

## Labor of Love

*A Message by the Rev. Molly Housh Gordon  
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My hands are most beautiful when they are holding other hands.

My hands are most beautiful in fifth position, dancing ballet.

My hands are most beautiful sticky and smeared with dough with flour up to my elbows as I bake bread for people I love.

My hands were like that last night – you’ll find cheddar biscuits made with love and lots of cheese among our potluck offerings today.

I wonder, when are **your** hands most beautiful? How do you use them to make or do or be what you most love?

Now I must admit that if someone were to ask me that question at a party, I might roll my eyes. Speaking of cheesy!

And yet, I wish there was a good way to get at that core when we are trying to get to know one another. That good old standard ‘getting to know you’ question just seems so inadequate.

You know the one I mean ...

“Hi Adam. Nice to meet you. So... **What do you do?**”

How do you answer that? Well, I dance, I bake, I minister, I partner, I sleep. I really like to sleep.

And of course there usually seems to be another question hanging off of that one. What do you do... for money? And do you make a lot of it? And if not is the work at least prestigious?

You have a paying job, right? A full time one? Outside the home?

What do you do. We’ve all been the one asking it, and we’ve all been the one answering it – sometimes comfortably, sometimes not.

And there’s nothing wrong with the question itself. After all, in a very broad sense we are what we do. We garden and are gardeners, teach and are teachers, build and are builders, love and are lovers.

No, what makes us uncomfortable about the question is the culture behind it -- the unspoken, powerful culture that echoes beyond the words.

The culture that equates worth with paid work. The culture that sees the individual as consumer, more concerned with what they can acquire than what they have to give.

This culture literally says your entire worth, your net worth is the balance in your bank account.

That's a difficult culture to live in during a time when unemployment is above 8%. It is a hard culture to endure in a state where the minimum wage is well below the cost of living and predatory payday lenders keep hardworking people indebted with interest rates over 400%. It is an unacceptable culture for the thousands of Americans who work longer hours than ever for little pay and still aren't quite able to scrape by.

Here at the UU Church of Columbia, we reject that culture and join other communities of faith in calling upon our government to cap payday lending interest rates, raise the minimum wage, and promote social welfare policies aimed at supporting ALL who struggle in today's economy.

Indeed members of this congregation were instrumental in collecting signatures for the Raise the Wage and Cap the Rate ballot initiatives that we hope to see in the voting booth statewide this November.

We reject the culture that equates human worth with material wealth because we believe that **worth comes first**. That all people, *because* of their inborn, God-given, inalienable worth, deserve a living wage. We believe that all people are **worthy first** - worthy of safety, nourishment, and the pursuit of personal fulfillment.

We dream of a world where life and livelihood are a given for all to such an extent that all have the time and energy to put their hands toward the work of their hearts. A world where material needs are met for all in order that we might move together from scraping by to flourishing, from drudgery to labors of love.

The culture we reject is powerful, and changing that culture starts with each of us. It starts with understanding its assumptions and individually replacing them with new ones.

In an Op-Ed in Friday's New York Times, columnist David Brooks described the Republican party as the "Party of Strivers," driven by the individual quest for ever greater material wealth and success. It's an interesting article, but the quest for wealth is not limited by political party. In reality the American tradition of material striving is deeply rooted in our collective culture.

In fact, it is written into our nation's founding, present in the attitudes of the very first settlers as they came to 'claim' this already-populated land and its vast material resources.

And present also in our country's religious heritage. For it could be argued that those early Puritan settlers brought a theology of striving with them when they fled to the Americas to escape religious persecution.

Their Calvinist theology in its most orthodox form believed that humans were born into damnation, except for a pre-ordained group of a few elect who would be saved.

In their culture, material success was often interpreted as a reliable sign that you were favored by God as part of the Elect. It seems inevitable that when material wealth becomes equated with eternal salvation, the question of cause and effect becomes muddy. So, of course these ancestors sought to assure their place among the elect by striving to amass ever greater material wealth.

These Puritan settlers are our direct religious ancestors as Unitarian Universalists, and unfortunately, their culture echoes down the ages. However, though we have always struggled to live its promise, our historic faith arose with a different vision.

We broke off from the Puritan strand with a direct response to their theological vision of damnation and election, arguing, instead, the Unitarian position that humans are born into blessing and the Universalist position that all are saved – all elect.

And now, amid the deeply entrenched American culture of striving, which tells us we must gain more and be more in order to have value as people, our faith has a different message. That we are already worthy, without exception. That we are each enough. Every one of us. Enough. Just as we are.

Truly living as though each of us is enough frees us from the culture of 'work to prove worth' into the world where we labor for love. Where we work to be of use - to be fulfilled, rather than saved.

In a world where each person understands they are enough, every person is able to **have** enough, because no one feels compelled to acquire more than they need.

Make no mistake, I am not speaking of the world we inhabit now. As it is, there are far too many who do not have enough, a small group who have way too much, and a majority of both who are not convinced of their own inherent worth.

And while I firmly believe that all people find ways to do the work of their hearts within every kind of job, many don't have the luxury of wondering whether they are fulfilled by their work. Many who have red, rough hands are not so sure of their beauty.

No, I am speaking of the world of our vision, the world that our faith pledges itself to build, where the culture of material striving is replaced at last by the culture of mutual flourishing, the culture of enough.

But here's the catch. We must start with ourselves.

Our culture only changes when we do. And so we begin to build this world of our vision with a task that is as common as mud and necessary as breath... the task of knowing ourselves to be enough.

... First and foremost we must know ourselves to be enough, just as we are.

Do you believe it? That you are enough. You are.

We must find at last that we have nothing to prove by greater wealth or more prestige. We were already proven worthy, the day we were born.

We talk a lot about affirming other people's worth, but it takes an unshakeable belief in our **own** to at last let go of the striving culture we inherit.

In the end, this may be more difficult than the work of political advocacy, because it involves deep personal transformation. It involves seeing our red, rough hands as beautiful when we have always believed them to be ugly.

Our cultures only change when we change.

This inner work is real, and vital. It is the ultimate labor of love.

Of course the work must continue with serving and advocating and voting on behalf of our belief that all are worthy. Together we will do all of these things. But we cannot forget to begin with ourselves.

On this labor day, as we remember all who labor, let us dedicate our hands once more to the work of love, within and without. Let us labor to transform our own hearts, and through us the culture that surrounds us.

Let us remember that our hands are beautiful in countless ways. But today especially, they are beautiful because they are joined together. United in purpose and ready to work on behalf of us all.

All of us: who are beautiful, worthy and whole.

May it be so.