To Work or To Live

On threading the needle

Aug 01, 2025

Hi everyone!

I have been thinking about work-life balance a lot recently. My office offered a compressed schedule for one month this summer which means that from July 15 to August 15, I am enjoying a four day work week. To say that I am loving it would be an understatement. It truly feels like this is how work and life is supposed to be.

This may contain: an open notebook with various items on it

artist unknown

Before I go any further — lets do the housekeeping.

First, if you are not already a subscriber and you resonate with any of the following descriptors, consider joining the cooperative: (1) Early-career professional; (2) Feminist; (3) Do-gooder; (4) Former Gifted Kid; (5) Overachiever; or (6) Capitalism-hater.

Second, if you like what I am saying and it makes you think of someone in your family/office/friend group, send it their way.

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Third, I say some personal and vulnerable shit every week. Say some vulnerable shit back. It’s called a community.

Leave a comment

Okay — back to it.

While I’ve been on this schedule, I have thought more about notions of capitalist productivity. We know that the 8-hour work day and 5-day week are products of the industrial era. Factories required as much human labor as they could get. In fact, prior to 1866, there was no nationwide precedent for an 8 hour day, rather factory workers would work 10 to 16 hour days. The push for the standardization of an 8-hour day took 67 years and was only implemented at a federal level in 1933 as part of President Roosevelt’s New Deal to revive the Depression era economy.1

Prior to the industrial period, work schedules were far more flexible. Think of the medieval peasant who performed manual labor but would work in an intermittent manner, taking long breaks for meals and naps.2 Think of anyone who works the land and how those tasks ebb and flow seasonally. Going beyond the work day, we can even think about the flow of the year. Pre-industrial societies were far more religious than post-industrial societies meaning that they had more holidays to celebrate. Where I get 11 scheduled holidays, in pre-industrial France, it was understood that they would get ninety “rest days” and thirty-eight holidays, in addition to the standard 52 Sundays.3 (Allegedly, in Spain they had 5 months worth of holidays per year!)4

It is my sense that capitalism robbed us of our ability to rest and our ability to be in community. This seems to be an unintended consequence that is rapidly hurtling us deeper into late-stage capitalism.

I’ve been getting endless advertisements for Amazon Pharmacy recently, which feels like quintessential late-stage capitalism, but actually works well to demonstrate my point here. The argument that these ads are consistently making is that our current healthcare system lacks consideration for our time and our wellbeing. Where in earlier eras, if you had a cold or the flu you could phone in your family or community to help, we largely don’t have that same luxury these days. Additionally, the impact of stress on our health has been well-documented, and yet we don’t take resting seriously, leading to health conditions that Amazon is now offering to help with. To put a fine point on it: post-industrial life has far less structured time for community and rest, causing negative health impacts, the scale of which have crippled our medical system and are now becoming the pot of gold that one of history’s wealthiest men is chasing.

Let us briefly return to understanding lives lived outside of capitalism. I love thinking about the great classical writers and how they might spend their days meandering through their worlds. Jane Austen would write in her living room, stopping whenever someone not in her family entered—and she had quite a lot of interruptions from servants and visitors.5 We can even begin to inch towards the modern era when we look to how artists and writers lived their lives. Take for example, Emily Dickenson and her hours of poetry or Robert Frost wandering through the seasons in western Massachusetts. Think of Ralph Waldo Emerson and his time around Walden Pond.

We can even look at contemporary writers. Glennon Doyle advised that if someone feels that they need to write a book, they should, and do so by writing for a couple hours a day and no more. She’s written four widely acclaimed books. This advice isn’t even uncommon!

I think that when we really break this down and consider the rules that capitalism and industrialism have laid out for us, it becomes clear that they aren’t intended for us to be humans who do things for their community, but rather tools of production. An eight-hour work day was not intended to keep us healthy and whole, but to rather make the most of the limited energy we have each day to keep producing for the material gain of those at the top.

[Brief aside that I feel I should note: I do not want to return to pre-industrial society (so many plagues and so much poverty and also slavery and just, no), but instead I want all of us to remember that the way that it is now is not some sort of fated outcome and we can choose a different way.]

Much of what I am saying today is not news. No one is surprised that I am mad that capitalism forces us to spend all of our energy on a thing that may not be exciting or fulfilling. As a generation, Gen Z is known for making these distinctions in our priorities and placing a high value on work-life balance.

Perhaps what I can add to the conversation is the following: when you know the outlines of capitalism you can choose the extent to which you live within—and outside—of them.

I have really enjoyed a four-day work week. I love my job. I like the people I work with. I like the practical work that I get to do. In a lot of ways, I benefit from my time spent within capitalism. On the other hand, having more time for rest and creativity has made me feel more human. I don’t think that you need to choose to either fully embrace capitalism or reject it. I think that the best thing that I can do for my own wellbeing is learn how to thread the needle.

Best,

Zoe

Femme Futures Cooperative

The Femme Futures Cooperative is a community space for young professionals who identify as over-achievers and activists to generate collective success by providing resources and platforms to thrive in challenging workplaces.

By Zoe

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1

https://civicsforlife.org/the-development-of-8-hour-workday/

2

The Overworked American: The Unexpected Decline of Leisure, by Juliet B. Schor (x)

3

The Overworked American: The Unexpected Decline of Leisure, by Juliet B. Schor (x)

4

The Overworked American: The Unexpected Decline of Leisure, by Juliet B. Schor (x)

5

Daily Rituals: How Artists Work, by Mason Currey (x)