

It's About Time

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Over the years, we have discussed the issues of time from many starting points. Most significant has been the discussion about the shape of time, that is, whether we see time as cyclical or linear. When we see time as cyclical, the implication is that things never change. That includes the seasons, the weeks, life situations, etc. It implies that the way things are is the way things are supposed to be...whatever those things are. Linear time implies that there is a past, a present and a future. And because we believe that God has acted in human time in the Sinai event and in the Incarnation, we have the reality that there was a past, before these events, a present, where we are now and a future...all of which may be different. This linear concept of time underlies our work for justice and our belief that the future can be different and better.

Recently, I began thinking about the concept of our time, the finite time that our human life makes available to us. Our time is limited. Who do we know who has “extra time” or “time on their hands?” Many factors influence the amount of time we have and the ways we are able to use it.

Wages and Working Hours: We all have to work. We work to earn the income needed to meet our needs and obligations. We usually examine wages/salaries in terms of how much we earn per week or per pay period. If we flip those two realities – “needs and/or obligations” and “earnings” - we realize we should be asking whether or not a person is able to earn enough wages/salary within the normal work week to meet those needs and/or obligations.

If the answer is no, there is not enough earned, then one of three things happens. First, the person and his/her dependents do without. Second, the worker works overtime, in fact needs overtime work in order to meet those needs and obligations. Third, if overtime is not possible on a regular basis, then a second job is needed to earn enough to meet those needs. What do these options do to that person's time? It is about time.

Relationships: If a person needs to work overtime on a regular basis, or work two jobs, then that overtime or that second job impinges upon the time available for relationships with others. These relationships include those with spouses, partners, children, friends, etc. Relationships require time, quality time and attention. When the time is filled with work, the time for relationship is emptied, either partially or totally. Again, it is about time, quality time.

Multi-Tasking: The push to multi-task, or do more than one thing at a time comes from many sources. In some work places, when staff has been laid off, the amount of work required of those who remain includes their own AND the distributed work of those who have been laid off. This work, of course, has to be done within the work day that existed before the layoffs OR it will be done after normal working hours, during paid overtime for hourly workers (if laws are followed) or during uncompensated extra work hours for salaried workers.

If we look at the reality of multi-tasking, even for those of us who do it well, we observe that essentially none of the tasks that are being done receive the complete attention of the person doing the work. While some claim that multi-tasking still allows people to do quality work, if we are honest, we have to question whether higher quality of work would be possible if the person were able to give his/her complete time and attention to the task.

Can we imagine the creativity that might emerge, the new ideas that might find space, if time were available for thinking, for reflecting, for imagining?

Appropriation of Our Time: There are so many subtle ways in which our time is appropriated, taken from us for use by others. In supermarkets and other stores where we are urged to use the self-checkout, it is our time that is not being paid for...and it is the supermarket that gains by not having to pay for another checker.

Our time is appropriated in stores where the company's "cost-saving" cut-backs on service personnel result in our time being wasted waiting. When we are put on hold by company representatives, when mistakes are made in our bills and we have to document that payment has been made, when doctors and dentists keep us waiting for hours because they overbook to make sure that their time is not wasted, all of this is the appropriation of our time...based on the assumption that our time is not as important, as vital as the time of others.

People who have a need to feel powerful often keep people waiting. Supposedly, it is a sign of how busy they are, how important their time is...and how our time does not matter. But the truth is: everyone's time matters.

The Speed of Time: A friend told me that as we get older, time goes faster. As I watch the days and months speed by, I understand what she means. It is such a contrast to the experience of time when I was in grammar school when time seemed to drag and vacation seemed so far away. With the world rushing around us and the push to get everything done faster and faster, it is important to find ways to re-claim our time and then to make time to attend to that which provides us with those times of reflection, of peace, of awareness, etc.

Two Advents ago, I decided that whenever I was on line and had to wait, I would take that waiting time as a min-vacation. Rather than counting the minutes and wasting restless energy, I used the time to be quiet, to think, to pray. Now, in the midst of Lent, I keep thinking that these mini-vacations need to be not only during the special seasons but available to us each and every day. If we do not attend to ourselves and to what we are able to hear in the quiet of these moments, from where will come the inspiration and the energy for our ministries?

It is not only for us that these times of rest, of quiet, are necessary. Somehow, in the economic scheme of things, these should be possible for everyone. None of us are machines; none of us have endless energy.

When we question what needs to be changed
part of the reason for questioning must be
not only how do we make sure that persons and families and communities
have the material things they need, but also
what are the models of life
what are the models of community
what are the models of work
that allow us to be truly creative, truly alive, in *our* time,
in the moments of quiet and in the time of action.