

6 Countercultural Reasons to Celebrate This Labor Day

Labor Day is a much-loved three-day weekend in the United States. This national holiday speaks of grilling out, family picnics and summer's last hurrah ahead of the harsh realities of back to school and even the winter to come.

However, the labor it celebrates just may not be as beloved as the holiday itself. I certainly understand everyone loves a special day off, and Labor Day comes at a particularly beautiful "end-of-summer" moment.

Family fun and one last fling at the lake are a welcome weekend to be sure, but what about labor, the work from which we take the weekend off? The value of the holiday is self-evident to a recreation-minded culture such as that of the U.S. Work itself?

Maybe not so much.

In fact, there is an actual anti-work message that percolates through Western culture at certain levels. Often it is expressed as a sort of joke, a playful poke at the Protestant work ethic.

In "My Fair Lady," Liza's incorrigible father, Alfred Doolittle, sings a joyful celebration of laziness and goldbricking:

"The Lord above gave man an arm of iron, to do his job and never shirk/ But with a little bit of luck, with a little bit of luck/ Someone else will do the blinkin' work."

It's good-natured Broadway fun, of course, but the old scoundrel is not so fun when he attempts to exploit, manipulate and even extort money from poor Liza. Laziness and

sloth often lead to a host of other even more dangerous sins. Isn't it interesting that this anthem to sloth is sung by a man named Doolittle? Doing little, as little as possible, is the goal of his ilk.

In 1928, decades before Lerner and Lowe put words in the mouth of the reprehensible Alfred Doolittle, one Haywire Mac (actually Harry McClintock) recorded a country music classic about hobo life, "The Big Rock Candy Mountain." Some of the lyrics are as follows.

"There ain't no short-handled shovels/ No axes, saws nor picks/ I'm bound to stay/ Where you sleep all day/ Where they hung the jerk/ That invented work/ In the Big Rock Candy Mountains"

Again, Haywire Mac's song is good-natured enough, I suppose. The problem is that the "jerk who invented work" is God Almighty. In the first three verses of Genesis 3 (KJV), work is mentioned three times and in all three, God is the one working. God invented work, modeled it and gave it as a gift to humanity.

Some have mistakenly concluded that work is the result of the fall of humanity. Nothing could be further from the truth. God gave man meaningful work to do in the Garden of Eden. Adam was the gardener. In the fall, nature itself was corrupted by Adam's own rebellion. Work was not part of the curse. It was a blessed part of life in Eden. Work, like every other blessing in Eden, including love, life, family, sex and nature, suffered from Adam's fall.

There are many ways in which work is a blessing from God. Here are but a few:

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1. Work is a means to provide for others, especially our families. The next time you are tempted to complain about your job, consider life in Haiti, where the unemployment rate is 85%. Work grants us the ability to care for our families instead of falling heir to the contemporary cure of life on the government dole. Work is not demeaning. Welfare can be.

2. Work is a means to serve and bless others, and to be a blessing in the kingdom. With the sweat of our brows, we can tithe to the church, contribute to other charities and pave the way for those who will come after us. Work enables us to be givers and not takers.

3. Work is a means of expressing our strength, gifts and creativity. It is a way to find a meaningful sense of personal satisfaction. Whether it is by laying brick, programming a sophisticated computer or cleaning public bathrooms, our work can and should give us personal satisfaction. Finished with cleaning a toilet, we should take pride in the job well done.

4. Work is a means to glorify God. We are called upon to do all that we do to God's glory, and that includes hard work.

5. Work affords us a means to witness. When others ask how we can work so well, so hard and take such satisfaction in the job, we can be quick to give God the glory.

6. Work makes rest meaningful. After six days of work, God rested. The rest means nothing without the work. We are not to be obsessed with work, never resting, never able to turn off the phone or take a day off. Sabbath rest is also a gift of God, but it means nothing without the gift of work. {eoa}

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