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Creating a Strong Family "I Should Have Spent More Time At Work"

By John DeFrain, Extension Specialist, Family and Community Development

"When you're sick in the hospital and think you're dying of cancer, it isn't the boss who comes and holds your hand."

That's one form of a common epiphany many people experience in life. A flash of insight when it becomes painfully clear that the values so desperately driving them are questionable.

National surveys consistently report that Americans as a group value family first, work second. Whether this professed commitment to the family is consistently demonstrated in actual behavior at home is another matter altogether.

I was on a plane once, flying from Denver to San Diego, and I sheepishly must admit to eavesdropping on a conversation between a young man and a young woman seated next to him. They were in the row directly in front of me. I leaned forward in my seat, super sleuth that I am, and spent a long time tying my shoe.

The young man was married, I gathered, but he was still enjoying the cheerleading of a female stranger who seemed genuinely interested in a very recent triumph. It soon became very clear that he had just pulled off a wonderful coup. A literal stroke of genius, apparently, for he laughed excitedly and his new-found friend enjoyed his good fortune with him. The story of the triumph was long and complicated: many moves and counter-moves, and the tension in his voice and demeanor were palpable as he recounted how close he skirted with failure. It was a true cliff-hanger.

After several minutes of this, I couldn't stand the suspense much longer and felt like leaning over both their seats and saying, breathlessly, "Please, please tell me what you do. I can't stand it any longer!" I had convinced myself that the young man had just brokered peace in the Middle East or found a cure for AIDS.

Fortunately, I kept my cool by tying the other shoe, and the young man's profession came out naturally in the conversation - he was a businessman who had just broken into the huge market for drink mixes in

the Southwest. He had, singlehandedly, brought his company's new red and green drink mixes to Phoenix. Years later, I still puzzle over this scene. Clearly, the world of work is enormously seductive to us as human beings.

In a society that elevates competition to a spiritual level (and sometimes frivolous competition, at that), we often focus on our work life to the detriment of our home life. Of course, this is often hard to admit. One very busy judge had his morning of epiphany before the bathroom mirror while shaving: "I always told my wife and kids that I was working so hard for them. The long hours were for their benefit. But that morning in the mirror I finally admitted it. 'Hell,' I said to the mirror. 'Quit lying to everyone. You're doing it for *you*. Not them.'"

This burst of honesty became the impetus for setting limits on his work life and beginning to build more meaningful connections with his family. Women fall into the same trap, of course. Sometimes they do this by re-creating the workaholic approach to life that men pioneered.

Sometimes they strike a silent bargain with their husbands that trades emotional connection for financial security. How does the classic story go? Two well-to-do wives were complaining over lunch about their husbands' long hours and inability to carry on a decent conversation when they finally did straggle home from work. "If you want someone to talk to," one wife finally snapped, "marry a woman!" Financial security has always been high on the list of reasons women, especially, have for choosing a particular partner. Even men have been known to chuckle, "It's as easy to marry a rich woman as a poor one."

But today we have added friendship to the equation. As a culture we value emotional commitment between spouses, and so the need for a better balance between work and home is ever-present. The marriage satisfaction bar has, in essence, been raised considerably.

It's very interesting to watch young children play. Sometimes two preschoolers will be playing side-by-side, very close together, and yet there is little real connection between them. They may even be trying to connect somewhat, but they are so wrapped up in their own thoughts and interests that genuine connection simply is not there. Early childhood educators call this *parallel play*, and spouses often engage in it, also. Pauline Boss at the University of Minnesota calls this condition *boundary ambiguity*, which describes a family in which it's hard to tell "who's really in the family, and who's out."

The key for family members is finding a level of commitment and emotional bond that works for everyone. Each of us has different needs in this regard, and often, some compromises need to be worked out. For what it's worth, I vote for a commitment to family over work and making this commitment long before it's too late. An ounce of prevention is worth a ton of cure when it comes to family dynamics.

When people in the news step down from a high-powered job, they almost always say, with a bit of humility, "I'm going to spend more time with my family." And, I have yet to hear a story of someone saying, at the end of life, "I should have spent more time at work."

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