

**The Concept of Leisure: The Art of Doing Nothing
(It's Not as Easy as it Looks)**

Wynn Radford
Athenaeum Society
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First, I feel compelled to tell you what topics I did not write about. My alternative topics included, "The Most Religiously Significant of Martin Luther's Ninety-Seven Thesis", "The Most Controversial Point in Wilson's Treaty of Versailles: Why the League of Nations Really Failed", and "My View of Life: As Expressed in the Lyrics of Country Music." If during the course of this paper you find it for any reason uninteresting or uneventful, please remember your favorite of my alternative topics and inform me during rebuttal. I have to write another paper in two years.

With those thoughts I mind, I think it fair to say that my prior Athenaeum papers have revolved around a specific concept, usually spinning out of control into a series of thoughts even more befuddling than the initial concept. Prior concepts have included ambition, risk, utopia, the motivation required to run a triathlon, and Dr. Fuqua's all-time favorite, the economic forces that influence one's purchase of Roquefort dressing at Wal-Mart. I say this for when one writes an Athenaeum paper, one must initially decide if the paper is to be humorous, informative, historical, for the benefit of the listener, or on a topic detailing with such minutia that that no one will ever know if the writer is correct, much less care. Historically, my prior papers have been on subjects of primary interest to me, and have perhaps shown little regard whether others share my fascination. For these reasons, tonight's paper is on a subject that everyone in this room has experience. Most important, it is hoped that you will feel compelled to later share your insights. Also, although almost eighty years passed before Ruth Yost became the first female to speak at an open Athenaeum meeting, it is hoped that this is not the case this year. In practice, many ladies may be as knowledgeable about the topic at hand as the men in the room.

With that being said, as an amateur philosopher and historian, I do not want to make the same mistake as did Herodotus concerning the geography of Egypt in "Historia". While trying to explain "Why Does the Nile Flood?", Herodotus made fundamental assumptions acting upon knowledge that made sense to him at the time and upon the reports of others. Herodotus incorrectly concluded that the Nile could not flood due to melting snow. Obviously, the key information we now know is that beyond his sight lay the mountains of Africa. To not make the same mistake, I am extremely confident with this knowledgeable group, perhaps more so than any group in Hopkinsville. Of the overall membership, most are retired and do nothing, others

play at work, and the remaining members always talk about what they are going to do. With such a resourceful group, it would be foolish for our community to not take advantage of such collective wisdom. As we begin this intellectual journey, I challenge each of you to lead me like the prisoner in Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" from darkness to light. Hopefully, when this paper is delivered and rebuttal is completed, the offered insights will allow us to no longer look through a "mirror darkly." With the above being said, let us begin, my topic for tonight's paper is:

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This paper centers on a quote from Henry David Thoreau in "Life Without Principle":

If a man walk in the woods for love of them half of each day, he is in danger of being regarded as a loafer, but if he spends his whole day as a speculator, shearing off those woods and making earth bald before her time, he is esteemed an industrious and enterprising citizen. As if a town had no interest in its forests but to cut them down!

This quote has particular significance to me as Michael Langhi is my neighbor, as was Bill Deatherage, and one could not have better neighbors, for they both love to work in their yard. Mowing, raking leaves, trimming the hedges all appear to give them pleasure and enjoyment, whereas none of this attracts my interest nor how I prefer to spend my leisure time. Sometimes, as I sit in my overstuffed chair and look out the window, I almost feel guilty and want to go outside and at least appear busy. My guilt even increases when I look out and sometimes see my lovely wife performing such chores, although she insists she enjoys such activities and considers it relaxing. Such action leads to the primary premise of this paper: That doing nothing, if done correctly, enhances our culture. To paraphrase Martha Stewart, perhaps our generation's best advocate for the life of leisure, doing nothing, if done correctly, a "good thing"?

Perhaps Voltaire in Candide said it best when after searching all his life he found the "best of all possible worlds" in his own backyard garden. Candide realized that sometimes life presents us with simply too many choices and options. Electing to simplify his life, Candide, his friend Panglos, and his entire household all agreed to tend to their own garden. This is Voltaire's final paragraph in Candide:

From time to time Panglos would say to Candide: 'There is a chain of events in this best of all possible worlds; for if you had not been turned out of a beautiful mansion at the

point of a jackboot for the love of Lady Cunegonde, and if you had not been involved in the Inquisition, and had not wandered over America on foot, and had not struck the Baron with your sword, and lost all those sheep brought from Eldorado, you would not be here eating candied fruits and pistachio nuts.' 'That's true enough,' said Candide; 'but we must go and work in the garden.'

As concluded by Voltaire, one does not have to travel far to achieve peace of mind. By sitting still and allowing one's mind to clear and rest, more perfect worlds can be imagined. Thoreau said as much, observing "I have traveled a great deal, here in Concord." In contemporary times, a newspaper reporter during the first Iraq War told his boss that he could better cover the war by watching CNN on TV than leaving his hotel room in Baghdad. Blessing or curse, today's technology allows one to sit in a chair and do nothing and yet be well-informed and intellectually challenged. Remaining in one place may prove unhealthy, but technology now allows us to be more informed than any time in the history of the world. Without moving out of one's chair, one can watch cable television, watch it again on TIVO, listen to satellite radio, and play inter-active video games. More significant, we can access the internet for any type of data, past and present, ever produced by mankind. Going forward, in light of Pareto's Principle, will 80% of the world literally 'sit' and be passive observers, will 15% understand this data and do nothing, and will 5% use this data to control the world? Now you are beginning to understand, just sitting in one's chair has serious ramifications.

Let us first look at leisure from a psychological perspective. Freud observed that getting in touch with our deepest sense of self is one of the most difficult things we can ever do. It requires time, energy, effort, patience, and practice. If and when we achieve our objective, the degree of difficulty grows even higher. Insight now requires further reflection and response. "Do I like this or that aspect of myself? Should I, must I, can I, change it? Can I make it go away?" Because of such demands we often flee from solitude and reflection, seeking distraction rather than insight, merriment rather than meaning. To paraphrase e.e. cummings: 'How do I know what I really think until I get a chance to hear what I have to say?' Solitude and the art of doing nothing must be recognized as a good thing, for we must focus and get past the "profane chatter" of everyday life. As astutely observed by Aldous Huxley, the only thing rivaling our appetite for work is our "almost infinite appetite for distraction."

Let us now look at leisure from a scientific perspective. No doubt your mind has already leaped ahead to the obvious reason for staying in one's chair, Newton's First Law of Motion: "An object at rest tends to stay at rest and an object in motion tends to stay in motion with the same speed and in the same direction unless acted upon by an unbalanced force." This tendency to resist change is known as inertia. Further support to do nothing is found in Newton's Third Law of Motion: "For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction." Obviously, I knew I was on the right track when I encountered the following example:

When you sit in your chair, your body exerts a downward force on the chair and the chair exerts an upward force on your body. There are two forces resulting from this interaction, a force on the chair and a force on your body.

In fact, Newton summarized his theories and identified the forces of energy required to move an object from inaction to action with a force he labeled a "Newton" Since we are attempting to solve a related problem, we will also create a new unit of measurement. Unlike a "Newton", which measures a unit of energy or action, an "Athenaeum" will measure the level of inaction. On a scale of positive or negative five, an Athenaeum measures the level of "deep thoughts" being generated during any moment of philosophical thought that benefits the individual or society. From a sitting still position, varying levels of "Athenaeums" include:

- 5 Athenaeum: Drunken stupor, no benefit to society or the individual
- 4 Athenaeum: Spending time in a chat room on the internet
- 3 Athenaeum: Watching a show like "Fear Factor" on TV
- 2 Athenaeum: Watching or listening to sports on TV or the radio
- 1 Athenaeum: Watching KET or the History channel

- 0 Athenaeum: Looking out at the window and doing nothing. Newton describes this condition as equilibrium.

- + 1 Athenaeum: Reading books that challenge one's current belief system
- + 2 Athenaeum: Reflecting upon one's goals for the future
- + 3 Athenaeum: Reflecting upon how the world can be made a better place
- + 4 Athenaeum: Passively reflecting upon deep thoughts with others, like listening to an Athenaeum paper
- + 5 Athenaeum: Actively reflecting upon deep thoughts with others, like giving an Athenaeum paper. Scary as it may appear, right now, at this point in time, is as good as it gets on the Athenaeum scale.

In those instances in which positive "deep thoughts" are being generated, others should stay clear and leave the deep thinker alone, for on some level the world is being made a better place. Using

this totally subjective scale, only the thinker of “deep thoughts” is allowed to grade himself, as any type of third party evaluation is certainly biased. Obviously, physical labor voids any opportunity for the generation of positive “deep thoughts”.

Let us now look at leisure from an historical perspective. Simply put, Western Civilization’s hope for a life of total leisure began and ended in the biblical account of Adam and Eve. Had Eve not eaten the apple, we would today be thinking “deep thoughts” in our own little paradise and not be distracted by work or other non-pleasurable activities. Perhaps the best historical overview of leisure is set forth in Josef Pieper’s 1948 book, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*. Throughout his book, Pieper wrestles with society’s divisive view of leisure. For the puritan, idleness is the source of vice. For the egalitarian, leisure is the sign of privilege, an opportunity to obtain greater knowledge of one’s self and the world. To best understand leisure, Pieper advises that we should not mistake idleness for leisure and believe that creativity can only be obtained through work. Rather, the more enlightened approach is to view work as a means and leisure as an end. Our work related goals should not be to accomplish a specific goal, and then another, and another. Within this context, sitting in one’s chair and confronting the important issues of life is actually more demanding than hard physical labor. If nothing else, it took allot of hard work to be in a position to not do anything. Anyone can mow a yard; only a visionary can imagine the perfect landscaped yard. (To this extent, fellow Athenaeum member George Byers should be commended. His backyard maze represents an excellent example of “deep thoughts” put into action).

In distinguishing between philosophers and non-philosophers, Plato offers the following in the *Theaetetus*:

Such are the two characters, Theodoros. The one is nursed in freedom and leisure, the philosopher, as you call him. He may be excused if he looks foolish or useless when faced with some menial task, if he cannot tie up bedclothes into a neat bundle or flavor a dish with spices and a speech with flattery. The other is smart in the dispatch of all such services, but has not learned to wear his cloak like a gentleman, or caught the accent of discourse that will rightly celebrate the true life of happiness for gods and men. (175-e)

Aristotle expanded this concept of leisure, “We are not-at-leisure in order to be-at-leisure.” For the Greeks, “not-leisure” was the word for the world of everyday life and its accompanying

hustle and bustle. The pursuit of leisure, as distinguished from idleness, demonstrated that one understood the correct ratio of work to leisure. From a Middle Ages perspective, the Christian concept of a “contemplative” life also incorporates Aristotle’s approach. Servile work, defined as physical work where wages are paid, was deemed inappropriate on the Sabbath, Sundays, or Holidays. From a class standpoint people who “worked” for a living and those who “thought” for a living were viewed differently. Thomas Aquinas clarified this concept: “Every art is called *liberal* which is ordered to knowing; those which are ordered to some utility to be attained through action are called *servile* arts.” As an aside, the closest that I have ever come to attaining such freedom was while attending a “liberal arts” college. Little did I know how precious those four years of doing nothing would be in relation to my overall work to leisure ratio. If graded on the Athenaeum scale, I attained a score of +5, perhaps my highest grade in college, and failed to realize my accomplishment.

Although difficult to do, we must not label persons of leisure as useless, idle, lazy, or worthless. For basically everyone who has ever lived, whether an Egyptian slave, a Russian serf, or a worker during the Industrial Revolution, America’s contemporary concept of leisure is unimaginable. In the history of labor, a forty hour work week, overtime, paid vacations, and coffee breaks would have existed only in a fantasy world. Yet, despite such government mandated work place guarantees, why does the world not have an abundance of Plato’s “philosopher-kings?” Why, with workers having the option to work less, do many work even more than a forty hour work week? Was Thomas Carlyle correct when he observed, “Work is the grand cure for all of the maladies and miseries that ever beset mankind?” Today’s culture teaches us that work leads to success, work is how we define ourselves, and that hard work keeps us busy and happy. As previously lamented by Thoreau, leisure is now scorned and deemed unproductive. From grade school, we are reminded of Thomas Edison’s advice that success is “. . . one-percent inspiration and ninety-nine percent perspiration.” Yet, many people do not like their jobs and cannot wait until retirement. Many retired workers, having worked a mandatory number of years to justify to society that they are not lazy or idle are perfectly content to do nothing in their retirement years.

On the other hand, many American workers have become seduced by the workplace. Having met their basic needs as identified by Maslow (food, clothing, shelter . . .), many workers live their

life within artificial time parameters. Two-week vacations, eight hour work days, and postponing leisure until they have retired after twenty-five years. For many workers, they like the adrenaline rush provided in the workplace, the sense of identity, and just having a place go in the morning. Simply put, the 'free' time produced through technology and workplace guarantees has been filled with additional work related responsibilities and stress. To compound the matter, many vacations now consist of trying to accomplish as many activities as possible in the shortest available time. Activity rather than relaxation is now the overriding goal in many vacations. Rather than returning to work relaxed, we are often more tired than before we left. Although this would appear to go against human nature, in 2001 it was estimated that one in six U.S. employees did not take all their annual vacation. Perhaps working Americans need to move to another country. Government mandated vacation days in Italy are 42, 35 in Germany, and 25 in Japan. As noted by Al Gini in *The Importance of Being Lazy*,

. . . on average, Americans worked 350 hours more per year than Europeans—and 70 more hours than even the Japanese, whose language contains the word *karoshi*, which means “death from overwork.” If some of these figures and projections are accurate, by the year 2010, the average workweek could exceed 58 hours.

What is going on here?! Unfortunately, it is only after a heart attack that many American workers take time off or reduce their workload. True, some people, usually the owners, actually enjoy working all the time. As to how we became a nation of workaholics, Diane Fassell makes an interesting point in her book, *Working Ourselves to Death*.

We have adapted to workaholism in much the same way that a frog can adapt to a pot of boiling water. If you suddenly drop a frog into boiling water it will leap out immediately. But, if you put a frog in a pot of cool water and gradually heat the water to the boiling point, it will remain in the pot until it dies.

To avoid becoming a work-day Sisyphus, how can we re-direct ourselves and our understanding of work to be more in line with Aristotle and Plato than John D. Rockefeller? Working longer, other than perhaps making more money, does not mean that we are working smarter or making a better product. For most people, work is a chore or responsibility that is directly related to surviving. Perhaps the “common man’s” perspective is best expressed by Mike Royko of the Chicago Tribune, “. . . if work is so good, how come they have to pay us to do it?”

It is interesting to note that for the greater part of history, physical work may have been more strenuous but did not include such long hours. For example, many primitive societies never worked more than 2 ½ days in a row. The ancient Greeks celebrated at least fifty to sixty festivals per year and often three times that amount. Even in the Middle Ages, except for harvest time, peasants worked less than twenty hours per week, adapting their work schedule to the rhythmic cycle of the seasons. Only with the advent of the Industrial Revolution did the concept of a routine work schedule emerge. Surprisingly, the forty hour work week that we now take for granted was not formalized until the 1920's with Henry Ford. In an attempt to decrease absenteeism and improve productivity, the five day work week was implemented. Far from any type of compassionate approach, weekends were created so workers could rest so they could work even harder on Monday.

In contrast, the objectives of leisure have perhaps been best expressed by G.K. Chesterton, the English essayist:

The first and most common form of leisure is being allowed to do something other than work. The second is being allowed to do anything that engages one's interest or desires. And the third is being allowed to do nothing, a noble habit that is both difficult and rare.

Yet, if we as individuals and society value leisure, what types of activities are most beneficial? In the best of all possible worlds, such activities should provide a change in pace, provide diversion, and change the nature of one's usual habits. Leisure, even if pursued on weekends and vacations, should not be seen as a reward for working hard but as an opportunity for freedom. Leisure should consist of those activities that in themselves can be done without any other incentive or reason. Whatever the activity, we are in control.

Similarly, how do we reconcile our understanding of leisure with retirement? Does society's understanding of leisure begin at a specific point in time? That is, should an individual postpone leisurely pursuits until age 65 or until a pre-determined financial goal is achieved? Should we value leisure for its own sake or should one be entitled to leisure? Do we perceive a 65 year old playing golf every day the same as a 30 year old? Does it make any difference if the 30 year old won \$100,000,000 in the lottery and that is why he plays golf everyday? Living life within artificial time constraints, does happiness always lay "in the future?" As we wrestle with the question of whether retirement is a perk or a penalty, people are living longer. When Social Security began, most people were dead at age sixty-five. Now, another baby boomer turns fifty

every 8.4 seconds. From an individual standpoint, how does one handle a second career, two different retirements, and time without responsibility? From a government standpoint, how does a society pay for unfunded pension plans and what some describe as “geezer entitlements”? As you can see, our understanding of leisure becomes more and more complicated.

Quite frankly, to truly understand the concept of leisure, perhaps we simply need to more closely examine why we work eight to ten hours per day. Specifically, what are we gaining and losing for working additional hours and not taking regular vacations? This is the old ‘do we live to work or work to live question?’ If we agree that the better approach is to work to live, then what is the perfect job? Perhaps the perfect job as defined by a MENSA member with a high IQ, is a mailman. The MENSA member stated that although he obviously had other options, he preferred the life of a mailman because he works eight hours, he gets his daily exercise, he sees and meets new people every day, his work is beneficial to society, his work is not overly taxing, and he has time after work to read late into the night about a wide range of subjects that truly interest him. As important, when the route is done, he is through for the day; his work has a definite beginning and ending. On the somewhat morbid side, I remember from life insurance school that actuarially speaking an accountant has one of the highest suicide rates and a carpenter one of the lowest.

Yet, as our community is comprised of more than mailmen and carpenters, how do we recapture the ancients more enlightened understanding of leisure? One thoughtful observer recommends the following:

1. Pursue activities that encourage self-development in new and challenging areas. Applied to Hopkinsville, when was the last time we explored the Pennyroyal Museum, visited the McCarroll Room of the Public Library, or enrolled in a non-credit class at the Hopkinsville Community College?
2. Avoid pre-packaged forms of leisure created by someone else. Do not passively cycle through the year by watching NCAA basketball, the Masters, Major League baseball, and the next big event on television. Applied to Hopkinsville, when was the last time we stopped to watch HHS play UHA in high school tennis, watched five year olds run the wrong way in a YMCA soccer game, or attended the CCHS art show?
3. Pursue social interaction that is active rather than passive. Applied to Hopkinsville, participate in events like First Methodist’s “Great Day of Service”, volunteer in the Rotary Auction, or mentor a child after school at the Aaron McNeil House.

4. Do not allow our purchase of products to become a competition. In Hopkinsville, shop at Wal-Mart and eat at Ferrell's rather than Dillards or Mario's. And most certainly, eat at Waffle House, where one can meet the most interesting people. Although the quality may be better at more upscale establishments, what is the additional cost in terms of lost leisure required to earn such items? Perhaps William McDonough said it best, "When did we stop being people with lives and become consumers with lifestyles?"
5. Approach work as if we were an artist and attempt to turn work into play. Adapting a Zen like attitude, the doing becomes as important as what we are trying to accomplish. Otherwise, as admonished by John Gardner:

The society that scorns excellence in plumbing because it is a humble activity, yet accepts shoddiness in philosophy because it is an exalted activity, will have neither good plumbing nor good philosophy, and as a result, neither its pipes nor its theories will hold water.

6. And finally, avoid off the chart activities, like exotic vacations or running in ultra-marathons. The downside is that the bar can be raised too high so that normal activities lead to disenchantment. In Hopkinsville, this means vacationing at Pennyrile State Park rather than Las Vegas. Or, simply stay home and work in one's own backyard, which is where this paper began.

Having reviewed the thoughts of many from Plato to Martha Stewart, let us now return to Thoreau. Perhaps the key question is not whether others in Hopkinsville think we are a loafer for walking in the woods. Instead, using our own newly developed Athenaeum scale, we judge ourselves and not by the world's objective scale. If we choose to work in our yard or think "deep thoughts" in our overstuffed chair, then who is to question our actions? For it is our decision, and ultimately we will live with our own decisions and consequences.

In closing, although I have used the term ". . . perhaps he said it best" many times in this paper, let me close with a degree of finality. Perhaps Robert Frost said it best in the last stanza of his poem the "Road Less Traveled":

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence
Two roads diverged in a wood
And I took the one less traveled by
And that has made all the difference

Now that we know how to do nothing correctly, let us go forward and not feel guilty while watching from our overstuffed chair our neighbors work hard. Let us now "wear our cloak like a gentleman [or gentelady]" in deference to Plato, enjoy our candied fruits and pistachio nuts as advocated by Voltaire, and think "deep thoughts" as espoused by the Athenaeum Society.

Let us now sit still and save the world.