

Philequity Corner (May 26, 2014)

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Meditations on Idleness

The job or position, or the last one we held if we are now retired, is how we are introduced to strangers as guest speaker. Without the defining career, does the person then become undefined? The absence, even if temporary, of a connection to a company or position can cast us in social limbo from which only prayers of the faithful and the acquisition of a new calling card can rescue us.

With the lengthening of the life span beyond the career exit points, the unemployed (or leisure class) should be growing. What if we seem to be idle but are still able to generate cash for our needs and desires? Is an entrepreneur to be limited to someone with an office and some clients, maybe minding a store that caters to walk-ins? Someone at home placing orders by computer and then getting invoices digitally or in print may look idle. But can he be idle with cash, which is a bit different from “idle cash”? What if he just has his wealth managed and doesn’t even pretend to be occupied?

How did the idea of defining ourselves by what we do and what title we carry become so pervasive? One’s status seems now to be delineated by some position which provides a regular income. Does the invention of the calling card have something to do with this development? Should a small rectangular cardboard stating title and e-mail address determine our place in the social firmament and promote the idea that we are our jobs? A song from the musical, *Chorus Line* resists this kind of self-definition—“Who am I anyway? Am I my resume?”

The original calling card in the nineteenth century was intended to identify a visitor who wishes to drop in on an important personage. The particular revered one seems to have all the time in the world to be receiving guests. What did he do for a living?

The luxury of leisure needs to be given back its proper status. Anyone not hurrying off to a meeting or needing to attend to a beckoning e-mail via a smart phone must be given credit for a vast reserve of “me-time.” Someone with this undervalued asset of disposable time should be worthy of our kind thoughts, even envy. The individual with time on her hands is not a bum. Indeed, she possesses a wealth of possibilities that a blank appointment book bestows.

In his 1932 essay, “In Praise of Idleness,” mathematician-philosopher Bertrand Russell makes a case for the need for idleness to flee “frayed nerves, weariness, and dyspepsia.” He cites the Athenian slave state that allowed a “leisure class” freed from the drudgery of work to contribute philosophy, history and the military arts to civilization. Bertrand Russell states that emphasis on production (and work) rather than consumption (and leisure) gives “little importance to enjoyment and simple happiness.”

From Russell’s point of view, work is merely the means to leisure, and certainly not an end in itself. It is leisure that marks the worth of a man not the drudgery of making a living. What is he to make of the modern compulsion to work as a way not just of increasing production but deriving power and status? Has there been a shift in the perception of work? Is the workaholic who works long hours in his job a hero in Bertrand Russell’s mind? The modern workaholic was the Athenian era’s slave.

Glorifying work is akin to judging a violinist not by his performance but by the number of hours he devotes to rehearsals. The effort towards perfection should not take center stage. It is the effect of such efforts that provide the allure and value of a virtuoso performer. Why then should work which is only the means towards enjoying leisure time preoccupy us at all? Should the rat not concentrate on the cheese rather than the maze through which it has to blunder along to get to his goal?

While Russell admits that a man used to having worked long hours is bored if suddenly idle, he sees this merely as “disrupted routine” rather than a desired activity taken away.

Displeasure now arises not in having to work but ironically its opposite—having no work to do. Idleness, especially if involuntary and imposed by a twist of economic fate, is no longer seen as an opportunity to contribute to civilization, including one’s own. It is seen to lead instead to a loss of self-identity and a feeling of being set adrift. Even with financial independence, the absence of a current job for one not yet of retireable age is perceived as a social failing. It necessitates avoidance of the topic altogether (what do you do?) or the creation of pretense, such as a make-believe job like consultant, stock trader or fund-raiser for good causes.

To admit without any preamble that one is currently free (the positive form of unemployed) seems akin to having a communicable disease and needing to be quarantined. Somehow, the meaning of free has evolved into being merely useless.

In praising idleness, Bertrand Russell is not being ironic. He sees liberation from work as a goal to be pursued. He believes that efficiency, his example is an increased productivity in pins, should lead not to unemployment of some and overworking of others, but the provision of leisure for all.

This approach to work as necessary evil goes against the grain of modern thinking. Industrialization and the dominance of economic activity (measured in the GDP) has elevated work and the job as means to self-actualization, power, status and the ability to rate your subordinates and remove them from their boxes.

Maybe, this glorification of work stems from the monetary rewards it can bestow. The social formula equates work with the monetary rewards and the consequent status it brings. This simplistic mentality classifies some kinds of work as being more important (meaning, more financially rewarding) than others. It is not even the social contribution of a particular job (say, teaching or writing) that determines financial value.

Something else is at work in this regard, the dynamics of supply and demand, even if this is artificially created. Is shaping and developing the minds of young people less important (measured in amount of compensation) than a tax consultant who tries to find loopholes in the payment of government levies?

Antoine de Saint-Exupery’s “Little Prince” published in 1943 has become a small cult work for looking at less obvious things—“What is essential is invisible to the eye.” It takes a look at work differently, like the businessman constantly counting stars and believing he is managing them. The Little Prince from Asteroid B-612 may well wonder how a person can possibly be identified and recognized only by his job and how much money he makes, rather than what books he reads, and if he collects butterflies.

What we actually enjoy doing is often unrelated to job or career. The latter can even be the source of anxiety and pain rather than unmitigated pleasure. Still, occupations are described only in terms of productive and compensated employment. Activities that absorb us like conversations with a friend, contemplation of a painting, writing this rather abstract article, or reading “Les Miserables” are not something we do, but something we happen to be doing. When asked what we do, we provide job descriptions or the positions stated in our calling cards. Seldom do we answer that question with the activities that give us pleasure, or what we do on weekends or at our leisure.

When we take a vacation and leave our job, either temporarily or for good, we are engaged in recreation. We are creating ourselves all over again—what management gurus may call “reinventing” or “refreshing.” When boxes are moved around to accommodate some and displace others, it is termed “re-engineering” or “downsizing.” We do this too in our lives, taking up stamp collecting and setting aside our exercise machines bought from a TV shopping station.

If a company changes its core activity and defines itself not as a seller of pork rind, but a purveyor of an arteriosclerotic lifestyle, it is re-branding itself and changing the way it is perceived. This repackaging of its corporate personality is intended to promote its product and make it more desirable to increase its market share in the snack food arena and then evaluating when to have an IPO.

Individuals also undergo this process of “recreating” themselves. St. Paul on the road to Damascus is struck down from his horse and afterwards changes his focus in life from persecutor to apostle and writer of epistles. Conversions and second careers that go with them are seldom this dramatic. Sometimes, transformation involves nothing more pedestrian than going to the gym more regularly or giving up smoking. Still, such re-inventions are often momentous especially on the first day.

In contemporary *mores*, leisure as a permanent state is designed to be enjoyed only after retirement. But here again, it is one’s declining productivity, as young replacements shove out old dogs clogging the career path, that leads to the end of work, rather than the beginning of leisure. Retirement pay is intended to finance the non-productive and non-compensated joblessness, not to promote the enjoyment of leisure. It is however this lump sum of cash along with savings, if not yet spent beforehand, that forms the bulk of investible funds.

Idleness must be given its former place of honor as symbol of elevated status. The absence of work and its tedium allows us to shed routine and enjoy life and its possibilities. Only with a blank screen can we have a new movie in our minds. And sometimes, this new plot, not always of revenge, becomes a pleasurable experience with a different set of heroes and... maybe even a few new villains, usually the ones who are still working.

Still, the best combination is having nothing much to do with the money to think up of what to spend on. We sometimes devote too much time making money and then somehow forgetting how to enjoy it... at our leisure.

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