

THE LOST ART OF LEISURE

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“Have Leisure and know that I am God.” *Psalm 65:11*

As you all know, this is the big Labor Day weekend – when we Americans (historically at least) set aside a day to honor workers and their unions...and also unofficially mark the end of summer...although that part of the holiday hardly works by the climate here in Florida, where summer’s grip of heat and humidity can be felt for at least another month! In any case, I want to use this occasion to reflect with you on how we as a culture might find a healthy balance in our living between the duties of labor and the enjoyment of leisure. ..or, said a bit differently, a healthy balance between work time and free time.

Now...some of you might think such a balance would come naturally to Americans -- who, for generations, have had clear labor standards that limit the length of the work day and ensure that most workers get two full days off a week -- a wise, “free-time” break known as “the weekend” when our time is supposed to be our own. But a host of commentators on American culture have recently observed that Americans seem increasingly unable to practice leisure. Just last weekend some of you may have noticed that the lead article in the *Parade* magazine pointed out most Americans these days are absolutely lousy at “giving themselves a leisurely break” on Saturday and Sunday, not to mention the rest of the week! I quote from the article:

These days [in America], managing your weekend is like running a marathon at a sprinter’s pace – with a stagger across the finish line on Sunday night....“Most people I work with aren’t enjoying themselves on the weekends,” says psychologist Amy Wood; “they’re drained by Monday morning.” It wasn’t always this way, the article goes on, there was a time in America when those two days were truly a collective respite... weekends used to provide us a safety valve against stress and work...but now most people just continue their stressed-out lives, 24-7. We need to learn how to put, the article concludes, a bit more fun back into our free time.

Now some of you may not think this problem of being lousy at leisure applies to us here on the Treasure Coast. You might reason that here in this tropical paradise – with a culture that is decidedly not as tightly wound as say that which you find in New York, Philadelphia or Washington – with our almost infinite resources, venues, and activities for relaxation, play and pleasure – that we would all know how to chill out and bathe in free, fun time. Some of you might further reason that this would particularly be the case here in this congregation, where at least half the members are retired. You would think leisure would be something we would be near experts at! But the truth is that like all Americans, we Floridians, even the happily retired ones, are in general pretty lousy when it comes to truly practicing leisure. Over recent decades, leisure has somehow worked its way out of the genetic code of Americans!

As exhibit one, I remind you of all the nasty, scornful, judgmental commentators who, when our President, Mr. Obama (a very hard-working and diligent man by any standard) announced a few weeks back that he was going to take a 10-day (just a measly 10-day!) vacation to Martha’s Vineyard with his family. He was publically excoriated for daring to leave Washington without having singlehandedly solved the global debt crisis, the economic downturn, the skittish stock market, the war in Afghanistan, the civil war in Libya, the drought in Texas, the earthquake damage in DC, and hurricane Irene – which ended up truncating his vacation anyway, poor man!

Look...I will be the first to recognize that this is, without doubt, a complicated American summer, and I am sure there is always something more the President of the United States could or should do for the nation, but for God's sake can't even our president's worst enemies realize that our hard-working commander-in-chief needs and deserves a few days off to sleep in late, play golf with his buddies, take a bike ride with his daughters, read a murder mystery on a porch overlooking the harbor, and have a leisurely lobster dinner over candlelight with his beautiful wife? How have we gotten to the place in American thinking where work (and a nearly non-stop regimen of it) is thought of as noble and normative, and leisure is disparaged as some sort of unnecessary, lazy frill in life? God help us!

A few weeks ago, I was able to carve two full weeks out of my rather busy ministerial work schedule and drive up to the Adirondacks, where Collins and I have a home we love on the beautiful and wild Schroon River. Now...without trying to make anyone jealous (because, believe me, I know how to take time off!), I will tell you that those 14 days were sheer bliss in leisure land. In leisure land, you do not set an alarm when you go to bed, you sleep in to your heart's desire, and only get up when the bird songs through the open window beckon you to coffee and the morning paper. In leisure land, you don't check your business e-mail 8-to-10 times a day and respond to every inquiry, thought, or need that comes your way. In leisure land you don't wear a wrist watch, keep up with CNN, or slog through a "to do" list as long as your arm. In leisure land you ride bikes, swim in the river, take naps in the hammock, tube down the rapids, enjoy a cold drink on the deck with neighbors, barbeque heaps of chicken and sweet corn on the grill, eat by candlelight, have a naughty after-dinner cigar in the gazebo (OK, maybe that's going too far), and go to sleep whenever your eyelids get heavy. My two weeks in the Adirondacks with Collins was sheer, lazy, healing, free-time bliss. And every American, every last one of us – for our mental and physical and spiritual health – must know how to regularly dive into leisure...and stay in those cool pools of delicious relaxation, free of work, worry and guilt!

Perhaps I need to give a precise definition of leisure before I go any further this morning. Leisure time is free time to be – with self, family and friends, hobbies, nature and activities you love – to just be as you will, away from the pressures, expectations and demands of one's employer, community or nation. My Merriam Webster dictionary defines leisure as, "freedom, or spare time, provided by the cessation of activities...free time as the result of temporary exemption from work or duties...time at one's [own] command that is free of engagements or responsibilities...one's own time, at one's convenience...rest." I think of leisure as a relaxed way of being in the world which enables us to keenly notice and enjoy the world which is at hand, so that when we do return to our work and duties in life, we are rested, restored and ready. Practicing leisure in your life is intentionally allowing there to be renewing space around your work and duties which allow you to keep both perspective and joy in your living.

I would like to suggest (as have many others who have written about human health, happiness and well-being) that in order for any human being to have a well-rounded, meaningful and healthy life, one needs on a daily basis to have more or less equal amounts of three fundamental human activities:

- 1) Work (volunteer or paid...at home or on the job...and that includes those of us in retirement), and
- 2) Sleep (the federal government now says that, regardless of age, we all need at least eight hours of restorative sleep every night), and
- 3) Free (or leisure) time – time to let your hands and feet and hearts and minds go where they will regardless of what duties await.

This balance is, I believe, the healthy, human ideal. So I would pause now to ask all of you... how are you doing in your life right now with balancing these three essential aspects of living?

I think the evidence is irrefutable that most of us Americans – despite all our obvious freedoms, privileges and material wealth – have a serious problem when it comes to creating and protecting enough genuine leisure time in our lives, even if we are retired. Simply put, we are addicted – some of us severely! – to too much work, too much labor, accomplishment, service, information, activity and hurry.

As Jay Walljasper recently put it in the *Utne Reader*:

“More and more it feels like our lives have turned into a grueling race toward a finish line we never reach...It wasn’t supposed to turn out this way. As a kid in the 60’s I remember hearing that one of the biggest challenges of the future would be what to do with all our leisure time. Amazing inventions [like the computer, I-pads and cell phones] were going to free up great stretches of our days for what really matters: friends, family, fun. But just the opposite has happened.” We hurry through our lives with lots of work, but little leisure.

Most Americans no longer know how to truly go to leisure land...we have simply fallen out of the practice. Here are just a few facts. Over recent years, Americans, perhaps the hardest-working and most productive people on the face of the earth are working harder and harder. Juliet Schor, in her book *The Over-Worked American – The Unexpected Decline of Leisure*, writes:

“In the last twenty years the amount of time Americans have spent on their jobs has risen steadily. Each year the change is small, amounting [now, upwards] of nine hours, or slightly more than one additional day of work [each week]. The accumulated increase over two decades is substantial....The growth of work time did not occur as a result of public debate [she observes]. There has been little attention from government, academic, civic organizations [or unions]. For the most part, the issue has been off the agenda, a non-choice, [a silent shift].”

It may startle you to hear – as it did me when I recently heard this statistic – that the average American family – husband, wife and kids – has approximately – are you ready for this? – just nine days of vacation together a year. Just nine days...that’s a little less than two weeks off when you add in the weekends. Compare that with European families – our noticeably calmer and surely more contented neighbors across the Atlantic – who get eight weeks off every summer, in addition to other holidays throughout the year! I saw a report recently on the evening news which suggested that most Americans suffer from a new and dangerous kind of stress – VDD – “Vacation Deficit Disorder”

The truth is that in America today, millions of us routinely work 10, 12, 14 or more hours a week...including (and now I am addressing those of you who have retired, who think this trend should not concern you) including many of your children, grandchildren, nieces and nephews. Now I grant you, I don’t see quite as much of this here on the Treasure Coast, but when I served a congregation in suburban Washington, almost everybody was working too hard. We could never have church meetings before 8 PM, and even then folks arrived late directly from work! Lawyers, doctors, computer consultants, supervisors, floor managers, storekeepers, tree trimmers, even ministers (!) – countless Americans work far more than the standard 8-hour day which was established to protect workers from injury and abuse nearly a century ago. The bottom line is clear: in spite of the fact it was never supposed to be like this in the 21st Century, Americans have more

work and less leisure than they used to, and sadly there is no reversal of this unhealthy trend in sight.

And, tragically, we have passed this non-stop workaholic ethic onto our kids and grandkids! Study after study show that today countless American children (especially those from families where there are high expectations) are terribly “over-programmed” with activities, lessons, clubs and sports. One report says that America has “an epidemic of over-programmed kids,” who no longer have the time for the “free, imaginative play” and “relaxed routines of childhood” – like long, languid summer vacations, which are so crucial for them to grow into happy, well-adjusted, properly socialized adults. All you parents and grandparents out there this morning have a responsibility to help your little ones experience the leisure that is so important to human wholeness and happiness.

And, again, in this culture which so values productivity and is so scornful of laziness, I would generally have you think of leisure – the kind we need much more of for our spiritual and emotional health – not as some sort of lazy inactivity, but rather as time when we again “at our own command,” and “at our own bidding, not that of someone else”...choose relaxed engagement and focus with precious people and things which we personally value and enjoy. Leisure engagement and focus, unlike the engagement and focus we experience while working, is purely regulated by what we as human beings choose for ourselves.

My colleague Will Saunders suggests if we are to be healthy and balanced human beings: We need to...let go of work and its corollary, buying and spending...we need to relieve ourselves of activities that cause worry – paying bills, preparing tax returns, making lists of things to do in the coming week...we need to ‘waste’ time on the pleasure of being with friends and family, the delight of simply enjoying the world...[we need to set aside time] to renew our relationships with nature, God and others. I think that is the key benefit of leisure, it enables us to renew our relationships with all the truly important stuff in life!

And what’s more, leisure pursuits (while they may accidentally help us to become wiser, more well-rounded, smarter and more productive persons) really must be engaged not for their potential usefulness, thereby becoming in effect a kind of “work,” but rather simply for their own calming and satisfying sake! So leisure looks like spending a part of the afternoon watching the infinite patterns of summer clouds from your backyard hammock...or spending a morning tending your stamp collection...or taking the family out for a laconic picnic or boat ride along the lagoon...or strolling through your favorite museum for the umpteenth time...or going birding in that favorite Florida wetland of yours...or spending the afternoon leisurely researching your family’s genealogy on the world wide web...or even taking a deliciously dreamy afternoon nap without setting an alarm!

I quote again from the “Free Time/Free People” affirmation, which I read to you earlier in the service, by Rabbi Arthur Waskow, “Having time for leisure goes to the heart of what it means to be a human being...Human beings need time for self-reflective spiritual growth, for loving family and communal sharing...free time [for] family, community and spiritual growth.” People need time just to simply be – in all of life’s elemental simplicity.

Listen to essayist Peter Marin describe what feels to me a perfectly holy everyday example of leisure:

Sometimes, somehow, almost as if by accident, we get things right. Now at noon, we sit on the grass beneath this tall tree, having within reach the fruits of countless harvests – wine, bread, cheeses, fruit, chocolate. I look at the grass, the sky, the passerby, my companions – and my heart fills with a joy equal to any more obviously mystical or

religious sentiment I have ever had. There is nothing beyond the absolute beauty of the transience of this day – this wind, this ease, this flesh. It arises from the heart in answer to a human presence, and one understands – if only for a moment – what it would mean to be free. It is a passion beyond all possessiveness, a fierce love of the world, and a fierce joy in the transience of things made beautiful by their impermanence. I would not trade this day for heaven...no matter what name we call it by. Or rather, I think if there is a heaven, it is something like this...a pleasure taken in life, this gift of one's comrades at ease momentarily under the trees, and the taste of satisfaction and the promise of grace, alive in one's hands and mouth.

Poet Carl Sandburg, in a short poem entitled "Happiness," also speaks similarly to the disarmingly simple blessing that is true Leisure:

*I asked professors who teach the meaning of happiness to tell me what is happiness.
And I went to famous executives who boss the work of thousands of men.
They all shook their heads and gave me a smile as though I was trying to fool with them.
And then one Sunday afternoon I wandered out along the Desplains River
And I saw a crowd of Hungarians under the trees with their women and children and a
keg of beer and an accordion.*

This then – and a thousand other blessedly impractical, non-efficient and purely enjoyable human activities – is what leisure should look and feel like. Leisure (again... precisely because it is what we individually choose to do and be in our own time) relaxes, restores, recharges and rejuvenates us, and gives us energy and focus for when we return, as we always eventually must, to the work and labor we do for and by others.

The simple truth is that hard-working, plugged-in, fast-paced Americans aren't structuring enough soul-nurturing leisure into their lives. While it is true that some employers are pressuring or forcing American workers to labor too long and too hard (more on this unacceptable moral outrage in a moment), I would suggest to you that it is mostly ourselves who are responsible for the demise of leisure in our lives. Many of us seem to be falling victim to what one social commentator has called hurry sickness, a feeling of emptiness, fret, distraction and dissatisfaction which wells up within us because the frenetic pace of our lives never permits us to sit back and just be human in the way human beings were designed to be.

My first working title for this sermon was, "Don't just do something, stand there!" And that is what I would like to say to you all, for your spiritual well-being. You are a human being, not a robotic work machine. Every day, every week, every month, you need time (calm and substantive time) to step back from work and duty to reflect and relax and rejuvenate. So don't just do something, stand there! – your happiness (maybe even your survival as a person) may depend on your ability to create genuine, healing leisure in your life routines.

It seems to me that if we are to reverse the dangerous demise of leisure in both our individual lives and in the culture at large, change must occur in two venues.

1). First, as the "free time/free people" statement suggests, we must immediately and insistently begin to change public attitudes and public policy about work and workers rights. Just as in the early days of the industrial revolution – when society turned its collective attention to the many abuses of the workplace – as a fast-paced, technologically advanced, prosperous society we must once again say, in both law and spirit, to workers and employers alike, "every worker has the right to a balanced healthy life with reasonable, limited, humane work hours!"

This may mean we will need to establish new laws and workplace policies about long hours, unreasonable expectations, involuntary overtime, and other employer practices which implicitly or explicitly oblige workers to overwork. It certainly means America as a whole needs to return to the time-tested wisdom of the 8-hour work day for most workers. And another quick aside here: I believe that controlling workers hours ultimately benefits the employer, and is therefore in the employer's ultimate self-interest, in that the quality of work dramatically rises in workers who are encouraged and enabled to live balanced and healthy lives.

This is certainly true for me in my job here at UUFVB. I know enough about my own work patterns to know that if I were to ever fall into a sustained pattern of overwork, the quality, depth and focus of my ministry amongst you would noticeably decline. I must tell you that I intentionally limit my work hours to something akin to 40 hours a week in order to enable me to truly do my job, and to do my job well...and I suspect the same is true for most-if-not-all of you! If we are ever to change things in this unwise American imbalance between labor and leisure, it means that many of us will need to "speak up" and "act up" – for ourselves and everyone else in the society – in our workplaces, and say "enough is enough. None of this, of course, is going to be easy! No one should under-estimate how difficult it will be in this free market economy, long driven by new face-paced technology and the excessive American work ethic, to bring about such a shift in public attitude and policy. But I believe together we must all do what we can to change public attitudes and policies and begin returning a healthy measure of leisure and free time to our lives. The very quality of our lives and our souls hang in the balance.

2). But we cannot, of course, just rely on a shift in public attitudes and public policies to "fix" this problem and reverse the decline of leisure and free time. Trust me...no amount of new labor laws or workplace policies is ultimately going to protect most of us in this room this morning from overwork and "hurry sickness." Most of us need to make a change "in here" if the quality and balance and health in our own lives is to ever come to pass. While our work and retirement situations and expectations vary widely, I will nonetheless assert that ultimately we each have both the freedom and the responsibility to make decisions – although they be sometimes tough and costly ones – that will enable and ensure that we have constructed around us lives of balance, joyfulness and health. I pray you, good folks, do not regard leisure as some superfluous or optional dimension of your living. If you are to be fully and joyfully human, which is much of what being a Unitarian Universalist is all about, you need – and here's bit of irony – you need to discipline yourself to find and cultivate leisure – and genuine free time – in your daily living!

In closing, I will remind all of us of one of the wisest sayings known to humanity...I don't know who first said it, but it shouts with blunt truth, perspective and clarity: "No one ever says on his or her deathbed, gee, I wish I had spent more time down at the office." Look, my dear folks, life is precious and short. You were not put on this earth to be a joyless slave to your job, work, volunteer commitments or BlackBerry. You were put on this earth to be a full and fine, relaxed and balanced human being, taking in all of life's simple, precious gifts.

Sure, work is good...but leisure is holy. So please, protect the gift of life that has been so miraculously given to you. Insist that your life has the labor/leisure balance that is necessary for robust and joyful humanness – and talk to your kids and grandkids, neighbors and friends about achieving this balance in their lives, too! I pray you...measure your days for, in that measuring, heaven and happiness await – nothing less than heaven and happiness.

Amen.