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Work and Rest: Cultural Lessons from a Semester Abroad

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Abstract
"I sometimes wonder what the cost of the U.S. work culture has been. Have we become so fueled by work, success, busy schedules, and growth that we even created the phrase, 'time is money'?"

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**Work and Rest: Cultural Lessons from a Semester Abroad**

**Sam Roskamp**

As I sat in my aunt’s kitchen in the Paraguayan heat last November, drinking a cold blend of various fruits and dreading my return to the negative temperatures of the Midwest to finish up my last year of college, the conversation revolved around the various economic and social needs of Paraguay. Though a small, quiet country in the heart of South America, the developing country shows itself to be more than just another Spanish-speaking country with political corruption and social injustice, as many quickly assume (and leave at that). Beyond what the media shows, getting a chance to spend a semester in Paraguay showed me a world where the value of life is seen and measured in a uniquely different way than we North Americans are accustomed to.

As someone who comes from a multicultural family (Korean Mom, American-German descent Dad, growing up in Paraguay until 2003), I learned early on how to adapt to new and different cultures. While this has been an advantage for me, it also comes with the curse of never being able to completely become a part of a particular culture. I think especially of my dad, who could never get into soccer or of my mother’s difficulty in keeping up with English idioms, despite their years of experiencing each other’s cultures.

Likewise, while in Paraguay I found my Latino and American upbringings to be playing a sort of “tug-of-war” within me, showing itself distinctly in my idea of time and how I measure productivity. While I wouldn’t consider myself a punctual person, nor always the most efficient in my use of time, I found myself often getting frustrated with the slow-paced work life that is the cultural norm. Many days we would work for an hour, sit and talk for an hour, work an hour, and then go to lunch for two hours. After lunch, we would come back to work for an hour, take a break for an hour, and call it a day.
(That’s only 3 of 7 hours of actual work, by the way.) “How can you guys be sitting around and talking to each other when there’s so much work to be done?” was the question I asked in my head nearly every day. And then, it hit me.

For Paraguayans, human interaction is central to their culture. It’s what enables strangers to strike up a conversation as if they’ve known one another for a lifetime. My cousins constantly had to remind me that just because the conversation had been going for four hours, didn’t mean it is time to leave—they were just getting started, after all! It also explains the strange looks I received when they would see me walking around by myself or being alone. I suppose that is why some may believe Americans to be cold and unfriendly, misunderstanding our desire for personal time to mean we would rather not spend our time with them.

In the States, work is generally seen as a productive use of time. The CEO who runs the team; the farmer who toils and plows the field from sunrise to sunset; the student who is involved in every club and activity possible; the athlete who spends most of her time in the gym. These are all figures and roles we look up to and classify as successful individuals, and I sincerely believe that this belief about work stems from the conviction that God placed us here to work and care for the world with excellence and devotion (and ultimately, to worship him through these tasks). But in finding a sense of fulfillment and purpose, is it possible that somewhere along the way, we placed work at a level it was never meant to be on, changing the standard of what is successful and focusing our efforts on growth and improvement, never capable of saying we have enough?

As my aunt and I continued our conversation, thinking of the various obstacles that Paraguay would need to overcome in order to attain the status of a developed country, I asked her, “But, do we really want that?”

Though the U.S. certainly is an economic world-power, I couldn’t necessarily say the same for its degree of contentment, social life, and mental/Emotional health. I sometimes wonder what the cost of the U.S. work culture has been. Have we become so fueled by work, success, busy schedules, and growth that we even created the phrase, “time is money”? When did it become normal to cut out time from meals, sleep, and weekends to accomplish work?

Tim Keller writes in his book *Every Good Endeavor*, “If you make any work the purpose of your life—even if that work is church ministry—you create an idol that rivals God. Your relationship with God is the most important foundation for your life, and indeed it keeps all the other factors—work, friendships and family, leisure and pleasure—from becoming so important to you that they become addicting and distorted.” As we hear of the rise in college anxiety and depression due to overwhelming commitments and
standards, the stories of parents living vicariously through their children by placing them in clubs at young ages, the constant push for growth and improvement on businesses, homes, and individuals in our consumeristic society—if this is the cost for an economically developed country, I’m not sure I want such a thing for Paraguay, especially at the risk of losing such a social and interactive culture.

Having said all this, Paraguay is certainly not without its problems, and there are legitimate issues that prevent them from moving forward in many areas. But, if the Paraguayan people have mastered the art of leisure and finding rest in the company of their loved ones amidst political unrest, social injustice, and economic poverty, is there not something we could learn from them within our comfortable zones of wealth, success, and the security that we enjoy on a regular basis?

I learned from my experience in Paraguay to rest in the fact that God created leisure to be just as vital as work, sleep, and eating, and that it’s okay to say “no” to things if it means you’ll have more time to lie down somewhere and think. Work was never made to replace its Creator, but to be merely one of the ways through which we seek our Creator. As St. Augustine famously quoted, “Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in thee.”