For students and teachers, it marks the end of summer and the impending return to the classroom. For union activists it recalls those “who from rude nature have delved and carved all the grandeur we behold” (Peter J. McGuire). But for most of us, it’s a day off, a long weekend, and perhaps a last chance to enjoy the beach or other vacation spot.

Labor Day is an annual summer event, the repetition of which may lead us to forget its roots and its aspirations. Begun in New York in 1882, this city celebration passed from municipal ordinance to state law and finally, in 1894, to a federally mandated holiday. Enlivened by street parades, and replete with speeches from prominent persons, the Labor Day festival pays tribute to the American worker. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, this celebration recognizes that “The vital force of labor added materially to the highest standard of living and the greatest production the world has ever known and has brought us closer to the realization of our traditional ideals of economic and political democracy.”

And there’s the rub. By focusing narrowly on economic or political dimensions, we risk missing the point. If we reduce this event to reminiscing about the power of the American workforce, we might actually find obstacles to impede our celebration. Currently 6.4 million Americans are unemployed, while 7.5 million hold more than one job. Can those without jobs or those overworked truly celebrate labor? Others in our nation are classified as “marginally attached” or even “discouraged” workers. Will these 1.5 million people fully join in the fun? Locally, the recent layoffs at Lucent and other companies, not to mention the empty shells of once mighty Bethlehem Steel, may shed a dismal cloud on the festivities.
But Labor Day is not simply about labor! It’s really about work. Work is not merely an activity undertaken in pursuit of the production or distribution of things. Nor is work only a means to a paycheck. Work, at its core, is about being human. It is the activity upon earth and in civilization that creates and advances our culture.

That activity takes on many forms today. Work is manual, in the numerous ways that we carve our existence from the stuff of the earth. Work is intellectual, in the discoveries by which we understand more or understand differently the world around us. Work is technological, in the inventiveness by which we seek to better the lives we lead. And work is of service, in the benefits we share with others in need. But no matter what the type, work is more than the expenditure of effort in dealing with nature or thought or automation or even care. It is about who we are as persons, and who we are to become. It is, as Pope John Paul II writes, “a good thing for man – a good thing for his humanity – because through work he not only transforms nature, adapting it to his own needs, but he also achieves fulfillment as a human being and indeed, in a sense, becomes ‘more a human being’.”

Ironically, we celebrate this achievement by taking a day off from work! But this is as it should be, for it highlights the distinctiveness of the day and the meaningfulness of work. As Samuel Gompers, founder and longtime president of the American Federation of Labor, once noted: “Labor Day differs in every essential from the other holidays of the year in any country. All other holidays are ... connected with conflicts and battles of man’s prowess over man, of strife and discord for greed and power, of glories achieved by one nation over another.” But Labor Day is not about dominance. It is a celebration of human being and human living, a celebration of the many men and women (and, sadly, sometimes children) whose toil in years past has actualized the freedom that we Americans hold dear, and whose innate human drive in years to come will revitalize that freedom in new and exciting ways.

This is a holiday for everyone. Labor Day highlights our personal freedom, not just our economic functioning. It champions our dignity, not just our doing. And so we should take a day off, a day of rest in which we would do well to reflect upon the goods we have actualized, and the potential that we possess. Perhaps then, through this leisurely experience, we will appreciate work in its more fundamental dimensions, as the vehicle for self-determination, the common good, and human fulfillment. For, as G.K. Chesterton once put it, “There is no obligation on us to be richer, or busier, or more efficient, or more progressive, or in any way worldlier or wealthier, if it does not make us happy.”

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