



“Musing from the Hill” by Susan Crossett

as seen on the *Dunkirk Observer* on Fridays
and the *Jamestown Post-Journal* on Saturdays



Meditating on Leisure

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Oh, dear reader, I have a little quiz for you.

No. don't bother reaching for paper and pen. Just the opposite. I want you to sit back, close your eyes if you'd like and picture yourself at rest. Sorry, no books, nothing whatever to distract you. So, what does “leisure” mean to you? Freedom, liberty, inactivity, time to spare. . . you get the idea.

What would you be doing – or perhaps not doing – if you were at leisure?

Once that picture is lodged firmly in your mind, slide ahead. (Well, I can hardly advise you now to “jump” or “skip,” can I?) Let's say half an hour. How are you doing now? How about an hour? More?

Once that picture is lodged firmly in your mind,

If you're anything like me, you were straining to get up and get going after the first fifteen minutes. I'm all for rest but I can't just sit and do nothing. I need to read – or write – or talk to another human being in real time. I simply have to be doing SOMETHING.

Turns out we're not alone.

An article in the January-February issue of “A” (formerly The Atlantic, formerly The Atlantic Monthly) claims we're wired to be that way. Derek Thompson in “How Civilization Broke Our Brains” asks “Where does the bizarre need to feel busy, even when one is sprawled on the couch on a weekend afternoon, come from?”

John P. Robinson, a sociologist at the University of Maryland, reviewed over forty years of time-use and happiness surveys which asked Americans how often they felt “rushed.” Or how often they had “excess time.” The happiest were the never-never group. “Their schedules met their energy level, and the work they did consumed their attention without exhausting it.” He concluded: “Happiness means being just rushed enough.”

We may gripe about the pressures of our schedules but, it turns out, the real problem is lacking any schedule at all. (Does that mean there is a reason – a need, if you will – to write my to-do lists before my first cup of coffee?) It seems if Americans don't have tasks, I read, they become fretful. One can encounter an urgent need to find a purpose – to overcome idleness – that, carried easily to extreme, becomes a source of stress.

I think we are all aware that residents in prisons or mental hospitals are given “jobs” for this very reason.

Anthropologist James Suzman spent close to thirty years studying the Ju/'hoansi “Bushmen,” a tribe in Namibia and Botswana who lived in isolation until the local government destroyed their way of life in the late 1990s. He described the early Ju/'hoans as healthy, cheerful, happy to work as little as possible and “ingenious at designing customs that discourage competition and status-seeking. “Only living things,” Suzman continues, “actively seek out and capture energy specifically to live, to grow and to reproduce.”



Back to Derek Thompson who wrote the article from which I've extracted various quotes. Our ancestors of roughly 2.5 million years ago, spent about eight hours a day foraging and eating; chewing and digesting all the raw pith, stalk and root, they probably slept nine to twelve hours each day. Not much time for anything else.

All that changed with fire which humans learned to control about a million years ago. Fire softened their meat and vegetables (“predigesting” their food) so they could eat in less time. Fire also made it possible for our ancestors to climb out of the trees and sleep safely on the ground, protected from predators. “Fire also allowed humans to grow huge, energy-greedy brains that take about a fifth of our calories.”



As our minds expanded and we began to have free time, “fire sparked humankind's capacity for boredom, amusement, craftsmanship, and art.”

Now one posits leisure exists for the sake of work. Think about downtime activities like social media. Are they not strewn with performance metrics? And what about childhood play such as team sports? Are they often now not used to enhance a student's resume?

“Modern life has made it harder,” Thompson concludes, “for Americans to forget about their work.”

What are you going to do when you put this article down? Be it work, factory, store or at home, I bet you're going to get busy.

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