might be a 30 year-old who was born with severe intellectual disability, or a 90 year-old unable to get out of bed. In the last half dozen years my research has focused on frontline caregivers who provide this help.

Most caregivers are family members, no doubt represented among you--parents of adult children with serious disabilities, spouses and children of older people frail, and many other friends and relatives. My research, though, has focused on *paid* caregivers—Certified Nursing Assistants in nursing homes, Home Health Aides who visit to provide care, and many others with different job titles—or perhaps no title—who are paid to provide help. The help provided might be bathing the person, helping the person eat, turning the person in bed to avoid bedsores—or any of the many types of personal care. Shortly after my Aunt Theo died many years ago, I met the caregiver who had taken care of in my aunt in her last years in Arkansas. The caregiver taught me the best definition of personal care when she introduced herself by saying, "I 'did for' your Aunt Theo

before she died.” She “did for” my aunt those personal tasks that those of us who are not limited by disability do for ourselves. That is the job that caregivers are paid to do.

I learned about caregivers’ jobs in two phases; the first was the academic research. I quickly learned that caregiving is not a glamorous job. Caregivers do not make much money – an average of \$11.00 to \$12:00 an hour in 2007. Nursing assistants have the highest rate of injury of any occupation, often from injuries inflicted by patients or back injuries moving patients. A quarter of caregivers are single mothers. Half of caregivers are either uninsured or on medical assistance. Almost a quarter receive cash welfare, and two-fifths receive food stamps.

Nor are they necessarily rewarded with positive feedback from their co-workers or supervisors. When we asked caregivers, “What is the single most important thing your employer could do to improve your job?” After improving pay, the most frequent responses were about work relationships, for example:

“Listen to us.”

“Give us more credit.”

“Treat us with respect.”

“Stop threatening our jobs.”

Then, six or seven years ago, I was at a conference to present some early findings from our research. I got word that my mother, who was 88, was experiencing extreme anxiety and did not want to be left alone; my father, who had mild cognitive impairment, was having difficulty coping. Luckily, the conference was in Orlando, so I left early, rented a car, and drove to their retirement community in Naples, FL. It turned out later, that the anxiety was the side effect of an ill-advised prescription, so the episode was relatively brief and in the end not serious. But this was the beginning of the second phase of learning about caregivers – from my personal experience.

What followed were a number of hospitalizations and nursing home stays punctuating several years of increasing frailty and cognitive impairment. Mom and Dad were fortunate during those years. They were not rich, but by saving they ended up able to live in a very nice retirement community – albeit a bit too buttoned up for my own taste. Importantly, it had an attached home care agency and nursing facility, enabling them to receive increasing caregiver help as they declined. From their caregivers I learned a great deal about the job of caregiving.

The job uses a wide range of skills. I learned it is not so easy to transfer an elderly woman from a chair to a wheel chair without hurting yourself. Oh, and don’t forget to move the foot rests out of the way first. And, set the brake. I learned about shaving, too, one day when I thought it would be nice for a son to shave his dad. After some difficulty, Danielle, a mother of three kids who cared for my dad, gently said, “I find it easier for your dad if he is sitting down when I

shave him” as she maneuvered the commode into position. It went a lot more smoothly then. The caregivers also learned to prepare the foods they liked – and perhaps most important, how to mix their drinks.

The caregivers were also the front line in medical care – especially in keeping them out of the hospital due to urinary tract infections or congestive heart failure. Both conditions can be treated at home if detected early. This required sensitivity to subtle changes in my parents’ conditions. The caregivers were acute observers who knew their patients well. The caregivers almost always noticed these conditions first, even before the professional nurses who saw them every day.

Despite their skill, sometimes caregivers were not even seen. One day my dad was having pain in a shoulder, Dr. S. came to his apartment to examine him. The professional nurse, Danielle, and I were in the living room. Dr. S. acknowledged the nurse, shook my hand, and walked by Danielle without as much as a glance. This, despite *her* having the best understanding of my dad’s status.

Caregiving requires sensitivity and patience. Marie, a quiet, gentle mother of a teenage daughter cared for my mom. My parents’ life in their later years centered on eating dinner in the formal dining room at the retirement complex – an activity that required their “dressing” for dinner--a coat and tie for my dad and the women here can imagine what for my mom. Even when she used a wheel chair, Marie patiently picked out clothes she knew my mom liked, applied make up, and as the final step, gently held my mom’s jewelry box for her while she picked out her own jewelry. One of many touching scenes of sensitive, patient, caring.

Marie, Danielle, and the other caregivers were caregivers not just in name. They were truly caring. They took meaning from what many consider an unglamorous job because they cared about those they cared for.

About two weeks before my mom died, she was in hospice care. I learned that Marie was no longer assigned to care for her. Surprised, I asked her supervisor why she was taken off the case, only to learn that she had *asked* to be reassigned. No, the supervisor didn’t know why. I asked Danielle, who was a friend as well as co-worker. No, Marie had not told her why. I never learned why, but I believe that she cared too much – that it was too painful to watch my Mom on hospice.

Whatever the truth, she had made her job meaningful. She gave my mom her final years at home living in dignity and warmth. I believe that Marie found meaning in her work. I certainly hope so.