

How the Work Week Encourages Short-Term Thinking

“So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom:.

– Psalm 90:12

If the way we think about our time determines how we spend it, then there’s something fishy about the traditional work-week.

When we think about our lives, most of us think in 7-day terms.

Most of us spend our Mondays scrambling to catch up with work. By the time Wednesday rolls around, we’ve given ourselves the satisfaction of being “halfway through.” By Friday, we’re patting ourselves on the back for finishing a long week. Through all the week we live as if there’s nothing but work. Then we spend two days in which we live as if there is nothing but play.

We’ve set our measure of progress and wellbeing against the passage of the work-week’s time. If we can console ourselves that Friday is coming (or that Thursday is the new Friday, or that it’s Hump Day), we’re far less likely to feel the itch of unfinished business in our personal or professional lives. After all, we think we’re almost “done.” You’ve probably been there, too. There’s a palpable slowness to Fridays and a palpable low-level panic on Mondays. And it doesn’t really change.

What that means is that we’ve made our lives about surviving a cycle instead of transcending it.

That cycle we’re stuck in? It’s the cycle through our work-week of ignoring consequences – neglected sleep, expensive order-out food, uncleaned apartments (e.g. “It’s OK if I spend this extra money – after all, it’s the work-week.”) – and our weekend of ignoring consequences – unchecked work, unadvanced projects, unresolved habits (e.g. “It’s OK if I spend this extra money – after all, it’s the weekend.”).

Problems can’t be left behind in one week. They will follow us to the next. This is surprising to some people, but it shouldn’t be. By dividing our lives into these discrete chunks called “work-weeks”, we can too easily shuffle away “the old units” down the memory hole.

If we want to transcend a cycle and grow, we wouldn’t make that cycle the measure of our lives. But whenever we’re “working for the weekend” or even “weekending for work”, we’re doing just that. When we’re aiming for meaning or progress as measured against some

specific part of the work week cycle, we're forgetting that time doesn't play by our rules. The weekend doesn't end the reality of value for value trade, or the reality of business. The work-week doesn't end the reality of personal needs, or the reality of personal growth.

If we want to think longer-term, we have to think differently about time.

How do we do that?

Somehow we have to visualize how each week as being inextricably tied to what happens in the next. We have to understand time and causality for longer than just 5-7 days.

I've found it helpful to have an underlying creative habit - writing - that goes on every day, uninterrupted by work week cycles. This reminds me that cycles can't stop dedicated creativity. I've also found it helpful to intentionally spend time on weekends not working much, but at least maintaining forward momentum on work in motion. On the other hand, I'll sometimes be smart enough to carve out time to pursue a meaningful social event or exercise during the week. This helps to remind me subconsciously that each day is its own time - not predetermined by its place in the work-week.

These are some ideas, but they won't solve the problem of work-weeks or short-term thinking. Still, I hope we can recognize this kind of looped thinking in ourselves more easily. Let's transcend the work-week cycle instead of letting it keep our memories short and our lives small.