

Work and Love and Everything Else
Comments on Labor Day, September 4th, 2011

“Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched the hollow of his thigh; and Jacob’s thigh was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, “Let me go, for the day is breaking.” But Jacob said, “I will not let you go, unless you bless me.” And he said to him, “What is your name?” And he said, “Jacob.” Then he said, “Your name shall no more be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed.” Then Jacob asked him, “Tell me, I pray, your name.” But he said, “Why is it that you ask my name?” And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the name of the place Peni’el, saying, “For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.” The sun rose upon him as he passed Penu’el, limping because of his thigh.”
-Genesis, 32.24-31.

“Love and work are the cornerstones of our humanness.”
-Sigmund Freud

“We say that the function of a [kind of thing] of a harpist, for instance—is the same in kind as the function of an excellent individual of the kind—of an excellent harpist, for instance. And the same is true without qualification in every case, if we add to the function the superior achievement in accord with virtue; for the function of a harpist is to play the harp, and the function of a good harpist is to play it well. Moreover, we take the human function to be a certain kind of life, and take this life to be activity and actions of the soul that involve reason; hence the function of the excellent man is to do this well and finely.

Now each function is completed well by being completed in accord with the virtue proper [to that kind of thing]. And so the human good proves to be activity of the soul in accord with virtue, and indeed with the best and most complete virtue, if there are more virtues than one. Moreover, in a complete life. For one swallow does not make a spring, nor does one day; nor, similarly, does one day or a short time make us blessed and happy.”

-Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, I.7.8-21.

“I don’t want to achieve immortality through my work. I want to achieve it through not dying.”

-Woody Allen

Good morning.

My name is Scott McCue. I've been a member here at First Parish for about a year, and I'm truly grateful for the opportunity to speak on this Labor Day Weekend. Roughly nine years ago, I began working to start a new urban public school called Boston Preparatory Charter Public School. Since 2003, I have served as Head of School at Boston Prep. In this role, I perform a variety of functions—raising money, balancing the budget, hiring staff, greeting school buses. I supervise the cafeteria at lunchtime, and I'm an ace at plunging toilets. It may come as no surprise that the world of education reform is a yeasty one, and one with a fair amount of turnover. Nine years of leadership makes me an old timer, at the age of 37. With that as a pretty lame credential, I'd like to share a few thoughts today about my work. This work is intense, and can be both draining and fulfilling. This is a congregation full of people that are, or have been, similarly committed to their own work. With that as a frame, I'd like to share a few reflections about the satisfactions and perils of hard work, drawing on my own experiences.

I suppose I should point out that John recommended a subtitle for these remarks as: "Confessions of a 37-year old, Over-Achieving, Workaholic, Do-Gooding Dad." When John Buehrens calls you a workaholic do-gooder, you know you've got issues.

Anyway, on this Labor Day, I'll start by mentioning that charter schools occupy a unique relationship to organized labor—one that has continued to evolve in recent years and months. The initial concept for charter schools was developed in the late 1980s, by the then President of the American Federation of Teachers, Al Shanker. The vision was that there would be independent public schools of choice, which would use their independence to innovate, and that the innovations from charter schools would be applied to more traditional public schools.

Charter schools in Massachusetts were created in the early 1990s, as part of a broader education reform act. In Massachusetts, charters follow all the state and federal laws that apply to any other public school, but are exempt from local school district regulations. We don't select our students at Boston Prep—they get in by lottery, and are a representative cross-section of the Boston Public Schools. However, we have our own unique curriculum, schedule, and approach to human resources. I am technically the superintendent of a very small, independent school district within the city of Boston.

Much of the controversy associated with charter schools stems from the fact that funding follows the pupils. When a student leaves the Boston Public Schools for Boston Prep, they bring roughly \$13,000 with them. For this reason, among others, labor organized strongly against charter schools in the 1990s. So, charter schools became the political darlings of the conservative right wing. Charter advocates such as Milton Friedman argued that creating a “market” of educational opportunities would cut through the red tape and inertia which had hindered education reform for decades. Teachers’ unions and many traditional superintendents resisted charters, and two distinct factions formed. Charters were supported by the political right, and opposed by the political left.

Just to be clear: I’m a Prius-driving, bearded, vegetarian, Unitarian-Universalist. A very odd child of the political right.

Fortunately, the acrimony over charters has changed dramatically, in recent years. There is a growing realization that charter schools represent much-needed options for the least well-served students in Boston and across the Commonwealth. The parents of these students are Democrats. Popular films like *Waiting for Superman*, and *The Lottery*, have made charter school founders look less like pirates and more like good guys. Our current Democratic President embraces charter schools even more enthusiastically than his Republican predecessor. There is a growing recognition that building flexibility into the work of teachers is one of the best ways to dignify them as professionals. And perhaps most importantly, leaders in district schools and in charter schools across Massachusetts have begun to build substantial bridges to one another—embracing the opportunities to share, while we compete—based upon the growing recognition that we are all ultimately in the same business.

Boston Prep occupies a unique role within the Boston charter movement. Our school is built around a two pronged mission. The first prong involves preparing all students for success in college. The stakes attached to this goal are high—young men in Boston are statistically more likely to go to prison than to go to college. In our opening years, we have had some encouraging success in our pursuit of this goal. Our students consistently lead the state of Massachusetts on

the MCAS exam. A 2009 study ranked Boston Prep as one of the top five schools in the nation, in terms of promoting student growth. Most importantly, every member our founding class—which graduated this June—was accepted to college. Many of them are starting school this week.

All that said, the second prong to our mission at Boston Prep recognizes that a great school does more than teaching students to read, write, and calculate. Boston Prep aims to cultivate a spirit of ethical reflection, with a particular focus on five key virtues. These are courage, compassion, integrity, perseverance, and respect. Students participate in a weekly ethics class, studying the virtues, and ultimately composing their own treatises on what the virtues mean to them. The idea is not that a weekly ethics class will make every student a good person. Rather, the goal is to create a common vocabulary. Adolescents are intensely interested in questions of character. Ethics class at Boston Prep creates a common framework, which permeates everything else—history class, basketball practice, even conversations in the cafeteria.

For me, the perspective of a Dorchester teenager on ethics places a unique lens on Labor Day here in Needham. Habits and attitudes are profoundly sticky. In so many ways, the students at Boston Prep are tested in ways my own sons never will be. Many Boston Prep students have had close friends or family members get shot or stabbed. One student came to school the day after her brother was murdered, and acted like nothing happened. Another—a 7th grader—witnessed a terrifying act of domestic violence, called 911, and then came to school later that morning. Many of my students don't have enough to eat. The amazing grit of these young people makes it hard to discuss courage and perseverance without sounding trite.

And yet many of these same students are accustomed to public schools that dismiss at 1:00 in the afternoon. The 2-3 hours of homework we require are viewed as exceptional—even for high schoolers who see themselves as college bound. Many of our most compassionate students still believe that “if somebody hits you, you must hit them back,” because in their neighborhoods, failing to do so is a fatal sign of weakness.

In any community, there are scripts we internalize. These scripts shape our attitudes towards work, and to everything else, in ways which are profound, and hard to shake. This can be true of neighborhoods or schools, churches and other types of communities. These scripts reflect a certain consensus around values and vision, and they are especially powerful in strong communities. They can serve to empower us, but they can imprison us as well.

There is a certain script I anticipate my own sons will internalize here in Needham. Kate and I moved here because the values of the Needham Public Schools resonated with our own. We have chosen First Parish because of an even stronger, clearer sense of resonance. While UUs are non-creedal, there is an unmistakable commitment to reflection and to service in this church community. This is an extraordinarily high-capacity community—a great, great deal work gets done by the members of this congregation, on Sundays, and especially on every other day of the week.

I would like to suggest that being a highly capable, ethically driven individual presents a unique set of spiritual challenges.

Growing up as the child of two accomplished professionals, attending high-achieving suburban schools, I internalized a sense that my work defined me in some fundamental way. Subscribing to Freud's notion that work and love were the two pillars of happiness, I threw myself into my work. (As a teenager, I found it a lot easier to find opportunities for work than for love.) I earned good grades and went to a fancy college. Much of my career has been spent striving to be the very best in what I chose to do. This is true for many people in this room today.

I also made a decision early on to pursue a vocation which reflected a visceral commitment to social justice. I lost myself in work. Not too long ago for me, 80-hour work weeks were the norm. I put in one 14-hour day after getting mugged at 4 AM, acting as if nothing had happened. I sacrificed sleep and health and many other things, and I never regretted it. My passion for the work and dedication to the people I worked with made it completely worthwhile.

Certainly, there are some big problems with this approach, and I'm getting to that. But there's something beautiful as well. As the story of Jacob wrestling with the angel tells us, there is something transformative about grappling with what we believe. Although we may be wounded by the effort, relentlessness allows us to glimpse the eternal in unique ways. Losing yourself in something can be very powerful. If we trade the Biblical tradition for the Classical, we might find additional justification for this point of view. Aristotle—a foundational thinker in 9th grade Ethics class at Boston Prep—frames the well-lived life as one characterized by “eudaimonia.” While “eudaimonia” translates loosely to “happiness,” in truth, Aristotle is describing a richer, deeper form of flourishing. Aristotle argues that humans experience eudaimonia in performing their most essential work in an excellent manner. For Aristotle, that essential work was living in accord with virtue. Just as the highest form of playing the harp is to play the harp with excellence, the highest form of being human is to live one's entire life in accord with virtue. While I may not have had Aristotle in mind specifically when I plunged into my career, I'm certain some variation on this concept played a role. What is the meaning of life, if not to act with virtue? And if some virtue is good, lots is probably better.

Of course, there are perils to this approach. Because ultimately, we are more than our work. As I moved even farther from awkward adolescence to somewhat-less-awkward adulthood, I came to appreciate the first prong of Freud's assertion. While doing good work, with passion, is important, love—for friends and family—must be seen ultimately as a foundation for our humanness. This was hard for me to see as a 20-year old. It came into rough focus when I was 30. And as I've matured, I've come to appreciate more and more the necessity for love for truly peering into the divine. Without question, part of what draws me to Boston Prep is my love for the students we serve, and the team I work with. And yet as I've been blessed with marriage and parenthood, in my more recent life, the balance has become harder. My time at Boston Prep comes at the expense of time with my family. Eating dinner with my sons, making time to talk to my wife, are sacred in ways I've only recently come to realize. I settle more solidly into the universe, in my time with Kate, Henry, and Eli. Indeed, as I've aged, I've come to realize that pursuits I might have once dismissed as frivolous—spending time in church, cooking a meal slowly, exercising, or just spending time being quiet—are deeply, and vitaly necessary as well.

This is a challenge so many of us face. There is undeniable fulfillment from deep vocational engagement, but a related spiritual imperative for love, for reflection, for life outside of work. There is no easy formula to striking this balance.

Perhaps it's the grappling itself that is in some way, the holy work. And on this Labor Day weekend, we should renew our commitments to our work, and simultaneously renew our commitments to the many sources of spiritual nourishment we rely on outside our work. Recognizing there may never be perfect balance, let us celebrate the humanity involved in this effort.

Thank you.