

Spending Your Time

The hours and days we have to ourselves are more valuable than we think, and it only makes sense not to squander them. Like money, leisure time is earned; so it should be spent wisely and invested over the long term in a rewarding life . . .

□ Whoever it was that first referred to leisure as "free time" was speaking with unconscious irony. In a sense, there is nothing free about it; it must be purchased with the basic currency of work. Unless we are unfortunate enough to have idleness imposed upon us by unemployment, most of us trade hours of work for hours of rest and recreation. Even the leisure we gain when we retire can be seen as a retroactive pay-off for work we have done in the past.

The provision of time off is a standard feature of the rewards system of a modern industrial society. It was not always thus: in the 19th century, most people with a steady income lacked time to do anything more than work, sleep and eat. This was quite in keeping with the prevailing religious theory that idleness was a sin and work was a duty. Many were, indeed, idle; but they could hardly have enjoyed their "sin," living as they did in poverty.

When labour unions and reformers in England demanded a 10-hour day, employers and conservative politicians countered with the argument that allowing working men more time to themselves would only lead them to drunkenness and immorality. The argument held that leisure — meaning free time with the means to enjoy it — should be reserved for those who were born to it. A relatively tiny leisured class had more than enough time on its hands, while the great majority of people who had to work for a living did so for 12 to 15 hours a day, six or seven days a week, with no annual vacations or the prospect of a

pensioned retirement. It was no less onerous to stay at home, where, in the absence of household appliances, being a wife and mother was literally a full-time task.

Conditions were not much better in North America, except that the leisured class had amassed its money rather than inheriting it. On both sides of the Atlantic leisure was seen as such a precious thing that men were willing to strike and fight in the streets for it, as they did on Haymarket Square in Chicago in 1886.

In the age of the 37½-hour week and liberal vacations and statutory holidays, most people today have no inkling of what it must have been like to be deprived of time for relaxation. They tend to take leisure for granted, and give scant consideration to how they use it. It rarely occurs to them that it is something they have earned.

Leisure is often described as disposable time in much the same way as economists speak of disposable income. As people have money left over after meeting the necessities of life, they have time left over after working, sleeping and looking after their personal needs. Seen in this light, the expression "spending time" has never been so apposite. We earn time like money, and we spend it like money — wisely, foolishly or otherwise.

There are, however, a couple of differences between money and time which most of us only come to appreciate fully at about the age of 40. One is that we cannot save time in the true sense of the word; it must be either spent or wasted, as the case may be. The other is that, unlike

money, it cannot be replaced or borrowed. It is what nowadays would be called a non-renewable resource: every hour that passes is gone for good.

Since time is priceless and irreplaceable, it only makes sense for each of us to undertake a periodic review of how we are spending it. The process is like reviewing a household budget, and much the same considerations arise. In general, we must ask ourselves whether we are using the time at our disposal to our best advantage. We must assess whether our spending is in line with our objectives in the long run.

People who shun relaxation may damage their own work

There are, of course, as many approaches to these questions as there are people. Our leisure time budgets are bound to be influenced by our tastes, backgrounds, occupations, incomes, ages, how many children we have (if any) and what their ages are. Obviously the parents of a couple of toddlers will not spend their leisure time doing the same things as a well-off bachelor. Still, some general principles may be stated that apply to almost everyone.

The first is to keep in mind that leisure should not be underrated. It is a genuinely vital matter. As any military organization knows, rest and recreation are essential to the maintenance of physical and mental health.

Rest should not be confused with sleep. While sleep is necessary to recharge your physical battery, it is rest that recharges your mental and spiritual batteries. "Lazily the day shall pass, yet not be wasted," as a poet once put it. We all could use the occasional day like that.

Recreation is something else again. The term derives from an old French word meaning the restoration and refreshment of the strength and spirit. While rest is passive, recreation is active. You must do things to "recreate" yourself.

To accord rest and recreation the importance they deserve, you must see your leisure time and work time budgets as two separate accounts; don't embezzle from one to give to the other. Time for "R & R" should be deliberately set aside.

There may be a happy few among us whose hobby is their work, but there are none who could not benefit from doing something different from

their work in their off-hours. The man who habitually spends his evenings poring over the contents of his briefcase is not doing himself any favours. He is courting mental fatigue.

"I don't think you get mental fatigue from over-working, but from thinking in circles, beating your head against the wall," said Dr. William Plasse, an American psychologist. "I get awfully tired after an intense day of work, but if I do some physical exercise for an hour or so, the mental fatigue goes away."

Paradoxically, people who insist they cannot spare the time from their work schedules for exercise or any other leisure activity may be detracting from their own on-the-job performance. "When you feel lousy, you think lousy," a personnel expert is quoted as saying. "If you feel good, you are receptive to ideas."

While physical exercise is an antidote to mental fatigue, it cannot by itself clear the mind for action. The brain needs airing. This is done by applying it to something far removed from its usual preoccupations. For their own sake, over-workers would be well-advised to lighten their load and take up a hobby or a subject of study far removed from their customary field.

The masters of managing time know the value of taking it off

People of this personality type are motivated by achievement. They may be pleasantly surprised by the sense of achievement to be found in activities that have nothing to do with their careers. They may get a charge — or a recharge — out of building a doll's house or making vegetables grow or garnering an expert knowledge of Beethoven's symphonies.

The "workaholic" syndrome is commonly associated with those who have climbed to the top of their business or profession, or are on their way to doing so. But, as a flip through the pages of *Who's Who* will confirm, there is no conflict between material success and a full leisure life.

Many of the people at the top take part in an uncommonly wide range of leisure activities, including hobbies and sports as well as religious observances and community work. This recalls the fact that possibly the greatest businessman

Canada has ever known, Sir William Van Horne, collected fossils, Oriental porcelain and paintings, was an accomplished painter himself, raised prize-winning roses, did conjuring tricks, travelled widely, and played a mean game of poker. None of this prevented him from overseeing the construction of a transcontinental railway against great obstacles and putting it on the road to becoming one of the largest transportation companies in the world.

There should be no mystery as to why some of the busiest people have so much time at their disposal and why they are able to do so much with it. They are keenly aware of the value of time, and they are masters of managing it. They are also aware of the value of rest and recreation, so that they do not come to the office to think in circles. They are living proof of William Hazlitt's theory that the busier the man is, the more leisure he generates for himself.

Investing a part of your time with a long-range objective

People like this give leisure the high priority it deserves, while many of the rest of us refuse to take it seriously. It seems rather trivial: much of it is devoted to play, and play is what children do. Whether we kick around a soccer ball or paste stamps in an album does not seem to have any great meaning in the scheme of existence. That may be true in the earlier stages of our lives, but leisure takes on a growing significance as we grow older.

Here again we come to the parallel between disposable time and disposable income. If we are at all sensible, we invest some of the money we save to magnify its worth at a later date. The same should be done with the time we have to spare; we should not spend it all, but invest some of it towards our retirement. As in finance, the earlier we make the investment, the richer the return we can expect.

The loss of a little physical stamina in middle age is a signal to start thinking ahead to the

days when leisure will become your full-time occupation. You will then want to be doing things which you can do for the rest of your days. For instance, some changes may be in order in the type of sports you practise — trading downhill for cross-country skiing, or strenuous team sports for golf or bowling. On the other hand, if you have become the kind of sportsman who derives all his action from television, you might think about doing something to improve your state of fitness.

Your middle years are also the time to build up your mental and spiritual defences against the restlessness and dissatisfaction that so often strikes retired people. This may mean spending a portion of your present leisure time in developing new hobbies and interests which will hold your attention for many years to come. It could be almost anything: growing tomatoes, baking bread, learning to play the flute, tracing your family tree, collecting pocket watches. You have the opportunity to experiment with different pastimes while you are relatively young.

A long-term investment in things to exercise the mind could yield handsome rewards 20 to 25 years hence. Your leisure portfolio should be diversified. One hobby is rarely sufficient to hold an enduring interest when it is all you have to do in your retirement years. Your list of activities should ideally include some exercise or sports, some creative craft or hobby (or both), some entertainment, some socializing, some travel, and study in some field unrelated to your work.

One of the lasting benefits of hobbies, studies and sports is that they give rise to companionship among people who share an enthusiasm. When people retire, they often find that they miss the camaraderie of the friends they have made during their careers. If they have established themselves in a group or groups centred around their leisure activities, they will not be so subject to loneliness.

Though preparation for retirement is an excellent reason for reassessing our use of disposable time, it should not be thought of as the only reason. We should try to make the most of our leisure at any age simply to make ourselves into complete human beings. We all possess a certain number of talents which "nature has concealed at the bottom of our minds," as de La Rochefoucauld put it. The creative use of leisure can bring these latent abilities to the surface.

"It always seems to me to be a sort of clever stupidity to have only one sort of talent — like a carrier pigeon," said George Eliot. In this age of specialization, many of us are obliged in our jobs to develop one talent to the exclusion of the others we might have. Even hobbies can become overly specialized and all-consuming. A specialty can be an ever-narrowing tunnel. If we let it dominate our thoughts, actions and conversation, we are in danger of becoming bored bores.

Boredom cannot be avoided without some conscious cultivation of the mind, which is mostly done through wide-ranging reading. Without the necessary mental preparation which comes through reading as a daily routine, solitude turns to loneliness and repose to ennui. "I pity the unlearned gentleman on a rainy day," wrote the old cavalier, Sir Lucius Falkland. Only by making our minds fit for it can we attain that enviable state described by the philosopher Cato: "Never less idle than when wholly idle, never less alone than when wholly alone."

Boredom is within ourselves: "Someone's boring me . . . I think it's me," Dylan Thomas lamented. The scientific explanation for this dreary state of mind is a "deficiency of sensory responsiveness to the external world." If you are inclined to suffer from this type of deficiency, you can whet your appetite for the world around you by strengthening your powers of observation and appreciation. The town or city you live in, for instance, is a blank wasteland if you do not know something of its history and cannot imagine yourself in the places of those who have been there before you. A flock of birds is just a flock of birds unless you know what species they are.

To a person who has made an intellectual investment in a full leisure life, boredom need never be a problem. It is as Jules Renard wrote: "Being bored is an insult to oneself." On the other hand, boredom is a dangerous condition if we have not equipped ourselves to combat it. It has been said that it creates more drunkards than thirst, more gamblers than greed, and more suicides than despair.

The self-destructive habits to which people are driven in vain attempts to escape boredom are hard to relinquish. Habit is proverbially a good servant and a bad master, and all too many people are held in servitude to the habits they have formed. But if we recognize that we are indeed creatures of habit, we can replace old habits with new ones. When we come to reassess how we spend our leisure time, we can deliberately choose a different set of habits and mould them into second nature after a while.

The use or abuse of leisure is a matter of personal choice

Most of what we hear about leisure these days is couched in terms of social questions. Seminars are held with titles like "Leisure: a Blessing or a Curse?" and experts worry aloud that such developments as shorter work weeks, job-sharing, early retirement and a higher average age will bring about new social ills. The abuse of leisure time is held to be largely responsible for alcoholism, drug addiction, family break-ups and other such problems. All this might be true; but in a free country, the use or abuse of leisure is a matter of individual choice.

The main point to remember is that leisure activity is something you do for yourself, whereas work is something you do for others. And, since you are doing it for yourself, some crucial questions arise. Among these are: Is what I am doing the best thing for myself and for those I care for? Is it going to help me or hurt me? Can I keep it up as I get older? Will it eventually make me content?

As the amount of leisure time grows in our lives, these questions will grow in consequentiality. For the individual as well as for society, leisure can indeed be a blessing or a curse. The ancient Greek philosophers believed that leisure could be the ideal state for both society and individual man if man could only learn to use it wisely. It was a Greek philosopher, too, who said that an unexamined life is not worth living. That large part of our lives we call leisure must be examined if we are to live fully and at peace with ourselves.