

## Working with a philosophy of enough

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When we<sup>1</sup> look for life-work balance, we are seeking well being. We are seeking that feeling of being in control of our lives, which makes happiness possible<sup>i</sup>. We are seeking that state where each element of our lives is in balance with the others, and where one aspect does not dominate to extent that our experiences become truncated, or even dysfunctional. This paper asserts that techniques for creating balance, such as time management or strategies for efficiency, may help in the short term, but will ultimately disappoint, if they are not supported by an adequate philosophy. The paper takes as its central theme the philosophy of *enough*, and proposes that it is capable of helping individuals, family groups and communities to work out a vision of balanced and sustainable lifestyles. Equally important, it can support practical steps for putting balance into practice. Enough is a way to freedom. The sooner we arrive at our personal definitions of enough, the freer and happier we can be.

Dwelling on the concept of enough challenges us to ask different kinds of questions about our lives and our communities and societies. It is about conscious reflection on our lives and what we want them to look like. It is commonplace nowadays in Ireland to take it for granted that more is always better – more money, more spending, more possessions, more promotion at work, more travel, more growth as a whole. This is a modernist concept, and those who critique it by suggesting that, in essence, less can actually be more, and that we need to consider our limits, are often accused of wanting to drag us back to a backward, tradition-ridden past. However, the concept of enough goes beyond that simplistic and dualistic debate in radical ways.

### **Enough and its connections to cultural creativity**

Ray and Anderson<sup>ii</sup> have identified three groups in the western world, who take different approaches to well being and balance: modernists, traditionalists and cultural creatives.

A *modernist* approach to well being suggests that we can assess it by counting the number and type of possessions we have, the money we earn, the money we spend, and by measuring GNP. The earth is treated as a resource at the disposal of humans. The human body is seen as a machine, and our main problem in achieving balance is to get organised, keep things under control, and to manage our time properly. Such a worldview suggests that we can solve many of our problems by spending money.

Modernism suggests that we can have it all. Many moderns deny what their lifestyles are doing to their emotional well-being. They tend to rely on technology to fix personal problems, or to buy satisfaction and well-being by means of material possessions and by paying for experiences such as holidays, adventure and travel. These approaches often work in the short term, but tend to lose their appeal, or else

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<sup>1</sup>Richard Sennett describes 'we' as 'the dangerous pronoun', in *The Corrosion of Character: The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism* (New York: WW Norton, 1999). I use it to reinforce my assertion that the issues I discuss are not just abstract ideas, but affect all of us, no matter what our status, in concrete ways.

to require that we spend increasing amounts of money on goods and services. Ironically, a culture of consumption does not provide the satisfaction and comfort that it promises. Therefore, many who subscribe to the modernist worldview are cynical about the meaning of life, and the possibilities for equality, justice and happiness on both local and global scales. Individualism, consumerism and looking out for oneself become the norm<sup>iii</sup>.

Modernism is currently dominant in Ireland. Within this mindset, it has become commonplace to assert that Irish people have more choices and enjoy a higher standard of living than ever before experienced in this country. An assumption also exists that the role of the ordinary citizen is to be a member of the paid labour force and a consumer, in order to 'keep the economy going'. Many people consequently live in a work-earn-spend cycle, spending much of what they earn on possessions and services now considered essential for everyday life. Savings are at an all time low, and credit-card debt at an all-time high, especially among people under 35<sup>iv</sup>. Everyday life is often experienced as harried and fraught.

However, it is becoming increasingly recognised that 'standard of living' and GNP are not indicators of human well being. We are presented with multiple choices, but we cannot do or have it all. Human beings, societies and the environment itself have limits, and unchecked growth takes its toll on individual, social and planetary welfare.

A *traditional* worldview, on the other hand, asserts that the past was happier and simpler, and that we would all be better off if we went back to traditional roles and values. Traditionals tend to gloss over the oppressive aspects of such a way of living: namely, the low status of women and children, the regulation of sexuality, the largely authoritarian nature of the church and education, and the closed nature of communities, with their suspicions of outsiders or difference.

*Cultural creatives* question both traditionalism and modernism, while not losing sight of the benefits that each of these worldviews has contributed to human development. For example, they understand the value of women's participation in the paid labour force, and its contribution to gender equality, but are critical of the way that this has contributed to the devaluation of unpaid caring work. They recognise the value of volunteering and caring and working to help others, as put forward by traditionals, but are critical of the rigidity of thinking that sees caring and other unpaid domestic work as primarily the responsibility of women. They put forward new ways of living that often come out of the same roots as many of the best traditions, such as care for children, community and spirituality, but they give a different expression to these, drawing on social movements such as feminism, environmentalism and anti-racism. They are aware of the complexity of contemporary social, political and economic issues, and of the need to avoid simplistic responses.

Cultural creatives value personal relationships, personal development, the environment, unpaid work, equality, quality of life, holistic approaches to health, learning about other cultures, spirituality, and community. They are critical of consumerism, a 'having it all' or 'more is better' philosophy, debt and exploitation of the earth's peoples and resources. Not all cultural creatives share exactly the same concerns, but they tend to be people whose approaches to life are complemented by a philosophy of enough. Those I have met in my research all have a vision for their lives and communities, and they use this vision to guide their day to day practical actions and choices.

### **The need for a vision**

To find fulfilment, we need to know what we are looking for. We need to constantly ask ourselves, 'Why am I doing what I'm doing?' Each one of us needs our own definitions of a successful life. Only then can we tell when we have enough. Neither our educational system nor TV and other media encourage us to develop inspirational plans for our lives. We are encouraged to think in fairly short-term ways about what we want from life. It is not part of popular culture to dwell on the things that we value in the overall picture of our lives.

'Visions alone don't produce results, but we'll never produce results without them', writes Donella Meadows<sup>v</sup>. Developing a vision is about taking the time to consciously reflect on our lives. It helps to develop life purpose. In the search for well being we all need to develop a formal vision of what we want our lives to look like, and to set out what principles are important to us. We need to understand what is enough for us in terms of money, possessions and success (personal and professional). If we don't do this, then we are just reacting to what is going on around us. We need to keep our vision in sight all the time and refer to it when we have choices to make. Prioritising helps us take action regarding our life purpose. Importantly also, we should not regard any vision as set in stone – it is for guiding us about our principles, not for creating a 'to do' list

Emotions are important in developing a vision. There are many good books and guides for drawing up one's vision, and the best of them encourage us to use our emotions as well as our rational faculties. It is all too easy to end up with a very logical list of roles of responsibilities, desires and priorities, set out in a reasoned and rational manner. However, in the messiness of everyday life, a purely logical search through all the possibilities is not possible. Emotions are necessary to bridge across the unexpected and the unknown to guide reason, and to give priorities among multiple goals. Emotions help us choose among a wide variety of options in a highly complex world by narrowing down our choices. We may need to set emotions aside sometimes because of the immediate situation, but if they are continually denied, then whole-person vision-creation cannot take place.

### **Work**

Paid work is the central feature of life for many in Ireland to-day, whether we think of it as just a job, or as a career for life. We tend to take our identities from our paid work, and we describe other people according to the jobs they do. As people try to fit other aspects of life, such as relationships, children and personal development, around their jobs, they often feel stretched to the limit all the time, an experience described by Richard Swenson<sup>vi</sup> as overload syndrome.

Work can provide a lot of things that we crave, such as a sense of self-worth and importance, a source of friends and social interaction. It helps us to develop our talents and aptitudes and provides a sense of identity. However, most of us think of work only as paid work, or our job. Unpaid work can also provide these things, but our culture does not encourage us to recognise this, because it has reduced the concept of work to mean paid work only.

Within the world of paid work, there is also a hierarchy of types of work. There is the stimulating, high-status work associated with 'career', which provides identity and companionship and a good income. And there are the low-paid, low-status, dead-end jobs that nobody really wants to do, but for which money is seen to be some compensation. All have the potential to cause great stress.

On the other hand, because home life can be complicated, time-consuming and unpredictable, and the relationships there often require a lot of attention, the world of paid work is often experienced as a respite from home. It becomes so closely identified with 'life work' or career for many people, that the roles involved in it take precedence over the other roles that people take on. Then, they find it difficult to fit those other roles into their schedules.

The paid work ethic also sees jobs as the means by which people are socially included. Employment is considered central to citizenship, in this scheme of things. But many people in high-status, high-paid jobs do not have the time or inclination to do the caring work that builds strong societies. And the low-paid or those in dead-end jobs are not necessarily genuinely socially included, simply by virtue of being employed.

Many – especially older -- people often wonder why others are unhappy in their paid work. They are not prepared to shed too many tears for a high-earning younger generation whose main problems seem to be 'time poverty' and job stress. However, the world of paid work has changed considerably in recent years. Brian Thorne<sup>vii</sup> points out that we are being taught that life means 'endless toil and competition, the pursuit of ever-greater achievement, the race for material affluence'. Policies directed at achieving greater efficiency and competition at ever lower costs have created a 'culture of contempt' that permeates the way we treat each other in the work- and market-places. Job insecurity and the spectre of redundancy are always present for individuals who suffer from their companies' drive for competitiveness.

In the workplace itself, huge effort and commitment are frequently demanded, often beyond what is reasonable, but supposedly justified by high salaries. Projects and teams are often short-lived, a feature that does not encourage long-term relationships or commitment. A great deal of routine work is also shift work, which plays havoc with sleep patterns, health, energy and the ability to create meaningful relationships outside the workplace.

Cutting back on paid work is often presented as a 'family-friendly' move, suitable for women who want to combine paid work and caring for children. But it is a mistake to assume that men with children and individuals who have no children would not benefit from taking up some of these options also. It is true that many parents today are walking a tightrope between job and family, but it is not just family commitments combined with paid work that leave us feeling burnt out. These options are also people- and society-friendly, and if parents are the only ones to take them up, they will not be seen as relevant to all of us.

### **Visible and invisible work**

It is not surprising that work has come to mean jobs in to-day's world. The predominant economic model that influences our society portrays paid work as the only work that contributes to well-being. People who do unpaid work are economically invisible, and they are considered economically inactive. Many activities essential for human happiness are not officially counted as part of the economy. People who do not have jobs, do not participate in business, or do not accumulate money, including children, retired people, old people, the unemployed, carers in the home, and volunteer workers, are economically invisible.

Women have traditionally done most economically invisible work. Feminists have long asserted the value of that work, and have opposed the culture that discourages men from identifying as fathers, carers and do-ers of housework and other domestic

tasks. In an egalitarian economy, every adult in a household would mix unpaid caring and domestic work with paid work. Instead, the conventional economic model originally encouraged middle-class men to take their skills into the full time labour market and to leave women at home to do the unpaid work. Working-class women, by contrast, often did some kind of paid work. Nowadays, the economic model encourages all women to work outside the home, and to pay somebody else to do their caring work. And when women in the paid labour force cannot afford to pay somebody else to do their caring and domestic work, many of them end up doing the 'second shift', that is, the bulk of the housework, cooking and childcare, along with their jobs. Men, women, children and society at large can only benefit from men's increased identification as fathers, carers and home workers<sup>viii</sup>.

Work, following a philosophy of enough, is much more than a job. It is anything that gives us satisfaction, recognition, or personal growth, or that contributes to the well-being of others, or the well-being of the planet. This kind of life work can help us to get to know ourselves better, and to find out more about others and about the world around us. Sometimes, we get paid for it, other times it is not inextricably connected to money. Work/life balance is not a culturally creative term, although both traditionalist and modernists can accept it within their worldviews. The culturally creative approach is to aim for a balance between job time and non-job time, or between paid and unpaid work.

### **Money – the 'yes, but' factor**

A common reaction to the observations I have made so far is to deny that one has a choice when it comes to cutting back on paid work. We assert that survival in the rat race demands certain kinds of spending, and that we are therefore trapped in jobs we may not particularly like, or working long hours, in order to have the money need. Many of us believe that we truly need a range of products that Juliet Schor<sup>ix</sup> calls the 'new essentials', from the latest in mobile phones to bottled water.

Consumerist culture promotes a continual blurring of the distinctions between the possessions we need and the possessions we want. The result is to make us believe that we have no choice but to spend. But the culture is one of overspending, often spending more than we realise, and frequently spending beyond our means, using credit cards and often accruing debt. Juliet Schor's American study found that the single biggest reason for staying in a frantic lifestyle was personal debt.

Money is undoubtedly central to many of the discussions about developing a balanced life. Yet, many of us have never really explored in any detail our attitudes to money and the ways that we use it. Most of us have no financial focus. As with life in general, we are directionless. But we need awareness of the financial choices available to us, and the concept of enough offers a framework and principles for thinking about them. Budgeting, recording spending and saving, by themselves, are mere techniques. They are transformed when we use a philosophy of enough to develop our own answers to our financial questions. Enough is a creative process, which connects time, work and money in a cyclical relationship with each other. If we live within our means, we can control our paid work; that creates more time for all the other kinds of work we want to do. What is more, with time on our hands, we can be creative about living within our means.

Most of us know our net income, that is, what is left in our pockets after tax and other deductions have been made. But many fail to take into account the other job-related expenses that eat into take-home pay. It has become a bit more common to cite the cost of childcare, in recent years, but what about job-related clothing, the cost of a

car to get to work, the lunchtime shopping that we do only because you are on a break from the job and the opportunity is there, the coffees and lunches out, the collections for gifts and other social occasions? Many people 'treat' themselves when work is taxing or boring, thus adding to the 'need' to earn even more. If our jobs are leading us into an exhausting work-and-spend cycle, then we have little to show for the life energy we invest in them.

### **The bigger picture**

As people seek quality of life, it becomes clear that none of their problems or choices exists in isolation. Global politics and economics are connected to hurried lifestyles, difficulties with money and debt, a deteriorating environment, the growth of conspicuous and competitive spending, and the lack of control over their lives that that many citizens in Ireland experience today.

The mainstream view of politics is narrow, seeing it as a pursuit of power, centered on political parties and pressure groups. But there are other ways of looking at politics, which see that both individuals and society are connected at a deep level, and that economic decisions and social relations exist together in a dynamic relationship. Economics is a key aspect of politics – to have people economically unaware is to undermine democracy, participation, a sense of connectedness, happiness and citizenship. The way that an economy is organised is a political decision.

The conventional economic thinking that dominates in Ireland and in most Western countries understands the economy as the visible economy – businesses, buying and selling of goods and services, paid work and money-making. It is seen as the primary source of society's wealth and well-being, and depends on the concept of economic growth. Growth is concerned with raising productivity, increasing competitiveness, developing new markets, increasing employment, stimulating investment and encouraging consumer confidence so that people spend more. Barbara Brandt<sup>x</sup> says that this thinking promotes a very narrow view of the economy, seeing it as purely the activities of the investment community. It also promotes the idea that economic growth should take precedent over all other considerations, and that the rest of life – people in their homes, families, communities, unpaid work, government, education, art, culture, religion and spirituality – is dependent on the economy for wealth and well being. It is assumed that economic growth will bring about progress for everybody, usually understood as individual betterment and material enrichment, without taking into account other systems, such as family, social cohesion, the environment, or fragile eco-systems.

Many alternative economists and systems thinkers, such as Hazel Henderson, Herman Daly, Richard Dowthwaite and Barbara Brandt<sup>xi</sup>, argue that growth may actually make us poorer because environmental and social costs mount faster than production benefits. Most conventional economists acknowledge the existence of ecological/environmental costs, but assume that they will be sorted out by technology. In practice, they ignore social costs because they are not easily measured. Robert E. Lane's research<sup>xii</sup> shows that, after a certain point, increasing wealth does not bring increasing happiness. In fact, living in an age of wealth and in a high-tech economy is the cause of extreme stress. People may become rich in material possessions, but poor in time. High earnings and consumption serve purposes that go way beyond meeting needs – they bestow self-esteem, status and identity. In the past, this effect was often confined to men, but now it is available to women also, and this is often portrayed as gender equality.

The world's high and middle-income groups are those caught up to the greatest extent in the work-earn-spend cycle. They have the most consumer power, and are concentrated in the highly industrialised regions. The way of life of this consumer class is depleting the world's raw materials, yet its affluence exists in the midst of poverty. And this consumer class is also setting a standard to which many less affluent people aspire.

Consumption patterns like these are also responsible for class inequalities. With increasing consumption, lower-income children and adults are left behind in the market, and the gap between the affluent and the poor becomes unbridgeable. This results in affluent communities trying to protect themselves from the poor outside. And as the pressures on private spending grow, support for taxes and public spending goes down. Public goods and facilities get little support, they deteriorate, and because they are not available, it adds to the pressures to spend privately<sup>xiii</sup>.

In one sense it is a highly elitist suggestion that already privileged people give up high-powered jobs and the high-consumption lifestyles that go with them, in order to create a better life for themselves. But in another sense, it would be an enormous change if the consumer class developed awareness of these issues and began living with purpose, clarifying their priorities, consuming only what they need, avoiding meaningless jobs, and devoting time to their families, relationships and communities<sup>xiv</sup>. Such a change could create the conditions for understanding that economics is relevant to everybody, and that the ways that the economy is organised is a political decision.

When citizens worry about the over materialistic values being transmitted to children, the downsizing of companies in the name of efficiency, the destruction of the natural environment, the long working and commuting times often demanded to keep the economy growing, and the consequent lack of time for self and relationships, the dominant modernist worldview tells them there is no alternative if we are to survive in the competitive global economy. Indeed, Richard Douthwaite points out<sup>xv</sup> that that is largely true, because of the ways that many countries, including Ireland, are locked into trade agreements – our government has little choice about how the economy is run. Because of global trade agreements, governments are required to run their countries in very specific ways. If they do not, international investors will cause a financial crisis by shifting their funds elsewhere. Within the present political and economic system, then, there is little choice. Democracy has been undermined by the extreme wealth owned by global corporations. But the system cannot continue indefinitely, because it depends on and is depleting natural and finite resources such as oil and gas. It also has personal, psychological and social consequences which many people consider unacceptable.

People of vision are often ahead of elected leaders in their life choices and in the possibilities they see for society. It is important that we see the connections between personal problems and wider economic and political decisions, and that we promote alternatives. To build a workable tomorrow, we need to have much better information about alternatives to the dominant ways of thinking. We therefore need to share ideas with like-minded people, in learning groups or study circles, and in day-to-day conversation.

### **Putting it into practice**

Responses to *enough* vary. Some see it as a 'penny-pinching', mean kind of concept, a recipe for mediocrity, while others receive it as a generous, expansive, liberating one. The former is a typically modernist response, rooted in the idea that there are no limits. On the contrary, I assert that *enough* is a recipe for wholeness, which allows

us to take into account every part of our lives. Excellence as it is portrayed in the modernist scheme of things is achievable in only very few areas of our lives.

The process and practice of balance involve a wise use of money, time, energy, and possessions – getting all of them just right, so that we have enough of everything, without personal or planetary waste. *Enough* is not about being a skinflint or living with low standards, but about appreciating everything to its maximum, being able to get pleasure from small things and everyday events, as well as big events and special occasions. Growth, in a context of enough, means quality rather than quantity. Pursuing the good life by means of money, career or possessions takes an enormous amount of energy. We always want more and we never know when we have arrived. The concept of enough is the opposite of that.

Enough encourages us to think about limits. It teaches us to adjust our expectations of ourselves. It deconstructs advertising and the ways it tries to construct desires and identities, continually moving the goalposts and raising the so-called standards, so that we become confused about what our needs are. Our achievements don't have to be earth-shattering, as long as they are personally meaningful. Enough helps us to let go and to say 'no', when an activity, a way of life, a type of work, an ambition, a standard, or a certain role is no longer providing fulfilment. Then we can let it go and explore other choices.

Enough also teaches us to reduce the expectations we have of partners, children friends and associates. We need to set limits here too. In intimate relationships, we have allowed expectations of what another person can do for us to become inflated. We tend to place extraordinary demands on a partner to make us happy and meet our needs.

In the business world, unrealistically high expectations can lead us to be impatient with other people, to treat them with contempt if service is not up to our expectations, to forget that they are human and make mistakes. When we understand the concept of limits in ourselves and are putting them into practice, so that we are not rushed or overextended, then there is more time to allow for other people's humanness. We take responsibility for our part of the encounter. Similarly, we learn not to place too much blame on government or leaders for the state of our society. We avoid the assertion that 'they should do something about it'. We take responsibility for our own roles in the creation of the social fabric. We can all become leaders, questioning the taken-for-granted, and developing new ways of living and working.

All of these processes demand a high degree of self-knowledge and emotional literacy. The decisions and choices we make are often rational in the long run, but they frequently have emotional and psychological dimensions that take us unawares. Every important decision or event has its own emotional resonances. We need to devote time to personal development, whether we take a spiritual or a psychological route to self-knowledge. This can be via religious practice, time out in nature, meditation, journal-writing or any other kind of personal development work. Acting on a philosophy of enough is also going against the grain of contemporary society, so it is easy to feel adrift or despondent. This makes it essential to communicate and learn with others who are also striving to put enough into practice.

### **Concluding remarks**

Without wishing to be prescriptive, I conclude by offering some advice on developing a philosophy of enough:

- Keep working on your vision of what is enough for you



- Question received wisdom and assumptions. Eugene Ionesco said, 'it is not the answer that enlightens but the questions'.
- Don't become cynical, or give up the search for alternatives. Be a creative and critical thinker – believe that alternatives exist, and that they are for everybody
- Challenge economic invisibility – value unpaid and caring work
- Remember that balance is a process, not an end point
- Stay self-focused and develop emotional literacy
- Seek wise counsel – talk to other like-minded people –family, friends and associates who are trying to put *enough* into practice
- Be patient with yourself. Don't try to change your life overnight. Don't take on too many changes at once. Small changes can be significant and can open up options
- Don't be afraid to refine it and change your vision as your circumstances and understanding change, and as you grow in the practice of enough.

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<sup>i</sup> R.E. Lane, The Loss of Happiness in Market Democracies (London and New Haven, Yale University Press, 2000)

<sup>ii</sup> P.H. Ray and S.R. Anderson The Cultural Creatives. (New York, Harmony Books, 2000)

<sup>iii</sup> M. O'Connell Changed Utterly: Ireland and the New Irish Psyche. (Dublin, The Liffey Press, 2001)

<sup>iv</sup> Europay International. Survey, August 2001

<sup>v</sup> D. Meadows, The Global Citizen. (Washington, DC, Island Press, 1991)

<sup>vi</sup> R.A. Swenson The Overload Syndrome: Learning to Live within Your Limits. (Colorado Springs, Navpress, 1998)

<sup>vii</sup> B. Thorne The Secular and the Holy: Person-Centred Counselling and Christian Spirituality. (London, Whurr Publishers, 1998)

<sup>viii</sup> B. Purcell For Our Own Good: Childcare Issues in Ireland. (Cork, Collins Press, 2001)

<sup>ix</sup> <sup>ix</sup> N. Schor, The overspent American: upscaling, downshifting and the new consumer (New York, Basic Books, 1998).

<sup>x</sup> B. Brandt, Whole Life Economics: Revaluating daily life. (Philadelphia, PA and Gabriola Island, BC, New Society Publishers, 1995)

<sup>xi</sup> B. Brandt, Whole Life Economics

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<sup>xii</sup> R.E. Lane, The Loss of Happiness in Market Democracies

<sup>xiii</sup> N. Schor, The overspent American

<sup>xiv</sup> D. Korten, The post-corporate world: life after capitalism (San Francisco, Berrett-Koehler, 1998), p 222).

<sup>xv</sup> R. Douthwaite, 'The growth illusion', in H. Bohan and G. Kennedy (eds) Working towards balance: our society in the new millennium (Dublin, Veritas, 2000)