

## *Life and Work - A Time Famine*

Life in Britain today should carry a health warning for there is a *time famine* which is characterised by a work life imbalance that threatens to damage lives and destroy relationships. The prescribing of anti-depressants rose from 12 million in 1991 to 24 million in 2001 and continues to escalate to proportions that might suggest that we are as a nation on the brink of a real crisis. Books on stress abound whilst vitamin supplements and high-caffeine drinks come to the aid of tired and weary lives, driven by the almost incessant demands and busyness of life and work.

It is important to ask what culture is doing to us in the realms of work. It's easy to be blinded from seeing the reality of how society is shaping our lives. Cultures are subtle; they have the ability to make us think that what is happening is normal, inevitable and that, if we don't like it, then there is little or nothing that we can do about it.

Work practices accompanying the accelerated growth and impact of the new technological age reveal an undermining of the quality of life and particularly in damaging that foundational element in for any society - relationships.

The potential and provision of the world and its resources provide the context and possibilities for human life to flourish. But does the way we live and work today realise such flourishing?

The signs are not convincing with record levels of anxiety, stress and a breakdown in relationships.



For example, how obvious does the connection between Britain's longest working hours and highest divorce rates in Europe have to get before we start doing something about it?

**One Institute of Management survey carried out amongst workers discovered that over 87% said they had no time for other interests outside of work, 71% felt that work was damaging their health and 86% said that work was adversely affecting their relationship with their partner and children.**

Some have felt under pressure to earn sufficient to keep up the so-called standards of a growing consumer society, to feed the cultural pursuit of the 21<sup>st</sup> century - shopping, or to continue to advance up the property ladder and serve the mortgage company for many years.

For some work is providing the means of making money but at what cost to themselves, their friendships and families? The issue of 'absentee' fathers and mothers, missing out on quality life with their children because of work commitments does not auger well for society

now and the future. According to the Relationships Foundation 40% of households share a meal less than once a month, more than half the population believe they would feel lonely without a television and nearly a third of young adults would not know their neighbours if they saw them.

Simply denouncing 'workaholism' doesn't help because for many people they are victims not perpetrators of spending too much time at work. Yet we cannot allow so many in our society to suffer without comment. When work hinders life from flourishing and damages relationships then we need to be saying and doing something. We may have a long way to go on how we challenge the oppressive dynamics of contemporary consumer culture and to dealing with the issues of overwork but if we ignore its pervasive influence upon our lives we will all suffer.

We can assert that it doesn't have to be this way. For example here in Britain we work longer hours and get more stressed than other European nations who have taken the standard working week down to 35 hours and seen unemployment fall and productivity rise.

It's time to call for a change for some of the systems of work are damaging lives and destroying relationships; marriages are failing,

children are being poorly parented, quality friendships are few, relationships lack depth and many in work are losing any sense of joy, fulfilment or sense of vocation.

The task is enormous and the issues won't be resolved by tinkering with stress management techniques, having a detox or going on a holiday in the sun. It will take more to both subvert and contribute to the building of an alternative culture where work brings life and contributes to the well-being of society.

We might begin to shape our response in ways that demonstrate a better way of working and relating. Where we model, amidst a work driven, anxious, stressed culture what a community marked by its capacity to work and rest, achieve and be refreshed, labour and build relationally might look like. A community, company or organisation that might reflect something of how we might live and flourish in the workplace. A culture that has time for relationships, where people are valued within and beyond the work environment. A way for living that begins to tackle the *time famine*.

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