

The Neglect of Relaxation

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The *Atlantic Monthly* used to feature an entertaining section on historical encounters between some of the significant figures of a particular period—Frederick the Great and Voltaire, Sarah Bernhardt and Thomas Edison, Fats Waller and Al Capone—with the suggestion that they were rather odd bed-fellows. I was reminded of that series when Roger Mannell told me that he had met and spent some time with Josef Pieper back in 1981 when Pieper visited the University of Waterloo. This surprised me as I had read Pieper's ideas on leisure along with those of Plato and Aristotle and imagined him nearly as long gone. A young assistant professor at the time, Roger asked the aging German professor if events or experiences in the 30 or so years since finishing "Leisure: The Basis of Culture" (1952) had led him to reconsider the views he expressed there. Pieper's unadorned answer was "no." "I had the distinct impression that he thought his views were at least as relevant these days," Roger told me.

The significance of that encounter has grown for me over the years as I have thought about the contribution of each to our field of leisure studies. We revere Pieper in some of our graduate classes on leisure theory and generally regard his *Leisure* as a "classic." But his emphasis on relaxation and receptivity seems to me to have had far less influence on research and practice in our field than has the work on concentrated effort, competence, and commitment in leisure that has been championed as optimal experience by Mannell along with Csikszentmihalyi, Stebbins, Iso-Ahola, Kelly and others. They have used different words, of course, but they have all taken a special interest in rather high intensity activity as being a source of satisfaction, self-realization, and even a sense of community.

Mannell, who demonstrated the connection between intense involvement and enjoyment experimentally (1980; Mannell and Bradley, 1986), also drew our attention (1993) to the similarity of a number of perspectives that demonstrate the significance and value of high investment, "serious" leisure (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Kelly, 1987; Stebbins, 1992). The only points of any real debate are why we don't have more of such experiences and how we can increase their frequency. Even the supposed deficiency of such ideas for capturing the *social* value of leisure seems to be addressed where these same authors demonstrate that sharing such activities contributes to relatedness, bonding, intimacy and an ethos of shared identity.

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For Pieper, in some contrast, leisure is to be found in an attitude of “non-activity” and receptivity: “Leisure is not the attitude of mind of those who actively intervene but of those who are open to everything; not of those who grab and grab hold, but of those who leave the reins loose and who are free and easy themselves” (1963 [1952] p.41) For Pieper leisure is completed in affirmation and celebration, but it is begun in being truly and abundantly *relaxed*. In contrast with idleness and boredom, as well as effort, it is comfort in just being.

Pieper’s conception of leisure seems even more elusive as we begin this new century. Being the productive society we are, we celebrate effort and value relaxation primarily for its role in recharging that effort. A more mature view sees the importance of relaxation for reflection and planning, for gaining the kind of perspective that leads to an effective change in direction, acceleration of efforts in some direction and deceleration of effort in others. But such considerations seem somehow to be recessed in our high speed, technologically-charged existence and rarely find their way into prescriptions for optimizing life’s opportunities.

Associating effort with work makes sense with respect to productivity, and it only remains to be demonstrated that productivity, life satisfaction and development are enhanced when relaxation is also integrated along the way. But it seems somehow ironic then that effort has also become the dominant ideology of *leisure* in contemporary society and central to our very understanding of what leisure is. That effort can be entered into voluntarily, spontaneously, and joyfully has become ever more intriguing for both intellectual and practical reasons. To find intrinsic motivation in the choice to be active and fully invested, concentrating and present-centered is very appealing as a prescription for optimal experience and performance. To find that such a combination is also associated with subjective well being, creativity and personal growth, as Csikszentmihalyi and others have, is also compelling evidence of its importance for quality of life. Enduring interests that are captivating also give people a sense of continuity, identity, integrity and—since others are usually involved—of community as well. (See Kleiber, 1999, for further elaboration of this point).

Csikszentmihalyi and others would argue that such a state of optimal experience, while not always easy to create and even harder to maintain, represents the ideal toward which all of society’s corrective engines should be directed. We are so far from that ideal in everyday life—whether considering typical classroom experience or typical leisure experience—that there is no shortage of things to do to improve and expand the structure of our environments and opportunities. Wholehearted investment in action is the essence of good work and, some would argue, the nature of true leisure as well (cf. Tinsley & Tinsley, 1986).

Relaxation is clearly neglected and subordinated in this view, and as a result so are such things as appreciation, contemplation and peacefulness. Committed and serious effort, joyous activity and celebration, and re-creation may emerge from leisure, but I share Pieper’s view that leisure is most essentially a position of relaxation, of faithful openness to immediate reality

and ease of movement and thinking. At times “flow” experience may feel effortless, but mostly we know when we are intensely engaged. And we know in contrast when we are not, when we are disengaged and relaxed, open to possibility, receptive to the world around and comforted by the conditions of our lives that allow us to be that way. This is the essence of leisure in my view.

This seems to come up in our research on the connotative meaning of leisure, as well, though we tend to ignore it in favor of other features. In her time diary studies of adults, Sue Shaw (1985) found that relaxation, along with freedom from evaluation, were characteristics that most people associated with leisure. To do things “at your leisure” or in a “leisurely manner” also speaks to a different, slower and more relaxed, way of doing things. We also seem to know both empirically and intuitively that negative affect chases away leisure; leisure, to be leisure, should be a positive experience. But our bias, born out of a culture that valorizes both youth and achievement, is to associate positive affect with action and interaction, with creating fun in an active sense that has some potential of yielding the gratification associated with competence.

This is at most half of the story of positive affect, however, according to psychologists. Studies of affect contrast pleasant and unpleasant on one dimension, but they also contrast activation and deactivation on another (e.g. Barrett & Russell, 1999) In the pleasant/deactivation quadrant are such experiences as contentment, serenity, relaxation and calm. These experiences seem to me to be generally ignored in our leisure studies literature, but they are vitally important to mental health and to creativity as well.

In *Freedom and Destiny*, psychoanalyst Rollo May (1981) discusses the significance of *the pause* as a critical element of freedom and creativity. The pause, which is more relevant to eastern than western thought, signifies what is *not* rather than what is. The pause signifies appreciation and opportunity; it is time pregnant with possibility. But it also represents a kind of resistance in interrupting “the rigid chain of cause and effect”:

In the person's life response no longer blindly follows stimulus. There intervenes between the two our human imaginings, reflections, considerations, ponderings. Pause is the prerequisite for wonder. When we don't pause, when we are perpetually hurrying from. . . one “planned activity” to another, we sacrifice the richness of wonder (p. 167).

May notes that musicians are especially aware of the power of pauses in giving notes meaning and clarity. He links the pause to creativity more directly in seeing it as “inviting the Muses” where painters, poets and other artists put themselves in a position of “readiness for the ‘lucky accident’.” The pause takes advantage of the capacity to appreciate. In everyday thought reflection requires pausing; and yet pauses can last for longer, as in an evening, a weekend, a vacation or a sabbatical. But May also notes that the American sense of leisure does not make particularly good use of the pause—in some contrast to Europeans as well as people in non-western cul-

tures—preferring to define the freedom of leisure in the action that can occur, in movement and becoming rather than in contemplation and being.

For Pieper, faith in God is needed for true leisure. Perhaps that is so. But I would argue that disengagement and emotional security would be enough to give leisure meaning and value in our time. Having said that, our task in leisure services (perhaps in contrast with recreation services) would change to be that of addressing the factors that contribute to dis-ease. While there are many such causes, they fall into two contemporary groups: those that result from the conditions of the world around us and those that seem to be more of our own making. In the first case, we should come to understand how poverty, oppression and abuse undermine any possibility of relaxation and thus leisure. Leisure is not available to some, even in advanced post-industrial societies. Correcting that is and should be a social agenda. Establishing leisure, as true relaxation, would be a mark of progress.

It does not follow though that wealth and abundance bring leisure. Indeed, the consumptive patterns of wealth of upwardly mobile individuals seem to create the leisure lack that Steffan Linder (1971) wrote about nearly thirty years ago; to acquire things and then to have to take care of them creates a threat to leisure. Being “harried,” to use his word, is certainly the absence of leisure. In contrast people can be leisurely with very little. Simplicity and leisure are often companions (cf. Goodale & Godbey, 1988). We need to study those who find leisure in modest even troubled circumstances. They are a leisure class of a different kind.

Leisure is given vitality and meaning in celebration and active engagement, but it starts with relaxation and comfort. Let’s give leisure our attention—both in research and practice—as an experience reflecting emotional security—a child at play, a wondering tourist, two old friends rocking on the porch. The conditions, internal and external, that threaten such experience deserve our attention.

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