The Institute of Family Living

BALANCING WORK, LEISURE AND FAMILY: YEAR 2001

*Thirty years ago, **Henry Regehr** and the late **Dr. Stan Skarsten** founded the Institute of Family Living. Their vision was one of a faith-based and professionally rigorous counselling centre, with therapists trained in marriage and family therapy, and credentialled by the American and Ontario Associations of Marriage and Family Therapy. Since 1971, IFL has expanded to include a multi-cultural team of professionals such as clinical psychologists, addiction counsellors, a family mediator, family doctors, an art therapist, a child and adolescent specialist, and vocational counsellors. The original vision of thirty years ago sought to address the delicate balancing act of competing demands in contemporary society among work, leisure, and the family. Today, IFL clients continue to face these same complex demands.*

According to research done by Canada's Vanier Institute on the Family, and according to the experience of millions of people, the demands of the workplace are a serious threat to the life of contemporary families. As therapists, whether we are involved with individuals struggling with vocational options, couples seeking to juggle career and marriage, parents struggling to balance time with children and the insatiable demands of their employment, or mid-life couples dealing with the prospects and uncertainties of retirement, we see the steady encroachment of the world of work on the time, energy, and commitments of family life.

Until the Industrial Revolution, family life was enmeshed with work life. Early hunter-gatherer societies, and later agricultural societies, had divisions of labour which allowed for the care and nurture of children. Extended family networks were always a part of the raising of children and of the caring for the sick, the weak, and the elderly. The Industrial Revolution, which has spread throughout the world since the 18th century, has forced people to leave the village in order to seek work in larger urban centres.

Today we read of the "depersonalization" and the "alienation" of people living in cities of all sizes throughout the world. Such urbanization has undermined the traditional kinship groups which nurtured human life at all stages, and today fewer families live in neighbourhoods where children are known to all and where they are able to play freely and safely. Shift work and the breakdown of marriages have further eroded the foundations of neighbourhoods as relatively stable communities.

In Canada, the post–World War II "single breadwinner" families have become — of necessity — dual wage earning families in order to meet the basic expenses of housing, transportation, and the requirements of urban living.Hard-won law limiting the basic work week to 35 hours is history; the Ontario provincial government has recently extended the permissible work week to 60 hours. What effect will this action have on Ontario's already beleaguered families?

The demands of the workplace, the attractions of our consumer society, and the breakdown of the extended family have all placed enormous burdens on the shoulders of parents. As *work* increasingly defines the parameters of self, family, and even friendship, more and more Canadians report fatigue, stress-related illnesses, and a lack of time

available to spend with children. We therapists used to be able to take it for granted that families would eat several meals a week together. Today family mealtimes are an increasingly rare phenomenon.

Recently, when counselling a family whose mother was seriously ill, I asked the children (whose ages ranged from 10 to 18) if they could develop a roster of chores in order to help their Mom in her recovery. The father said he couldn't be home until at least 7:30 pm. The older teens had after-school activities and part-time jobs. The younger children played sports, then came home and watched TV. All of the children needed some time to do homework. Intitially, no one was willing to make adjustments to help fill the organizational vacuum left by the mother's illness. Incidentally, Mother also carried a full-time job, as well as being the main home organizer! Increasingly, this family is the norm.

"Family time" is eaten away by the demands of work, school, extra-curricular activities, television, peer groups, and so on. Quiet moments to connect with one another, to play, to encourage and listen to each other's experiences, to invite friends over, to converse about what each member is learning, etc., are becoming rare.

Intergenerational times with grandparents, for instance, are disappearing due to our highly mobile culture. The Friday evening Shabbat meal, the Sunday dinner, and special events such as birthday celebrations are family traditions which keep alive the threads of connection and the bonds of intimacy. As with times of worship, these are *intentional* gatherings, which — if they are to survive — must be given a high priority, since no longer do they "just happen."

Our society's health is linked to the health of the family. But relationships take time and need to be cultivated and nurtured. As such, they require a certain amount of leisure. As a culture, we are currently challenged to re-examine the priorities of work, leisure, and family. We need to reclaim the habit — the *commandment* — of a weekly day of rest. Then, perhaps, we therapists — when consulted during occasions of family distress — won't have such difficulty in aiding families to find time to spend together, helping one another.

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