



## Vacations

James E. Read, Ph.D.

Laurie (my wife) and I have just gotten back from a couple of weeks vacation. Before we left, we realized how much we needed a holiday. As a nurse manager in today's constantly-changing health care system, Laurie was feeling what she described as "brown-out." For me too it had been a full year of activities. So we talked to each other about getting away "to recharge our batteries"—to come back to work with new energy. And, gratefully, that has happened. But I wonder if there isn't something crazy, maybe even unchristian, about thinking of vacations as time out so we can be better workers.

Crazy or not, Laurie and I are not alone. Studies show that those of us who are working full-time are working more hours than ever before.

And acquiring more stuff. Architects say the average square footage of new housing starts is at an all-time high although average family size is declining. And what do people want in the new house? More storage space. As we drove the freeways between Winnipeg and Toronto, I'm sure we saw more storage facilities than ever before. Not business warehouses. The kind that individuals rent when they run out of space in the garage.

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203-290 VAUGHAN STREET • WINNIPEG, MANITOBA • CANADA R3B 2N8 • PHONE: (204) 957-2412 • FAX: (204) 957-2418  
EMAIL: ETHICS\_CENTRE@CAN.SALVATIONARMY.ORG

According to the PBS series, “Affluenza” :

- seventy percent of Americans visit malls each week—more than attend churches or synagogues;
- on average, Americans shop six hours a week and spend only 40 minutes playing with their children;
- Americans throw away 7 million cars a year, 2 million plastic bottles every hour, and enough aluminum cans annually to make 6000 DC-10 airliners.

Whether it’s the material goods we possess, the size of property we own, or the hours on the job, ours is a culture *defined* by measurable outcomes. According to Steven Covey, not only every business, but every *individual* ought to have a personal mission statement with correlated goals and action plans to plot the path to those goals.

Strategic plans, outcome-based programing, etc. are not alien terms to those of us who work in The Salvation Army. When I was in college, an English professor introduced me to Leonard Cohen’s poem “Suzanne takes you down,” which includes the lines “Suzanne takes your hand/and she leads you to the river,/she is wearing rags and feathers/ from Salvation Army counters.” I assumed this referred to our Thrift Stores, but to the professor it referred also to our counting of souls. There is some truth in his observation.

The ethical theory that best fits this cultural mindset is called utilitarianism. Put briefly, utilitarianism says that there is one supreme moral duty under which all other duties are subsumed. That duty is to perform the action which in the circumstances will produce the greatest good for the greatest number. In other words, the only thing that matters ethically

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is actual outcomes, and the more positive outcomes the better. To produce less than the maximum that was possible is to fail in one's moral duty.

Trying to justify my vacation to myself on the basis of the good it would do me fits perfectly with the cultural utilitarianism in which I swim. With very little effort I could even convince myself that taking time away was a moral *duty*, since I would come back more productive than I would be otherwise.

It was in the midst of that kind of thinking that I needed to hear a biblical message concerning sabbath. Abraham Heschel writes, "The Sabbath as a day of rest, as a day of abstaining from toil, is not for the purpose of recovering one's lost strength and becoming fit for the forthcoming labor. Man is not a beast of burden, and the Sabbath is not for the purpose of enhancing the efficiency of his work." You've got six days to work, to be productive, to make things and acquire things, Exodus 20 says; the seventh has a different kind of value—protect it religiously.

Sabbaticals are good for people. How good? We can't say very easily, and that's the point. Good holidays are good in a way that doesn't map onto an ethics of outcome measures.

My vacation was good. Probably not the *best* thing I could have done with my time. But so what?

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