

This reading is from Ursula Leguin's 1974 novel "The Dispossessed"

*Saemtenevia Prospect was two miles long, and it was a solid mass of things to buy. .... Coats, dresses, gowns, robes, trousers, shirts, umbrellas. Clothes to wear while sleeping, while swimming, while playing games, while gardening, boating, dining, hunting -- all different, all in hundreds of different cuts, styles, colors, textures, materials. Perfumes, clocks, lamps, statues, cosmetics, candles, pictures, cameras, hassocks, jewels, carpets, toothpicks, calendars, ... figurines and souvenirs and kickshaws and mementos and gewgaws and bric-a-brac, everything either useless to begin with or ornamented so as to disguise its use. .... After one block, Shevek felt utterly exhausted. He could not look any more. ...*

*But to Shevek the strangest thing about the nightmare street was that none of the millions of things for sale were made there. ... Where were the workmen, the miners, the weavers, the chemists, the carvers, the dyers, the designers, the machinists? Where were the hands, the people who made? Out of sight. Somewhere else. Behind walls. All the people in all the shops were either buyers or sellers. They had no relation to the things but that of possessions*

## The Interdependent Web of Labor

Adapted from a homily originally delivered by UU minister Kayle Rice of Moscow, Idaho

"Where were the workmen, the miners, the weavers, the chemists, the carvers, the dyers, the designers, the machinists?" Leguin asks. "Where were the people who made?"

Leguin's novel is considered a major work in the field of utopian fiction, and she asked the question of her mythical world of Anarres, described by some as an ambiguous utopia. But we could ask it just as easily in any Wal-Mart. And it raises the issue of our UU seventh principle: the interdependent web of all existence. Is there an interdependent web of labor?

I suspect that most of us at one time or another have worked at minimum-wage jobs, and certainly with minimum-level dignity. There

is a terrible discrepancy in our culture as to the respectability of workers.

The discrepancy is all the more glaring when we look at today's corporate culture – perhaps better phrased as the cult of the CEO, and best personified by Tyco CEO Dennis Kozlowski's \$6,000 shower curtain. It is a lifestyle is far different from that experienced by the vast majority of loyal workers.

Robert Reich, who was secretary of labor during President Clinton's first term, puts it this way in his book, *The Future of Success*:

*Imagine that several decades ago a genie appeared and offered the nation a choice: Stay working as you are, or choose this: By the start of the next century, some of you will be extraordinarily rich, most of you will be better off in terms of what you can buy, and the economy will balloon. But your jobs will be less secure, your incomes less predictable; there will be wider disparities of earnings and wealth; and your society will fragment. You will work much harder, and the rest of your lives will be tightly compressed.*

*Now imagine: how would Americans vote?*

Reich goes on to ask: "Is unprecedented prosperity worth the price? Americans never made the choice, of course. At least not directly – not in any way we understood ourselves to be making it." But the choice was made.

Consider the minimum wage, which recently went to \$5.85 an hour.

The federal minimum wage was first enacted in 1938. It was meant to put a secure floor under workers and their families, strengthen the depressed economy by increasing consumer purchasing power, create new jobs to meet rising demand and stop a "race to the bottom" of employers moving to cheaper labor states.

But in recent decades, the secure floor has plummeted, dragging down average real wages as well. I have some numbers from author Holly Sklar; they're a few years old, but still relevant.

The real value of the minimum wage peaked in 1968 at \$7.92 per hour, adjusted for inflation to 2000 dollars. Since then, in real dollars, productivity has gone up, but wages have gone down.

Productivity grew 74.2 percent between 1968 and 2000, but average hourly wages fell 3 percent, adjusted for inflation. For minimum wage workers--two-thirds of whom are adults-- wages fell 35 percent in real dollars.

If wages had kept pace with productivity, the average hourly wage would have been \$24.56 in 2000, rather than \$13.74. The minimum wage would have been \$13.80 an hour.

Profits also went up as wages went down. Domestic corporate profits rose 64 percent from 1968 to 2000, adjusted for inflation. If it had kept pace with domestic profits, the minimum wage would have risen to \$13.02.

The retail trade industry employs more than half the hourly employees paid at or below minimum wage. Profits in that sector increased even more, 158 percent. If the minimum wage had risen at the same rate, it would be \$20.46 per hour.

As you might expect, the income gap is most visible in executive pay. In 1980, the average CEO at a major corporation made as much as 97 minimum wage workers. In 2000, they made as much as 1,223 minimum wage workers.

And it's not just wages: In 1978, 70 percent of workers in the private sector were covered by employer-provided health insurance. By 1998, the figure had dropped to 62.9 percent. And by 2004, it had dropped to 56.4 percent. In other words, almost 14 percent of the private sector workforce lost their employer-provided health insurance.

Here in Montana, the percentage with employer-provided health insurance fell from 54.4 percent in 1999 to 49.9 percent in 2003.

One of the “capstones of progress” in labor is the 40-hour workweek. It is intended to allow people to maintain a balance in their lives between work and family and community and leisure. Polls show about 94 percent of Americans believe if you work 40 hours a week you ought to be able to live on what you earn.

Yet millions cannot, and they live in poverty while doing hard work. That is dismaying and it is shameful. Barbara Ehrenreich wrote the book *Nickel and Dimed*, about her journey into poverty. And she argues that the 'working poor' “are in fact the major philanthropists of our society.”

They subsidize us. They may go hungry so that we can eat cheaply and conveniently. They neglect their own children to care for ours. They live in substandard housing so that our houses will be clean and shiny. They endure privation so that inflation will be low. To be poor is to be an anonymous donor to the affluent. We are dependent on the underpaid labor of others.

Meanwhile, companies across America are laying off workers and then requiring those who wish to keep their jobs to work extra hours. With jobs unstable, with companies downsizing, the worker is not in much of a position to refuse. And we’re not talking only of blue collar workers. People who punch in at 8 and out at 5 are not likely to get ahead in management, or in the law, or in banking or real estate. Those who think teachers work from 8 to 3:30 with two months off in the summer are living in a fantasy world.

This isn’t the way it was supposed to be. Unbelievable as it may seem, the U.S. Senate passed a bill in 1933 that mandated a 30-hour workweek; the bill died in the House. That was undoubtedly aimed more at spreading work around during the Depression than improving quality of life, but it was the way people expected the economy to go. Richard Nixon, while running for vice president in 1956, predicted that a four-day workweek would become the norm. Instead, too many of us shuffle off to work, bleary-eyed and bone weary, to something that is beginning to resemble a six-day workweek. In my company, which is spread across the country, it was routine for news editors and bureau chiefs to send out an e-mail notice when they left on vacation

– and 95 percent of them noted that they would be checking their e-mail daily, and be available on their cell phones. Why do we do that?

Well, millions of Americans have to work two or even three jobs just to survive. This puts real strains on families and may have dire social implications. Many other Americans work extra hours to save money out of fear that the basic protections we rely on, such as medical coverage and retirement benefits, won't be there when we need them. But for a large number of workers, the explanation is less straightforward. Many people are driven to work too hard by a culture that insists that more is better.

Leo Horrigan from The Center for a Livable Future at Johns Hopkins University puts it this way: “American consumerism is about buying things we don't need, with money we don't have, to impress friends we don't have time for.” Our houses, vehicles, televisions, waistlines and credit card balances are getting bigger, but the time and energy to enjoy our lives is shrinking. The fact is that our national obsession with becoming a millionaire, or at least living like one, is a leading cause for our fatigue. In our chase for more, we seem to have lost the capacity to rest, to take time just to "be" rather than "do."

Buddhism looks at work differently. Buddhism views the function of work to be at least threefold:

- First, to give one a chance to utilize and develop one's potential;
- Second, to enable one to overcome one's self-centeredness by joining with others in a common task; and
- Third, to bring forth the goods and services needed for a becoming existence.

Buddhism sees the essence of civilization not in a multiplication of wants, but in the purification of human character. One way of forming character is through work. And work, properly conducted in conditions of human dignity and freedom, blesses those who do it and equally blesses their products.

What does this mean for us as Unitarian Universalists? Let's see how we can apply some of the Seven Principles:

### **The inherent worth and dignity of every person;**

We can affirm those persons who are working minimum-wage jobs; show them respect and courtesy, perhaps even tell them we appreciate their service. Remember that their difficulties subsidize our affluence.

### **Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;**

UU has an organization for economic justice, which works for worker rights, corporate accountability, and economic equality. We can become acquainted with it and its goals. Its full name is Unitarian Universalists for a Just Economic Community.

**Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth.** We can examine our own lifestyles; are they in line with our personal ethos? Do we cultivate a sense of gratitude? Does our livelihood cultivate character and spirit? In the words of Buddhism, is it “right livelihood” - promoting the good of humanity, harming none?

### **The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;**

Embrace a more democratic relationship between workers and management in terms of authority, responsibility and compensation. Workers and managers need to seek justice, equity and compassion in their relationships and work together, and we should support workers trying to assert their just needs.

### **Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.**

Learn more about the products you buy; find out about “the miners, the weavers, ... the designers, the machinists, ... the people who made.” And, of course, reuse, recycle, return.

I'd like to close with this quote from Albert Einstein: “**Strange is our situation here upon earth. Each of us comes for a short visit, not**

knowing why, yet sometimes seeming to a divine purpose. From the standpoint of daily life, however, there is one thing we do know: That we are here for the sake of others .. for the countless unknown souls with whose fate we are connected by a bond of sympathy. Many times a day, I realize how much my outer and inner life is built upon the labors of people, both living and dead, and how earnestly I must exert myself in order to give in return as much as I have received.”

Thank you.