

Leisure: Idols and Opportunities

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If Harold Meyer and Charles Brightbill were here today, they would surely be gravely concerned with our welfare and the prospects for leisure in our time. The community and the common wealth they were so eager to build have been sacrificed to rights and freedoms claimed only in the name of individuals, never in the name of us all. Examples abound.

Before the year is over, about half of the 50 states will allow virtually everyone to carry concealed weapons. This is done in the name of individual security. Never mind the evidence that one is less secure. Never mind 24,000 gun deaths a year. Never mind that when we all carry weapons, security will require escalation to bigger, longer-range weapons. Never mind that the security of our streets, schools, parks and our own very lives are even further compromised. But the public be damned. Individualism reigns. There is no public good — no common wealth.

Here, in a nutshell, is why Meyer and Brightbill would be gravely concerned about our welfare, and here in a nutshell is why, with the potential for leisure so great, so little of that potential is realized.

Conceptualizations of rights and freedoms are individual, not collective. We claim multiple individual rights, including the right to a good time. For many, the highest and best use of wealth and freedom is laying on a beach somewhere or taking a funship cruise. But as Paul Goodman (1960) noted decades ago, millions of individuals having a good time doesn't add up to anything.

From the standpoint of the community, there is no benefit, as no commonwealth is produced. Private wealth may accrue to those who sell bathing suits or operate funships. Individuals may benefit from the rest and a good tan, but there still may be no contribution to the commonwealth. That depends on what people do once they are rested. Often their non-free time, their work, makes no contribution to the commonwealth either. Millions do work that doesn't need to be done: millions, in fact, do work that shouldn't be done. Joe Camel is one of them.

The ascendancy of individualism and collapse of community is the product of a crumbling value system. Over 40 years ago, Jacob Bronowski (1956) demonstrated that values are what make possible membership in human communities while at the same time preserving the integrity of single persons. So it is that we value freedom permitting originality, tolerance permitting dissent, both based on respect for others, based on self-respect. Today, self-respect has been replaced by self-esteem, self-efficacy, and most of all self-interest. The ascendancy of individualism and self-interest means forfeiting membership in community. Our communities, being dismembered, are gradually dismantled.

In a dismembered society, tribes form along racial, ethnic, and gender lines, into offensive and defensive alliances. But the problem is not race, gender, or ethnicity. Political correctness conceals and cultural diversity avoids the problem in an effort to soothe the conscience of a white middle class too tired to build community and too frightened about its own future to care about the poor. Those are the problems. Too many poor, too little community. All the rest is distraction or illusion.

Centuries ago Francis Bacon suggested four sources of human error. He called them idols, using that term as the early Greeks used it to designate illusions and false appearances. The first of those sources of error or illusion he called the idol of the tribe. By tribe he meant the human race in general and its false assertion that people's perceptions set the standard of things. Our perceptions are flawed.

Further tribalizing by race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation or whatever, magnifies the illusions and produces little but a white male reaction: Proposition 187, *The Bell Curve* (Herrnstein & Murray, 1994), the attack on Affirmative Action. An additional problem with tribalization is that the defining characteristic of the tribe becomes an unassailable basis for points of view and ways of life. Tribe members no longer have to defend their opinions or justify their beliefs on rational grounds. Being Black, gay, pro choice, born again, or whatever gives you an unassailable position, and if you're not Black, gay, or whatever, you wouldn't understand. That's nonsense, of course, but to faulty perception we add tribal distortion.

Rational thought and public deliberation is replaced by genetic coincidence or geographic accident. So as the society becomes dismembered, our basis for civil life and civic order is dismantled as well.

Tribes within tribes seem an outgrowth of Bacon's other idols. The second idol he called the idol of the den, a most apt description it turns out. This idol refers to the inevitable distortion of individual disposition, experience, training, social relations, and, Bacon said, reading. Today, few people read. The idols of today's den come from television. Frightening though it is, among the very few things Americans still have in common are Oprah, Geraldo, and now O.J. Simpson.

One is reminded also of Plato's simile of the cave, a parable of education and ignorance. Confined in the cave, people see only shadows and the voices too come from the shadows. Forced to turn to the light, to the real and the true, cave dwellers find it blinding and painful, and retreat to the comfort of shadow and illusion. In today's den, the shadows are those of entertainers and salespeople paid handsomely to make us discontented with our lives. Watching TV is Americans' number one free-time activity. One can hardly say enough bad things about television.

Bacon's third source of error he called the idol of the market, by which he referred to social and public discourse and interchange in general. We are plagued, Bacon argued, by constant exposure to words that undermine or preclude understanding. The "permissible lie" of the world of advertising is the obvious case in point. Robert Heilbroner

suggested that one effect of TV is to teach children that adults will lie for money. But political discourse is rapidly becoming as deceptive and dishonest as commercial discourse. Little is left but photo opportunities, sound bites, and spin doctors. Selling has become the principle occupation of everyone.

Some of our most perceptive authors such as Sisela Bok with her books on *Lying* (1978) and *Secrets* (1983) have pointed out some dangers, and a spate of recent books reinforce that: titles include *Tainted Truth* (Crossen 1994); *News and the Culture of Lying* (Weaver, 1994); *Culture Inc: The Corporate Takeover of Public Expression* (Schiller, 1989); *Deceptive Advertising* (Richards, 1990); *The Unreality Industry: The Deliberate Manufacture of Falsehood* (Mitroff & Bennis, 1989); *The Predatory Society: Deception in the American Marketplace* (Blumberg, 1989). Truth in America has come to mean anything which is not legally false. All to make a pitch.

One result is to magnify the advertisers' assaults on our senses. The volume of ads on television is turned up a notch, and we do more and more flyers on shocking pink paper. One example comes from one of our newer "professional organizations," the Resort and Commercial Recreation Association. It not only assaults our senses but also insults our intelligence. This flyer reads:

Commercial Recreation Students. Do you dream of a career working in a glamorous resort, on a leisure filled cruise line, or perhaps with a similar, exciting commercial recreation agency. RCRA is your ticket to the networking and professional contacts that will help you make those dreams a reality.

Analyze this advertisement a bit: dreams and realities, glamour and excitement; hyperbole everywhere, and it threatens our language. "Networking and professional contacts" is a language which, unwittingly, justifies our cynicism about objectivity, fair play, and justice. It is a euphemistic way of saying it is not what you know, but who you know. That you have to sell yourself over the network only reinforces the notion that we are a nation of salespeople. The record no longer speaks for itself. Too often it's a lie anyway. Again, an example from the folks at RCRA:

RCRA Conference Scholarship Application:

The purpose of these scholarships is to provide interested students with formal association administrative experience while helping to defray conference fees. Each student will be expected to assist for a maximum of ten hours during the conference. Assignments will vary, but may include registration, monitoring and/or support services.

It is the Association's hope that the time spent can be counted as fieldwork or practicum experience and be worthy of inclusion on a resume. In recognition of their service, each scholarship winner will receive a certificate acknowledging their contribution. As a stipend, one half of the student preregistration conference fee will be deducted (value equals \$95).

Analyze this flyer a bit. Registration, monitoring and support services are called “formal association administrative experience.” The association hopes you can get college credit, and you can put on your resume 10 hours of work commonly done by temporary service employees with a few minutes of training. If you work 10 hours and pay a \$95 conference registration, we will call this a scholarship, and you can put that on your resume. Harold Meyer and Charles Brightbill would not be pleased.

As Orwell warned us in so many of his works, when you destroy the meaning of words, you destroy the ability to think. In addition, you destroy all but the shallowest notions of freedom, because the lack of accurate information, where choices are involved, renders you powerless. If you want to empower people, arm them first with knowledge and second, courage; no substitutes.

The fourth idol Bacon called the idol of the theater. He was referring to dogmatic systems of philosophy that create fictitious, theatrical worlds, even farces and tragedies. James Madison once said that government by the people, without a well informed people, “is but the prologue to a farce — or a tragedy.” The dogma and fiction underlying today’s tragedy come from those for whom free markets and small governments are holy quests.

Free enterprise, free markets, and laissez-faire capitalism are championed by those who spend billions trying to extract favors from government. They don’t want laissez-faire: they want favors, guarantees, protection, subsidies, insurance, and bailouts. Laissez-faire is for the poor. Then they champion the idea that financial rewards reflect merit and just desserts. Another myth. Wealth more likely results from inheritance, accident, deception, or luck than from merit and just dessert. Women are paid less than men are paid for the same work. Millions of people get no benefits, insurance, or pension for doing the same work as people who do.

By what perverse logic does Madonna deserve 80 million dollars per year? That is not merit or just dessert. That is obscene.

A third myth is that to interfere with the market would destroy initiative, at least initiative among poor people. Government largess apparently doesn’t destroy initiative among the rich. The plea for free markets is really a plea for more inequality. Even if inequality is a necessary corollary of freedom, there is no moral rationale, nor even a utilitarian one, for the gross inequities and disparities in this country. The old Protestant ethic, mixed with social Darwinism, Tawney wrote, means, “a society which reveres the attainment of wealth... (and which) will naturally be disposed to regard the poor as damned in the next world, if only to justify itself for making their life a living hell in this one” (1962, p. 267).

Even Adam Smith in the *Wealth of Nations* said watch out for the predations of big business. Thomas Jefferson said, “Experience declares that man is the only animal that devours his own kind, for I can find no milder a term for the general prey of the rich upon the poor” (1787, p. 209)

John Maynard Keynes (1930) said that collective well-being is not an automatic outcome of self-interest and that, indeed, individual interests are often best served by aggravating the diseases and evils of economics. Karl Polanyi (1944) argued that allowing market mechanisms to direct the fate of people and the environment would result in the demolition of society.

A free market, Robert Kuttner (1991) argued, does not “add up to a socially defensible allocation of either private income or public investment. It does not efficiently or fairly distribute certain necessary social goods... Markets tend to crowd out social values.”

Especially in the last 15 years, disparities of wealth grew dramatically — private versus public; rich versus poor. About 80 billionaires are in the U.S. A decade or so ago there were a dozen. Yet several states and scores of cities are in financial peril with fewer services and supports for the poor. Our cities now have two education systems- a private one for the rich, a public one for the poor. We have two park and recreation systems- a private one for the rich, a public one for the poor, and even the public system is more kind to the rich than the poor. Compare the suburbs of any city to the urban centers. Downtowns are “revitalized” for tourists. More poor are displaced or left homeless. In the past few years, 49 cities have enacted anti-homelessness laws, declaring on behalf of those most in need, the right to remain nowhere. As the French Nobel laureate, Anatole France wrote a century ago, “The law, in its majestic equality, forbids the rich as well as the poor to sleep under bridges, to beg in the streets, and to steal bread” (1894, p. 140).

Without doubt, the urban poor are disproportionately visible minorities. But as University of Chicago sociologist, William Wilson (1978) argued, the problem is not race but class, not cultural diversity but economic disparity. You know the figures: 40 million people below the poverty line; 37 million with no health insurance; about 26 million people in America receive food stamps; about six million children below age six, live in below poverty line households. But there is no money for basketball or swimming, perhaps not even for school lunches.

Those who think job training or workfare programs will help may be deceiving themselves. Corporations are now multi-national; production is increasingly done elsewhere. Wages paid to production workers, except in a few mature economies, are way below U.S. wages — sometimes less than 50 cents per hour. With a global economy comes a global labor force. So there are about 800 million unemployed, heading toward 1.5 billion 20 years from now. Contrary to popular myth, as the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported, occupations accounting for 80% of new jobs expected to be created over the next decade do not require a college education. They include retail sales, cashiers, general office clerks, truck drivers, waiters and waitresses, nursing aids and orderlies, janitors and cleaners, and food preparation workers. Those employed in the professions of law, medicine, engineering, architecture and the natural and social sciences will constitute 6.1% of the work force in the year 2000 (Mishel & Teixeira, 1991). The nation’s largest employer, by far, is Manpower, Inc., and over half the employees of the nation’s largest retail chains are part-time employees. Still, credentials are demanded

and, disproportionately, members of racial and ethnic minorities and others who are poor do not have the credentials. With our wonderful way with words, we now speak of the poor as marginal and the unemployed as redundant. As William Wilson wrote, "The situation of marginality and redundancy, created by modern industrial society deleteriously affects all the poor, regardless of race. Under-class whites, Hispano-Americans and Native Americans are all victims... of class subordination under advanced capitalism" (1991, p. 27). Not long before he was murdered, Martin Luther King asked, "what good is it to be able to eat in any restaurant you want if you can't afford a hamburger?"

Marginality and redundancy. In communities, no one is marginal, no one is redundant. But communities have been dismembered and now families, too. Millions upon millions are left to cope alone.

The problem is that if the only function people have is economic, they are marginal and redundant. We don't need them. And so the future arrives in barbaric form. We could have more leisure, much more. Instead, about 14 million people are unemployed and underemployed. We have millions of people on drugs, six million on Prozac alone. We have a million people in jail. We have 10-year olds planning their own funerals. In New Jersey, the courts recently ruled that getting shot while driving is part of the risk of driving and thus, covered by insurance. This scenario looks very much like the "collective nervous breakdown" John Maynard Keynes (1930) said we should expect if we continue to be guided by individualism and self-interest.

In 1930 Keynes said that we had 100 years to undergo a value change away from work and self-interest — toward leisure and community. The reason was that by the year 2030, productivity and savings could provide enough for all with a work week of 15 hours. Over 2500 years ago, Aristotle predicted inanimate slaves, machines, would create leisure for most members of the community. Recall that the Greeks had no word for work, they had to say "unleisure," and their word for leisure, which meant the opportunity to achieve excellence of the soul, was *skole* — in English, school.

Plato and his students believed that one should never work more than necessary; first, because man's unique role in the natural order of things was to sing, dance, play and celebrate; second, because to work more than necessary for modest comfort was to renege on responsibilities, as citizens, to serve the community. In the United States community service is a form of punishment. The Greeks had no word for individual. For those who put self interest ahead of community they had a word. *Idios* — in English, idiot.

Were Emerson or Thoreau here to needle us, undoubtedly they would believe us all idiots. Well over a century ago, Emerson (1870) in his essay "Works and Days" wrote, "It seems we have made a bad bargain. Works and days were offered us, and we chose work." And then he said so poetically what all sane people know about freedom:

He only is rich who owns the day. There is no king, fairy or demon who possesses such power as that. The days are ever divine, as to the first Aryans. They are of the least pretention, and of the greatest capacity, of anything that exists. They come and go like muffled and veiled figures, sent from a distant,

friendly party; but they say nothing; and if we do not use the gifts they bring, they carry them as silently away.” (p. 70)

The notion of a 20 hour week, a utopian dream to Thomas More 400 years ago, can easily be realized today, as Juliet Schor (1991) recently pointed out. Imagine 20 additional hours per week of free time. Imagine giving your television to someone you don't like, thus freeing another 20 hours per week. You could actually own the day and have a life. You could free yourself of the illusion of freedom, and thus be free in fact. The idols of the tribe, the den, the market, and the theater, after 400 years of enslaving, must now and finally be laid to rest. It is, quite literally, them or us. Leisure does not mean, as leisure researchers argue, “perceived freedom.” Perception is flawed as Bacon well knew. Rather, leisure means “acting out of internally compelling love.”

Giving away your TV is one way to start cleansing the lenses of perception. Get away from sound bites, slogans, and spin doctors. And while bumper stickers are not our most profound form of literature, this one is appealing. It says “TV Free America: The environmental movement of the mind.”

A second way of cleansing the lenses of perception is to invest some of the added free time in reading. True, all learning doesn't come from books; true we do learn from experience. But a significant part of the experience of educated people is books, good books in great numbers. “Make learning,” Gracian said, “not so much a servant as a friend.” You will find that books and their authors, living or dead, become enduring friends.

Our friends have much to say about work, leisure, opportunity and freedom. Among European scholars, Andre Gorz (1989) has framed the potential for leisure most clearly. In the preferred future:

The progressive diminution of work for economic ends will have made it possible for autonomous activities to become preponderant...; free time will have gained the upper hand over unfree time, leisure the upper hand over work; leisure will no longer simply be rest or compensation but essential living time and the reason for living, work having been reduced to the status of mere means. It would then be this free time which would be the bearer of all common values. One only has to think of the upheaval there would be in our society if creativity, conviviality, aesthetics and play came to predominate over the values of efficiency and profitability involved in work. (p. 183)

If this transformation does not take place, Gorz, argued, ... “the savings in work and gains in time engendered by the accelerated development of new technologies will bring only social exclusion, pauperism, ... mass unemployment, ... and the intensification of the war of each against all”

Our field has been hindered intellectually by its focus on individuals and on perception, while ignoring the impact of politics and economics on collective freedom. Despite protests that it is a separate objective discipline, economics is inseparable from politics. It is objectively true that raising interest rates slows economic growth. So does

raising taxes. The former is politically palatable, the latter is not. Analyze who benefits and who pays and you will get a lesson in political economics.

Other friends have addressed our concerns about work and leisure even more directly. In a 1993 Harpers article, "The End of Jobs" Richard Barnet wrote:

In the end the job crisis raises the most fundamental question of human existence: What are we doing here? There is a colossal amount of work waiting to be done by human beings – building decent places to live, exploring the universe, making cities less dangerous, teaching one another, raising our children, visiting, comforting, healing, feeding one another, dancing, making music, telling stories, inventing things and governing ourselves. But much of the essential activity people have always undertaken to raise and educate their families, to enjoy themselves, to give pleasure to others, and to advance the general welfare, is not packaged as jobs. Until we rethink work and decide what human beings are meant to do in the age of robots and what basic economic claims on society human beings have by virtue of being here, there will never be enough jobs (1993, p. 52).

Note the words Barnet used: "There is a colossal amount of work waiting to be done by human beings: "There will never be enough jobs." But note also what Barnet said sounds suspiciously like leisure, like activity filled with purpose and compelled by love: building decent places to live, exploring the universe, making cities less dangerous, teaching one another, raising our children, visiting, comforting, healing, feeding one another, dancing, making music, telling stories, inventing things, governing ourselves, and advancing the general welfare.

We hear much the same words from our Secretary of Labor, Robert Reich:

There is an opportunity for us ... (he said) to redefine who we are, why we have joined together, and what we owe each other and the other inhabitants of the world. The choice is ours to make. We are no more slaves to the present trends than to the vestiges of the past. We can, if we choose, assert that our mutual obligations as citizens extend beyond our economic usefulness to one another, and act accordingly (1991).

The poet T. S. Eliot (1971) made the same point in a different form:

When the stranger says: 'What is the meaning of this city? Do you huddle close together because you love each other?' What will you answer? 'We all dwell together to make money from each other'? or 'This is a community'? (p. 103).

If Harold Meyer and Charles Brightbill were here, I think they would ask, "What is the meaning of this city"? Do we huddle close together because we love each other? What would we answer? We all dwell together to make money from each other? This is a community?

On the eve of the next millennium, everything rests on the answer.

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