

Letters to Us: #1. May All Those Who Labor Find Rest

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2015.09.06

Labor Day

Dear America,

You inspire me into a coma.

I'm sorry; that was rude. I should have called you the United States of America, the United States, the U.S.A, or simply, the U.S. It's just that I really needed to make sure that I got your attention, and I wrote the salutation rather thoughtlessly, and—as so many of us often do—I almost forgot there was more to the Americas than one country. I'll have to remember to write an apology for my rudeness to Canada, Mexico, and all of the remaining [32](#) sovereign [nations](#) to our south.

Sorry for the digression. I'm trying to Tweet, update my Facebook status, comment on my friend's hot Instagram photo, draft my Fantasy Football team, check my Fantasy Baseball team's pitching status, and write this letter to you for a think-piece website I share with some friends. Understandably, I sometimes get distracted. I suppose I don't need to tell you that though, because—of course—but for you, I wouldn't have so many different entertainments demanding my attention. So forgive me and let me start over.

Dear US,

You inspire me into a coma.

It's not that I don't think you're exceptional; you absolutely are. You are the unquestionable number-one-ranked country in a number of categories, which include the following, et alia: the [highest number](#) of citizens incarcerated by the government; the [highest number](#) of homicides by gunfire; the [highest amount](#) of money spent in support of global warfare; and, of course, the highest number of lists on which we were voted the "Most Racist Country." See, e.g., [this linked list](#) and [this linked list](#) and [this linked list](#).

We're exceptional alright, so don't take this the wrong way. I mean, my biggest wish in this country is for everyone to realize just how exceptional we are.

But those are all topics for another letter, and trust me, there will be plenty more. I feel like there is so much that needs to be said between us. I mean, I know I wasn't born here, but I *am* documented. And I did go to war for your on four separate occasions. I know—I hate it when I play that card too; it's just that I could really use the diplomatic US to grant me an audience, so I can get some things off my chest.

I mean, please at least send a rep or whatever.

Maybe "get things off my chest" takes the wrong tone, especially if you're a conscientious and thoughtful representative of the US who has already made it this far.

It's just that I didn't expect it from you, US. You're busy after all. Sometimes, it seems you have a say on everything that happens around the world. From [Israel and Iran](#) to [Ukraine and Russia](#). How do you find the time?

And the funds! From whence dost thou procure thy coin? Surely

occupying no less than [74 sovereign nations](#) with a standing army isn't cheap.

To be honest, I didn't expect you to read more than the title and the first 250 words. I gambled and decided not to write a click-bait headline to disingenuously draw you in. I resisted the urge to seed my piece with gifs and memes to keep your attention, even though I know that's how most US citizens take in the massive bits of disparate information necessary to [steadfastly opine](#) on every single issue on the planet.

I really can't express how happy I am that you've stuck around this long—I don't take it for granted, and I have nothing but gratitude for the way the literate US enables speech for so many.

I mean, like—as an aside—the literate US should enable speech for [all](#), yet the literate US only enables speech for [some](#), typically US privileged whites. But, I know how it is. Even the literate US can fall victim to the hive-mind, taking shortcuts and using heuristics to determine which books are worth reading, which candidates are worth considering, which neighborhoods are ripe for policing, and which public policies [we should all embrace](#), because the choice is so obviously and unquestionably common sense.

Haha. Jk lol.

I'm just playing.

Except I'm serious. LMFAO.

But you know all that already. You are vast and diverse, US; you know that fixing what's broken is harder than it looks.

You see, with all the different experiences and cultures and colors and communities within this, our own US, it's not coming up with the answers to complex problems that's so difficult—problem-solving has always been the one of the two

fortes of which we're most proud, the other being power-projection. No, the great US has solved some of the most complex problems of all time, so it can't be that.

I propose to you, US, that the real problem with US citizens is that so few of us will [admit there's a problem](#) to solve. But I don't have to tell you that, and I won't. We'll just stick to celebration of the workers of the world.

Sorry if I abandoned post on the primary subject of labor like a Bergdahl in Afghanistan. My true aim of this letter really is to wish a happy Labor Day to all.

Today is a day to celebrate all those who raised their skinny fists at The Man in the late 19th Century, striving in all earnestness with nothing more than a collective voice to win increased wages, reduced hours, and improved working conditions for common people toiling at common jobs as they went about the business of living their real lives.

Yet, here we are over a century later and what do we see in every US community? We see a massive service industry fueled by workers who can't afford groceries, and those laborers are likely the very people who spent their Labor Day actually performing labor, just to stay alive.

A trade union plumber is making emergency calls because a water line broke right before the garden party. A certified electrician is sweating under his hard hat as he climbs toward the sky in his boom truck bucket to bring power back to an affluent section of the suburbs.

Likely in a Target somewhere, a liberal carries her guilt with her like luggage. She tries to make small talk with the young black woman behind the register. The woman, with all her Samsonites in tow, asks how the young worker is doing. When the cashier responds, "I'd be doing better if I were at the barbecue with my family right now," the lady tsks and shakes her head, mumbling in shame about what a shame it is that the

store made the young worker come in on a holiday.

In a Walmart somewhere, two young men in casual suits—not white seersuckers, of course—argue over which brand of bloody Mary mix to buy for the brunch they’re attending at their parent’s lake house—lake mansion, really. They would not usually go to a Walmart—they’ve seen the websites that show the kind of people that frequent Walmart, and these two young men are not those kinds of people. It just so happens that everything else is closed, and they have the choice of either shopping at Walmart or at a gas station where everything will cost 10% more, for the convenience. The young men were likely sent by their father to get charcoal and wood for the [K1000HS Hybrid Fire Freestanding Grill with Side Burner](#), which he got at a steal at just under \$21,000 last Labor Day. But because the Federalist Society young men are likely hungover and a bit dried out from the blow the night before, they forget why they’re there, and that’s how they end up arguing about the bloody Mary mix, eventually spilling it all over the waxed linoleum floor.

All that is to say, in a Walmart on this Labor Day, a single mother is cleaning up spilled bloody Mary mix for [\\$18K per year](#), which actually only turns out to be about \$15.5K after she pays her sister-in-law \$50 a week to watch the youngest of three while mom’s at work. All she can think about as she pushes the bloody mix on the floor back and forth the white strings of the mop is this: *40 hours a week and I still can’t make my rent. Who could at 10 Gs below the [poverty guideline](#)?* *Smh, man. Smh.*

I could go on telling you these things forever. This happens in every US community to which I’ve traveled. I have so many things I want to tell you, US, re our current labor situation and what needs to happen before every US worker can have a happy Labor Day, but with so many [distractions](#) in US media right now, I thought making a list would help keep me organized, because, well, I’m a list person. (But I’m not

exactly a [listicle person](#).)

Before all US workers can enjoy a happy Labor Day, I propose the following theses:

I. All we who earn must—if we are to live in a civilized society—agree that nutritious food, clothing, housing, and responsible care for the children who will succeed us are all basic human rights of the highest moral order.

a) Nutritious food is necessary to eat to fuel our bodies, our temples, the machines by which we carry ourselves through the world.

b) Clothing houses our bodies, our temples, and clothing is the necessary minimal protection to guard our bodies from vulnerability, shame, and the necessary, but dangerous elements of the natural world, e.g., sunlight, heat, rain, and wind.

c) Nothing less than clean and stable housing is adequate to protect against nature's fiercest onslaughts and natural predators. Nothing less than clean and stable housing is adequate to facilitate life-sustaining activities, e.g., sleeping, eating, and procreating. Safe shelter fulfills the most basic of animal instincts; even the beasts of the forest have their caves.

d) Our children are the most promising and precious raw material we have at our disposal as we work toward constructing a better, more compassionate, more civilized, and more cooperative US population. Taking care to raise our children well is more than life sustaining; it is species sustaining.

II. Those of us who refuse to work when we are able may not eat. This truism also applies to all other life-sustaining human rights.

a) Just as God helps those who help themselves, the US government should help all of her citizens maximize their human potential through lives well lived. A well-lived life balances the pursuit of individual physical, spiritual, and relational fulfillment with selfless service to the collective US and to the world writ large through regular legal labor of the mind, body, or soul. Therefore, the US government should encourage all US citizens to labor—to the extent that each citizen is willing and able—with the purpose of maximizing our human potential to serve others. The US government should mandate that all US employers limit time demanded of US workers with the purpose of maximizing our human potential to pursue physical, spiritual, and relational fulfillment.

b) This is not to say that those who will not work will not eat, find clothing, or secure shelter, but if a human being is capable of performing labors of the body, mind, or soul and yet refuses to work to earn daily bread—daily bread being all that we need to sustain our lives and preserve the dignity of our souls—then that human being has rejected the means by which daily bread might be procured and enjoyed. Thus, they have no right to the fruits of another's labor. I can think of no compelling case to the contrary.

c) Those who toil for their own rewards are entitled to a fair bounty of those rewards. Whereas basic human rights will trump fairness in every single situation in which all else is equal, we are all ingrained with a sense of justice from the divine. Rewarding those who refuse to work with the rewards of those who toiled to earn the rewards offends our divine sense of justice.

d) All of us who are unable to work remain inherently valuable, containing the spirit of the divine. It is true that those of us who will not work forfeit our right to enjoy the fruits of labor, but those of us who are *unable*

to work must be shielded from accusations of sloth. US society, if it is to be at all civilized, must care for those of us who are unable to work.

III. Those who will work shall not go hungry.

a) All those who are able and willing to contribute to the collective US through any legal mode of labor have the basic human right to the resources necessary to exist, i.e., to facilitate life-sustaining activities. Rephrased, those who would toil and contribute to US society do not deserve to die simply because US employers would prefer to increase profit margins.

b) All those of us who are able and willing to contribute to the collective US through any legal mode of labor have the basic human right to the resources necessary to exist. Rephrased, we who toil and contribute to US society do not deserve to live our lives fearing death from starvation, from the elements, from nature's predators, or from criminals simply because our time and honest effort do not command the same compensatory value as the time of the more fortunate.

c) If a citizen would give 40 hours of her God-given breaths each week to labor in the service of another, she should—at the very least—be paid enough to secure shelter, put nutritious food in the bellies of her children, and clothe the members of her family according to the seasons.

IV. If the government will not protect the worker's basic right to life by regulating mandatory and indexed living wages for all workers, the government bears the responsibility of sustaining the lives of her citizens.

a) If the US adult would work but still cannot eat, the US government should provide the US worker and her dependents with enough nutritious food to fill both her own belly and the bellies of every single one of her

children.

b) If the US adult will work but still cannot find shelter, the US government should provide the US adult and her dependents a safe and clean shelter that is adequate to provide privacy in times of bodily vulnerability and security during hours of rest.

c) If the US adult will work but might still go naked, the US government should provide the US adult and her dependents with clean clothing that is adequate to both maintain dignity for those desiring modesty and to protect the worker's bodily temple from each season's elements.

That's probably a good start anyway. Consider the Wrath-Bearing Tree my [Castle Church](#) door. .

I figured, US, we could start with the really common-sense stuff. I mean, since this is really my introduction letter, I figured covering anything controversial might be off-putting for US citizens simply trying to enjoy the holiday.

Really, when it comes down to it, I just wanted to start a conversation. With Labor Day upon us, this seemed like a perfect day to celebrate what should be the inalienable rights of any governments' citizens; especially those in our own exceptional US.

Therefore, I won't beg you to recognize the importance and vitality of #BlackLivesMatter, I won't plead with you to recognize that we can simultaneously support the safety of our police officers while wanting them to be held accountable when they murder young people of color with impunity. I won't yet berate you with statistic after statistic to get you to acknowledge the evils of mass incarceration, i.e., [The New Jim Crow](#). I won't badger you about our inhumane immigration policies, I won't dog you about our protracted and fruitless [Forever Wars](#), and I won't hound you about all the real problems you're ignoring, like [this one](#). Those are all topics

I can cover another day, and you better believe I plan to do so.

Because, you see, I'm going to keep writing these letters until I've said all I need to say or until all US citizens collectively change our US into what we could be. One thing I'm not going to do: I'm not going to simply give up hope and abandon the idea that we can be better. I still believe the entire US can be great, but we need to confess our collective sins, and US citizens need to learn to work. More than that, we need to learn to work together—for the common good of the entire US.

peaking of working together, I suppose it's customary to greet people on a holiday weekend with some form of acknowledgment of the reason for the season. I blew that one a long time ago—i.e., the greeting part of it, not the acknowledgment part—but I believe some clichés have value. One cliché that has value is this: better late than never. To that end, even though the sun has already disappeared beyond my western horizon, Happy Labor Day, US!

All the best and with plenty of hope,

Matthew J. Hefti

P.S. Feel free to write back; you know how to get in touch with me. Just use #WriteBack, and I'll do the same.

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