Work, Life & Balance – Oliver Belisle homily 12 April 2020 to CUUC via Zoom

OPENING WORDS: *"The greater the scientist, the more she is impressed with her ignorance of reality and the more she realizes that her laws and labels, descriptions and definitions are products of her own thoughts. The more she analyzes the universe into [smaller parts], the more things she finds to classify, and the more she perceives the relativity of all classification."*

*- Alan Watts (6 January 1915 – 16 November 1973), British writer, speaker & Episcopal priest.*

Human beings love nothing more than to isolate, identify, and classify. We develop labels and concepts for everything we encounter, everything we invent, and everything we dream of. And then, as if that wasn’t enough, we divide and subdivide and sub-subdivide, breaking an object down to its constituent parts, and then doing the same thing to each part, ever onward, until –

As Alan Watts put it in our opening words, “*The more she analyzes the universe into [smaller parts], the more things she finds to classify.”*

Our search for the bedrock of reality, the smallest building blocks of matter, has led us deeper and deeper into the weird and wondrous fabric of reality, where a particle occupies multiple positions at once, or else collapses into a wave when nobody’s watching. Needless to say, we’ve yet to hit bedrock.

And all the way up, it’s more of the same. Back in the thirties, the Milky Way was everything; nothing else existed beyond it. Then Edwin Hubble peeked through the state of the art Mount Hooker telescope and beheld a billion-billion galaxies just like ours – a universe, in which our Milky Way is but one tiny corner. Today, many astronomers and physicists likewise speculate that our universe is but one of many in an infinite multiverse.

Again, turtles all the way up.

The point Watts was trying to make, not only in the quote I shared with you but in his works generally, is that our knack for classification is quite useful; it’s a shortcut that allows humans to share a wealth of information quickly, effectively, and, in theory, with great precision. But sometimes this relativity of classification can get us into trouble. Sometimes our filing system oversimplifies, obscures, or misrepresents the reality it seeks to identify. Other times, it sends us on a wild goose chase in search of something that doesn’t really exist.

I call this phenomenon “classification confusion” – when language leads astray.

There are so many examples of this right now. Toxic masculinity; the pursuit of happiness; and politics as a whole is plagued by classification confusion. If we could only learn to look past the words, to their essence or meaning, we might actually come up with workable solutions; but as long as we remain fixated on the classifications themselves, we’re stuck.

My topic today, “Work-Life balance”, is a prime example of classification confusion. My hope is that by framing and reframing this idea in different ways, we will extract worthwhile insights from this concept, insights that we can use to make life better for ourselves.

Because there is something important at the heart of this notion of work-life balance.

But first, let’s talk about the problem. Work-life balance is a false dichotomy, meaning it presents a false choice; it implies that work and life are distinct and opposite from each other, when in reality they’re one and the same. To live is to work! There is no distinction.

Staying alive is work. It requires effort, an investment of energy. You have to nourish your body, keep it hydrated, keep it healthy, and avoid danger. And when we go to sleep every night, the body keeps laboring, beating the heart, digesting food, and doing a thousand other things to keep life flowing.

And then of course we humans have added an extra layer of work to the work of staying alive; we created work within work. We go to offices, construction sites, restaurants, and we spend our days laboring for currency, a medium of exchange that is meant to simplify and facilitate life.

As a husband, father of three, volunteer, full-time consultant, and part-time employee of the CUUC, the distinction between work and life has always been hazy. Back in the good old days, you know, three months ago when I still worked at my office, I would come home after a nine hour shift, get changed, and hit the gym, then load the dishwasher, help with dinner and kids’ homework, vacuum the house, work on the weekly church newsletter, and then at around 8:30 PM, I’d settle down for an hour of TV before falling asleep on the couch.

Then on the weekends, I’m driving kids to dance class, dropping them off at birthday parties, and somewhere in between I try to find time for chores, housework, and all the other demands of adulthood and home-ownership.

Where does work end and life begin, I wonder?

Now please, don’t feel bad for me: I don’t. I put myself in this position. More importantly, I’m not alone. I have many friends and colleagues in similar circumstances, many of them busier by far.

My wife is a great example. As a stay-at-home mom, the distinction between work and life are even more laughable. She starts working before I get out of bed and she’s right there with me until we drop down on the couch together in evening. For her, life and work revolve around our home, our kids, feeding everyone, and now, thanks to COVID, teaching as well.

If the idea of work-life balance is the result of classification confusion, then what is the reality behind it? How can we reframe this idea so that it actually helps rather than confuses people like me, who can’t really see a difference between work and life?

Personally, I think what we’re really searching for is a work-play balance.

What’s the line from the film by Stanley Kubrick, *The Shining*? “All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy.”

That’s what it’s all about: balancing the things you must do with the things you want to do; balancing duties and obligations with activities that are enjoyable, engaging, and rewarding in their own right.

Work is a means to an end; play is an end unto itself. We work to live, but we play because it’s enjoyable.

For me, the idea of a work-play balance is far more useful. It reflects my reality, in any case.

And it lines up nicely with the findings of Hungarian psychologist Mihaily Czhmihaily, whose decades-long work revolves around what he calls flow-states. Czhmihaily describes flow as a “state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it.”

His research is worth delving into, but for now let’s keep it high level.

Anyone who has a passion for something has already experienced flow. The gardeners, writers, painters, sculptors, athletes, even the mathematicians and historians and philosophers among us, have experienced it when engaged in their respective crafts. The hallmarks of a flow state are:

* Intense and focused [concentration](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Attentional_control) on [the present](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_present) moment
* Merging of awareness and action – you become so engrossed in the activity that other needs and concerns become negligible
* Time dilation—you lose track of time, hours feel like minutes, or vice versa
* You experience the activity as intrinsically [rewarding](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reward_system) – meaning, the activity is the reward, not a means to a further end

So I guess the balancing act is between work and play, which is to say, work and activities that lead to a state of flow.

Let me do some math here: 24 hours in a day; 8 for sleep, give or take an hour; 9 hours for paid work; that leaves me with 7 hours for all the important, essential work of fatherhood and husbandry and home ownership. Whatever’s left over – 1, maybe 2 hours if I’m lucky - that’s my play time. Doesn’t sound like much of a balance.

UNLESS. Unless there’s another way to spin this, another way to frame this conversation.

According to Csíkszentmihályi, “There are two main strategies we can adopt to improve the quality of life. The first is to try making external conditions match our goals. The second is to change how we experience external conditions to make them fit our goals.”

Here's an interesting thought experiment for you: what if it’s all play? Work, life, leisure – what if it’s all one big game? Sounds crazy, I know.

The word *Lila* in Sanskrit means *Play,* but not in the ordinary sense. Lila describes reality, including the entire cosmos, as the outcome of creative play by the divine Absolute. The Universe as Nature’s game, building and rebuilding exciting new forms out of star-dust; the Game of Evolution, from the Big Bang to this very moment, unfolding as we speak.

To me, this is a very comforting metaphor.

It can be extended to include the realm of local human affairs; the realm of economics, careers, mortgages, and so on. I described this as the work within the work, earlier, but now I’d like to suggest that this is merely the play within the play.

Epictetus, the former slave-turned rock star philosopher of Rome, taught his students that "We are like actors in a play. The divine will has assigned us our roles in life without consulting us. Some of us will act in a short drama, others in a long one. We might be assigned the part of a poor person, a cripple, a distinguished celebrity or public leader, or an ordinary private citizen.”

This might sound grim and fatalistic, but he offers a solution and inspiring advice: “Although we can't control which roles are assigned to us, it must be our business to act our given role as best as we possibly can and to refrain from complaining about it. Wherever you find yourself and in whatever circumstances, give an impeccable performance."

Again, this metaphor simplifies and clarifies things a great deal. Instead of bemoaning my lack of leisure time, which is a feature of the role assigned to me, I should focus on what I can directly control: how well I understand my role, and how well I play it.

I know that there is real pain and suffering in the world; I know that many of my fellow human beings are struggling amidst chaos and uncertainty; and I’m not trivializing it by referring to it as play. I’m simply choosing to filter the world around me through a more beneficial point of view.

As Csíkszentmihályi states: “Whether we are happy depends on inner harmony, not on the controls we are able to exert over the great forces of the universe.” For me, Lila – reality as play - creates the inner harmony I seek. So I’ve embraced it.

Loading the dishwasher is a game of Tetris; vacuuming the kitchen is Pac Man, gobbling up crumbs and stray pieces of Lego. Whether I’m fixing the toilet or reading to my kids, writing a proposal to an insurance company or a homily for you, I am doing my best to put in an impeccable performance and letting the chips fall where they may.

As a result, all of these activities are more enjoyable, more engaging, and more rewarding.

For me, work-life balance is nonsense; work-play balance is closer to the mark; but regarding the universe as play and myself as an actor, assigned to this stage for a short while and tasked with playing my part to the best of my abilities – doing this allows me to live playfully, without much anxiety or worry to speak of, and in a state of flow more often than not.

I hope that I provided something useful for you during this talk, and I look forward to chatting with you after the service during our open forum.

CLOSING WORDS: “Each player must accept the **cards** life deals him or her; but once they are in hand, he or she alone must decide how to play the **cards** in order to win the game.” - Voltaire