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“...and Two Articles a Year.”

Obstacles to Excellence: Work/Life Balance

By Theresa W. Tobin

When I arrived at Marquette, a colleague placed a cartoon on my office door. It pictures an Associate Professor welcoming the new assistant professor with this caption: “Congratulations! You have just been appointed assistant professor! We’ll expect you to teach three courses, sit on four committees, grade four hundred papers, and turn out at least one original article each term.” During my second year on the job, however, my confrontation with work-life balance reached a critical juncture that was not so funny. I was waking ridiculously early and putting in 15-plus hour days just to keep my head above water prepping new courses, trying to write articles, applying for grants, etc. I felt as if I had no time or energy left for close relationships, self-care, faith life, or anything remotely approaching fun. I initially thought this was a sure sign of incompetence because other people were working hard, but not at this pathological rate, and yet seemed to accomplish a lot more than I.

At the height of my struggle, someone brought to my attention that I was in fact making choices to value work over other areas of my life, and that I could make different choices about working less or differently, and still manage to do my job well. Intellectually this seemed right, but I did not *feel* as if I had a choice. I felt absolutely compelled by work, a bit like one driven by addiction, who is able to recognize alternatives as nominal, but not real options. Although my work is really important to me, family and faith life are even more valuable, so why

didn’t I feel the same sense of compulsion to spend time with my family?

Our very naming of “the work-life balance problem” commits a kind of category mistake by comparing two dis-analogous things. ‘Life’ is a much broader concept than ‘work,’ and the two are really not properly objects of comparison. The mistake in naming is illustrative, though, because it reveals the nature of the problem: ‘work’ no longer seems like part of ‘life’ but rather like some kind of distinct force that threatens to take over, consume, even destroy our lives by trumping all the other goods that make life meaningful. The hardest struggle for me is the way work encroaches on my interior life—the inability to stop thinking or worrying about work, feeling guilty for taking time off, or overwhelmed at what it will take to get back up to speed.

I am a bit of a perfectionist and a bit of a control freak, especially when it comes to teaching. I have a strong desire to pull my weight, which makes me eager to say ‘yes’ and feel guilt-ridden when I say “no.” And I have suffered from a lack of self-trust in my own judgments about what counts as a reasonable amount of work. Looking back, though, there are also many structural forces at work that have made achieving work-life balance such a challenge for me.

Some are broader cultural forces that affect all professionals in our society. Email and smart phones give us more flexible work options, but they also make it possi-

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ble never to leave work, and they shape social expectations that we will and should be available around the clock and from all locations. Our spatial sense of place that work happens “here” but not “there” has been challenged, and the technology that makes it easier to work at flexible times also makes it easier to work all the time.

Some obstacles have to do with the nature of my academic work. My spouse is an accountant. He likes what he does well enough, but accounting work is not identity constituting for him, in the way that teaching and writing about philosophy are central to my sense of self. Work-life balance is difficult simply because it is hard for me to separate what I do from who I am. In academic life, there is also a fair amount of unstructured time, which means one has to place her own limits on work. Yet for a tenure-track faculty member with the pressure to do everything she can in order to keep her job, or make herself an attractive candidate in the event of a move, it feels as if there are no limits to work, so it is easier to make distorted judgments about how many hours to devote to class prep, or to an article before sending it out for review.

Some obstacles are built into the institutional structure of my particular university. Marquette advances a teacher/scholar model of education, which values excellence in research and teaching equally. I very much admire and support this model as an ideal. Trying to live out this ideal in practice, though, has contributed to my struggle with work-life balance. At research-oriented universities faculty typically teach less and/or have graduate student assistance for grading and running small discussion sections. At teaching-oriented schools, there are typically reduced expectations for publishing. At Marquette, the expectation is that we will be both. Asking faculty to excel at both is not itself a problem.

I want to be part of a top-notch research university that also supports smaller class sizes and close teacher-student relationships. Yet we need to discern whether and how we provide faculty with sufficient material resources and time so that they are able to do both at the highest levels of excellence without reaching the point of total burn out or exhaustion, and without sacrificing other important goods, especially relationships with family and friends.

Marquette does have some institutional resources in place to mitigate these challenges, including a semester sab-

batical for most tenure-track faculty and a faculty-mentoring program. I have also found tremendous support from particular individuals in departmental and college leadership, especially from a department chair who has been willing to forge creative solutions for faculty struggling to meet these expectations while balancing the demands of the rest of life. This latter resource is unstable, though, because it depends on the will of the people who hold these positions.

One of the most effective resources for me has been the Faber Center for Ignatian Spirituality. They offer wonderful programs to facilitate the “inner work” that achieving work-life balance requires. It’s open to people of any faith perspective, or who claim no faith tradition but who nonetheless seek to strengthen their mental and spiritual capacities. I resisted using this resource at first because I could not imagine adding another

event to the calendar, let alone something not aimed at productivity. Yet the time investment has been small and the payoff significant. Allowing myself to pause, and to step away from work in order to care for the soul, has not only helped me cope but has actually enhanced creativity, productivity, and motivation.

Work-life imbalance is not unique to academic life or Jesuit schools. It is an American cultural problem. Being in the front lines of teaching, I see the impact of this cultural trend most acutely in my students, who have often appeared in my office on the verge of breaking down from the overwhelming pressure of academic work. What is unique about Jesuit schools is that the values we commit ourselves to make us responsible for resisting the trend to value work above all

The expectation is that we will do both.

else. And I think we can do better on this score. Catholic social teaching on the role of work in human life, and the Old Testament command to honor the Sabbath, a day of rest, are just a few of the rich resources our tradition offers for thinking about how to create a campus ethos that genuinely supports the formation of the self in all its dimensions. ■

