

Boston Workmen's Circle Rosh Hashanah 2015 Dvar by Tolle Graham

Good morning –

WOW- I really had to challenge myself to accept this amazing invitation to deliver the dvar before you this year! First I want to give a shout-out to two of my biggest cheerleaders- my son Sam Graham-Felsen who delivered the dvar 10 years ago and to my husband Mike, who was similarly honored – though after his son!

I find myself really humbled by the weight of this particular invitation.

I mean – come on – we're in a large group self-evaluation period this week. That's heavy stuff! We're re-examining our values and targets and re-committing ourselves to.....?

It is fitting for my remarks today that Labor Day was just a week ago – when we celebrated the invaluable contributions of working people who built this country and who also built the middle class. Labor Day *also* involves self-evaluation: labor leaders and even President Obama at this year's Greater Boston Labor Council Labor Day breakfast talked about the labor movement's values, our successes and challenges, while calling on all of us as unionists, workers, and the electorate to recommit ourselves to fighting for the rights and dignity of working people.

A little about myself – I'm a member of the United Steel Workers Union. I'm the Labor and Environment Coordinator at MassCOSH – the Coalition for Occupational Safety and Health – that works to end unsafe working conditions and to organize for safe secure jobs and healthy communities. I did not grow up in a strong union household. To put that in context - *I have to tell you a quick family story about my mother and her union experience. She was a secretary at Newsday – a large newspaper in L.I. New York. My mother is kind of a character and for a number of years, brought her large bull mastiff dog to work each day. “Esther”, the dog's name, even had a portrait of herself - sitting at the head of the board room table, taken by a Newsday photographer – which hung on a wall somewhere in the building for decades. In the early 1970's the non-technical staff at Newsday were unionized. For the next few years my mother fumed about the union almost as much as about management because shortly after the union victory - management tightened up many work rules (a common tactic) - including expelling her dog from the premises. My mother did, however, retire with a good pension and benefits.*

I chose the labor movement over 35 years ago, because I thought that was the way to build democracy at work and a social movement that put people before profits. As with many progressive unionists, this vision got reformulated many times over the years – but I still believe that the labor movement is the necessary formation to defend workers' rights inside the workplace and to champion change for all workers. A great example: the *Fight for Fifteen*, that promises to increase wages for low-wage workers. And this past April, we celebrated a local victory when 1199 SEIU fought for and won \$15 an hour for the 35,000 personal care attendants in Massachusetts, who care for our family members that are sick, elderly or disabled.

With that in mind--- I want to frame my remarks today about the WC community and economic justice - by looking back at some of the history of the Workmen's Circle – and, in the present, how we can, and might I say, should, continue to engage in solidarity with working people. And finally, how we might reframe that activism through a lens of racial justice.

Here's an excerpt from the 1901 Workmen's Circle Declaration of Principles –

“The constant want and frequent illness which particularly afflict the workers have led us to band together in the Workmen's Circle, so that by united effort we may help one another. The

Workmen's Circle knows that the aid which it can bring to the worker today is no more than a drop on a hot stone. It will do in time of need. But that there shall be no need—this is the true ideal. The Workmen's Circle desires to be one more link in the workers' bond of solidarity, ultimately bringing on the day of complete emancipation from exploitation and oppression.”
Powerful – right?

Members were “duty bound,” according to the constitution, to be loyal to their unions. By 1940 the Workmen's Circle ran 100 Labor Lyceums, or community centers, across the country and came to be known as the Red Cross of Labor, providing benefits that poor immigrants were otherwise denied. It also acted as a Mutual Aid Society, providing social services, benefits, health centers, tuberculosis hospitals, and homes for the aged. *By the way – I got this great historical information directly from the Boston WC website!*

So - WC members as union members directly benefited from labor victories over the years. They gained shorter work hours, better pay, social security.... but they also maintained their own internal safety net and cultural/social home, where their families could express their cultural, educational, and social strivings.

I think it's useful for us to look at the two phrases that most historical passages use to describe the WC – the WC as the Red Cross of the Labor Movement, and the WC as a Mutual Aid Society -- and think about how they apply to us today as **we** act for economic justice.

Although historically, many of the WC members benefited directly - as workers - from that Red Cross relief --- receiving and offering strike support or help for those affected by disasters, like after the Triangle Shirtwaist fire - -- this was also the way the Workmen's Circle reached out beyond their own membership to other workers and ethnic groups and, over time, to other social movements. I think it's safe to say that today – when many if not most WC members are **not** members of a union -- we do mostly look outward from our own ranks when we engage in solidarity for worker and economic justice. As far as I'm concerned, it's a great way to keep exercising our Jewish values --- but how and why do we engage in these kinds of efforts now? That brings me to the other historic phrase associated with the WC - - the Mutual Aid Society. I think many of us know what it used to mean – member services that offered just about everything from cradle to grave. At that time, for many this was the only place they could access those services.

About seven years ago this phrase came back to **our** Boston chapter when a group of our young adults, many of whom were organizers themselves, said – yes, we want the WC to be engaged in worker rights and economic justice work – but we also want to build a Jewish home for ourselves here in the WC. They created a mutual aid society that took on a new form. They organized skills exchanges – like bike repair and baking; they met and talked about their class backgrounds and discussed economic insecurities and their futures. They dedicated themselves to creating spiels about current worker campaigns at the wild and wonderful Purim party – Gragger. Why? Because creativity and celebration were core values as they fashioned their own Jewish home – and worked in solidarity with other communities.

They wanted to have these conversations with the “elders” too – so intergenerational group meetings were organized and a whole series of house meetings for each of our generations took place – together and separately -- where we shared how the economy was affecting us and our families. Many of us - as elders - were anxious about our sons and daughters who were entering the workforce in a bad economy - and at a time when labor and the whole organization of work was under attack. We were also experiencing the costs of taking care of aging relatives and

getting to know their low-wage care-givers — and sometimes we, as part of that system, were paying those low salaries ourselves!

This mutual aid process was very powerful for all of us. We launched an intergenerational committee, called *Acting for Economic Justice*. An earlier version, the Immigrant and Worker's Rights Committee, had actively signed on to various campaigns focused on labor and immigrant struggles. But AFEJ helped to clarify *why* we do social justice and offered a model for how we both engage our WC community in this work, and also help to shape the campaigns themselves -- like those ensuring through legislation that both temp and domestic workers have a Right to Know the terms and conditions of their employment—which, believe it or not, wasn't assured before these bills became law.

And I would also add – just as importantly - the collaborative process of creating our own version of Mutual Aid seeded Boston Workmen's Circle with a new cadre of younger leaders. Where does racial justice fit into all this?

The deaths of Eric Garner and Michael Brown a year ago this summer -- and the powerful slogans “I can't breathe” and “Hands up, don't shoot” -- stunned and shamed us. As the “Black Lives Matter” movement has spread – we have begun, again, an internal process of self-reflection and evaluation within the Workmen's Circle. How do we, as individuals, and as a community, address – and maybe even contribute to -- the terribly destructive effects of institutional racism, every day, on people of color? How can our work for economic justice help pave a path to racial justice?

As we continue to look inward while also reaching out to our allies – let's find ways -- honestly, creatively, and passionately – to do this hard work – together!

L' Shana Tova!

Tolle Graham

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