

CAN FITZGERALD'S TYCOON LIVE A BALANCED LIFE?

**A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan
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How can we live a balanced life when there's so much to do? The 9-5 work day seems a relic of the past, if it ever existed. Stanford students feel enormous pressure to live in the library or lab, and to stay awake late into the night, trying to keep up with their academic work, much less juggle all the extracurricular obligations most have taken on. College-aspiring school children, going all the way back to nursery school and kindergarten, are often hurried from one structured activity to the next by their parents, when they're not in school. True retirement for many older people simply never comes.

In this morning's gospel lesson from Markⁱ, Jesus' disciples have just returned from a period of intense preaching and healing activity in villages of the Galilee region.ⁱⁱ Jesus encourages them to rest: "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while. For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat." Yet, when they try to do get some leisure time to eat and to rest, the crowds won't let them, wanting Jesus and his disciples to address them and to cure their ailments. Jesus responds to the people of Galilee with compassion, and he and his disciples are quickly back into a full work mode. The reading from Psalm 85 promises a time of peace to come, but it's clear that hasn't happened by the time of Jesus' Galilean ministry, or by our time two millennia later.

A biblical commentary that I use presents Jesus as the Good Physician in today's gospel lesson: "Here is an eloquent portrayal," the commentary explains, "of the need for rest as primary equipment for [religiously-motivated] service... If we are too busy to allow strength to be renewed by withdrawal and rest, we are too busy to serve God with our best."ⁱⁱⁱ There's a novel by F. Scott Fitzgerald, The Last Tycoon^{iv}, which does a good job of addressing this problem of finding balance in the midst of a busy and successful life. The book puts this issue into a contemporary context in a very useful way. Ultimately the title character fails as well, but there are helpful lessons along the way.

Fitzgerald modeled his tycoon, whom he calls Monroe Stahr, on Irving Thalberg, "the 'boy wonder' of the movie industry who became head of production at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer in 1924." (vii) The story unfolds in Hollywood in the mid-1930's (ix), and the editor of the version of the book I use explains that "Monroe Stahr is the archetypal American hero, the embodiment of the American Dream: a Jay Gatsby with genius." (vii) Early in the novel there's an earthquake at 9 p.m. on a July night, which knocks out power and bursts water mains at the studio. Stahr is

still at work and immediately takes charge of disaster response, although, as the narrator puts it, he's 'grey with fatigue.' (24) By the end of the episode, he's standing near the studio exit as the night crew leaves. Fitzgerald writes: "Men began streaming by him -- every second one glancing at him, smiling, speaking [saying his name]...He spoke and waved back as the people streamed by in the darkness, looking I suppose a little like the Emperor...he was their man, the last of the princes. And their greeting was a sort of low cheer as they went by." (927) Like Jesus in Galilee, Stahr is the savior whom the crowds adore.

He's also willing to take work time for very personalized responses to his employees, not only speaking to them, but literally curing their ills. He attends to a cameraman who tries to commit suicide and resolves the issue that has this person so depressed. He works with a writer to cure him of writer's block. He helps save an actor's marriage. He also has social vision, raising tens of thousands of dollars from the studio's board of directors and sending a dozen studio stars to a benefit for those in the local community whom the earthquake has left homeless. He convinces the same board to make a quality picture that he knows will lose money but, on the other hand, will produce long-term good will.

The downside of Monroe Stahr's life, however, is that he works much too hard. He calls his work "very congenial," and he enjoys working more than anything.(79) There's an ominous scene with his heart doctor, though, where Stahr has the usual excuse for not taking his doctor's advice to slow up and rest: "In about six weeks things'll ease up."(109) In fact his heart condition is very serious. The doctor thinks to himself, "Who could take him away and keep him away. It would almost surely be worthless. He was due to die very soon now. Within six months one could say definitely. What was the use of developing the cardiograms? You couldn't persuade a man like Stahr to stop and lie down and look at the sky for six months. He would much rather die." (109-110) Monroe Stahr is only 34 years old. (15)

There is someone who could take Stahr away and keep him away, though. A good portion of this book is a love story -- the story of growing feelings between Stahr and Kathleen, a woman who first visits the studio as a tourist. At one point when he's with Kathleen, Stahr begins thinking this way: "He wanted the pattern of his life broken. If he was going to die soon, like the two doctors said, he wanted to stop being Stahr for a while and hunt for love like men who had no gifts to give, like young nameless men who looked along the streets in the dark."(91)

Stahr comes to learn that Kathleen is engaged to another man, who is soon to return to California to marry her. Despite herself, though, she's falling in love with Stahr, and he with her. Fitzgerald does a wonderful job of portraying two reluctant lovers finding themselves inexorably drawn to each other. The plot reaches a dramatic denouement when Stahr has an opening to ask her to marry him and it's clear she'll say yes: "He knew he could not let her go now, but something else said to sleep on it as an adult, no romantic."(116) The narrator murmurs in the background, "It is your chance, Stahr. Better take it now. This is your girl. She can save you,

she can worry you back to life."(117) The narrator also tells us that, unknown to Kathleen or Stahr at the time, her fiancée will be arriving in California the very next day.

They drive back to her house after a date, and this is the scene at the door: "As he said goodbye he felt again that it was impossible to leave her, even for a few hours... It was a deep and desperate time-need, a clock ticking with his heart, and it urged him against the whole logic of his life to walk past her into the house now -- and say, 'This is forever.' Kathleen waited, irresolute herself -- pink and silver frost waiting to melt with spring." (117)

Then Stahr resolves to sleep on the decision: "'We'll go to the mountains tomorrow [afternoon],' said Stahr. Many thousands of people depended on his balanced judgement -- you can suddenly blunt a quality you have lived by for twenty years." (117)

Here's what happened then in the light of day: "He was very busy the next morning, Saturday. At two o'clock when he came from luncheon there was a stack of telegrams -- a company ship was lost in the Arctic, a star was in disgrace, a writer was suing for one million dollars, Jews were dead miserably beyond the sea. The last telegram stared up at him: 'I WAS MARRIED AT NOON TODAY. GOODBYE.' (117-118)

The next chapter has Stahr deep in grief at having lost Kathleen, and it shows him also losing his business acumen in negotiations with a union organizer. In fact, Stahr gets drunk, picks a fight with the organizer, and is knocked unconscious in the most sumptuous room of the studio.

That's where the book ends. Not because it was supposed to end there, but because Fitzgerald, the author, dies himself of a heart attack at the age of 44, with only half of a working draft of The Last Tycoon complete. (168) Living too hard was not just a problem for Fitzgerald's fictional character.

My father used to tell me, repeatedly throughout my childhood, that "All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy." A life-changing event occurred for me in the seventh grade when my parents forced me to go to bed one night before I'd completed my homework and studied for my French exam the next day. "But I'll fail the test and get in trouble for not finishing my homework!" "Too bad," was their response. "It's your bed time. You need to get your sleep and to get some balance in your life. That's much more important than this particular test and these particular homework assignments." I was very upset: "Parents aren't supposed to act this way -- interfering with their son's academic success!" Yet, within a few years I came to appreciate the lesson taught. My wife and children might now say that I still work too hard, but I've never forgotten that seventh grade experience. I do think that balance is a critical value in life, and an important virtue to aspire to.

All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy. It killed Fitzgerald, along with alcohol abuse,

and was about to kill Monroe Stahr before his author died. What's the antidote to overwork? I believe it's meaningful relationship, not just taking more time off. The vision of Psalm 85 is that the era of peace to come will be marked by steadfast love.^v Jesus keeps coming back from his public ministry to spend quality time (if you will) privately with his disciples. They regularly break bread, drink wine, and talk together. Monroe Stahr was very close to saving his life through a loving relationship with Kathleen, but he let his business orientation take precedence, to the ultimate detriment of both his business and his life.

This becomes even more important as a spiritual issue. As the commentary I mentioned earlier counsels, in reflecting on the gospel lesson for today, "The watchful care of [one's] health and strength is a primary religious duty. When we fail to take that care, we sin against God. We snatch away from [God's] full use the instrument [God] ought to have."^{vi} "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves," Jesus says to his busy disciples, "and rest a while.' For...they had no leisure, even to eat."^{vii}

May we work reasonable hours so that we have real time to spend with our lovers, our families and our friends. May students find a balance in their lives to develop relationships just as surely as they pursue their academic and extracurricular interests. May school children be given their childhoods back, with unscheduled time just to play and have fun with their friends. And may retirements at the other end of life be true retirements, rich with relationships as well. In the words of the Psalmist, "Show us your steadfast love, O Lord, and grant us your salvation... Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other. AMEN.

NOTES

i. Mark 6: 30-34.

ii. See Mark 6: 7-13.

iii. Interpreter's Bible (New York: Abingdon Press, 1951), Vol. VII, p. 738.

iv. Page number citations in the text of this sermon will be to the version of F. Scott Fitzgerald's unfinished novel which was edited by Matthew J. Bruccoli and re-named The Love of the Last Tycoon (New York: Scribner, 1994).

v. Psalm 85: 10.

vi. Interpreter's Bible, Vol. VII, p. 738.

vii. Mark 6: 31.