

REFLECTIONS IN FAMILY PRACTICE

The Work Life

Mark Su, MD

“Don’t make your work your life,” said Dr. Mark Green, popular emergency department physician on the NBC hit-show *ER*, when speaking to his colleague, Carrie. “Live a little.”

I begin this commentary with an important qualification: I am in no way a proponent of burying one’s self in work as a form of escapism, avoidance of family conflicts, or enhancement of self-esteem. Nor do I encourage work becoming a consuming burden that can lead to destructive addictions to escape life’s pressures. Mark Green’s intended encouragement, however, contains both an assumption and a cultural bias, which, when cross-examined, raise counterpoints of discussion worth considering when applying his advice.

Is It Five O’clock Yet?

This question, or a variation of it, is perhaps one of the most commonly heard questions in the American workplace. A plethora of other sarcastic or humorous remarks can be heard throughout the day that imply the same attitude: working is no fun, and it is never too soon to go home (or retire!).

Mark Green’s comments reflect the sentiment that working hard, or working more than what is perceived by others to be normal or reasonable (however that might be subjectively defined), is minimizing the quality of one’s life and selling oneself short of living life to the fullest. Such is not true for all persons. Careful self-examination is important to avoid being swept up by this attitude. Doing so could shortchange any true appreciation and enjoyment of work, which would be an even more serious misfortune than not enjoying work on an absolute level.

For those who truly enjoy their vocation, perhaps their jobs are not work in the negative connotation the word seems to carry in our society.

Perhaps the way some make a living is so enjoyable that they are living life to the fullest. Admittedly, those with such an occupation appear to be a rare minority and are truly blessed to gain such meaning and fulfillment from their vocation. So in this context, I ask the question: Is it then more acceptable for these persons to lean toward “making their work their life”? How much more acceptable would this motto be for couples who work together and who are dedicated toward the same life vision? Perhaps these couples are already living more than a little, and they are doing so through their work.

Compartmentalization

In our postmodern world, with advancing technology pushing the pace of life to move faster than ever before, Western society has become one that demands compartmentalization. As individuals, we separate our lives into different boxes: our home life, our work life, our spiritual life, our social life, and in some cases even our Internet community life. I argue that this compartmentalization results from the dissolving boundaries of what we think of as community. As we forge relationships and partnerships across lines that formerly separated us, we create multiple communities, many of which intersect, creating even more confusion. A second contributing factor in our move toward compartmentalization is the increasing sources of stimuli in our lives. Advanced technology and the need to work harder than our competitors or to serve a greater number of clients or patients have made us increasingly available, by not only mail and telephone, but also by e-mail, cell phones, and pagers, all of which continue to diminish our personal spaces. Our defensive mechanism has been to create artificial boundaries to bring order to our overstimulated and even sometimes chaotic society.

Even so, we should be careful to recognize this compartmentalization paradigm when considering how our work life might be encroaching on our home life or any other box of life. Creating artificial boundaries is indeed an arbitrary coping method

Submitted 7 October 2002.

From the [Au, please name your residency program here, City, St.] Address reprint requests to Mark Su, MD, 35 Walnut Place, Brookline, MA 02445.

that need not apply to a life philosophy. For those who are comfortable without compartments to help order their lives, and for those who truly appreciate and enjoy their work, separating work life from home and social life is truly tragic. It strips the freedom of a person to choose to live outside the box of arbitrarily created boundaries. It is hard for me to believe, for example, that members of tight-knit farming communities in developing countries have problems with their work life (harvesting crops) interfering with their home or social life (their family and friends). Often their family and friends are doing the exact same work, and they live on the very land on which they labor! Why, then, should we create such a distinction between our vocational life and our personal life, except to order our lifestyles? If we chose to avoid the distinctions between work life and personal life, Mark Green's suggestion becomes invalid, because work life and home life blur into one, and work and life are in harmony.

The Work Life—Choose for Yourself

Many physicians have brought their experiences to light from both perspectives of this argument. David Loxtercamp is a country family physician in Belfast, Maine, who documented 1 year of his life in the book *A Measure of My Days: The Journal of a Country Doctor*.¹ He muses about his colleagues, his patients, his family, and his faith as he reflects not on the integration of his home life, work life, spiritual life, and family life, but rather on how his unified, focused, and coherent life journey leads to his discovery of "peace and perspective and companionship along my muddled way." In contrast, *The New York Times Magazine* recently documented the story of a family physician in a small New Hampshire town who, as a consequence of his overbearing workload and constant accessibility, turned to alcohol, which led to his professional and personal demise.² The reader is led to wonder whether this physician could have avoided such turmoil and seeming failure if he created more appropriate boundaries or compartmentalized his life.

Portraying a middle ground along this spectrum of experiences, William Carlos Williams narrates the story of a physician in *Old Doc Rivers*,³ who lives on the fine line between full integration of life and work and self-destruction. Despite being a known alcoholic and drug abuser, the members of his com-

munity continue to turn to him for help. Surely, community acceptance of his addictions does not encourage sobriety and abstinence, but he remains, for the most part, functional while patients continue receiving the care they need. This type of physician can often "hedge the fence" between being of constant service to patients, essentially integrating a work life and personal life, and forcing a divide through addiction as escapism, essentially leading to a dual lifestyle.

At this point, I would like to reiterate that in no way do I condone the abuse of one's work as a way to escape conflicts with family and friends, to provide financial gain to enable destructive habits, or to create a dependence on self-worth based on professional achievements or status. Nor do I condone a lifestyle that leads to destructive behaviors and addictions to escape overwhelming and consuming pressures at the workplace. My intention is to bring to light the minority viewpoint, that this paradigm of compartmentalization does not automatically or necessarily hold true for each individual. In a society that often belittles the potential of appreciating a person's vocation, enjoying work might indeed be a way of living life to the fullest.

Unfortunately, most in our society do not seem to enjoy their work, so living life more fully does not incorporate their vocation. Whether these persons dislike their work because they lack challenges or feel unappreciated, or whether they simply work to bring home the paycheck despite a sincere lack of enthusiasm for their job is a topic for another discussion. It is also unfortunate, yet true, that the mind-set of compartmentalization is widespread in our society. Efforts at fighting or reversing this mind-set are again a discussion that deserves not only its own space but even whether it is worthwhile to undertake.

As for me, I can speak only of my own experiences. I cannot imagine doing anything other than what I am doing today as a family physician. I say that wholeheartedly and without regret, footnote, or qualification. I consider myself to be the luckiest man alive. There have been few times, if any, that I felt my work life was encroaching on my personal life. I am truly blessed to have a wife who not only is understanding but also shares a life vision of dedicated service to patients. As a resident, I realize I am still learning to create appropriate boundaries, and when my own children arrive, my life perspective will in all likelihood change. Perhaps at that

time I, too, will be comparing my average number of hours practiced each week or spent in direct patient care or patient-related service against the national averages (50.8 hours and 40.9 hours, respectively, according to 2001 American Academy of Family Physicians data).⁴ For now, work and life stand side by side, not only because of the time demands placed by residency training, but also because of my pure satisfaction and enjoyment in the privilege to enter others' lives along our common journey of life.

I encourage each person, especially physicians, to recognize the philosophical biases of compartmentalization, undertake a sincere and in-depth

self-evaluation, decide whether this paradigm holds true in your own life, and consider whether you might be living life more fully than you think.

References

1. Loxterkamp D. A measure of my days: the journal of a country doctor. Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1988.
2. Winerip M. Did you hear about Doc Ogden? New York Times Magazine May 5, 2002:6.42.
3. Williams WC. Old Doc Rivers. New York: New Directions, 1984.
4. Facts About Family Practice 2001. Kansas City, Mo: American Academy of Family Physicians, 2001.