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High Wire Act: Balancing Your Work and Leisure

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By David Whitemyer

In 1986, "Ramblin' Rob" McDonald set a world record. Just short of 19 days, he spent over 453 hours rocking in a chair. Wouldn't it be great to have that much time for something so frivolous? Just a measly ten minutes would be nice.

But who's got time for leisure? Work is busy and there are chores to do at home. Someone needs to take Junior to soccer practice, and the car needs another oil change. With so many responsibilities, there just aren't any moments left to enjoy yourself.

Feeling overwhelmed? Take this True or False quiz to see if your work and leisure lives are off balance:

- It feels like every minute of the day is scheduled
- After my last vacation I was so exhausted that I needed another
- I haven't seen my best friend in over a month
- Most of my "free" time is spent running errands

If you answered two or more of these statements as "True," congratulations! You're normal! In fact, if only two were "true," count your blessings.

These days, you haven't got an extra thirty minutes to cook a lavish meal, let alone hours for a hobby. Despite all of the attention given to a poor economy, people are working harder and longer than ever.

Fortunately, for your blood pressure, things might be changing. There is a growing national trend towards the re-balancing of our crazy lives, and it "transcends all age groups and economic backgrounds," says Barbara Brandt, of the Shorter Work-Time Group.

The American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research (AEI) issued a 2001 report called "Attitudes about Work and Leisure in America." It states that in 1973, 36% of working Americans considered leisure-time to be an "important thing." In 2000, that number jumped to 43%.

More people are looking for a balance of work and leisure. But not everyone has access to benefits like telecommuting, flex-time, job-sharing, or the option of a new career. What are some tricks to slowing down and enjoy your time?

- "Carve out some time to be alone." suggests Brandt. "Take stock of what's happening in your own life." When you understand what's going on in and around you, it's easier to take hold of what's really important.
- Reprioritize your free time, and define what "leisure" means to you. For many people, running errands and doing chores is not leisure. It's simply unpaid work. And where one person finds leisure in a ten-mile kayak trip, another might find exhaustion. "Work and play are words used to describe the same thing under differing conditions," said Mark Twain.
- Take a day off in October. Hoping to bring about a more European model of holidays, downtime-advocacy groups are organizing the first annual Take Back Your Time Day (www.timeday.org). To be held on October 24, 2003, the day will include events around the country, focused on reclaiming your life.
- Numerous organizations exist, providing advice to people looking to take back their free time. Visit www.newdream.org and www.worktolive.info for helpful information.

Isn't it ironic that we have to organize a day on which to take it easy? It's also a little scary. It takes practice and discipline to live a relaxed life.

But if you apply yourself, you might find time to break "Ramblin" Rob's chair-rocking record. Or better yet, take up woodworking as a hobby and build yourself a rocking chair to relax in, while someone else takes a stab at the world record.