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The search for balance in work and life

One of the most disconcerting sights when working by the side of a plate glass window in a large office is the appearance of the window cleaner. I always believed that the Financial Times window cleaner enjoyed sneaking up on dozing journalists and slapping his squeegee over the glass for maximum effect.

Life outside the window seemed much less complicated than life on the inside. This impression was confirmed last week in the first part of a short documentary series on BBC Radio Four, *The Workaday World**, presented by Bill Morris, the former general secretary of the Transport and General Workers Union.

To get both perspectives the series producers interviewed a financial worker called Jane in Canary Wharf and Patrick, a window cleaner, who cleans the windows of big offices. "We are now vision technicians," he said.

Jane complained of being "chained to a desk in front of a PC", a kind of bench-work she likened to working in a sewing factory. "You could drop dead on the floor and they would pull you out and bring the next person in," she said. "You have no control of your life."

Patrick, on the other hand, said he enjoyed his job. "Every day's a good day," he said. "I think I'm on the greenest side of the window."

The idea, of course, was to suggest that Patrick, who probably earns a fraction of the salary paid to Jane is intrinsically better off. This has been a classic theme among writers and artists for more than two centuries in their search for the working idyll.

Often they found it – or thought they had found it – in farmers' fields. In *Anna Karenina*, Tolstoy wrote of the "blessed moments" to be enjoyed while wielding a Scythe where it is possible to build up such a regular and deliberate pattern of mowing that worker becomes lost in his occupation. The Welsh writer Ifan Edwards wrote about the skills to be learned and satisfaction to be achieved in shovelling earth in to a skip.

Other writers such as Herman Melville and Richard Henry Dana observed the artistry and respect to be found in the mastery of seamanship. On my shelves I have a collection of the photographs of Frank Meadow Sutcliffe who chronicled the work of fishing people in Whitby during the Victorian Era. There is a beautiful honesty in his pictures. There is dishonesty too, because it is so easy to forget that much of this work was hard and uncomfortable.

But this was the point that these writers and artists were attempting to convey – that a comfortable life is denied the sense of purpose to be found in what some have described as "honest toil". Is it any coincidence that these people were living during a time of rapid change that was influencing their own approaches to work? Dana had qualified as a lawyer and only went to sea on doctor's orders in the hope that it would remedy his failing eyesight. Sutcliffe's art was exploiting the latest photographic technologies while Tolstoy was witnessing the undercurrents of political change that would culminate in the Russian Revolution.

Yet all of these people were recording a world that seemed, on the face of it, to be unchanging. In the BBC programme, Peter Nolan, the director of the Economic and Social Research Council's Future of Work Programme, reminded us that those who spend long periods staring at a computer screen remain a minority in the workplace.

One of the fastest growing jobs in the UK, he said, was that of a shelf-filler. Some 40 per cent of jobs in the UK, he said covered traditional manual work while a further 25 per cent were in traditional service industries such as hotels, shops and clerical work.

Such statistics are sometimes used to suggest that the way we work is changing less than some have suggested. But statistics, like the photograph, do not always reveal the full picture. Change is subtle and gradual. More than forty years ago when I started school I can recall few of my classmates who had a working mother. Those who did were called latchkey kids because they let themselves in when they came home from school.

The latchkey kids were pitied because everyone knew their mothers worked out of necessity to supplement their father's earnings. Today most women enter a career by choice. Very quickly they become bound up in the debt cycle that is introduced to young people as soon as they take out a student loan. The service of debt has become institutionalised to such an extent that it has become an unconscious obligation. Once that working people take on a mortgage they can be denying themselves the opportunity to step out of a career for at least half a lifetime.

In these circumstances it is understandable that many working parents are likely to welcome the announcement by Ruth Kelly, the UK Education Secretary, that funding is being allocated to allow state schools to open their doors from 8am to 6pm. This will mean that schools will become not simply centres of learning but supervised social arenas from which young people are likely to draw most of their formative influences.

Such changes fail to address a worrying deficiency arising from the growth of organised working – a corresponding shrinkage of opportunities to step outside those institutionalised arenas we tend to occupy when we are not at home.

There is a mountain of literature and expertise on the stresses and pressures of work. But it is easy to be misled by the focus of many studies in to believing that the biggest problem is the work itself. Real physical work, like wielding a scythe, digging a hole or working the nets on a trawler, is far less stressful than the indeterminate distractions of the workplace. The pressure builds from so many directions – the expectations of managers, colleagues, customers, suppliers, investors, politicians plus a hundred and one ill-defined individuals who intermeddle in our lives.

This pressure starts early, in the schoolroom and the play ground, so in that sense the new "Kelly day" might be equipping young people authentically for a future in which most may find themselves dancing eternally to someone else's tune.

For myself, I count my blessings that I finished school at four, came home, ate my tea (dinner was lunchtime), then set out to play with friends before returning home for an hour or two with the rest of the family before bedtime. I'm sure my memories are rose-tinted but I remember there was a warmth and security in the sanctuary of the family. That too is no longer reflected in the disjointed relationships of contemporary life.

The stable family, like the traditional job, still exists but not as I recall it. Today my family lives together under the same roof but rarely combines as a group beyond meal times.

We may never find that idyllic combination of work and rest that sometimes seems as unattainable as the alchemist's dream. But I cannot help thinking just now that too many of us are looking in all the wrong places.

**Tuesday, BBC Radio Four, 9am and 9.30pm (listen also on www.bbc.co.uk/radio4)*

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