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| **Why Play?****Contemplation, freedom, and the spirit of leisure.***Jim Rice* |

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|  | **With all this free time, why aren't we having more fun?**THANKS LARGELY TO unions ("The people who brought you weekends"), most of us no longer have a 10- or 12-hour work day or a six-day work week. Since 1850, statisticians tell us, the average work week has been reduced by 31 hours. Vacations, time off for maternity (and paternity), and now even "family leave" are standard parts of the benefits package. With so much time to call our own, why does it seem that we're busier than ever?First off, the average work week for full-time workers hasn't shrunk quite as much as the macro numbers indicate. If you take away part-time and temp workers (the fastest-growing segments of the American economy), the average full-time work week is closer to 50 hours than it is to 40. Add in the fact that many people are forced to carry more than one job, and add in longer and longer commutes, and suddenly much of that "extra" free time seems to evaporate right away.Perhaps more important are the increased demands on that "free" time. Eight hours for work, eight hours for sleep, eight hours for all the rest: shopping, chores, transportation, writing, helping children with homework, reading the newspaper, visiting the doctor, going to church—the list, it seems, grows ever longer. And we're left with less and less time to call our own.GENERALLY SPEAKING, when people talk about leisure, they mean the time not spent at work. In common parlance, it's time when I can do whatever I want: "free time." Despite our busyness, the word leisure conjures up images of Lazy Boy Recliner Rockers, hammocks, and lounging on the beach. Somehow, I don't think that's quite what Aristotle had in mind when he wrote that "leisure is essential to civilization" (although on a Friday afternoon after a hard week that hammock may seem pretty essential).While there has been a leisure class since the dawn of recorded history, it took the Greeks to construct a philosophy of leisure. For the Greeks, leisure was the furthest thing from doing nothing. The root of the Greek word for leisure (*skole*) is also the root of our "school." The freedom to learn—a preserve of the wealthy made possible by slavery—required leisure. There was no true creativity without it. Leisure provided the freedom to dream, to imagine, to create, and the opportunity to become more vitally alive. Leisure was considered essential because creativity was essential, and there was no true creativity without leisure.For Plato, leisure was the basis of the search for truth. Leisure enabled contemplation, reflection, and analysis to understand the world and appreciate it more deeply. The creativity released in leisure was not solely for the sake of the individual. The good discovered in contemplation was to serve as the model for the proper ordering of society; action in the world was to be rooted in contemplation.**The activity of leisure**THUS, FOR THE GREEKS, leisure entailed the opposite of doing nothing: The activity of leisure was thinking. (Even for the Greeks the concept had a theological aspect, as contemplation was said to bring us "closest to the mind of the gods.") Nowadays, thinking isn't seen as "acceptable" activity. Ask a young child after a time of play what he or she was doing, and the answer is usually to describe their most visible activity. If they were playing on a swingset or throwing stones in the river, they are unlikely to answer that they were "thinking." In our culture, thinking is not understood as an action. Silent reflection is not without its cost, especially when we hush even our chattering minds and begin to listen to the still small voice that emerges from the silence. In such quietude we are made to confront our own demons, our own hates and hurts and fears. Perhaps that is part of the reason so much of contemporary "leisure" activity is closer to diversion, and why many of us keep moving fast, even in our "off" time, as a way of avoiding our self.BUT LEISURE ISN'T just about thinking or contemplation. Leisure involves the freedom to engage in any art or skill that's not a means to an end—in other words an activity that is pursued for the sheer joy of it.The fathers of the early church took it even a step further. The heart of patristic teachings was salvation. All activity not bearing on salvation was therefore secondary. The activity of contemplation was considered the highest of all. Work, on the other hand, was what people did in their "free time," and for Augustine the best work was that which distracts a person the least—like handwork or tilling—leaving the mind free for contemplation.While the Greeks and the church fathers idealized contemplation, in most of the rest of human history a primitive variation of the work ethic reigned supreme: If you want to eat, you work. If you want to survive, you work hard. For most of humanity the reality was that leisure was a luxury enjoyed by the wealthy few.**Life is short. Play hard.**THE THEOLOGICAL and intellectual justification for the work ethic emerged as the industrial age was born out of the Renaissance. Bankers and manufacturers felt that the best way to get an honest day's work was to encourage thriftiness, seriousness, and abstention and discourage "idleness." Adam Smith, in *The Wealth of Nations*, argued that activity is only truly productive if it takes raw material and makes it into something useful; the idle produce nothing. The Renaissance doctrine that it is through work alone that a human produces and knows became the guiding principle of the 19th century—a philosophy embraced not only by followers of free-marketer Smith but by socialists, communists, "scientific" thinkers, and utopians as well. Idleness as the devil's playground was a long way from the ideal of leisure as essential to civilization.As the 19th century wound down, a new phenomenon emerged. More and more workers had money in their pockets beyond that needed for the essentials of life, and—no surprise here—entrepreneurs rushed to fill the need for something to do with that extra money. Between 1850 and 1900 businesses grew that profited from after-work spending. Amusements that had been recently condemned as "frivolous" took on new meaning—and acceptance—as they began to be seen as potential revenue sources.Even what people did for fun changed from free games such as quoits, bowls, and rabbit coursing to pay-per-view entertainment such as boxing, golf, and "football" (soccer). Not coincidentally, the very language used to describe these after-hours carousings was transformed as well. The word "idleness" faded from usage, and the word "leisure" began to emerge.What was being born, of course, has now become the multibillion-dollar industry of play. Our culture provides a steady drumbeat of advertising that not only sells us the myriad things we must have to fill our free time, but offers wondrous time savers to create more of it. Now we are not only encouraged to work hard, but we are instructed that we have to play hard as well.**Toward a spiritual leisure**THE MODERN commercialization of leisure is in some ways the exact opposite of the biblical notion of Sabbath (see "'Type-A Play' vs. the Sabbath," at right), and certainly a long way from the ideal of the contemplative life. Recreation, re-creation, and play are certainly essential to a life of wholeness and harmony, but not necessarily the way Madison Avenue would have it. What are some principles and criteria we should keep in mind as we consider a spiritual approach to the question of leisure?***1.*** *It's OK to play.* Most of us grew up with stories like "The Little Red Hen" (moral: you don't work, you don't eat) and "The Tortoise and the Hare" (you linger, you lose), tales that illustrated for us the consequences of too much play. Those who didn't keep their noses to the proverbial grindstone usually suffered for their idleness.Activists can be the worst grindstoners, some being as intense about their play as they are about their work. There's lots of enculturation to overcome to get to the point where we not only affirm the value of play, but recognize its necessity and accept it as a gift from God.***2.*** *Leisure is an end in itself.* Our culture is driven by results, and let's face it, so are many of us. Even our play is often motivated by a desire to produce something or accomplish something—even if it's only a lower heart rate or cholesterol count. We ought to cherish leisure for its own sake, celebrate joyfulness simply because it's a good thing to do, and accept that music or art or contemplation or play is intrinsically good, and doesn't need another justification. ***3.*** *The commodification of leisure is a spiritual matter, and needs to be acknowledged as such and resisted.* While advertising implies an equation between what we pay and how much fun we have, there's actually no necessary connection between money spent and enjoyment. Yes, parasailing at $40 an hour or skiing at Aspen can be fun and exciting. But so can a free game of volleyball at a church picnic or a Yahtzee match with your children. ***4.*** *Individual self-fulfillment is not enough.* God's intention for creation is summarized in the biblical concept of *shalom*, which entails the pursuit of wholeness, of fullness of being, including beauty, goodness, truth, and joy. *Shalom* involves by definition a social dimension. No individual fulfillment is possible apart from the building of relationships and seeking the welfare of the whole community. In other words, bowling alone just won't cut it.***5.*** *Leisure is not about what we watch, but what we do.* A key aspect of the commercialization of leisure has been the growth of spectator sports. Sedentary activities in general are among the most regular ones for most of us: TV, reading, driving, meetings, lectures, visiting, dining out, theater and concerts, playing cards.But it's important to note that sedentariness is not the same as passivity or indolence. "Active" and "passive" are oversimplified categories, especially because it is hard to measure activity of the mind. For example, among "passive" activities, there may be an appreciable difference in neural activity between watching a Bill Moyers forum on Genesis and watching *Married With Children*.***6.*** *The quality of leisure is directly related to broader questions about simplicity of life.* Many people couldn't "afford" to work shorter hours and take less pay, even if given the option, because to do so would mean being unable to buy the things that advertising dangles in front of our eyes. Freeing ourselves from reliance on material things opens many life-enhancing possibilities.***7.*** *The amenities of modern life don't necessarily enhance our experience of leisure.* A community of Amish people were once offered a television set. Their response: "If we were to add television to our lives, what would we take away? Conversation with our children? Reading? Praying?" They graciously declined. We don't often stop to consider what we "take away" when we make such additions to our lives.AS WE SEEK to approach leisure in a more intentional, spiritually grounded way, we don't do so in a vacuum. Our culture of busyness, the pace of our lives, directly affects the quality of our leisure. We should be careful not to romanticize the past: People (especially on the lower end of the income scale) have always had to work hard to scrape out a living. But a century ago, and in some cultures still today, the slower tempo of daily life meant less tension and more time for themselves and for each other.In the contemporary work world, many of us leave home for much of the day, hurriedly battle rush-hour traffic, arrive home tired and spent, eat our evening meal, and then face a long list of household chores. Western society, far from encouraging spiritual leisure or even the pursuit of happiness, inflicts as a norm the disease of a thousand-things-to-do. We can resist this disease, but only with the proper inoculations.The first step is to recognize, name, and resist the forces around us that work against our pursuit of spiritual leisure or a contemplative life. But changing the externals won't be enough. Many women and some men have left their fast-paced, high pressure work in the professional world to be home with their young children, expecting in their new life to have time for quiet, prayer, and contemplation. Often they find that the pace of their life hasn't changed at all, and finding quiet is just as difficult as before, if not more so. The most critical change, it turns out, is within, in our attitudes, assumptions, habits, patterns, and expectations.We sometimes feel and act as if we're victims of time, the passive subjects of forces totally outside of our control. But time is not something that happens to us. We can make choices of how we live our lives, more often than we may think, and as we make them we discover that new possibilities open up.To make these against-the-grain choices, however, will require that we give up something, that we spurn societal definitions and affirmations of success, that we redefine and be satisfied with "enough." All that is only possible when our life is firmly grounded in contemplation.As we begin to nurture and cultivate our own spirituality of leisure, we will begin also to see why that is fundamental to living well. The grace that abounds will be its own reward.  |

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