

from America the Gutted

UUCR Chalice Circle Program - Early December 2012

Chalice Lighting and Opening Words:

Light the chalice, and then read the following opening words:

Bless the hands of the people of the earth,
The hands that plant the seed,
The hands that bind the harvest,
The hands that carry the burden of life...

Bless the hands of the workers,
Bless the hands of those in power above them
That the measure they deal will be tempered
With justice and compassion. Amen.

-Farm Worker Blessing Prayer

Check-in:

1. Please share your name.
2. What is the best job you ever had?
3. What are you feeling in your heart in this moment?

Reading:

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Global Post

Instead of the first reading, if possible, present Glenda's story in her own voice: <http://vimeo.com/52045897>

For the better part of three decades, Glenda Bell spent eight hours a day, five days a week bent over a sewing machine. But Bell doesn't talk of drudgery when describing her years spent stitching belt loops and leather patches onto Wrangler's American Hero jeans. Instead, she says her job inside Wrangler's cavernous 50,000 square-foot factory was the best she ever had.

"I loved my job," Bell, 57, said, in the modest home her wages helped buy. "It made me who I am."

A mother of four, Bell notes with pride that she missed just 12 days of work in 26 years on the job. Doing the right thing is important to her. That's clear whether Bell is describing her decision to adopt twin teenage boys out of foster care, or the work ethic she embraced at the factory.

"At Wrangler, the motto was 'quality first,'" Bell said. "That's what made me stay there 26 years. That's what made me stay there until the plant closed, because I liked that motto."

Bell was one of hundreds of thousands of workers laid off in the last decade in North Carolina, which has lost more manufacturing jobs per capita than any other state as a stampede of American companies chased cheap labor abroad. For many of the laborers left behind, a decades-old social contract has crumbled. Hard work can no longer secure them a comfortable spot in the middle class. Instead, those lucky enough to find new jobs struggle to survive on lower wages, often without benefits, and with no promise their paychecks will be there next week. Experts say the challenges now faced by workers like Bell reflect a massive economic shift in American history.

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The days when blue-collar workers could easily buy homes or send their children to college may be gone.

After Bell was laid off from the Wrangler factory, she defied the odds by re-training to work in a more promising industry. But for a woman in her 50s with few other prospects, even this course has proven rocky. After receiving her license as a nursing assistant, Bell found a job caring for an elderly woman for six hours a day. At \$8.50 an hour, it was the best job she's had since Wrangler. When that woman passed away, Bell couldn't find a patient to replace her.

After a year on unemployment, she found temporary work this summer cleaning beach side rental homes. She said she earns an average of \$250 a week. It barely covers essential costs. Bell, a proud woman who once had little trouble feeding her family, now often finds herself pinched at the grocery store. Perhaps the toughest challenge, she said, is the growing suspicion that, no matter how hard she works, things are unlikely to improve.

Read twice. Then please share your reactions, reflections and responses to the reading, allowing each participant who wishes to share to have an opportunity before entering into a more open discussion. Later, the facilitator may offer specific questions or other thoughts for you to consider, if you feel comfortable.

Check-out:

1. Please share your name.
2. If this Chalice Circle session has changed your perspective on work, low-wage workers, and/or the unemployed, then in what ways has it done so?
3. What are you feeling in your heart in this moment?

Closing Words:

From a Buddhist perspective it is not quite enough to say that we each are our brother's keeper. We need to feel instead that we actually are our brother. And from this, fair treatment flows naturally. There is then what we Buddhists call Right Livelihood - mutually productive work, with everyone being treated fairly, everyone being treated Right.

- Ven. Sevan Ross, Zen Buddhist priest

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Facilitator Guide

The following questions can, but don't have to be used to facilitate the discussion:

1. What, if anything, does (did) work mean to you, besides money and other material matters? Bell says that her work "made her what she is". If you feel similarly, please share how has work "made you what you are".
2. Bell indicated that her efforts at retraining were motivated greatly by her responsibilities to her two adopted children. Please share how responsibilities to family and others motivate you.
3. What sacrifices do you feel you would be willing to make in your own life to safeguard fair treatment for workers here at home despite added competition from foreign labor? (Please share what sacrifices you would be willing to make, personally, rather than discussing what you feel others or the government should do.)