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What is Leisure?

By John Oswalt

What is leisure? Before we can decide what to do with it, we had better be sure we know what it is. If a small boy were asked what leisure time was, he would probably reply, "That's the time when I can do whatever I want." And I suspect that would define the term pretty well for most of us. Leisure is free time, time that is unencumbered by the "have-to's" or the "ought-to's."

LEISURELY SCHOOL DAYS

But is that all? Isn't there something more to leisure than just "nothing to do"? There certainly is, and like most ideas, we understand it better when we trace it back to its earliest usages. In this case that earliest usage was by the Greeks.

Now I think you are in for a surprise. I certainly was. Guess what the Greek word is for leisure? It is schola - the root from which our word school is derived! Now for most of us the last thing we associate with school is leisure. We think of having to get up in the morning, having to do all those piles of homework, having to learn things whether we liked it or not. But school didn't mean that for the Greeks. What it meant for them was freedom to learn. Only persons who had leisure were free to learn. To have leisure was to have that freedom. The poor fellow, poor woman, who had to work 90 hours a week never had that opportunity. They were never free to look at their world and ask, What does it mean, what's it about? But the person with leisure has that luxury of time to look at the world, to see the relationships among its various parts, to see what it's about, to see where it's going.

What has happened to us? Why don't we think of education in the same way? Well, first of all, I'm sure that Greek schoolboys whose parents required them to go to school looked out the windows of their schoolrooms at a beautiful spring day just as longingly as any modern child does, so we ought not to romanticize the situation too much. On the other hand, the problem of universal compulsory public education is a real one. When we all must do something, whether we have the desire for it or not, it is very difficult for us to see it as a privilege.

Some years ago when a seminary faculty of which I was a member was debating whether to retain Greek as a requirement, I saw this effect of compulsion. I was arguing vigorously that the requirement should be retained. However, one of my colleagues, a professor of Greek, pointed out that I, a professor of Hebrew, which

was not required, might not understand the nature of the problem. "You only have students who want to learn the subject in your class," he said. "How would you feel if more than half of your class did not want to be there and if your major task was not teaching the subject, but convincing the majority of the worth of the subject?" I had to admit that added a new dimension to the problem. It is a great privilege to know the language in which the New Testament was written. But if I am required to know that language, the sense of privilege fast disappears. We voted to retain the Greek requirement, but I gained a new appreciation for the nature of the problem my colleagues faced.

Now I am not in favor of eliminating compulsory public education. Although it creates some problems, its benefits are too great for it to be discarded. What it does mean is that we will have to work harder to recapture the true meaning of leisure. For whatever else our discovery about the meaning of the word teaches us, it teaches us that leisure is the privilege of learning.

As such, leisure is the furthest thing from idleness. It is not doing nothing, which is what idleness is. Rather, it is the use of our free time to become more alive, more vital. To be idle is to fail to look at the world, to fail to appreciate it. It is to fail to become excited by the complex wonders around us. Leisure is looking at the world, appreciating it, becoming excited about it. If we could produce that kind of understanding of and expectation for leisure, I think our society would be vastly different.

Obviously, in the Greek society this kind of leisure was the preserve of the wealthy. Only the wealthy had the freedom to learn, the freedom to look at the world. They had the opportunity to do something most of us, I suspect, are not comfortable with-the opportunity to contemplate.

I am not thinking here of the Eastern concept of contemplation whose ultimate goal is detachment from a world that is considered essentially bad. No, I am talking about a view that considers this world to be good and valuable and that is willing to spend time in reflection on and consideration of this world. For most of us who have been raised in an age of pervasive noise and instant analysis, the thought of applying really careful attention to something for a period of time in order to really see or really understand does not sound like leisure. For all too many of us leisure means the opportunity to shut off our minds.

But for our ancestors it was different. Think of Tevya in Fiddler on the Roof: "If I were a rich man, what could I do? I could sit in the synagogue all day and read the sacred books and argue with the rabbi." That's leisure. If I were a rich man, I would have the opportunity, the freedom, to think about the world, to think about what matters, to contemplate it. I don't have that freedom now, because I've got to milk my one cow and haul the milk away and keep my wife and family in tow.

CIVILIZATION AND LEISURE

It is in this sense that Aristotle, the great Greek philosopher, argued that leisure is essential to civilization. He believed that civilization could not exist unless a significant group of people had time free from other obligations to look at the world and think about it, time to put it together. And when you consider that for a moment, it's not hard to understand Aristotle's point.

Civilization is more than just a group of people living together. At the least, it is a group of people who are living together in such a way as to achieve their highest potential, both as individuals and as a group. How does that happen?

Well, one way to describe it is with the idea of harmony. Harmony means interrelationship of the parts. When you have a choir singing in harmony, then the parts all fit together. But that can't happen unless you know what the parts are and have some idea of how they fit together and what the priorities are. Of course, it also helps if everyone is singing at the same tempo!

But how do you do that in life? How do you find out what the various parts are and how they fit together in the right sequence and tempo? Only, says Aristotle, if we have the time and the will to step away from the daily grind long enough and frequently enough to get the picture. Most of us, and I would put myself right in the middle of the group, do not feel much harmony in our lives. Why? Because we don't have time, we don't have leisure, to look at the pieces.

Instead, we spend a lot of time just pushing our way through the pieces so we can get to the next one. That is not a prescription for harmony but for discord.

And what is the result of all that discord in our social life?

A rapid descent to barbarism—or, to put it in biblical terms, the triumph of the flesh over the spirit. The reason for that descent is that without harmony we each do our "own thing," and that is always the most pleasant and least taxing thing. Like weeds, the simplest and most physical of the desires need no cultivation. But the more complex and spiritual possibilities in us, like roses, need constant attention. Without the leisure and the will to tend to them, we cannot maintain them.

IMAGINATION AND CREATIVITY

As I have just been suggesting, not only is harmony essential to civilization, so also is the expression of imagination and creativity. Without these, we are only high-order animals. Have you ever thought about just what the image of God consists of in us human beings? Obviously it is not our physical shape. Then what? What is it that makes us different from the animals? Oh well, some might

say, animals can't reason. I'm not so sure of that! I have encountered some dogs and cows in my time that had remarkable capacities to put one and one together and come up with two. Especially when I didn't want them to!
Well, someone else says, animals aren't self-conscious. How do we know that? Since they can't talk to us it is difficult to be certain. Have you been following the reports of the gorillas that have been taught sign language? Some of the stories are fascinating. For instance, there is the one about the researcher watching from hiding while the gorilla did something it was forbidden to do. Later the researcher asked the gorilla what it had been doing, and the gorilla lied! That takes a pretty high level of awareness.

So what is the image of God? Well, it would be presumptuous for me to suggest that I can solve this age-old problem here. But I do have an idea that one of the elements of that image is the capacity to imagine. What is imagining? The act or power of forming a mental image of something not present to the senses or never before wholly perceived in reality, says Webster's. Coupled with this is the ability to give complex expression to what has been imagined. That is creativity, the power to create something, something useful or not useful, but something that has never existed before. So I am saying that we are the most human, the most civilized, when we are the most creative. But there is no true creativity without leisure, the freedom to dream, to imagine, to try.

So whenever we've talked about great civilizations, we've talked about people who are living in some degree of harmony, who are able to stretch and express their imaginations, and who are able to be creative, not simply in terms of ideas, but also in terms of things. And you can't do that if you do not have time to do it. This is why Aristotle says leisure is essential to civilization. There is no civilization without the freedom to look at the world and sort it out—to discover the parts and how they relate to one another.

A MEANS OR AN END?

This concept of creativity unveils a further element in the Greek idea of leisure. Think about the artist. How does she feel when she can only afford to paint commissioned works? Shut in. We can hear her say, "Well, I've got to earn my bread, so I've got to paint what so-and-so wants." But, oh, how wonderful when she's finally made it! Now she can just express what is within her and not have to feel that she's doing it for pay. Now she feels free-and leisured. Leisure is not the absence of work; it is something more than work.

Work is done for some purpose other than itself. Thus, it is but a means. It is useful; I work in order that I may achieve some other end. But leisure, as the Greeks understood it—and in the light of what it has meant across the centuries-is that which is done for itself. It is an end in itself; it does not have to be useful to some other end. You don't engage in leisure because it's useful.

Now, for many of us, that is a heresy. Everything has to be useful—I mean, you don't do it if it's not good for something! But leisure is an end in itself. A painting is an end in itself. An essay is an end in itself. I will talk more about this in a later chapter, but let me comment a little further here. Whenever something is done for an end beyond itself, it is very easy for the thing itself not only to become devalued, but to become drudgery. We see this with a great deal of work today. Why should I do this task any better than I have to? After all, the only reason I'm doing this stupid thing is for the paycheck. If all of our lives are filled with activities of this sort, the result is a feeling of entrapment and, worse, dehumanization. But genuine leisure is activity performed for itself alone, and at that point, like the artist, a person is liberated and in that sense of liberation can be lifted once again above the merely animal.

But can't we combine both kinds of activities? Isn't it possible to paint a picture for the sheer joy of it and yet earn money for it, even though that's not the main reason the thing was done? Yes, and that's one of the interesting things in this whole discussion. You see, it is almost impossible for us not to bring leisure-activities performed for themselves alone-into those activities that are performed for some other end.

I remember how, as a teenager plowing, I wanted to get those furrows exactly straight. Why? Yes, my dad had told me that it was a good idea, because once you get a furrow crooked, the next one will be a little more crooked, and before long you're going to have a serious problem. But there's something more than that. There's a special delight in getting that thing ruler straight and being able to look back at the end and say, "Wow!" Why? There is not that much usefulness in a straight furrow. No, I did it for the "fun" of it. I did it for itself alone, and to that extent I was free.

In the same way, think about pottery. A jug is a jug is a jug. But there is something in us human beings that makes the potter want to give that jug an appealing shape and color. Why? It will not hold water any better. It will not be any more useful. Yet somehow making that pot an expression of what the potter sees as beauty becomes an end in itself.

These examples can be duplicated endless times. There is something in us that loves to do things for themselves. But that is not always appreciated in our society. We are a utilitarian culture if ever there was one. If a thing's not useful, it's worthless. So our leisure activities must all serve some other end. It's all right for me to spend five hours reading because I'll work better. It's all right for me to go out on the golf course because I'll live longer. What we have done is to make leisure itself a means. As a result we have lost a part of what the heart of leisure is the freedom to look at, to appreciate, to understand, to value.

LEISURE AND THE LIBERAL ARTS

This is one of the struggles of our time in education. We have the liberal arts opposed by what we may call the professional arts. Originally these professional arts were called the "servile arts," but that has become a loaded phrase now, for obvious reasons. However, at the outset liberal arts were the opposite of the servile arts. They were the arts that set a person free, while the others only fitted you to find work. Today, few people want a degree in the liberal arts. They say, "The degree is not good for anything. I want a degree that will prepare me to do something. Why read English literature, for heaven's sake? I'm not going to teach it. I'm not going to sell it. I'm not going to write it. So why read it? It's not useful."

But the original idea of the liberal arts was that these are the studies that preview. These are the studies that open up the world to you, which preview. These are the studies that make you able to appreciate and integrate and understand and therefore make you ready to do whatever you need to do elsewhere. Persons with a liberal arts education will be liberated; the ground will have been prepared, and they will be ready to learn the particular job skills that they need over and above the basic life skills. In the sense that the liberal arts prepare you to live, they certainly are "useful." Beyond that, when Aristotle says that leisure is necessary for civilization, he is saying that in a real sense these studies have an ultimate utility. But how easily we mortgage ultimate good for short-term utility.

These thoughts illustrate the difference between work and leisure. There's an immediate usefulness in work, and there is a broader, more ultimate usefulness in leisure. But do you see what we have done? We have sought to save the liberal arts by arguing for their ultimate utility. We are tempted to save leisure in the same manner. In other words, utility equals value. A thing is valuable if it's useful. Of what value is four hours spent in building a model? It's not useful, so are we to conclude that it's of no value? Or how about an amble through the woods by yourself? Of what use is that?

But perhaps value is something more than utility. Nowhere is this more clearly stated than in the Old Testament attitude toward the widow, the orphan, and the stranger. These were persons who had very little usefulness in their society. How easily they could be cast aside on the dump heap of life. But God says, "No, the value of these people, their worth, is not in their contributions. They are not a means to an end. They have value in themselves." Leisure helps us develop this kind of attitude. If we have learned to do things for the sheer enjoyment of them alone, we will be more able to treat people in the same way. So in more ways than one leisure is liberating time.

But along with our tendency to evaluate everything according to its immediate utility, there is another enemy of leisure that is all too common among us. I call it "oughtness." Because we are a driven people in so many ways, there is a subtle

hint that creeps into the liberating time contaminating it with the suggestion that we must do such and such a thing. I must contemplate the world. I must sort things out. I must see things in relationship. I must, I must. And the whole concept of leisure as freedom goes by the boards. We come again under the tyranny of the imperative.

It's as easy to do that with a hobby as with any other activity. Sometimes I find myself as driven to accomplish goals in my hobbies as I am in my work. The "oughtness" creeps back in, and what is to be creative and freeing becomes again tension producing. But this won't be the case if we remember what leisure really is.

LEISURE VERSUS DIVERSION

But without doubt this ideal definition poses problems because most people today have no such idea of leisure. It is time to do what I want. Period. As a result most people have neither the training nor the inclination to use leisure in a civilizing way. And someone has said, probably correctly, that a better term for our non-work time today is "diversion." Thus, we are not seeking leisure time, but rather diversion time, time when our attention can be distracted from whatever it is normally given to.

This concept of leisure as diversion is part of the problem for the Christian church, for when leisure is merely doing what I want, then commitment, discipline, and patience, to name a few qualities, are at a very low premium. Yet these qualities are at the heart of the Christian experience. In fact, they are at the heart of any genuine creativity. For most of us the idea of discipline that gives freedom or of value beyond utility is very difficult to grasp. But if we can implant this broader definition in people's minds, one of the positive by-products will be its effect on Christian commitment.

The picture I've been painting, one that is all too uncommon among us, is of a leisure that is primarily oriented toward mind and spirit. It involves freedom to learn, not so much because learning is useful, but just because it's there and the world is there. It involves an openness to wonder. It involves deliverance from the tyranny of the "ought" into the liberty of the "why not?" It means that instead of becoming less human by escaping into dehumanizing diversions, we become more vitally alive by plunging into the very heart of life. This is leisure as it may be if only we would seize it.