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Beyond Work-Life Balance

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Single and no pets, right?” This was the comment that greeted my colleague as she rolled her carry-on bag into the apartment elevator. Looking worn and weary, she was headed to the airport for the umpteenth time that year for work-related travel.

The “single and no pets” assumption that work holds a presumptive claim over a young professional’s every waking hour has made me a long-time fan of efforts to strike a better “work-life balance.”

After three years of working full-time as a lawyer in a large firm, I set out on the part-time path. It was not because I needed to pick up an infant at day care on the stroke of five, but simply because I hoped to reclaim time for all of those ordinary aspects of life: cooking, cleaning, exercise, prayer, keeping up with friends, and maintaining “outside work” community projects and commitments. “Work-life balance” is important when work seems to be taking up 90% of one’s waking hours.

In my current work with lawyers and law students, however, I am beginning to see another angle that leads me to think there is something slippery and corrosive about the “balance” image as well.

The symbol for the legal profession is a scale that represents the fairness and equality that should permeate the legal system—important goals for which we should strive. But as students soak in law school culture they begin to see scales everywhere. Absorbing the elements of legal analysis that balance rights against other rights, rights against responsibilities, and costs against benefits, many students develop the impression that just about everything can be sliced up, measured (often in terms of money), and balanced to provide the right answer to any given problem.

What happens when this mentality is applied to how we imagine the role of work in our lives? I see two problems.

First, when the “balance” imagery is coupled with a mentality of “time is money,” many begin to perceive only “work” tasks as truly valuable and other tasks as

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The pressure to put all one’s energies into a demanding job can be offset by attention to values other than work.
devoid of meaning. For some busy professionals, many of the seemingly mundane tasks in life such as cooking, cleaning, and laundry are increasingly delegated to others at a cheaper salary because “on balance” they are not worth their time.

Second, the ubiquitous scale can feed into the tendency to compartmentalize. If “work” is a separate category from “life,” then the “work” world can maintain its own rules and claims, which should be given their due, because they are distinct from the “life” sphere, where personal values hold sway.

The balance image may actually feed into what the Second Vatican Council’s Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, Gaudium et spes, termed “among the more serious errors of our age”—the “split between the faith which many profess and their daily lives.”

As Igino Giordani, Italian parliamentarian in the years following World War II and now Servant of God, colorfully framed the challenge: “When we cross the threshold of our home to go out into the world, we cannot leave our faith hanging on the back of the door like a faded old hat.”

A “balance” is certainly better than letting work completely take over one’s life. But the “scale” itself does not provide an overarching vision that gives meaning to the whole of existence. What might ground an alternative perspective?

The Second Vatican Council suggests that we look to the life of Christ, who, along with his other activities, worked as an artisan. Following his example Christians would be “free to give proper exercise to all their earthly activities and to their humane, domestic, professional, social, and technical enterprises by gathering them into one vital synthesis with religious values, under whose supreme direction all things are harmonized unto God’s glory.”

In light of this example, the project becomes one not so much of balance as of personal integration. The “work” sphere and its time demands must be judged in light of an overarching framework that gives meaning to one’s entire life. Within the same framework, tasks and commitments outside the workplace also find their value and meaning in the model of Christ’s own life, which certainly embraced a range of activities—not only manual labor, but also foot-washing, cooking breakfast for his friends, family celebrations and dinners, and moments of respite and prayer as well.

If a balance scale does not quite capture the complexity of this dynamic, what image might do a better job?

In the recent collection Essential Writings, Focolare founder Chiara Lubich suggests the image of a rainbow: love is “like a ray of light that upon passing through a raindrop opens up into a rainbow of seven colors.” Just like a rainbow, “love, the life of Jesus in us, would have different colors and would express itself in different ways.”

In Lubich’s “rainbow” image, work—as an expression of communion—is just one of seven aspects. It takes its place next to outreach, prayer and spiritual growth, care for personal health and the health of the community, care for clothing and the beauty of one’s home, study, and attention to the means of social communication.

With love at the basis, she explains, with Jesus “always living in us in every manifestation of our life,” the result is that “our life would be integrated into a wonderful unity.”

How did this “rainbow” change my approach to work as a lawyer?

First, it provided a hefty and much needed antidote to the mantra, “time is money.” Through this alternative lens, and with the help of friends who were making the same effort, I began to see time as a gift and an opportunity to love. This in turn helped to heal the fre-
In my own community house and with my friends, this perspective opened my eyes and my heart to be edified by the manifold ways in which love builds up our society: through the gentle touch and encouragement of a physical therapy assistant at the nursing home down the block; through the patience and humor of a seventh-grade special education teacher; in the straightforward and diligent precision of a bookkeeper.

On darker days, when long hours of typing in front of a computer or pushing papers around my desk made it hard to find meaning in the task at hand, these examples helped me to sustain a conviction that love could transform my work as well.

I realize that the rainbow image poses a formidable challenge to many aspects of professional culture. In the seven years since I left practice in a large law firm, salaries have skyrocketed. Astronomical salaries tend to force the “single, no pets” presumptive claim on just about everyone.

For this reason we need to push beyond “work-life balance.” If we do not open up the “work” sphere to a more overarching horizon, then narrowly conceived “work” rules and patterns—often driven by the values of the market—will continue to dominate and suffocate hope for personal integration.

“Love is light,” Lubich observed. Love itself, the life of Christ, in all of its manifold expressions, can illuminate the path toward the “vital synthesis” that the Second Vatican Council envisioned. And in this we can find the promise of an integrated life in which all of our time commitments, all that we are and all that we do, may be brought into the harmony of God’s Kingdom.
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