

Labor Pains

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Reading

Excerpts from a short story entitled "[Twenty-Six Men and a Girl](#)," by Russian novelist, playwright, short story writer and essayist, Maxim Gorky (1868-1936):

Sitting opposite each other, at a long table—nine facing nine— we moved our hands and fingers mechanically during endlessly long hours, till we were so accustomed to our monotonous work that we ceased to pay any attention to it.

We had all studied each other so constantly, that each of us knew every wrinkle of his mates' faces. It was not long also before we had exhausted almost every topic of conversation; that is why we were most of the time silent...For the heavy drudgery seemed to crush all feeling out of us.

Sometimes, [though], we sang; and this is how it happened that we began to sing: one of us would sigh deeply in the midst of our toil, like an overdriven horse, and then we would begin one of those songs whose gentle swaying melody seems always to ease the burden on the singer's heart.

At first one sang by himself, and we others sat in silence listening to his solitary song, which, under the heavy vaulted roof of the cellar, died gradually away, and became extinguished, like a little fire in the steppes, on a wet autumn night, when the gray heaven hangs like a heavy mass over the earth.

Then another would join in with the singer, and now two soft, sad voices would break into song in our narrow, dull hole of a cellar. Suddenly others would join in, and the song would roll forward like a wave, would grow louder and swell upward, till it would seem as if the damp, foul walls of our stone prison were widening out and opening. Then, all six-and-twenty of us would be singing; our loud, harmonious song would fill the whole cellar, our voices would travel outside and beyond, striking, as it were, against the walls in moaning sobs and sighs, moving our hearts with soft, tantalizing ache, tearing

open old wounds, and awakening longings.

The singers would sigh deeply and heavily; suddenly one would become silent and listen to the others singing, then let his voice flow once more in the common tide. Another would exclaim in a stifled voice, “Ah!” and would shut his eyes, while the deep, full sound waves would show him, as it were, a road, in front of him—a sunlit, broad road in the distance, which he himself, in thought wandered along.

But the flame flickers once more in the huge oven, the baker scrapes incessantly with his shovel, the water simmers in the kettle, and the flicker of the fire on the wall dances as before in silent mockery. While in other men’s words we sing out our dumb grief, the weary burden of live men robbed of the sunlight, the burden of slaves.

So we lived, we six-and-twenty, in the vault-like cellar of a great stone house, and we suffered each one of us, as if we had to bear on our shoulders the whole three stories of that house.

I remember reading an essay by a literary critic--though I cannot remember now the critic’s name nor the publication—but this critic was bemoaning the fact that *work* seemed to have vanished from modern literature. Novels, short stories, drama, poetry...all claimed to talk about life as we live it, but the slices of life that were chosen very rarely had to do with *employment*. Granted, it may be that, for many of us, our working lives do not seem to lend themselves to poetry; do not seem to justify lavish (or maybe any) prose;...yet, for most all of us, a considerable portion of our lives is spent working. Can we really talk about life, and what matters in life, and ignore the fact that at least half of our waking hours are spent at work? Do we only grapple with the important matters after we punch out? Do we only *really live* while on vacation, or in retirement, or on weekends? And if our employment is peripheral to who we are...what does it mean that, peripheral or not, it swallows up most of our time?

What is even more disturbing to me is that, not only does literature avoid the particulars of employment, but religion, also, has generally adopted a hands-off policy regarding work. Outside of a general entreaty to “practice our values at the workplace,” there is not a consistent moral critique of how this society treats workers. If anything, I think this trend has grown worse in recent years, drifting further and further away from what was known as “the social gospel” movement in the early to mid-twentieth century. Why is that? How can we gather as religious communities, and then push each other out the door and simply throw up our hands as we witness the devastation of “market forces” on our lives. How do we respond to the words of Abraham Lincoln when he says, “The strongest bond of human sympathy outside the family relation should

be one uniting working people of all nations and tongues and kindreds.”

Here’s my theory. Economics has become its own religion, a competing religion that doesn’t need to explicitly compete because no one recognizes it for what it is. Yet even the terminology that’s used lends itself to this interpretation--“market forces;” “invisible hand”—and look at the faith that it inspires; the reverence, even among folks who don’t necessarily *like* what’s happening. I have heard people who have no qualms about handing out ethical advice in most cases, who have strongly-held opinions regarding many things that happen in our communities, I have heard them, when it comes to the marketplace, say, resignedly, “It sells.” As if that very fact effectively suspended any judgment and justified most any practice. As if sales superseded ethical imperatives. As if we were speaking of a natural disaster: regrettable but inevitable.

I was on a political chat after the WTO demonstrations in Seattle, when people filled the streets saying that the way things are going, the way the World Trade Organization and the World Bank and the major corporations tied in with the most powerful governments in the world want things to go, does not have to be the way it is. They said, regular working people across the world should have a hand in economic decision-making. What a concept! And I was talking to a guy from Minneapolis who was rather appalled at my support of the demonstrators. He gave me all kinds of economic reasons why I was wrong, but somewhere along the way I found out that he was a Christian, so I found the passage in the Gospel which reads, “I was hungry and you did not feed me; I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink; I was homeless and...” What do you say to that? I asked defiantly. Certainly, if you believe in the teachings of Jesus, these have some ramifications for the work of the World Trade Organization.

No, he said. You don’t understand: that’s religion; this is economics.

That’s religion; this is economics. He’s not alone in making that decision. Keep your ears open. Just try bringing morality, ethics, spirituality, the respect and dignity of each individual into a discussion about wealth distribution in this country, and watch the reaction. Oh, silly boy, you don’t realize the horrible implications of raising the minimum wage. You don’t realize the unforeseen consequences of trying to reign in corporate greed. You don’t understand what chaos would ensue if we sought to hamper “free enterprise”...(and let me just point out that this term is

used very loosely.) Religion is all well and good, you will hear, but this is economics. Render unto God that which is God's, and to Caesar that which is Caesar's. (That's just one of the ways that this utterly meaningless statement of Jesus' has been misused).

Let the experts decide on economic matters. Let the invisible hand work. Let trickle-down do its job.

Remember trickle-down? I think it was during the Reagan era that this idea became popular, but he had many followers. Basically, give tax breaks, subsidies, and other unfair advantages to the rich, and the wealth will overflow and spill onto those below on the economic ladder...getting everyone wet, I guess. It's working, right? No? No, of course not. We all know what ends up trickling down...

There is this idea that we can't tamper with economics, no matter what our moral outrage. We have often bought the idea that there are forces at work that we can't control; that people seeking to exercise control over business, corporations, the market, would loose demons upon the earth. But let me say this...we *may not* know all of the ramifications of raising the minimum wage, of demanding a living wage, but we *can see* the ramifications of the present policies, creating a whole class of people known by what should be an oxymoron: the working poor. We *may not* know all of the ramifications of regulations on corporations that put the worth and dignity of actual humans first, but we *can see* the ramifications of the present policies that grant personhood to corporations and encourage corrupt partnerships of business and government that effectively insulate corporations from individuals' complaints and government regulation alike. We *may not* know all of the ramifications of intentional investment in public works projects, education, job training, healthcare, and childcare, but we *can see* the ramifications of the present policies that consistently and ruthlessly strip funding from programs that serve the most vulnerable to provide "tax relief" to the most wealthy.

And who can rightly name the ramifications of the present policies? Who can dare to point the prophetic finger at injustice if not our religious communities? Who else can stand against the intimidation of an administration that consistently blames those who point out atrocities rather than those who commit them? Who can shout out an unequivocal "NO!" to immoral conditions,

no matter where or why they occur? Who can call our present economic climate what it is, unfazed by the explanatory jargon and the optimistic predictions that are always *just about* to happen? Who can stand up when we are told that the state of the economy is healthy and strong and say, “That is a LIE!” (It’s not a myth; it’s a lie!) Numbers in the hand of lackey economists, like Bibles in the hands of Pat Robertson and his like, can be used to tell you whatever you want to hear.

Let’s be clear: it’s not “tax relief” when it is only benefiting the very wealthiest among us, wealth that strains the imagination of anyone here, in a country where the gap between rich and poor is growing at an almost unbelievable rate. It’s not tax relief; it’s morality-relief. It’s relieving the burden of doing the right thing. It’s common decency relief; it’s relieving the burden of caring about anyone else in society.

And let’s be clear about the invisible hand of the market. Look closer; it’s not invisible at all. When you look closely, you’ll see the hand, hands, many of them; grasping fingers of corporate interests reaching out to direct the market, as they intone the only prayer they now know, the one word prayer, “*More.*”

I heard a sermon on the Christian station recently and, again, my memory fails me as to the name of the minister and the precise text that was being used (it’s hard to make notes when you’re driving). But it was a message from the one of the Prophets from Hebrew Scriptures, and the minister was going through a list of the sins that were condemned. Sexual immorality: a whole host of indictments against society, example after example of how we have sinned in this respect. Idolatry: again, a whole host of indictments against this society and example after example of the ways in which we worship unworthy things in place of God Next, economic injustice! This should be interesting, I thought. I was all ready to discover solidarity with a minister that, admittedly, I felt a distinct separation from theologically. But no, this time there wasn’t a whole host of indictments. The sermon was kind of wrapping up and he only had time for one quick example: telephone solicitors and scam artists who took advantage of the elderly. That was the lone example of economic injustice. Nothing about the fabric of our society. Nothing about policies that gave unfair advantages to the wealthiest. Nothing about the lack of benefits for workers; the charges that employees have been made to work off the clock; that they’ve sometimes been locked in to stores overnight; that corporations jump from country to country looking for the cheapest labor, and allegations that they look the other way as brutal government

and military forces in these countries do what they need to in order to maintain loyalty to the employer. Nothing about Kenny-Boy Lay from Enron, or Brownie from FEMA...nothing about New Orleans...nothing about the working poor...nothing about full-time workers who can't afford a home...nothing about Halliburton with their no-bid contracts and the millions of dollars this administration can't seem to find...no, the sum total of economic injustice was encapsulated in some shady, unscrupulous characters who set up shop with a phone and a phone book and steal a few thousand dollars from the unsuspecting. Is that bad? Sure. Does it begin to touch the realities of economic injustice in this country and across the world? Not hardly.

But the economic system that so many struggle under, the house that is planted firmly on the backs of the workers that Gorky describes (and there are people working under those conditions and worse), this whole way of life is wrapped up in a shroud of inevitability. And since it is inevitable, railing against it is really the only sin.

It's an effective strategy, if you want to maintain the status quo, to demonize those who expose the problem. Suddenly, it's *their* problem. That is unfortunately what has happened in this country: the poor are really to blame for making the rest of us feel bad. If only they were more responsible; if only they didn't hang out on the streets embarrassing us; if only they didn't do drugs; if only they managed money better, didn't want the things the rest of us want, didn't expect so much...then we'd be okay.

This is a common psychological reaction. Families often send one family member to counseling, hoping to fix that person and thus fix the uncomfortable situations that have arisen. Family systems theorists point out that the problem, as you might guess, is in the family system...it's *everybody's* problem. And *everybody's* opportunity for growth, to put it in more positive terms. It is systemic. And the only way to shake up the system, sometimes, is for one of the members to resist expectations, to act in new and surprising ways, thus shaking up the system. One can't always tell how it will reform, but the point is that it must change somehow.

The Hebrew Prophets were great at this. I imagine that they thwarted all expectations of prophet-like behavior. Isaiah, it is said, walked through the streets naked...*for three years*. Hosea married a prostitute, who apparently continued working, to demonstrate the infidelity of Israel in

its relationship to God. Ezekiel begins his life as a prophet by saying *nothing at all*, remaining mute until God tells him to speak. When God does tell him to speak, there are actions that he commands also. He is to shave his head and beard in three parts, burn some in the fire, scatter some to the wind...He builds models of the city, then destroys the walls, lies on one side for 40 days or so in the midst of this, then the other side...I'll let you check out the details, if you like. Suffice to say, I'm imagining these prophets drew more than a few scandalized stares. They had a message, and they were willing to thwart all expectations, to be outrageous, to stand outside the norm in service to their message.

We may need to do the same; to be outrageous (but check with me if you plan on walking around naked...we may not want to take it that far), if we have to; to engage in direct action (remember direct action?); to disrupt the system enough to let people know that it's not the only way. [G.K. Chesterton, in an introduction to the Maxim Gorky story](#) that provided the reading, says that countries who have come under the influence of the evolutionary idea, as regards society, have failed in righting the wrongs in their communities. They've tried to replace revolution with evolution. "These countries have no revolution," he writes, "they have to put up with an inferior and largely fictitious thing which they call progress."

There comes a time when patience is *not* a virtue; where it is just a cover for apathy; where it is a tranquilizer for our fear. But there is hope. There are minimum wage and living wage campaigns across this country. The Unitarian Universalist Service Committee has chosen to work on these very issues, the central piece of their Justice Sunday this year. The World Council of Churches has spoken out against misguided economic priorities and called this administration to invest in the people who need it the most, who need the opportunities. We can choose to join with working people across the world, to stand up for living wages, to speak out for the worth of every individual and the priority of human dignity over corporate profit. We can expose the false religion that masquerades as economics. We can call this society, all of this society, to compassion and respect and concern for the common good. We can sing. We can sing with those workers in Gorky's story...we can sing loud and strong...strong enough, maybe, to bring those walls tumbling down.