

# Take the day off

## Labor Day intended to let us relax from our constant striving

By Dean Poeth

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Tomorrow is Labor Day, a holiday that celebrates the American worker. It is an opportunity for all workers, from entry-level to the executive, to rest from their labors. It can also be a difficult reminder for those who have lost their jobs due to the prolonged global recession.

Labor Day is an opportunity to rest and forget, for a moment, the stress and difficulties of work. Yet, even though most private and public sector employees in New York have the day off, few will choose to use the day as it was intended.

Twenty-first-century Americans are great at working, but we are not so great at resting. According to the Center for Economic and Policy Research, Americans take the fewest hours of vacation of all industrialized countries. And number of uninterrupted downtime hours continues to shrink, thanks in part to cellphones, laptop computers, instant messaging and email.

Just two generations ago, workers could get off the treadmill at least one day a week: Sunday. It's hard to imagine now, but department stores, convenience stores, and even gas stations were closed so businesses could give their employees a day off. Now, primarily in the name of profits and shareholder equity, many businesses are open seven days a week.

### **ANOTHER WORK DAY**

For many employees, Sunday has become just another workday. I sometimes wonder if our grandparents were smarter than we think. Most holidays, like Sunday, have fallen in the same way; a consequence of the relentless pressures of business, customer demands and our own ambition.

Life is choices. Many of us, though not all, work non-stop because we want to. We like the money and the satisfaction that results from climbing the corporate ladder. Most can control this inner drive and maintain a healthy work-life balance. Some cannot.

I once worked under an executive who sacrificed his family and his integrity to get to the top. He missed his kids' birthday parties, anniversaries, his son's track meets, and just being there when his kids needed someone to talk to. He was proud of his reputation for being tough, and his conscience was as scorched as a burnt steak. Throughout his contentious career he bought all kinds of stuff: a boat, a summer home and many other expensive toys. He never had much time to enjoy them during his working career, but planned to after his retirement.

He died of a heart attack six months after he retired. After his death his family sold all the cool stuff he had sacrificed so much to get, and then proceeded to fight over the money.

Contrast his attitude with that of a co-worker I knew (I will call her Mary) who had been diagnosed with a terminal illness at the age of 35. The difference between Mary and the rest of the group was profound.

Because of her illness, her dreams of rising up the corporate ladder had understandably faded into unimportance. She was smart and a hard worker, yet unlike my more competitive colleagues, she was kind, helpful and honest. As we worked together during the last few months of her life, she continually surprised me by being more normal and well-balanced than the more healthy members of our department.

### **MORE TO LIFE**

Mary has been gone for many years, but her example lives on. I wonder if, in our quest for money and trinkets, we have lost our perspective. Does it take the specter of a coffin to remind us that there is more to life than ambition?

Take Labor Day off — really. Hard work is important and rewarding, but keep it in perspective. For just one day, turn off the cellphone, laptop, and don't check your email. Take one day to genuinely rest from your labors.

That's what Labor Day is for.

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