

Father and Son: A Labor Day Reflection
September 5, 2010

On April 20th of this year, the Deepwater Horizon rig leased by British Petroleum exploded killing eleven workers. We are inclined to compartmentalize this as a tragic accident, and thus we mourn the losses of workers upon the ill-fated rig.

Their deaths, however, are not an isolated event. There have been widespread safety concerns about many of the rigs in the Gulf of Mexico. There were problems with the ballast system that should have kept the rig afloat and stable. There were issues of deferred maintenance. Dozens of deficiencies were reported including the rig's blowout preventer and other critical equipment that were linked to the safety of workers but ignored by the corporation.

In July of 2005, a passing ship in the Gulf noticed British Petroleum's oil platform listing precariously to one side. The problem, analysts determined later was not an anomaly but a warning that BP was taking too many risks and cutting too many corners in pursuit of growth and profits. (Apparently, BP has not learned from its mistakes.)

In a set of worker-safety reports recently released on four of BP's rigs on the Gulf, and published by The New York Times, it was disclosed that 43% of the workers expressed fear of reprisals for reporting problems. Some workers interviewed said the company was systematically deferring maintenance to save money.

After reviewing the many compiled documents, Senator Patty Murray from the state of Washington, serving as chairwoman of the Subcommittee on Employment and Workplace Safety, voiced the following: "These documents are more evidence that despite the growing count of worker deaths and safety violations, the oil and gas industry still just doesn't get it." And then she delivered what I consider the unforgivable situation in which we find ourselves today in these enlightened times. She said: "They need to change their worker-safety culture, and I am pretty sure we can't count on them to do it by themselves."

When a corporation's drive for profit takes precedence over the safety of its workers, I call that "sin." To disregard the sanctity of another's life in favor of one's own self-interest, reveals the dark side of our human nature. And when companies fail to consider the horrific and unsafe conditions under which people must work in order to eek out a living...in coal mines, oil rigs, sweat shops, factories, meat packing, chicken farms, we glimpse the vile realization that our base nature is consumed with greed that overrides all other humane considerations, including the endangerment of the lives of others.

The scenario of a worker fearing reprisal in efforts to address safety concerns in the workplace, epitomizes the distrustful relationship between labor and management

in today's world, and yet it goes back to pre-Revolutionary War days. The first group of workers to organize in this country were the women seamstresses who challenged their employers back in 1765. Calling themselves the Daughters of Liberty, they led many successful strikes. (They are not to be confused with the DAR - Daughters of the American Revolution).

But it all goes back to what Senator Murray said the other day: That changing the culture to take worker safety into account, let alone treating the worker with dignity will not just happen by itself. That statement sums up the history of labor unions striving to protect workers in our country.

We shouldn't be surprised by any of this: Industry has contaminated our air and waterways for decades because it was expedient and profitable to do so and there were no regulations in force. Just last week, as eyes were focused on BP in the Gulf, a BP oil refinery in Texas City, Texas, released huge amounts of toxic chemicals into the air including the carcinogen benzene that went unnoticed by residents until many saw their children come down with respiratory problems.

Rather than taking the costly step of shutting down the refinery to make repairs, engineers tried to divert the gases to a smokestack and burn them off, but thousands of pounds of the chemicals still escaped into the air. BP never notified the public or government health officials. And what do we hear in the halls of Congress today: Regulation of industry is bad for the economy. Suddenly, protecting the lives and health of people and the future of the earth has been interpreted as a "socialist agenda."

We are incapable of regulating ourselves even when it comes to not injuring others if it gets in the way of the bottom line. Perhaps this is the human condition. We get a troublesome perspective back when Jesus exhorts us all to love our neighbor as ourselves, until a lawyer says: "Hold, on. Define your terms. What exactly do you mean by "neighbor?" And still today we're looking for the loopholes in this moral obligation that gets in the way of our opulence and self-indulgence. We are currently awash in a xenophobia that has erased any empathy towards our neighbor.

Our economic collapse today is tied directly to the banks failing to regulate their greedy impulses. The escalation of profits and bonuses beyond one's wildest imagination is deemed essential to creating a good business climate. Regulations would only dampen the competitive nature of our system and would smack of the dreaded word, "socialism."

Regulating the banks...regulating brokers...regulating Wall Street is portrayed as anathema to American values. I am forced to wonder what American values really entail. Is no business able to curtail its income "on its own" merely for the sake of human decency? Are watch dogs necessary to keep us from breathing toxic fumes, paying 35% interest on credit cards, and forsaking safety for the workers in coal mines and oil rigs?

Forgive me for sounding trite but I think it's okay at least in church to inquire: "Am I my brother's keeper?" It is not only industry and corporations that have lost sight of this most basic moral query, but individuals, too, join the tax revolt that have undermined education and human services, and even not supporting our patriotic veterans who return from combat tours in Iraq and Afghanistan as almost unidentifiable shells of their former selves. If we won't raise taxes to educate our children, feed the poor, serve those who are the least of us, and heal the sick, then we have turned our backs on our brother and have forgone ANY obligation to our neighbor. We have taken self-absorption to its bitter conclusion.

The question raised in the business of being our brother's keeper has evolved as the sharp edge that divides our nation. Pundits call it polarization and point to hot-button issues such as immigration, slashing human service budgets, the government's reach into regulating industry, healthcare reform, and federal protection of wilderness so as not to destroy it for our own recreational pleasures. But inescapably, at the heart of these hot-button polarizing issues, is the age-old question about whether or not we are our brother's keeper.

The labor movement in this country was dedicated to protecting the worker from unsafe working environments, oppressive working conditions, and from suffering the indignity of sacrificing all integrity merely to stave off starvation. From admonishments in scripture to Senator Patty Murray's recent revelation, employers won't do this by themselves. If laborers unionize, however, and strike in order to stop production and the flow of profit, they may gain a shred of dignity. But the fear of reprisal from the ever-powerful employer was as prevalent back in the days of Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger, back in the days of Cesar Chavez, to the present fear among workers on the Deepwater Horizon. If anything, labor is losing its influence in the debate of being our brother's keeper because the mantra of our nation has evolved into "every man for himself and keep government regulations off our backs." And so what was once referred to as "economic justice" has become a relic of the past.

Bob King, the new president of the United Automobile Workers, remembers its history when back in 1936 and '37 union men were beaten up and shot at, and their cars blown up by gangsters hired by the corporations. And he said an interesting thing just last week: "The UAW will be marching and campaigning and organizing for jobs, for a moratorium on home foreclosures, for civil and human rights and against the mistreatment of immigrants, and for peace. The Tea Party has been more vocal than we have been. There is something wrong with this picture."

Yes - - there is something very wrong with the picture in which we find ourselves today. Glenn Beck, who seemingly owns the Civil Rights movement these days, would have been conspicuously absent in 1968 in Memphis, as Dr. Martin Luther King supported the striking sanitation workers. I look dimly upon our midterm elections as we will essentially be voting on whether or not we're our brother's

keeper. Regulating industries and offering concern for our brothers and sisters and environment will, I fear, take a beating at the polls. It's epitomized in Orrin Hatch's desire to refuse federal money to help education here in Utah. Said Hatch, it would only go to support a bunch of union workers. (I think he meant the teachers).

I want to examine the story of one Utah family as a metaphor for the schism that can arise, even between father and son, when it comes to which side you stand on in the question of being our brother's keeper.

In setting the stage, I'll need to begin with a notorious labor organizer, a member of the Industrial Workers of the World, or Wobblies as they were called – a fellow named Joe Hill. The mine owners here in Utah and the owners of industry in general, have long sought to break the power of the unions. It made their lives a whole lot easier not to have unions and so union people were blacklisted, labeled as troublemakers and agitators.

Joe Hill was regarded as a troublemaker extraordinaire, being involved in some important strikes in Utah's history at the Bingham Copper mine back in 1912 and 1913. The strikes turned violent and worried the owners. Joe Hill concentrated not only on the mines, but other Utah industries where conditions were unsafe, unsanitary, and workers worked long hours for very little pay.

There was a murder at that time, and the police were looking for an ex-convict named Frank Wilson. They arrested Joe Hill, claiming that although he said his name was Joe Hill, he was really the murderer they were looking for. Then the police chief in San Pedro called, where Joe Hill had not long ago organized the long shermen, and the police chief said, "They guy you have is a Wobbly. A bad apple. You've got the right man."

A case was built against Joe Hill on total circumstantial evidence. The gun was never found. Witnesses could not identify Hill conclusively. Joe Hill was convicted of murder. Even with President Woodrow Wilson supporting Hill, the Utah State Supreme Court refused to commute Hill's sentence. He was executed by firing squad in 1915 pretty close to where our church holds its annual picnic at Sugar House Park.

Paul Higgins was born in Salt Lake City in 1904. He had blond hair, blue eyes, Irish American origins, born into a conservative Republican family. He attended East High School during his junior and senior years. He took up piano, but ultimately pursued his passion in painting. At the age of 20, he traveled to Mexico City to see the mural renaissance involving Diego Rivera. Higgins became an assistant to Rivera and worked with him on three of his most important murals. The two men became life-long friends.

Higgins became a muralist himself and a political graphic artist spreading the ideals of human rights to the masses in Mexico. As an Anglo-American from a well-to-

family he reached enormous success among the Hispanic population in both Mexico and Southern California. But Paul kept one secret to himself: His father was an assistant district attorney, instrumental in the execution of Joe Hill. The polarization as to which side of the moral debate you were on, led him to distance himself from his father as much as possible. He changed his name from Paul Higgins to Pablo O'Higgins, and never saw his father again.

Pablo worked on behalf of Mexican farm workers he met in Southern California. At age 23 he joined the Mexican Communist Party. He contributed illustrations to *The Daily Worker*. Besides being a highly respected muralist in Mexico, he co-founded the world-famous Political Arts Workshop in 1937 to denounce Fascism.

O'Higgins lived in Mexico for all his adult life with visits to the U.S. where he developed strong ties with labor in the 1940's. He painted murals for the Ship Scalers Union in Seattle in 1945, and for the International Longshoremen's Union in Honolulu in 1952. He helped local San Francisco artists develop a graphic arts workshop. Interestingly, whenever he was asked where he was from he would say San Francisco, an attempt to distance himself from his father his whole life.

When Pablo O'Higgins died in 1983, the Mexican government gave him a state funeral. His portrait is included in a mural in Chicano Park in San Diego County, the largest collection of Chicano murals in the United States. He appears next to Diego Rivera, Frida Kahlo, Pablo Picasso, Che Guevara, and the Virgin of Guadalupe.

He's in fine company. He is hailed as an inspiration for artists seeking to create socially-conscious, community based art.

Social conscience has never been construed as particularly helpful in creating a good business climate. The key word, I believe is "conscience." Self-interest and conscience collide because conscience always tries to mitigate the inflated sense of self. Acknowledging and accepting that we are ultimately our brother's keeper is a matter of conscience. Conscience precludes trying to find loopholes in loving our neighbor.

Framing Joe Hill because he was a union troublemaker was unconscionable.
American industrial sweatshops around the world are unconscionable.
That eleven men died on the Deep Water Horizon is unconscionable.
Expediently releasing toxins into our streams and air is unconscionable.

As we know, this will not change by itself. And yet setting regulations in place is unacceptable in America.

I know I am preaching to the choir, and I love this choir that gathers faithfully on Sunday mornings. But tell me, what else can I do? What else can we do to promote the inherent worth and dignity of every human being?