Labor Day

Work is present in our daily lives on many levels. We labor at our formal employment, we toil on building relationships, and we act to keep ourselves fit and healthy. All of these chores fit one of the dictionary definitions of the word **work.** Each one is a “purposeful effort”.

As we are closing in on Labor Day, I find myself with mixed emotions. This symbolic end of summer is usually marked with picnics and barbeques of which I love. Any excuse to eat outside and cook on the grill is fine with me! That means less work and more fun. I rebel against the high society dictate that this date marks the last day until the following Memorial Day when it is fashionable to wear white. I have tossed this old-fashioned concept away with my church gloves and elastic girdle and freely mix my white pants with fall sweaters. I am ambivalent to the beginning of the NFL and college football season. The TV remote control is rarely in my hands anyway and a good book trumps any televised game.

As a child in upstate New York we always started school the Tuesday after Labor Day so at this time of year I am yanked back to my fond childhood memories of traipsing through the morning dew to the sunny spot in the backyard so that my mother could take our First Day of School picture. There was a sense of excitement as I climbed on the Pine Sol scented school bus in my new outfit clutching my blank notebooks and sharpened wooden pencils with virgin pink erasers. Yes there would be schoolwork to do, but I was ready.

But now as a teacher in Pennsylvania I have to bid goodbye to my bell-less days before Labor Day as we start school at the end of August. For the past twenty-two years I have been on the other side of the desk and I feel a sense of loss of my freedom when I go back to my formal work. I anticipate the shorter days and know that there will be longer hours of darkness. I know that I will have to retrain myself to get up before the sun and learn a host of new names that each year gets harder and harder to remember. I will have to find a way to stay fit and healthy since I cannot be out in my garden in my bare feet or at the beach taking carefree long walks along the shoreline. I will have to make sure to squirrel away enough energy from my demanding day to be able to give attention to my husband, children and grandchildren when they need me. In the summer I freely and joyfully release my listening time to attend to everyone’s needs and push off household chores at the slightest suggestion for a visit. But after a long day in the classroom during the school year, where there is only one of me and up to 80 demanding adolescents who have the collective needs of a small country, I secretly scale back during the day when I need to.

We all work hard in many ways and taking care of ourselves should be our number one job. We need to find the balance in our lives for all of our tasks. And when the balance is thrown off, the successful alignment suffers. Grief can be a turbulant force and we work at managing its impact for a lifetime after we are struck by it. Labor Day weekend 1977 was the setting for the wedding to my late husband and the father of my children. So for me this complicated holiday additionally escorts me back to a little corner of my life-long healing process. My cherished memories are intact, even though he is no longer with me.

So for the days leading up to Labor Day I will be working as a teacher to help my students reach their potential. I will be working on the adjustments to my sleep patterns, and I will continue to work on my grief journey…. all with a “purposeful effort”.

May you take the time on this holiday weekend to enjoy a well-deserved rest from your many jobs and enjoy the fruits of your labor.

Happy Labor Day!