

## BRINGING BALANCE TO OUR EVER-MORE HECTIC LIVES.(OPINION)

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By JOHN ESPOSITO

A BUSTLE OF ACTIVITY has been underway for more than an hour in the one-bedroom apartment Mr. Dart rents above a pizzeria. Wheeling the foldable treadmill under the bed, he can now boast with some fleeting satisfaction that the morning's three-mile ritual is complete for another day.

With pulse and blood pressure in-check, he downs his instant breakfast drink with one hand while turning on the shower's pre-set temperature dial. Meanwhile, the fax has begun churning out the second of nine pages needed for today's presentation.

Mr. Dart is feeling especially invigorated today. His digital sports watch tracks him a full 15 minutes ahead of schedule, translating to a guaranteed seat on the 5:47 train into 33rd Street. Well, maybe.

The swift pace of modern technology is dominating daily life like never before. Speed has become the order of the day. The development of new innovations has resulted in giant increases in productivity and greater efficiency.

This, however, has not come without a price. It is no small revelation that our nation is confronting the most serious quality of life issues in many generations. Unceasing demands to hasten performance are playing havoc with our very existence and jeopardizing what is most important to us, our independence.

With the numerous scientific and technological advancements in the past decade, there has also been a "Catch 22" at work. We face mounting socio-economic problems, not from this new technology, but from heightened and unrealistic expectations that derive from it.

Demands are now routinely made upon people to take on additional and excessive responsibilities. In pursuit of increased rapidity, industry has failed to recognize the cumulative impact it has wrought. Vast changes to existing work habits, leisure time, consumerism, and overall priorities have become the net result.

Americans are a people on the run. At home or work, the use of mobile phones, laptops, beepers, palms, fax, printers, scanners, and answering machines have become indispensable tools. We take them to the mountains, the beach, and even Barnes & Noble for a quick latte.

Add automatic tellers, a little on-line banking, trading, and shopping, and we continue to keep strong the "time is money" ethic of Western culture.

The United Nations' International Labor Organization reports "Workers in the United States are putting in more hours than anyone else in the industrialized world." Statistics revealed that last year the average American worked 1,978 hours - up from 1,942 hours in 1990, representing an increase of almost a week of work.

Lawrence Johnson, the chief labor market economist, states "the increase in the number of hours worked within the United States runs counter to the trend in other industrialized nations. "We have this blurred line now between what is work and what is play," he says.

Leisure time is unquestionably declining. It should surprise no one that sophisticated devices do not really free us to enjoy more leisure activities. To the contrary, they serve as tools to use our existing time more effectively. In actuality, there has been an increase in the amount of work being asked of employees based on increased efficiency standards.

Higher salaries have resulted in certain sectors, but so have longer working hours and the inability to enjoy the freedom of leisure. The stress quotient is high as some workers choose not to use some or even any vacation time for fear of layoffs, downsizing, and re-engineering. Many now look upon free time as more valuable than money and, thus, the greater commodity.

All work and no play, however, make Jack and Jill dull people. Advertisers tell us that for working those 60- to 80-hour weeks, we should reward ourselves. We are only too happy to oblige. Enjoy 500-channel satellite hookup with high definition wide-screen television as part of a surround-sound home theater. Pick up the latest in CD and DVD players, digital instant cameras, and anything you can get your hands on at the "Sharper Image."

Now if we only had the time for our expensive toys.

There is no turning back and little time to wax nostalgic about a simpler past. For those who lived back then, it really wasn't so simple. Speed has always been a mark of a progressive society. It would be naive to believe a moratorium will ever be placed on it.

If there were a message to this, it would be that while life can be complicated, it is also very short. After the black cloud of Sept. 11, long airport lines don't seem intolerable anymore.

Perhaps next to speed, we can insert common sense, balance, and patience into our New Year's resolutions.

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