

How is that Working for You?

Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda

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The popular Saturday morning cartoon *The Jetsons*, by the Hanna-Barbera studio that also brought us *The Flintstones*, offers us one vision of the future. And just as *The Flintstones* offers a vision of the past that takes... some artistic license, *The Jetsons* offer us a mixed bag when it comes to predicting how our future might be shaping up.

Set one hundred years from when it was created, *The Jetsons* shows us a society that in many ways mirrors contemporary life in the 1960s – a nuclear family with a male breadwinner, with a teenage daughter that spends her generous allowance at the space-mall, and a son who takes after his father in the local school's sports team (except, instead of baseball, they play spaceball).

But, of course, they make some half-serious predictions about how technology might impact our lifestyles. Like much of fiction set in the 21st century, they have flying cars. And while that technology has been on the cusp of reality for several decades, it is yet to reach any practical or realistic application. Many question whether it would even be desirable to have that mode of transportation in our cities.

A few things *have* panned out. Moving sidewalks are a technology that, while not widely used, has been a reality for decades now, and many of

us have even used them – probably at an airport. Same goes for treadmills.

In the cartoon, the standard way of communicating at a distance is the videophone – a telephone with a screen that shows you, visually, who you are talking to. This is something that an increasing number of us have become familiar with. In fact, our videophones are probably more sophisticated – and portable – than the cathode ray ones in the cartoon – and we don't really call them videophones, but rather laptops, or tablets, or... phones. Now, the cartoon doesn't really show the Jetson family going to church, but if they did, they could well have done so on their videophones, like much of the world does on Sunday mornings these days, now that we live in the future.

The one prediction that I find most interesting – and perhaps most disappointing in its non-fulfillment – is the one about the workweek.

George Jetson, the patriarch and breadwinner of the family works three hours per day, three days a week – for a total of nine hours a week. He complains about his heavy workload, and is not entirely happy with his short-tempered boss. Technology, it seems, has made this possible.

This particular prediction has not come to pass for most of us... but could it? It is not entirely without precedent after all.

For thousands of years, there have been established traditions that eschew the kind of non-stop workweek that continuously goes day in and day out, and instead have a formally-instituted day of rest – it's in the Bible! (Genesis 2:1-3, Exodus 20:8)

This sabbath day was partly to allow space for worship, as we do in this community. And what is worship? Last week, I read words from Jacob Trapp, who among other things, describes worship as the possibility to stand in awe among all that is before us – the “stars, a flower, a leaf in sunlight, or a grain of sand”, the ability to be receptive, “to pause from work and listen to a strain of music”, to be able to listen “to the still

small voice within” and be able to move “through deeds of kindness and through acts of love”. These things *can* be done while working, but they can be even easier to do when we take a sabbath day and seek moments of sabbath.

In the Bible, that sabbath was a Saturday, which continues to be observed in the Jewish tradition, and by Seventh-Day Adventists. Folks in the Christian tradition – and those of us who share in that heritage – have moved that practice to Sunday, because of a mix of historical and theological reasons. And that Sunday of rest has become standard in what is often called the Western world, as well as many other places around the planet.

But Saturday has also made a comeback. Thanks to the work – and often significant sacrifice – by leaders and supporters of many labour movements, the standard work week has come down from six to five days. Some industrialists, including Henry Ford eventually embraced this change, finding that rather than lose productivity, workers were better rested and more effective in the tasks of the week. It took a long struggle, but the modern weekend is a popular standard around the world.

And there has long been a campaign for another major shift toward a four-day workweek, which has gotten a boost lately, as the Pandemic has invited people to rethink how work is done, where it’s done, and when it’s done.

Not only is there precedent with the Saturday comeback, but it’s also witnessed around the world, as can be seen in some places in Europe, where three-day weekends from Friday to Sunday have taken some hold. And there is evidence, again, that productivity often does not decline and may even increase.

Perhaps the Jetsons were not that far off. Now that we live in the future – about halfway in the timeline from when *The Jetsons* were conceived

to when their story is set – it might be a good time to take some stock of how we think of work.

Now that we live in the future, our society is, by many measures, magnitudes of scale wealthier than ever before. And a lot of it is owed to technological advances. It can be argued – and many have – that our middle class lives a wealthier life than any medieval monarch... when you factor in things like better health and medical care; common luxuries, like the availability and variety of food; amenities such as plumbing, clean running water, and electricity. Even something like owning a car can represent a better quality of life than the richest people in the middle ages had in their lifetime.

But just because our society – and many individuals in it – may be wealthier in our lifestyles, does not necessarily mean we're richer.

Poverty is still real, with real impacts on people's lives. Even when many aspects of quality of life are better now than centuries ago, living with precarious housing conditions, or no housing – or unreliable access to those benefits that many of us can easily obtain – means that, in many ways, the life of the future has not made many folks all that much better off... even with shinier gadgets and better institutions. And technological advancements alone have not made the space for leisure that is often speculated in visions of the future. Our world may be wealthier, but the access to that wealth has not benefitted everyone in the same way.

And there's another complication at play here. What does it mean to have access to all this wealth – at least in principle – if you don't have the time to truly benefit from it? To enjoy it. To allow it for us to grow into a more meaningful life as individuals and as a community.

This doesn't mean that folks today can't have meaningful lives. Or that if you work full shifts and overtime you can't find moments of fulfillment. But the case remains that, we could imagine a far more

fulfilling life – a more enriching life – for each of us and our society, if we're ready to embrace the possibility that maybe we don't all need to be working all the time, or so much of our time, for the sake of sustaining our existence. Or, as can sometimes be the case, for the sake of ever-increasing riches, even when there's already enough to sustain oneself.

I rather like it when a rationale can be supported by both principled *and* practical arguments. And the case for a shorter workweek often covers both of these.

Not only would more time out of required paid work make space for more fulfilling lives, but the evidence suggesting that, by allowing workers more time to rest and devote to their personal and family needs – leading to more efficiency when performing tasks – suggests mutual benefits for all.

More time out of required paid work doesn't mean that people want to work less, but that they may have the opportunity to do *other* kind of work that is enriching in other ways, to themselves and to their community, such as volunteering for a cause they find important, thus enriching society at large, or following personal passions, like a hobby or further education, thus enriching one's life. Having more time for family and friends also allows for better mental health, and having space to focus on play and exercise can also lead to better physical and mental health, which benefits the individual *and* society, by reducing both social and financial costs. This is both a principled cause and a practical cause.

My friends, re-envisioning how, where, and when we do work, is not a case for doing less work, or for making fewer contributions to society. Rather, my friends, it is a case for making space for other options in how we contribute to each other and ourselves, for how we can make a more fulfilling life, for how we can make a more worshipful life.

My friends, living in the future has opened up many possibilities and opportunities... maybe it is also a time to see those possibilities and opportunities truly fulfilled for *all* of us.

So may it be,
In Solidarity and Love,
Amen

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Opening Hymn #51 Lady of the Seasons' Laughter

~)-| Words: Kendyl L. R. Gibbons, 1955- , © 2003 Kendyl L. R. Gibbons

Music: David Hurd, 1950- , © 1983 G.I.A. Publications Inc.

JULION 8.7.8.7.8.7.

Sing with WESTMINSTER ABBEY tune (Hymn #295)

Meditation Hymn #157 Step by Step the Longest March

Words: Anon.

Music: Irish folk song, adapt. and arr. by Waldemar Hille, 1908-1996,

© 1969 by Waldemar Hille

SOLIDARITY 7.6.7.6.D

Closing Hymn #139 Wonders Still the World Shall Witness

~)-| Words: Jacob Trapp, 1899-1992, © 1981 Jacob Trapp

Music: *Oude en Nieuwe Hollantse Boerenlities en Contradanseu*, c. 1710

IN BABILONE 8.7.8.7.D