

Labour Day – “Putting in Seventy Percent”

Last year a manager from the community health sector, working in a program that supports people experiencing homelessness, substance abuse and mental illness, told me that he only expects seventy percent productivity from his staff. In fact he worries if his staff are working right up to finish time! Aware of the effects of vicarious trauma, the demands placed on staff by people with high and complex needs as well as the low ‘recovery’ rates, he said that working in this sector is like “running a marathon, and to just complete it you need to pace yourself”. As I write this I am deliberately not disclosing who the manager is or what organization he works for. Deliberately omitting these details (rather than saying who he is so we can all go and work for him!) says a great deal about the culture of our workplace and our world.

We are living in a culture where we are increasingly expecting One Hundred Percent from ourselves and from those around us. We expect One Hundred Percent from our health and our bodies, from our marriages and from our friendships; from our employer and our staff – I see that even the humble bottle of cider is advertised as ‘Putting in 100%’. Good enough just won’t do. No wonder we experience so much stress!

This weekend we will celebrate the victory of Labour Day which began in April 1856 when workers in Melbourne downed tools and marched on Parliament House to demand an Eight Hour Day. The victory of this march (and others) would eventually enshrine the right of every Australian worker to ‘Eight hours labour, Eight hours recreation, Eight hours rest’. In this formulation work demands thirty-three percent of our day, sleep another thirty-three and the rest is, well just that, rest. If you are wondering, as I am, where my eight hours of ‘rest’ goes each day then let’s remember that within those hours of ‘rest’ we include commuting to and from work; picking up children from school; preparing lunches; washing clothes; cleaning the house; going to the gym; repairing cars; planning holidays; shopping; checking emails (repeatedly!); visiting sick parents; watching TV. I’m feeling tired already!

Indeed many of these things I enjoy doing, but are they rest? Do they lead to a feeling of having rested?

While I am speaking out of my own situation I know that I am not alone in feeling as though I live much of my life in one hour segments. When I spend time with clients of EACH I am struck that for many half an hour here and a couple of hours there is nothing at all. And I wonder if this cuts me off from being fully present to those I serve?

Does the culture of service delivery threaten the quality of the encounter with the people for whom the service exists? Indeed it can, and there is no ignoring the fact that the reporting demands that are attached to funding agreements threaten the meaningfulness of our experience at work.

But what if we need only be productive for seventy percent of our time at work? What if we could make the changes that are necessary and develop the skills that we need to fulfill all the requirements of our job and still have time to rest in the privilege of the role? Is this possible?

The victory celebrated by Labour Day is not essentially about work; it’s about life. By limiting our time at work to thirty percent of our day we make it possible to experience one hundred percent of life.

As we move into Autumn – this ‘season of mists and mellow fruitfulness’ [1] <https://webmail.each.com.au/owa/?ae=Item&a=New&t=IPM.Note&cc=MTQuMy4xNzQuMSxlb1BVSwoMjk0OTY3Mjk1LEhUTUwsMCww&pspid=1017138577156_45278547#_ftn1> – as the days become shorter and the nights cooler and quieter, may we know that putting in seventy percent is probably good enough.

Happy Labour Day,

James