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The Great American Work Ethic

Before I begin my presentation I would like to take a moment and break a long-standing Athenaeum Society tradition by actually citing my paper's material sources. I recently read a book entitled *Doing Nothing* written by Tom Lutz, and quite a bit of this paper is lifted directly out of his work without the benefit of footnotes, quotation marks, or bibliography. I also have borrowed freely from a recent book by Dr. Peter Axt called *The Joy of Laziness*.

As some of you may know, five years ago I retired from a 34- year career as an employee of the Commonwealth of Kentucky. During those working years I often found myself to be the object of jests and ridicule regarding the legend of the state worker and his somewhat underdeveloped work ethic. One of my friends once suggested that the term "state worker" was an excellent example of oxymoron. You know the routine----- "Working hard, or hardly working," "feeding at the public trough," and other less complimentary sayings. These half-jesting comments, of course, strongly suggested that state workers were for the most part a bunch of slackers, loungers, and loafers.

Now, while it is true that the state payroll is not entirely devoid of its share of chronic goldbrickers, I do not believe that this is a problem that is strictly the province of public employees. The disinclination to work is as old as work itself and permeates most all professions and walks of life within the human family.

Having said that, I have known some fine examples of slackers and loafers during my years in public service. I worked with a woman once who had an annoying habit of arriving to work on hour late most days. We will call her Betty. It was Betty's custom to approach the front door of our office building with a stack of documents in her arms when she arrived late. Then, being the clever lady, she would back through the front door so that if she were to encounter anyone in the entry hall, she would reverse her steps and pretend to be leaving the office on a work assignment, loaded down with work documents for her busy day. Of course, this sophomoric trick never really fooled anyone, but that really didn't seem to matter. After lunch, our intrepid Betty usually took an hour nap at her desk. When confronted by her boss concerning her habitual slumbers, she consistently denied her sleepy behavior. One day when Betty was on vacation her co-workers found it necessary to search in her desk for a much needed file and discovered a nest of baby mice in the bottom drawer of her desk; these were mice which had obviously gone undisturbed there for long enough to have raised a family. Interestingly enough Betty professed to having a strong work ethic and had no sympathy for who were out of work. To her, like so many other workers today, she equated a good work ethic with remaining gainfully employed over an extended period of time. Quality and quantity of work did not factor into the equation. Jerome K Jerome once wrote, "There is no fun in doing nothing when you have nothing to do." Betty always had plenty of work assigned to her, so she must have had her share of fun doing nothing.

Now I must confess that I, like most of us, have gone through periods in my life of loafing and lounging, goldbricking and lollygagging. When I was in the ninth grade, my grades were atrocious and my study habits poor. It was then that my parents decided to banish me to a far away, college-preparatory, boarding school, which they hoped, would better prepare me for life. During my first semester away from home, I remember well a letter my mother must have carefully composed and sent to me, "George, life is like a long, tiring mountain climb. You move up the mountain and advance from one plateau to the next, going ever higher with each new challenge. But, George you have yet to begin your ascent. You are still groveling around at the base of the mountain, playing in the dust. So, George it's time you get off your rear and get to climbing." She, of course, signed the letter with love. At the time I felt that my mother's note was mean-spirited, but it must have proved effective, since forty plus years later I still remember that letter almost verbatim, and I did finally get my act together and finished that preparatory school which was my first "climb."

Oscar Wilde, a self-professed goldbricker, penned, "The way of the loafer is steep and hard. Sometimes one needs to hunker down and work to relieve the pressure."

In the early seventies I finished graduate school and took a job at a state juvenile correction facility in Butler County. Sarah and I bought a little house in nearby Beaver Dam. Our next-door neighbor, whom I will for the purposes of this paper call Stan, worked as a heavy dozer operator for a local coal strip mining operation. Every morning at 5:00 AM, winter, summer, spring, and fall, Stan would prepare to go to work by icing down a case of beer in a cooler in the back of his Ford pickup. Good-humored Stan's sole job at work was to prepare a path for a giant dragline machine. Now these mammoth dragline coal-stripping machines only move a few feet in the course of a day's work and Stan shared that it usually took about half an hour for him to clear a new path. Once this task was completed, Stan would retire for the rest of his workday, with his case of beer, to the employee lounge. He was very proud of his strong work ethic and would quickly point out that he took few vacation days, and never called in sick. He worked overtime on his birthday and many holidays. Stan was also quick to point out that the quality of his work was excellent and that he shouldn't be criticized as to the quantity of his work as those standards were up to his union and his boss. I feel it worth noting that he received double pay for each holiday worked, and if he worked on his birthday, he received triple pay. Did old Stan have a good work ethic?

At the time I remember feeling very conflicted by my neighbor's work regimen. On the one hand I was envious of his job responsibilities and salary that allowed him to labor for half an hour but be paid for a full day. At that time I was putting in twelve-hour workdays and making far less than Stan. On the other hand, I felt that there was something dreadfully wrong in our country's work culture when the unions could

virtually bring large employers to their knees to the point that the term “employment” did not necessarily mean “work” But I was young and naïve.

What constitutes a good work ethic? Early in my career I knew a young man whom we will call Charlie who worked full time with me as a state social worker in Louisville, Kentucky. He also had a morning job walking horses at Churchill Downs. In the afternoon he had a part-time job as a lifeguard and pool manager at the apartment complex where he lived. Several times a week Charlie, who had a wife at home, found the time and energy to hook up with a nurse from Norton’s hospital on his lunch hour. Oh, and did I mention that he was also a full-time day student at the University of Louisville Law School. He was eventually found out and fired from his state job. Did Charlie have a good work ethic? He was certainly energetic and industrious enough, and I must say was one of the best at multitasking.

Benjamin Franklin has generally been credited with fathering the American work ethic through his writings in *Poor Richards’ Almanac*. Most of us are somewhat familiar with his work-related adages, such as “Sloth makes all things difficult, but industry all easy, and, “He that riseth late must trot all day, and shall scarce overtake his business at night.” I like his, “Laziness travels so slowly that poverty soon overtakes him,” and “Early to bed and early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise.” Probably best known is, “A penny saved is a penny earned.”

Franklin’s writings insisted upon regularity of habits, perseverance, and efficiency. He believed that time was to be spent or saved, but not necessarily enjoyed. Franklin said, “A man may, if he knows not how to save as he gets, keep his nose to the grindstone,” and, “If time be of all things the most precious, wasting time must be the greatest prodigality.” The irony is, of course, as history tells us that Franklin did have his moments in enjoying himself. John Quincy Adams once attempted to have Franklin sent home from France during the Revolutionary War because of his late night partying, and poor work habits. But Adams was a bit of a stuffed shirt prude, and he himself was called home. Franklin continued to make friends with the French, and eventually convinced the French to assist in the revolution.

Franklin definitely had his work cut out for him in promoting an American work ethic. We must remember that the British dumped a goodly number of the early colonists here in an effort to rid themselves of their undesirable citizens. Petty thieves, beggars, debtors, pickpockets, and other unsavory characters were brought here by the shipload and dropped off up and down the eastern seaboard. It was not until the conclusion of our war of independence that Britain stopped using the colonies for their dumping ground and began shipping their unwanted human cargo to the eastern shores of Australia. These early settlers were certainly not known for their strong work ethic.

When these vagrants and vagabonds arrived in the colonies, most were immediately indentured along with the other hard-working immigrant class. Arriving in America, they found themselves subject to fairly strict laws against loitering, so strict that Massachusetts attempted to fix wages low enough to require men to work very long hours

to keep order and respectability. Whipping and fines were imposed for idleness in Connecticut and Rhode Island. In the 1700's there were widespread Acts of "Restraining, Correcting, Suppressing, and Punishing Rogues, Vagabonds, Common Beggars, and other Lewd, Idle, dissolute Profane and Disorderly Persons ---The purpose of such acts is and shall be to set them to work."

The clergy also did their part, of course. Cotton Mather is said to have remarked about the unemployed, "Let them starve." Mather was an important influence on Ben Franklin through Mather's library which he had opened to a young Ben Franklin. So it is really no surprise that Franklin secularized the work ethic in America.

Until the late nineteenth century, the American work ethic was mostly the professional province of literary writers, legislators, and preachers. But, starting in the 1860's some new professions decided to have their say, chief among them were the medical doctors and sociologists. George M. Beard, M.D., in analyzing what he saw as a high degree of nervousness among his patients, concluded that the pace of modern life, its noisiness, and information overload, along with the wear and tear of overwork were debilitating. Neurasthenia, the disease he invented to describe this debilitation, was not only often caused by over work, it left its victims unable to work, and Beard proposed a number of cures.

One of the most common cures for Neurasthenia was the rest cure. This treatment required weeks and sometimes months of complete bed rest, during which the patient was allowed no activity whatsoever—no visitors, no reading, no writing, no knitting, and, of course, no sex. It was thought that the body would naturally, through a steady diet of warm milk and meat, regenerate its own energy. Now, I don't know about you, but if I had been subjected to this type of treatment regimen, I would have been begging to be put back to work after very short time.

Dr. Beard's other favorite treatment was by electricity. Since overwork ran down a patient's batteries, the best a doctor could do of the patient was to zap him with some new energy. Dr. Beard used a galvanizer, a large imposing generator, and would have the patient strip down to loosened undergarments. With one electrode placed under a foot, the other was placed between Dr. Beard's hand and a wet sponge to increase conductivity; Beard would then touch the patient over the entire body. Special attention was paid to affected areas, the head for headaches, the penis for impotence, or just to get the patient's attention. This treatment would be repeated daily or every other day for months. The end result was supposed to be the renewal of energy and vigor. For those who couldn't afford expensive daily visits to the doctor to have their penises massaged with electrical current, stores and mail-order houses offered electric belts, complete with batteries and genital attachments, guaranteed to make one "a new man."

Victorian Americans took pride in being diagnosed as being overworked and suffering from neurasthenia. It began as an upper-middle-class disease. The theory was, the more educated, refined, and civilized one was, the more sensitive one would be to the overwhelming pace of modern life. Thus the more it would wear one down and cause

one to be unable to work. Poor people were not thought to be capable of such a diagnosis of overwork as they were simple people with simple minds and simple needs. Women were excluded from treatment and mostly branded as "malingerers" if they complained of overwork.

Historians later discounted this theory and agreed that neurasthenia was in fact an inverted work ethic, born of resistance to work by the wealthy that allowed them no negative fallout for their slacker behavior.

Bertrand Russell, the British Philosopher, said that, "The work ethic was the cumulative effect of years of forcing powerless peasants to produce more than they needed to support the idle warriors and priests above them. The concept of people's duty to work, speaking historically, has been a means used by the holders of power to induce others to live for the interest of their masters rather than their own."

By the 1950's neurasthenia was long forgotten, but cardiologists were once again turning their attention to the dark side of the work ethic, the type "A" personality "Workaholic" was invented. In the mid-1950's white collar salaried workers became the largest occupational group in the country and by 2000 they would grow to 60 per cent of the workforce. Increasingly salaried workers were expected to put in long work hours, massive amounts of overtime, and a minimum amount of vacation time.

Doctors began to see a strong connection between such a frantic work pace and the rise in heart disease in our country. Their conclusion was that the wear and tear of modern life was increasing the frequency of heart attacks among the over-stressed work force. Did you know that the term "workaholic" was coined by Dr. Wayne Oates in 1968 at the University of Louisville Medical School? Oates described the workaholic as "Someone who cannot stop working, who needs larger and larger doses to get by. They work frantically and they play frantically. They have forced themselves into exhaustion, depression, cardiovascular disorders, and excessive eating in order to maintain energy and all manner of imbalances of the human life." Dr. Oates recommended a goodly amount of rest and relaxation, totally away from the hectic, stressful work schedules as a form of treatment for the workaholic.

Now it is my belief that most of us fall somewhere in the middle in the chronic slacker/workaholic continuum. There have been times when we took it easy and loafed a bit, and there have been periods of overwork and stress. But, as a self-professed sometime slacker, it was with great enthusiasm that I stumbled upon a book published a few years ago entitled, *The Joy of Laziness*. Now I didn't really read this book; that would have been a little too much like work, but I did pull up a few one-line book reviews that proved interesting. *The Joy of Laziness*, written by two German doctors, Dr. Peter Axt and his daughter Dr. Michaela Axt-Gadernann, makes a very compelling case for the health benefits derived from the no-stress life styles of slothes and lollygaggers. Their research strongly suggests that doing nothing actually does a great deal of good, and that being lazy can make you healthier and strengthen your immune system. High-

energy lifestyles can accelerate the aging process and too much stress, exercise, and food can shorten your life. Laziness is good for the brain. Being relaxed and even-tempered can actually make you more intelligent. Getting a fair amount of sunshine and sleeping in on a regular basis will allow you to live longer. All of these medical findings make me feel more comfortable about my retirement and lollygagger lifestyle.

So what is the work ethic anyway? Well, after reading a lengthy book and writing a paper about our work ethic, I can honestly say that I am no closer to answering that question than when I first began. I do believe that Sigmond Freud in 1930 came as close as anybody to successfully defining work ethic. Freud said that "The work ethic, finally has little to do with reality. It's simply an attitude or feeling about how we and others spend our days the way we do. It all depends on who is looking at whom, at what moment.".... "Once man discovered that it lay in his own hands, literally, to improve his lot on earth by working, it cannot have been a matter of indifference to him whether another man worked with or against him." Freud understood that the eye we cast upon our neighbor's labor is the origin of what we call the work ethic, not some internalized form of self-understanding. One's own slacking can cause either guilt or pleasure over the idea of getting something for nothing. While the slacking of others can excite laughter, envy, or rage, as I have tried to point out, we all tend to embody a bit of both ends of the spectrum.

I would like to leave you with a few of my favorite slacker sayings: "Never put off until tomorrow what can be put off until the day after tomorrow." "Hard work has a future, laziness pays off now." "When birds fly in the right formation, they need only exert half the effort, even in nature, teamwork results in collective laziness." "Remember motivation can be overcome." And, regardless of where you might happen to fall along the work ethic spectrum, don't forget to stop and smell the flowers.