Ironically the industry most associated with the assembly line may be in the process of dis-assembling itself. Daimler-Benz is reviewing its options with Chrysler, which it swallowed in 1998 and this could result in another 13,000 in job losses.

Recently Alcoa announced job cuts of 6,700; before that VW was in the news with up to 10,000 in job losses. France Telecom needed to eliminate 23,000 jobs; Whirlpool, Electric Boat, BA and Merck have also been “right-sizing” as well. The list goes on and even the venerable institution of the church has not escaped with the US Presbyterian Church announcing a modest reduction of 75 positions.

In January the International Labour Organization, in its annual report on employment trends, noted that even though more people were employed that ever before the number of new jobs created fails to match the rise in global population. Strong global economic growth is failing to reduce unemployment worldwide and the number of “working poor”, those on $2 per day or less, is not diminishing.

Spare a thought for all those who, perhaps through no fault of their own, either have no work or are thrown out of work? Indeed, as work becomes increasingly commoditized and the economic ramifications of globalization penetrate ever deeper the subject of work, or more importantly, its lack becomes of vital and universal interest.

In an economic system where the market is relied upon to deliver solutions should we not merely allow matters to run their course? The answer to this lies in how one views the subject of work. If labour is merely a factor of production, a commodity bereft of its human
element that will generate a certain response. However in a just and equitable society should unemployment merely be managed or, better yet, eliminated? Should it be anyone's job to help the un-employed get employed?

As long as the view exists that in a market-based economy there will be a natural level of employment, any level of unemployment, for those that want to work, will remain an intractable issue. Challenging the received wisdom that a percentage of the work-force has to be idle requires looking at the subject from a different perspective. Wendell Berry and Khalil Gibran help in opening up the view.

Berry, a writer, philosopher and poet shared a close intellectual bond with E. F. Schumacher. In his 1981 lecture to the Schumacher Society in Great Barrington, Massachusetts he had this to say:

*People are joined to the land by work. Land, work, people, and community are all comprehended in the idea of culture. . . . To presume to describe land, work, people, and community by information, by quantities, seems invariably to throw them into competition with one another. Work is then understood to exploit the land, the people to exploit their work, the community to exploit its people. And then instead of land, work, people, and community, we have the industrial categories of resources, labor, management, consumers and government. We have exchanged harmony for an interminable fuss.*

By contrast Almustafa, the Prophet in Gibran’s masterpiece, when questioned by the ploughman on the subject of work, answered:

*You work that you may keep pace with the earth and the soul of the earth. For to be idle is to become a stranger unto the seasons, and to step out of life’s procession, that marches in majesty and proud submission towards the infinite. . . . But I say to you that when you work you fulfill a part of earth’s furthest dream assigned to you when that dream was born . . .
These lofty views on work can be reduced to the practical. Pope Leo XIII in the encyclical, Rerum Novarum, of May 15th 1891 noted:

*To labour is to exert oneself for the sake of procuring what is necessary for the various purposes of life, and chief of all for self-preservation. ‘In the sweat of thy face thou shalt eat bread.’*” He continued: . . . *man’s labour is necessary; for without the result of labour a man cannot live, and self-preservation is a law of nature, which it is wrong to disobey.*

No one would argue with self-preservation being a need but it would appear to rise to the level of an obligation – a law of nature. Accordingly, to be without work is unlawful; an unorthodox view.

The obligation to work is quite different from the right to work or earn a living. This latter right has a long pedigree and Sir Edward Coke (1552-1634) was an outspoken defender of the right to earn a living. Before this, in 1215, Section 41 of the Magna Carta provided support for the same notion. In 1868 the Fourteenth Amendment to the US Constitution was ratified and has been construed to protect

* . . . the right of the individual to contract, to engage in any of the common occupations of life . . . and generally to enjoy those privileges long recognized at common law as essential to the orderly pursuit of happiness by free men.*

Our market economy obviously recognizes the right to work. However, if society were to have as an informing principle the lawfulness and obligation of its members to work the requirement for potentially full employment would become an imperative. This is not to say that there are no provisions to assist the unemployed, of course there are, but are they the most effective. Income support and welfare comes from government, some corporations provide retraining to assist in out-placement and those seeking work are out looking for it. However are these and other measures pro-active enough?
A nation’s people are its greatest asset and one of the roles of government is to do for its people what they cannot do for themselves. Accordingly, without making the case that government alone should shoulder the task there has to be a role in developing a framework that will foster meaningful job creation. Policy directed to the creation of dignified employment opportunities leading to full, and we mean full, employment will enable all those who see the need to fulfill their lawful obligation to work.

The corporate sector, in some cases, recognizes that labour is better thought of in terms of human capital and is taking measures to treat employees and former employees accordingly. At the level of the individual those wanting work are taking steps to help themselves through education and other initiatives.

Any solution to the issue of structural or chronic unemployment is most unlikely to come solely from a market-driven approach. No doubt the market will play its part but a comprehensive framework will likely involve an integrated tri-partite approach involving the individual, the employer and the government. Absent a more enlightened approach to the issue there will likely need to be a body of regulation that both stimulates beneficial change and discourages inappropriate behaviour. However, the first step in the process is likely to be to recognize that, in fact, unemployment at any level is unlawful and is a matter of universal concern if man is to reach his highest ideal.

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