

The Wasting of Time and Human Happiness

As an undergraduate, I went for walks in rural Michigan. Sometimes alone, sometimes with others. Romantic walks, friendly walks, philosophical walks, beautiful walks. On one memorable walk, I delighted in the loveliness of the effect a streetlight can have on green leaves in the dark. I wasted time on those walks, and it shaped my soul.

Such time-wasting walks do not happen very often in a fast-paced, modern society of constant work. Even when we do walk, we do so quickly. In an interview with National Public Radio, Alan Lightman, physicist and novelist, references a study by the British Council at the University of Hertfordshire that studied walking speed; the study found that in a ten-year period, walking speed had increased by ten percent.

Our speed-walking is connected to our fast-paced world, which Dr. Lightman, in his book *In Praise of Wasting Time*, argues has lost something essential to human flourishing because it does not encourage time-wasting. According to Dr. Lightman, the modern world, which he calls “the wired world,” is a world in which every moment is filled with projects. We are constantly working, and our advanced technology allows us to do so: “We take our smartphones and laptops with us on vacation. We go through our email at restaurants.” Nor, according to Dr. Lightman, are our institutions of higher learning innocent: “Our university curricula are so crammed that young people don’t have time to digest and reflect on the material they are supposed to be learning.” Students are so busy with assignments that they don’t have the freedom to contemplate the truth and beauty they encounter. It is a loud and crowded world.

It is a world that poses a threat to human flourishing,

particularly to our mental flourishing. In his interview with NPR, Dr. Lightman declares that in a capitalist society, in which time is money, “we just don’t put enough value on leisure time, on time for reflection, on time for letting the mind wander, and I think it’s going to have to be demonstrated that there’s a severe mental health problem until we do something like that.” Our addiction to technology also has mental health consequences; as Dr. Lightman observes: “Depression in teenagers has increased since the emergence of the internet.” Our technology allows us to fill every moment with sensory stimulation, and that has detrimental consequences to our mental well-being. We are depriving ourselves of “that needed replenishment of mind that comes from doing nothing in particular.”

We are depriving ourselves of what Josef Pieper calls leisure, that receptive disposition to reality that makes possible poetry and philosophy. Those with leisurely souls are receptive to the beauty of the world around them and full of wonder about its causes. Such receptivity is important to our mental health. In our busyness, we are neglecting the cultivation of an inner richness that is part of a healthy and flourishing life.

Dr. Lightman looks to the health industry for a solution to our society’s blindness towards wasting time: “It’s going to have to be demonstrated by the health industry, in this case the psychological health industry, that we’re doing damage to our mental health in the same way that we finally grasped the fact that we’re doing damage to our physical health with smoking.” Dr. Lightman’s analogy is powerful; just as smoking threatens the body, constant work and addiction to technology threaten the mind. The psychological health industry has started to examine the connection between technology and mental health. A recent article in *Clinical Psychology Science* states that “adolescents who spent more time on new media (including social media and electronic devices such as

smartphones) were more likely to report mental health issues, and adolescents who spent more time on non screen activities (in-person social interaction, sports/exercise, homework, print media, and attending religious services) were less likely."

We are in the midst of a mental health crisis, and our technology, despite all its benefits, is contributing to that crisis. Perhaps the healthcare industry can help us see the problem and raise the cry of alarm—invaluable first steps—but it does not have the philosophical depth to help us restore leisure.

Liberal education does have such depth. After all, one of its goals is to cultivate that inner richness, to dispose the student to the world in a way that is not simply focused on productivity. The liberally educated person has a rich inner life that allows him or her to waste time well, to waste time contemplating the beauty of a Shakespearean sonnet or musing over a Thomistic essay. That kind of contemplation replenishes our minds and contributes to our happiness.

How does liberal education do this? Certainly, those in institutions dedicated to liberal education work. They read and write; they have assignments and deadlines; they produce. But all these matters are in service to the cultivation of the soul, to what John Henry Newman calls "the philosophical habit of mind" and Simone Weil calls "attention." Weil declares: "The development of the faculty of attention forms the real object and almost sole interest of studies." Liberal education cultivates attention to reality and a habit of mind that is receptive to revelations of beauty and wisdom. Liberal education also awakens and nourishes the desire for that inner attentiveness. Teachers of liberal education, by modeling such an attentive life, play an essential role in awakening that desire in their students. Liberal education, that type of education which is particularly concerned with human happiness, endows students with an inner richness that is

essential for very happiness that it asks students to consider.

Perhaps all this seems rather sentimental or naive. But we have testimony of the extraordinary difference that a well-cultivated soul can make in the bleakest of circumstances. In *Man's Search For Meaning*, Viktor Frankl talks about how a rich inner life helped those in a concentration camp survive: "Sensitive people who were used to a rich intellectual life may have suffered much pain (they were often of a delicate constitution), but the damage to their inner selves was less. They were able to retreat from their terrible surroundings to a life of inner riches and spiritual freedom." If the enriched soul provides protection and enrichment in the midst of such horror, surely it can do so in the midst of the more ordinary trials of life.

Given the restorative power of liberal education, those of us committed to its defense have a rhetorical opportunity. After all, persuasion relies on some shared good between the rhetorician and his audience. We have the shared good of mental health, a health that goes beyond merely ridding ourselves of neuroses, but of obtaining an inner peace and richness that frees us from the tyranny of modern busyness. I am not recommending liberal education as a cure for all mental disease, as if reading Shakespeare can prevent or cure schizophrenia. Nevertheless, reading Shakespeare can help us cultivate a mind that is able to waste time well, to wander and muse without a definite agenda, a mind that is not always attending to the demands of work or of social media. Defenders of liberal education can join with those in the healthcare industry who see a crisis in mental health and present liberal education, not as a panacea, but as an essential tool for developing inner freedom and peace.

Such a defense does not reduce liberal education to utility—get a broad, interdisciplinary education because it will help you feel less anxious. Instead, it points to the

role liberal education plays in human flourishing. Human beings are not simply producers; they are also lovers of beauty and contemplators of truth; they are wasters of time.

The liberally educated person does not have an agenda when he walks. He simply walks slowly, keeps his eyes open, and his wits about him.

Bibliography

Frankl, Viktor E., *Man's Search For Meaning*, Beacon Press, 2006.

Lightman, Allan, *In Praise of Wasting Time*, Simon and Schuster, 2018.

Newman, John Henry, *The Idea of a University*, Project Gutenberg, 2008.

Pieper, Josef, *Leisure the Basis of Culture*. Translated by Gerald Malsbary, St. Augustine's Press, 1998.

Twenge, Jean M., Thomas E. Joiner, Megan L. Rogers, Gabrielle N. Martin. "Increases in Depressive Symptoms, Suicide-Related Outcomes, and Suicide Rates Among U.S. Adolescents After 2010 and Links to Increased New Media Screen Time." *Clinical Psychological Science*. 14 November 2017.

Weil, Simone. "Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God" *The Great Tradition*, edited by Richard Gamble, ISI Books, 2007, 589-594.

["You've Wasted Another Perfectly Good Hour—And That's Ok."](#) *Think with Kris Boyd*, from KERA 24 May 2018.

—

This [article](#) has been republished with permission from *The Imaginative Conservative*.