

What This Country Needs Is a Time Revolution

Gwyn Kirk

My friend Julie has a T-shirt that says GOTTA GO! in 6-inch red letters. On the way home from work she's got to pick up her daughter from day-care, swing by the store for something for dinner, and call in to see her ailing mother-in-law on the other side of town. Before bed she arbitrates arguments between her two boys, supervises homework, and throws the laundry in the washing machine. She irons a blouse for work. She figures out what to pack for tomorrow's lunches. The T-shirt saves her time, she says, by announcing her jammed schedule the minute she walks through the door.

Work is running our lives. Home life is tightly choreographed around calendars and lists. Exercise is a workout. The waitperson looks at your plate and asks, "Are you done, or are you still working on that?" We have more "labor-saving" gadgets than any generation in history but, on average, folk in this country are working significantly more than our parents did. A three-day weekend, a couple of times a year, is as close as many people get to a vacation.

Julie longs to have time to relax with her husband, Sam. She wants to take salsa classes and learn to make angel food cake. Sam wants to dig out the guitar he stashed in the basement when the kids started to arrive. We could all do things we love everyday, if everybody had their time back. This will mean abolishing work as we know it. But it doesn't mean that people will be unoccupied, uncreative, or unproductive—far from it. And it does not mean we'd be poor.

This revolution could happen, worldwide, with just three crucial changes: "Only do the work that's necessary," "Share wealth and resources," and "Kick the work ethic."

Let's wipe the slate clean and start again. Everyone has 24 hours in their day. What are our priorities as a society? What do we really need to live? We have to eat, raise children, and care for everyone. Other essentials are clothing, enjoyment, play, and opportunities to learn what we need to know. We need ways to soothe our spirits and inspire each other. Then there's cleaning up the mess. I don't mean just taking out the trash, but restoring what humankind has done to wreck and contaminate the earth that sustains us.

This is what's necessary. Everyone can share in it. Everything else can go. This would free up millions of creative people to figure out how to take the drudgery out of routine tasks, feed everyone on the planet, use recycled materials, and resolve conflicts without violence. Someone will need to invent a safe way to deal with nuclear waste. There will be plenty of challenge.

Corporate downsizing is going to continue. Many young people, especially those without much education or marketable skills, will never have a regular job in their lifetimes. In this economy they are unneeded and dispensable. Does that mean we leave them to the military, small-scale drug deals, and time in jail?

Cities like Detroit went from boom to bust in two generations, drawing in thousands of workers from the rural south, and leaving behind mass unemployment. The same thing is happening, and faster, in countries like South Korea, as corporations move jobs to China or Indonesia, where they can pay even lower wages. Environmentalists warn that this kind of economic growth cannot continue. For impoverished countries to develop along the same path as western Europe and north America will require at least 2 more earths—one for the raw materials and the other for the trash.

This country has a vast wealth of forests, rivers, farmlands, orchards, seashores, mines, small towns and cities, and maybe the most diverse mix of people in the world. Multiply this thousands of times over to imagine the wealth of the planet. There is plenty for everyone—but not enough to squander on extravagance. People work 40-, 60- or 80-hour weeks at dead-end or irrelevant jobs, and live behind locks and bars because so far we have not found another way to share this wealth.

In times of crisis, like wars, the emphasis is on pulling together for a common purpose. Then work is organized very differently. During World War I, for example, millions of British workers produced nothing to support civilian life. They were deployed in the war effort: in the armed forces, in munitions factories, or in government offices connected with the war. But changes in policy and the way work was organized—in favor of essentials—meant that people still had the basics of life. From this experience, philosopher Bertrand Russell argued that people could live on four hours work a day. He looked forward to a future with all manner of tools and gizmos that would make this even lower. In 1974, coal miners in Britain went on strike to oppose the government's plans to privatize the coal industry. Stocks of coal at power stations grew low, so electricity was rationed. Prime Minister Edward Heath declared a 3-day working week across the country to conserve electricity and to erode public support for the strike. This undoubtedly led to much inconvenience, but industrial productivity did not go down. People worked a little faster and perhaps cut a few corners. They produced in three days what had previously taken five. So why work five days?

Once the emergency is over, “we” reverts to “I” and it's back to business as usual. You're on your own to meet your needs and pay your way. In reality, people are highly interdependent. It's co-operation not competition that has moved things forward. We are trained to think in terms of scarcity. If you get the goodies there will be less for me. In the '90s we heard vitriolic condemnation of mothers on welfare as loafers and scroungers who are getting away with something at everyone else's expense. The same argument is not made about much bigger subsidies to farmers or corporations, or the fact that military families are entitled to free medical care for the rest of their lives. People need to be valued because we exist. We can all make a contribution to our families, our communities, our world. A time revolution will mean thinking of ourselves as “we”

more than “I”—as part of many groups: on our block, across the city, throughout the north-east or the west coast, nationwide, and internationally.

It also means rethinking the work ethic. In this country, great moral value accrues to those who hold down a job and pay their way. Others are easily written off as wastrels, bums, idlers, good-for-nothings, freeloaders, or parasites. The language is rich in opprobrium for this shameful failing. Yet, unemployment figures amply demonstrate that the economy cannot absorb the time and talents of all who need work to earn a living. Many spend the best years of their lives fiddling around for 8 hours a day, minding stuff in stores, flipping burgers, or folding sweaters at the mall. Work is an economic necessity not an issue of morality.

Yes, work gives many people a satisfying sense of identity. I’m a mechanic—and a good one, a golf instructor, a teacher, a writer, a short-order cook. I pull my weight. And a time revolution will only enhance this. Of course, we are more than our resumé’s. We are parents, children, lovers, musicians, dancers, hikers, and storytellers. We invent jokes, plant flower gardens, speak three languages, and enjoy fly-fishing. At present we have to juggle these interests around our work lives. And we are expert jugglers.

Julie and I are talking about what would make us feel like a million dollars. This is my list for now: to know that everyone has the basics of life—guaranteed, to experience health, beauty, love of family and friends, and kindness from strangers. I want respect and fairness to be basic principles of our society. I want many opportunities to learn, and to know that I have something worthwhile to contribute. How can we have any idea of our creative potential when our best hours, every day, are mortgaged before we wake up?

We’re talking about a time revolution. Some of our colleagues are scornful. “Get real!” they say. “This is just how it is. You have to pay the rent, put food on the table, clothe the kids and take care of their teeth.” Some of them are into it. Julie giggles, “Never thought of myself as a *revolutionary!*” She’s ordered a stack of T-shirts: GOTTA LIVE. I’m a Human Be-ing not a Human Do-ing. Next, maybe, we’ll make bumper stickers. Gotta get the idea out there. This time revolution is long overdue.

12/9/2003