

Don't Labor on Labor Day - By Sr. Margaret Dorgan, DCM

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DON'T LABOR ON LABOR DAY

Work is assigned to us at all stages of our personal maturing. From infancy onward, we make our way with tasks to accomplish and skills to learn. Walking and talking require exertion. We can't just lie in a crib for the rest of our lives. Would some of us want to? Let's hope not.

Shakespeare writes in *Henry IV, Part 1*,
"If all the year were playing holidays,
To sport would be as tedious as to work."

In our contemporary world, to excel in sports is to engage in a discipline wholly rooted in work. If Shakespeare attended the world Olympic games, he would be observing athletes pushing their strength to the limit. They were taking part in what are called games but not the playful, fun-filled pastime the word conveys for most of us.

This year's Labor Day should make us ponder how a holiday is a well-deserved reward for working hard.

"Who first invented Work—and tied the free
And holy-day rejoicing spirit down
To the ever-haunting importunity
Of business, in the green fields, and the town...?"

Charles Lamb asks the question in a letter he wrote way back in the September of 1822. He was observing how the "importunity of business" was taking over too much energy and time "in the green fields and in the town." What would he think of today's commercial world when for some, the day never closes; the shades of night simply shift negotiations to a country far, far away just rising with a new dawn?

Nobody mortal is dispensed from work. The rich avoid some forms of labor by hiring the less wealthy. These prosperous people are envied for their freedom to determine what they want to do. Yet obligations still remain for each one of them as well. The physical body issues its own special orders. Family and social relationships have rules that can't be bypassed. Work is woven into the texture of our hours.

But labor should not be the total occupation of the weeks and months and years. There should be some space laid out where it ceases. "For six days you may work, but on the seventh day you shall rest...even during the seasons of plowing and harvesting" (Ex 34:21). God is speaking to the chosen people to make them realize that human life is too precious to be wholly absorbed in toil. Part of it must be set aside for a quieting down when we turn attention to chosen diversions that refresh the spirit. We release the firm grasp our hands have put on demanding tasks.

Jobs and careers require initial training, a program that takes us from the beginning stage to a final mastery of a skill. But another pursuit should aim at learning how to make leisure fruitful for our growth and development.

In our task-driven world, we must make an effort to develop a capacity for enjoyment when a vacation pause arrives. Leisure is a word that does not attract us enough. Too often we are tempted to admire someone who keeps working when a party is going on. Not everybody masters the skill of relaxing, the renewal of our strength. This is to miss the essential worth of leisure in our lives.

God calls us to initiate a quiet space in which creation reaches out to us, not to be exploited but to be relished for its own goodness. We pause and let activity subside as we contemplate the plenitude God pours into our existence. Music, art, reading, observing natural beauty or the wonder of human accomplishments, the sight of children and grown-ups, the delight of animals at play. In all this, we take a happy receptive role, letting what is before us sink into our consciousness, being grateful for every part of it. We are breathing in so much wonder about realities we usually pay little attention to. Prayer arises spontaneously. Our Maker is telling us, "There shall always be rejoicing and happiness in what I create" (Is 65:18).

On these precious occasions, we unlock pure gold that does not add to a bank account but gives treasure for the spirit. Celebration joined to leisure makes for a high return. Going back to work, we find ourselves better able to take hold of daily requirements and relationships.

On June 28, 1894, the United States Congress declared Labor Day a legal holiday for the first Monday of September. Our neighbors to the north a bit later on July 23, 1894 enacted a similar decree for September's initial Monday. Canada and America were recognizing the value of human work and workers in this brief respite from the usual labor opening a new week.

The author of Ecclesiastes speaks to us, Americans and Canadians both, **"What advantage has the worker from his toil? I have considered the task which God has appointed men and women to be busied about. God has made everything appropriate to its time, and has put the timeless into their hearts....I recognized there is nothing better than to be glad....For everyone to enjoy the fruit of all his labor is a gift of God"** (Ecc 3:9-13).

Everybody in North America, make sure you really enjoy your first Monday of September.

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