

MVPs (Most Valuable Players)

Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda

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Those among you who are into sports will know that – unlike the internet-related abbreviations I’ve previously used – this month’s abbreviation, MVP, has been around way before the internet was a thing. MVPs are the *most valuable players* in a particular team or league – the VIPs of that particular sport community, granting them recognition and a certain special status among their peers.

Over the past year, there has been some version of this “game” playing out in the larger labour market. Except it isn’t a game – it’s sometimes been more of a debate, or a lobby, or a struggle, to figure out some kind of... categorization, or even a type of hierarchy, among different kinds of workers.

We first started seeing this kind of conversation intensify around March of last year, when the question arose around what work could be considered “essential”.

There are many answers to this. It is subjective – which is to say, it depends on whose perspective you are trying to answer this from. It can depend on what we are actually asking, and it is perhaps more helpful to ask “essential for what?”

From a sociological perspective, one might consider something like health care to be a primary industry during a global health crisis. It was

probably never a question that health care practitioners would be considered *essential* during shutdowns or other restrictions on mobility.

With a slightly larger scope, the provision of food and household necessities were also quickly identified as primary needs, so that grocery stores – and importantly – their workers, were deemed *essential* quite universally. Grocery stores may have adapted, but they never closed. And certain fears around the availability of things like toilet paper and other household items were mostly unwarranted.

Things got fuzzy around things like providers of alcohol and cannabis. These too were designated as essential. The rationale behind this can be a whole conversation of its own, but the bottom line is that these stores also never closed – and their employees showed up.

From an economist's point of view, the subjective filter used a slightly different question – something to the effect of, “what industries need to continue functioning, so that the economy doesn't completely collapse?”

This included areas such as transportation – specifically regarding the chain of supply – as well as banking, construction, and... to varying degrees, education and childcare.

I could devote a lot of time and space outlining what the different provincial guidelines officially labelled as “essential”. A year ago, I noted that Ontario's guiding document listed several dozen industries, with several subcategories, as well as exemptions and allowances for adaptations for things that could be done from home, or in a way that reduced contact with the public. There were many gray areas.

Last year, the Calgary Physician Choir sang the song *Fix You*, by the band Coldplay. If you watch this virtual choir, you'll see that the last 30 seconds of the video are devoted to crediting over 40 singers – all of whom are doctors – and to whom we're giving extra credit these days.

The title *doctor* has always carried with it a certain degree of prestige, and there are good reasons for that... from the level of skill and training required to obtain that title, to the hazards involved in that work, and the life-saving potential they have, for us as individuals, as well as for the health benefits of society as a whole.

That hasn't changed – if anything we have been reminded of why that recognition is there to begin with.

The same could be said for other healthcare practitioners who do not carry as prestigious a title as *doctor*, but who also require similarly specialized skills, and contribute as team members in the provision of quality healthcare to individuals and society.

And we also recognize that many other work positions, in several sectors, are equally not often recognized for the value that they bring to us as individuals and to the functioning of society, and which themselves can carry their own occupational hazards, especially now.

Now that vaccines have become available – to varying degrees – a similar set of questions around what is “essential” has been floating around. Part of this has revolved around which industries – and their workers – have been prioritized in the immunization order of precedence.

Now, it's important to note that many of the decisions made around this kind of conversation are not necessarily tied to which jobs are “more important”, and often try to follow a *practical* set of rationales, including risk factors, such as the possibility for exposure to disease – for the employees *and* their clients. Though it is also important to note that these metrics have at times seemed to have been applied... unevenly.

Which brings us to a larger question around what kind of work is important. And again, the answers are somewhat subjective – which is to say, the answers revolve around the *subjects* that we focus on.

In our economic system, jobs – and the work attached to them – exist because there is *value* that our society places on that work. Which means that, at some level, every job has an element of importance.

At an individual level, the stakes become even higher. For most of us, a job is a means to a livelihood – a way to eat, a place to live, a form of pursuing fulfilling activities – a matter of survival.

And this means that employment is – or has been – one of the most important parts of one’s life for a large segment of the population. Which makes for an especially difficult decision, when the means to a livelihood can also represent a risk to one’s life, or the lives of those near us.

Over the past year, we have been called to give a *closer* witness the hazards of work. To be clear, there have always been hazards and dangers attached to all manners of labour. In the past while, it has been clearer that some kinds of work are more hazardous than we realized, and some of them have become even more hazardous still.

For too many in our community, that has been a choice they’ve had to make – survive, or put one’s life at risk. That choice has always been present for too many among us, and now, that choice has come up even more often.

Leading epidemiologists and labour analysts have made it clear that, one of the main mechanisms that we can keep workers, their coworkers, their families, and society at large, safe – especially now, but also at other more... typical times – is for paid sick leave to be a standard, normalized, part of our culture... a part of our work ethic.

This was true before, even when the greatest threat was a regular flu, and it is just as true today – as the stakes are higher.

My friends, this week we recognize that people make this kind of difficult choice every day. Whether their work is officially categorized as *essential*, or not. On the national Workers' Mourning Day, on Wednesday, we remember those who gave their all, in the service of our community and in the service of their families.

And, my friends, we recognize that, in an economy that relies on the work of all who offer value to our society, *all* employees are the economy's Most Valuable Players. May we recognize that value.

So may it be,
In Solidarity and Love,
Amen

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Opening Hymn #357 Bright Morning Stars

Words: Anonymous

Music: American folk song, arr. by James A. Lucas,

© 1983 Plymouth Music, used by perm. of Walton Music Corp.

BRING MORNING STARS

Meditation Hymn #333 Alone She Cuts and Binds the Grain

Words: William Wordsworth 1770-1850

Music: A.D. Carden's *Missouri Harmony*, 1820

DEVOTION

Closing Hymn #128 For All That Is Our Life

~)-| Words: Bruce Findlow, 1922-

Music: Patrick L. Rickey, 1964- , © 1992 UUA

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