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Work, Leisure, and Family

> In order that people may be happy in their work, these three things are needed: they must be fit for it; they must not do too much of it; they must have a sense of success in it…. [They must have] a sure sense, or rather knowledge, that so much work has been done well, and fruitfully done, whatever the world may say or think about it.
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> — *John Ruskin*

A household was in distress. The mother, who was the main home organizer and also carried a full-time job, was seriously ill. There was no extended family to help. The father and the four children, whose ages ranged from ten to eighteen, needed to develop a roster of chores in order to help their mother in her recovery.

Initially, no one was willing to make adjustments to help fill the organizational vacuum left by the mother's illness. The father couldn't be home until at least 7:30 every evening from his job in a local factory. The older teens had after-school activities and part-time jobs. The younger children played sports at school, then came home and were used to watching TV. And there was homework to do.

Gradually, and with difficulty, the children picked up some of the household work, and the father did the grocery shopping. With time, the mother recovered, but she was no longer able to work and do the "second shift" of household management, and the family struggled to maintain a more cooperative structure.

This family is not unusual.

Current research on Canadian families

According to the experience of millions of people, and to research done by Canada's Vanier Institute on the Family, the demands of the workplace are a serious threat to the life of contemporary families. Individuals struggle with vocational options. Couples seek to juggle career and marriage. Parents try desperately to balance time with children and the insatiable demands of their employment. Mid-life couples face the prospects and uncertainties of retirement. We are seeing 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 observed divisions of labour that allowed for the care and nurture of children. Extended family networks were always a part of the raising of children and the caring for the sick, the weak, and the elderly. The Industrial Revolution, which spread throughout the world after the eighteenth century, forced people to leave the village in order to seek work in larger urban centres.

Today we read of the "depersonalization" and "alienation" of people living in cities of all sizes throughout the world. Urbanization has undermined the traditional kinship networks that nurtured human life at various stages. Today fewer families live in neighbourhoods where children are known to all and can 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 Two "single-breadwinner" families have become — of necessity — dual-wage-earning families

in order to meet basic expenses such as housing and transportation. Hard-won laws limiting the basic workweek to thirty-five hours are history; some provincial governments have considered extending the permissible workweek by many more hours. What effect would such legislation have on already beleaguered families?

Work and leisure

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.

A limited amount of stress helps us to think, cope, and work better. But beyond a certain level, stress begins to fragment us. Hormones flood our system, and our brains go into overdrive. Warning signals of stress-related problems may include anxiety, anger, tearfulness, frustration, forgetfulness, or blocks to creativity. We may experience physical symptoms such as headaches, backaches, or insomnia. When we keep pushing beyond our limits, and fail to take time for relaxation and restoration, we can make ourselves and our families ill.

Family time in contemporary society is eaten away by the demands of work, school, extracurricular activities, television, peer groups, and so on. Quiet moments to connect with each other, to encourage, play with, and listen to each other, to invite friends over; to converse about what each member is learning, are becoming rare.

Likewise, intergenerational times with grandparents, other

relatives, and family friends are disappearing because of our highly mobile culture. Families used to eat several meals a week together, but today family mealtimes are an increasingly rare phenomenon. The Sunday dinner, the Friday evening Shabbat meal, and special events such as birthday and anniversary celebrations helped to keep alive the threads of connection and the bonds of intimacy. As with times of worship, these intentional gatherings — if they are to survive — must be given a high priority, since no longer do they "just happen." We need to plan and set aside time to come together for special family rituals.

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. With no time for reflective living, there can be a loss of genuine enjoyment of life and of our most intimate relationships. We need to reclaim the habit — indeed, the *commandment* — of a weekly day of rest, a Sabbath.

Question: How to live in time responsibly?

Responses to a time management survey showed that during a lifetime we spend

- 8 months opening junk mail
- 1 year waiting
- 2 years returning phone calls
- 5 years waiting in line
- 1/4 of our life sleeping

Time to listen

Jean Vanier, on the occasion of his seventy-fifth birthday, wrote to members of the worldwide L'Arche communities about the meaning of what he calls "presence." He says this:

> Presence: being present to people who are fragile; being present to one another. To live fully the present moment and not to hide behind some past ideals of future utopia. Our human hearts are thirsting for presence: the presence of a friend; the presence of someone who will listen faithfully, who does not judge but who understands, appreciates, and through love lowers the barriers of inner fear and anguish. This presence implies compassion and tenderness as well as competence. Above all being present to God, listening to God. It is important not to be afraid or to feel paralyzed in front of all that is so painful in our world and in our [families]. We need to discover the presence of God in the actual reality of each day. God is not to be found in the ideal but is hidden in the poverty of the present moment, in all that is broken and inadequate in our [families] and in our own hearts [*Letters to L'Arche*, Fall 2003].

"Presence," then, is the capacity to live in the present moment within our family life, and to be attentive to one another — as couples, as parents with children; to the sick, elderly, and disabled in our midst. Families are the first place where we learn *to be* in the world — to be known, to become, to be understood, to be playful, to be compassionate. When families are stressed and overtaken by the "tyranny of the urgent," there is little time for knowing one another, for listening to one another, for growing emotionally and relationally.

Intimacy should characterize our family relationships, but when we are constrained by work demands, and unable to relax

and shift gears at the end of a day, then family relationships suffer. Parents can lose touch with their children. Children often feel alone in the midst of a busy family that makes no time for connections. The elderly and disabled frequently are ignored.

Stephen Covey's Time Matrix

1. Important Urgent	2. Important Not Urgent
3. Not Important Urgent	4. Not Important Not Urgent

[Stephen Covey, *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1990)]

We might consider Stephen Covey's famous "time matrix," and reflect on how much time we allocate to things that are "important but not urgent" (quadrant two) in our busy schedules. Whether ruled by the urgent, or what seems important in the minute, busy parents frequently have no time to practise the art of what Vanier calls presence for one another or for their children. And how many of us use "not urgent and not important activities" (quadrant four) to tune out or numb out the stressors of the day, without creating space and time for *true reflection*?

If we are to learn to practise the listening skills so essential to the flourishing of relationships, and so critical for the developing young hearts and minds of our children and grandchildren, then we need to intentionally carve out the time for being together. In particular we need to cultivate the art of listening, especially when we are feeling defensive and fearful of losing something that seems important to us. When we can learn to listen and validate another, we *gain* what Vanier calls

true "presence." Being with the other and entering into their experience helps us to gain deeper understanding and empathy for our family members.

Sustaining healthy relationships is often a quadrant two issue — "Important Not Urgent." It takes time and patience, and requires good listening.

Good listening recognizes that every human being needs to know:

- I am of worth;
- my thoughts, feelings, and experiences matter; and
- someone really cares about me.

Good listening can help to fulfill these basic needs because through it we act as mirrors for each other and validate each other's lives. Here are four rules of good listening:

- Listen by giving your full attention, without judging or critiquing.
- Listen to both the thoughts and feelings being expressed.
- Listen to the underlying needs being expressed.
- Understand by seeking to put yourself in the other person's shoes.

The liberation of joy

Joy is listed by St. Paul as one of the fruits of the Spirit [Galatians 5:22], but joy is often sacrificed to the "tyranny of the urgent" and to the excessive demands of work on our lives. Joy is elusive; it is more exultant than a sense of well-being, deeper than happiness. Overwhelmed, easily frustrated, often exhausted, and "stressed out," we are all in danger of becoming joyless victims of what the Japanese call "hurry sickness." Children suffer too: child psychologists and educators frequently warn us that our

children are overprogrammed and overstressed. Far too often they seem joyless as well.

One person who has embodied reflective, prayerful living in the midst of the "tyranny of the urgent" is Archbishop Desmond Tutu. A personal friend who visited the Tutus at the height of the struggle against apartheid in the mid-1980s reported with amazement that, in the midst of a busy family life and the oftentimes brutal demands of public life, Archbishop Tutu would rise very early in the morning and begin his day with meditation and prayer. This practice has borne remarkable fruit in both his

Keys for Good Listening

1. Set a time and place to talk.
This helps to ensure that each of you will be able to communicate and listen well. (Remember to avoid the low blood sugar times. These times are especially risky: 5:00 to 7:00 in the evening or before dinner, and whenever people are tired, especially late at night.)

2. Repeat back (mirror) what the other person said.
This helps to ensure that you understand the concern or issue clearly.

3. Validate what is said.
This does not mean agreeing but, instead, indicating that you understand the meaning of what the other has said and why it makes sense to them.

4. Empathize with the other's feelings.
This helps to show that you understand and care about each other's feelings. The feelings in question may be clear and specific, such as hurt, anger, sadness, disappointment, excitement, happiness, or joy. Or they may be more general and even vague, such as discomfort, uncertainty, frustration, or something quite unclear.

personal life and his public life in the South African church and state. Carving out time for renewal and spiritual restoration has allowed this very gifted and faithful Christian leader to respond to the urgent and important demands of his work.

Desmond Tutu has given the world an enduring model of peacemaking. Courageous in the face of the overwhelming systemic oppression of apartheid, and visionary in the process of seeking justice and forgiveness in South Africa's new democracy, Tutu has also struck many with his ebullient spirit, his wonderful sense of humour, and his deep joyfulness. When he speaks, it quickly becomes evident that this joy is grounded in his faith in God's love and mercy, and also in his strong commitment to a view of freedom that encompasses liberation for both victims and oppressors. It is probable that the secret to his joy and his vision is the time he spends in God's presence.

Although in Canada we don't live in a society with the same structural tyranny as South Africa, we are not free from the oppression that robs us of joy. Social injustices, such as homeless people living outside in the cold of winter, children having to rely on food banks for basic nourishment and suffering violence in schools, elderly people living alone in isolated rooms with no visitors, are apt to create us versus them polarizations and reduce people to survival mode.

In families the stress and pace of life create a different kind of oppression. No time for family meals. Few opportunities for tired parents to read bedtime stories to children. Both parents working — usually of necessity — without adequate backup resources in case of illness. Little "couple time" to nourish a couple relationship. The increasing number of single-parent families or families in which one parent travels regularly and the resulting high stress level of the other parent.

Clergy, therapists, family physicians, and other professionals

see daily how stress-related illnesses, chronic sleep deprivation, anger management problems, addictions to alcohol, drugs, food, and the Internet, contribute to family crises. It can be helpful to do an occasional reality check, using tools such as a stress test (which doctors and therapists can give) that looks at changes and losses over the past year of life, or a time management chart (as mentioned earlier). Such self-care assessments can facilitate reflective living in the family.

Celtic Blessing

Bless to me, O God,
  My soul and my body;
Bless to me, O God,
  My belief and my condition;
Bless to me, O God,
  My heart and my speech;
And bless to me, O God,
  The work of my hands.

Living a reflective life

The challenge to earn more or even just enough money, the lack of extended family supports, and the constant demands of work diminish time available for maintaining family relationships and for the leisure that restores and replenishes our individual and communal souls — such activities as play, friendship, exercise, meditation or worship, attending concerts, walking in nature, adequate sleep, and so on.

Living a reflective life entails changing habits. But changing habits, and creating new patterns in work and home life, requires both time and commitment. The family described in the begin-

ning of this chapter needed to reorganize their priorities. No longer could they expect the mother to run the household and be the hub of the wheel of relationships and communication. Everyone had to make changes, from the father to the youngest child. And it worked. As each person learned to pull his or her weight in the family, the crisis resolved itself and the family became stronger.

The father refused a promotion at work in order to be home at a consistent time, and he learned to be a better listener to both his wife and his children. He also learned to emotionally "shift gears" between work and home so that he was less irritable and more available for relationships. The older children helped their younger siblings with their homework, which eventually strengthened their bonds of affection. With more peace and stability in the family, the mother was able to slowly recover her strength and to take on some responsibilities that she could handle without endangering her health. Family members learned to pray together daily and to draw their strength from God. In this way they were enabled to become open to changes that were ultimately healing.

Noticing the simple things of life and the daily gifts of grace require that we become attentive to the demands being made upon us and learn when to accept and when to refuse them. Archbishop Tutu's time in prayer and meditation every morning allows him to reflect and to receive strength from God. If we take time to allow it, we too may find that *joy,* not stress, begins to rule our lives.

What can we do?

There are things we can all do to be more available to the people we love, and to give the gift of time to our partners, children, parents, and siblings.

Living more reflectively

- We can remember, as people of faith, that we are called to be stewards of *all* our resources (time, talents, money, relationships), and that our calling is to our homes and families and not only to our work.
- We can take time — both individually and as families together — to reflect on the pace of our lives, and examine where and how we actually spend our time.
- We can intentionally share with our families when we are under stress or pressure — at work, at school, in our health, and in our finances — and ask for help and cooperation where possible to solve problems together.
- We can ask our partners, children, and friends to remind us to keep to our priorities so that we do not become workaholics, compulsively driven and unable to reflect or to rest.

Improving communication

- Families can make eating together a priority three or four times a week (with neither telephone and television interruptions, nor other distractions) in order to stay connected and interested in one another's lives and to keep the lines of communication open.
- Parents can volunteer whenever possible to help coach their children's teams, or to go on school trips. Spending one-to-one time with a child can help a parent to understand the child's world.

- Parents can sit with children doing homework, encouraging their learning and working habits, but not doing the work for them.
- All family members can make time for friendships — to visit, call, and e-mail (if a computer is available) those who are precious to us.

Developing cooperative homes

- Families can develop clear rosters of household chores so that everyone contributes to managing the home, and so that housework and the organization of family life does not fall on the shoulders of one person (far too often the mother, or an older sibling).
- Families can play cooperative games instead of competitive ones, so that competition, sibling rivalry, and a winner/loser dynamic doesn't contribute to family stress.
- Families can take the time to celebrate the small things of life and to rejoice with one another in successes and accomplishments.

Study on Canadians and Work: "Voices of Canadians" [reported on CBC's television program Venture, 19 January 2003]

133,000 Canadians were surveyed in 2002 on their work/life balance. Here are some of the survey's findings:

- Workweeks of fifty hours or more are common.
- There is high-level use of antidepressants and anti-anxiety medications.
- Absenteeism costs employers about $3 billion annually.
- Flex hours or telecommuting, though often available, are seldom used.
- Many companies pay lip-service to a "family friendly" policy.
- Only 5% of those surveyed said something good about their workplace.
- There has been an 80% increase in fathers using extended parental benefits.
- Caregivers of gravely ill family members need compassionate leave.