

Funding the Future

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Burnout is not a personal failure. It is the result of an economic system that steals time, daylight and energy from our lives.

In this fifth video in my Christmas series on light, I explore the relationship between light, healing and health — and why modern work patterns deny people access to the very conditions they need to recover and thrive.

Light regulates sleep, hormones, mood and immunity. Yet long hours, commuting, shift work and poor housing mean many people barely see daylight at all. Artificial light cannot replace what we lose.

This is not accidental. It is structural. Productivity is prioritised over health, time over care, and people are blamed when they break.

Light is a public good. Time should not be a privilege.

A society that denies people light cannot be surprised when they struggle to heal.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AMvXkcC6doc?si=NggEqPX3_A1prkk

This is the audio version:

https://www.podbean.com/player-v2/?i=ti8sy-1a0211e-pb&from=pb6admin&share=1&download=1&rtl=0&fonts=Arial&skin=f6f6f6&font-color=auto&logo_link=episode_page&btn-skin=c73a3a

This is the transcript:

This is the fifth in our series on light that we've been putting out over the Christmas season in 2025. It's not the last. We will have one more video to do to draw this season to a close, and that will be coming out tomorrow and draws all the threads together. But there is one last thread that I want to talk about today, and that is light, healing, and the theft of time.

Many people feel exhausted and unwell in the world right now. We are told that this is personal failure, but I'm going to suggest to you that it is not. It is actually about a structural failure, and light is part of the explanation for that.

What we know is that light regulates our sleep. It affects our hormones and mood, and it supports our immune function. This isn't some form of make-believe mumbo jumbo; this is, of course, established medical science.

But there is a corollary to it. Darkness and artificial light are now known to damage our health, and I do mean both of them. And there are consequences of that.

We know that seasonal affective disorder, sometimes called SAD, is real.

We know that vitamin D deficiency is widespread and is tackled by sunlight.

We know that circadian disruption is commonplace, and these are environmental conditions; they're not moral failings.

These are facts of life created by light.

Older knowledge knew and understood this. In pre-industrial societies, these rhythms were known. Daylight shaped work. Rest followed seasons. Holidays were there for a reason to allow for recovery. Healing included exposure to the light and time, and just have a look at how old hospitals were built to understand this. If you haven't got one near you, have a look at the old Addenbrooke's Hospital in Cambridge, near where I live. It's now the Judge Institute, a part of Cambridge University. But if you look at the building, you will see that there were balconies where patients could be taken out and left in the light, and that was one of the cures available at a time when, frankly, drugs were limited in supply; but it worked. And all of that basis of medicine at that time was not based upon ignorance. Modern research now shows that it was wisdom reflecting real need and the requirements for recuperation.

Modern work patterns don't reflect any of this, nor do they respect them.

Long hours ignore daylight. Now, this time of the year, many people never see daylight. They've left home before the sun is up. They arrive back home after work, after the sun has gone down, and that's in southern England. By the time we get to southern Scotland, and then go even further north and arrive in the Shetlands or somewhere, you are seeing very little daylight at all, and, of course, in the Nordic countries, it's even worse. You are not seeing much daylight, and it has an impact. And artificial light that

replaces that which is natural is not an alternative. It doesn't work in the same way.

We suffer from a lack of sunlight if that is something that isn't available to us, and shift work also creates this suffering, and commuting steals our time outdoors. The way that we work, the way that neoliberalism demands that we work, has consequences. In fact, you can say that capitalism steals light from us. Time is extracted, rest is minimised, daylight becomes scarce to us. Productivity is prioritised whilst health is secondary, and yet the very condition for good health on which these other factors are dependent is light, and we are denied it.

The consequence is clear: burnouts happen. Burnout is not the result of weakness. It is the result of energy depletion, and of course, the energy that is depleted ultimately comes from light.

Our economic systems are consuming people, and then it blames them for their collapse. This is unjust. What we need is healing, but healing does depend upon access to light, and, in turn, that depends upon housing quality, urban design, the design of working hours, and our transport systems.

Health and health policy is then a part of social policy. We cannot now separate these because we know that light is critical to our well-being. Access to light should be included in the working patterns of everyone if we are to achieve the best outcomes, not just for people, but for us as communities and as societies with economic concerns.

So, light is a public good. It shouldn't be a privilege, although right now it is.

And nor should time be a privilege either.

And green spaces matter because they are where we can absorb the best quality light.

So shorter working hours, as well as better pay, are key conditions for a better future; that's my argument. Planning for this matters because if we are really interested in a politics of care which treats a person as a whole, then we aren't just ensuring that people have the financial means to make ends meet. What we require is that they have the physical, health and light means, through energy, to achieve that goal as well.

This means we have to reframe well-being. Well-being is not optimisation, it is balance. It is rhythm. It is exposure to light. It is the things that light makes possible. The flow of energy from light through us is, after all, why we are alive, and that energy comes from the sun.

So care begins right there. If we want healthier societies, we must redesign our use of time, redesign work, redesign space, and we have to do all that so we have the energy to thrive. That would be the basis of a good economic policy.

A society that denies people light cannot be surprised when they struggle to heal, and

that's where we are. We need a better world. If people are to heal, if people are to be better, if people are to fulfil their potentials, then we need access to light, and we're not getting it.

One of the things we need to plan is a future where quite literally everything is lighter.

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