

Stepping Off the Treadmill

Marilyn Paul & David Peter Stroh



Are you running to keep up? Is e-mail eating up your time and energy? Are you working longer hours, but with unclear effect? Do you sometimes feel that you have lost track of what is truly important to you? People are working harder and harder with no end in sight. For example, Americans in the manufacturing sector work on average 320 hours more than their European counterparts, who average eight to nine weeks off a year. Service sector workers and professionals follow similar patterns. Even those of us who are deeply committed to bringing a caring presence to our lives and making considered decisions find ourselves breathless as we seek to accomplish all of our goals.

What contributes to the treadmill that so many of us find ourselves on? It is common to cite such factors as the advances in technology to which we owe much of our recent economic success. Such time-saving devices as email or cell phones create the unintended consequences of the expectation of instantaneous response. We feel as if we should be continuously on-call, everything is urgent and quick response can consume every free minute that might otherwise go to silence and regeneration.

Global competition is a second commonly cited driver that puts pressure on us to work harder and generate sufficient income as many businesses and jobs move irrevocably overseas. It has become more difficult for many families to meet the growing costs of such basic needs as health care, housing, and education without working two or more jobs.

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Yet, we need to consider that how we think is another important factor. Capitalism motivates us to evaluate our self-worth in terms of what we own, so we work more to earn more. We consider productivity to be one of our highest values, so we add more commitments to our calendars often without pausing to consider that our clear-minded presence might be the greatest contribution that we can make to our colleagues and families. Organizations reward working harder because they believe that longer hours leads to increased productivity. Recent research shows that while this may be true to a limited extent, burnout and stress that result from overwork is very costly over time. Some people feel compelled to put in “face time” in order to appear hard working even when they are producing little value.

What makes the problem even more frustrating is our tendency to avoid conflict and neglect of the valuable tools that we have. Failures in the workplace to set clear goals, plan wisely, manage interruptions, deal constructively with role ambiguity and conflict, and follow through on commitments result in expending a great deal of energy in patching up problems that need not have occurred if we had slowed down a bit. For example, one manager we know calculated that it took him 120 hours to clean up the confusion and conflict that was created by his failure to participate in the two-hour kickoff meeting of a new project he was sponsoring.

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The treadmill is very costly. The long working hours take a toll on our health, our family life, and community. We are at risk of losing the productivity gains derived from new technology because of the simultaneous increases in stress, burnout, and chronic illnesses that contribute to rising health care costs. At the organizational level, people suffer confusion, fatigue, resentment, and demoralization. On a deeper level, overwork reduces the communal bonds that provide spiritual nourishment and in-kind services for people in many other cultures. We become disconnected from ourselves, each other, and the natural world that supports us.

We believe that it is possible to work more productively and in ways that are more sustainable. We can do more of the right things, well, and in a timely way. We can preserve and restore resources for sustainability in ourselves, our families and communities, and nature. We can make decisions that benefit more people, including ourselves, over longer time frames.

In order to achieve these ends, we need to change how we approach both everyday and sacred time. It helps to begin with a diagnostic – asking ourselves such questions as:

- 1 What has you running? What messages do you listen to from yourself, your family, your organization, and the culture we live in?
- 2 How do you define success? How does that definition differ from what others expect of you?
- 3 What inconsistencies or incongruities exist in your own belief system?
- 4 What do you espouse? And what do you actually do?
- 5 Do you keep trying to find time for meditation or rest, yet keep pushing it off to another time?

On a daily level, consider how you can develop clearer direction for yourself and others. Determine ways to connect with others more effectively and combine their efforts with your own. Look for leverage: the few things that you and others can do with limited resources to achieve the greatest sustainable impact. Recognize your own energy patterns and work with them instead of against them.

It is also important to renew yourself through sacred time, the time when you don't have to do anything to receive life's fullness, when you can regenerate by deeply experiencing the blessings in your life and all around you. Take time for meditation, rest, walking in nature, or having a feast. Observe a weekly Sabbath. Watch ants be industrious for a change. Reflect on your own or with others on what enables you to slow down, and how you feel when you do.

Keeping up with the treadmill is not our only alternative. We can compare the benefits of racing with the true costs; observe those aspects of it that are of our own making; rethink our aspirations, relationships, and strategies; and slow our pace accordingly. We can make more of the time we have, and be nourished further by the world that exists beyond time.



Marilyn Paul and David Peter Stroh are the principals of Bridgeway Partners (<http://www.bridgewaypartners.com>), an organizational consulting firm that integrates four aspects of human experience—action, thought, emotion, and spirit. Together they have over 50 years experience consulting in the private, public, and nonprofit sectors. David is a pioneer in the field of organizational learning and a recognized leader in applying systems thinking to organizational change. Marilyn draws on her acclaimed book, *It's Hard to Make a Difference When You Can't Find Your Keys* (Viking Compass, 2003), to help organizations and individual leaders manage their time and workload more effectively.

Marilyn and David will lead a two-day workshop titled “Stepping off the Treadmill: Recrafting Time, Energy, and Action” at the Institute’s Summer Program. See http://www.shambhalainstitute.org/2004/pp_strohpaul.html