

Royal Bank Letter

Reflections on Our Times

The Place of Recreation

In a high pressure world, recreation is a necessity, but we must take care that it does not add to the pressure. As a society, our quality of life is coming to depend on the quality of our leisure. The question is, are we “amusing ourselves to death?”

THE WORD “RECREATION” has a purposeful air about it redolent of sweaty locker rooms and public swimming pools heavy with chlorine. There is something chillingly calculated, after all, about the idea of “recreating” oneself in order to maintain one’s capacity for work. If we think of recreation merely as an adjunct to our working lives, then free-time activities logically fall into the line of duty. It is

almost as if someone were shouting at us from the sidelines: “You will enjoy yourselves whether you like it or not!”

Actually, recreation does not entirely deserve its plodding reputation. Properly speaking, it consists of any harmless activity voluntarily engaged in for the satisfaction it brings. A recreation may indeed be a way of making the mind and body fit to take the strain of working. But it may also be pursued for sheer pleasure or fun.

Recreation through many eyes

Shakespeare called recreation “sweet,” and a defence against the “foes of life,” led by melancholy. When he lived in the 16th and 17th centuries, most people spent no more time than was absolutely necessary at work. The average family enjoyed about 200 work-free days a year, compared with about 130 days in present-day North America. People amused themselves with a wide variety of outdoor sports, games, dances, pageants, fairs, and plays.



Shakespeare was an actor and playwright in London when the Puritans began to resist the spirit of “Merry England.” Puritanism would later spread throughout the Protestant-dominated parts of the world. It taught that human beings were inherently and chronically sinful. They could only redeem themselves by fervent worship, abstinence from luxuries, and dogged work. When the Puritans ruled colonial America, they made profanation of the sabbath a penal offence – and “profanation” could be something as minor as playing chess on a rainy Sunday afternoon.

In their zeal to preserve Sunday as a “day of rest,” the Puritans and their imitators confused rest with idleness. In the former state, the mind is at ease; in the latter, it may be seething with all the ingredients of temptation. Apparently it never occurred to them that temptation could be obviated by allowing people to occupy their minds through harmless activity.

In military terminology, rest and recreation are regarded as two different things, even though the result of recreation is active, you may rest by sitting in a park, for example, but to engage in recreation you would have to do something there – stroll, ski, play horseshoes, toss a ball around.

And not every free-time activity qualifies as recreation. There is nothing recreative about heavy drinking or taking drugs, which in the long run have a degenerative, as opposed to regenerative, effect.

Keeping behaviour in check

The fact that human nature harbours self-destructive tendencies explains why public authorities attempt to control what people may do in their non-working hours. For example, the business hours of bars are restricted in many places, and public gambling is banned. Much as libertarians might deplore official paternalism, there is no doubt that the behaviour of some people needs to be kept in check, not only for their sake, but for that of society.

It was to provide wholesome alternatives to pastimes that may cause personal and social harm that the first adult recreational movements were founded. Organizations such as the Young Men's Christian Association, which began opening recreational facilities in Britain and North America in the latter half of the 19th century, were dedicated to keeping youths away from strong drink and the temptation that accompany it.

In olden days, much of the leisure time spent by ordinary men was taken up with imbibing. Despite the best efforts of the Puritans, people consumed

great quantities of drink on Sundays – so much so that many workmen in Western European countries took Monday off to recover from their hangovers.

The workmen themselves decided whether or not to work on Mondays, leaving employers and customers guessing. To regularize

production, British factory owners in the 1880s started giving their employees a half-day off on Saturday in a move that foreshadowed the standard two-day weekend in western nations today.

In the 16th and 17th century, the average family spent about 200 work-free days a year, compared with about 130 days in present-day North America

Towards a working leisure class

The advent of the weekend was followed by shorter daily working hours, more disposable income, more mobility through the ownership of automobiles, and a much-expanded range of free-time activities. When the pioneer American sociologist Thorstein Veblen published *The Theory of the Leisure Class* in 1899, the group he was writing about constituted a small fraction of the population. Today, most people fortunate enough not to have idleness forced upon them by unemployment could be said to have joined the leisure class part-time while on a payroll, full-time when they retire.

They indulge in many activities formerly reserved for the extra-affluent. Until quite recently, for instance, you had to be very well-off to own a cabin cruiser, and golf was considered a rich man's sport.

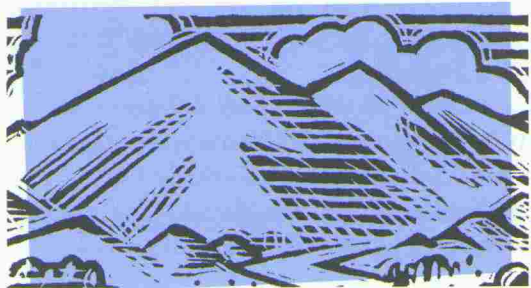
The general access to leisure activities has brought a move away from the traditional western work ethic. As *Fortune* magazine recently noted, "Unlike their workaholic fathers, many of today's managers are not willing to give up personal interests for more work. They want to spend their time in stimulating outside pursuits that let them discover and extend themselves."

Recreation as stress therapy

As the amount of free time and the means to enjoy it have increased, so has the need for recreation. Amidst the affluence, the multiple diversions, and the timesaving conveniences of the 21st century, the pressures of life have grown, especially in the urban areas where most inhabitants of western countries now live. Ample free time alone is not enough to keep people from succumbing to damaging stresses. On the contrary, having time on your hands can actually bring on stress-related problems arising out of boredom, loneliness, and habits that take a toll on health.

"If you're under a great deal of stress," wrote Peter G. Hanson in *The Joy of Stress*, "it is not good enough to simply walk away from it and lie down and stare at the ceiling. The mind continues to race, and perpetuates new stresses. The best way to unwind is to switch to something else that is also stressful. The alternate activity should be something that requires full concentration, but involves different circuits of the brain or body. Thus, such obviously stressful activities as roller coaster rides, mountain climbing, white water boating, parachuting, racquet sports and surfing can all have tremendous value in the reduction of ordinary stresses."

To extract full satisfaction out of leisure, variety is essential. One should never follow only one sport or hobby. If you concentrate on a single pastime too intensely, it becomes “too much like work,” and a source of unhealthy stress in itself.



Freedom or obligation?

The great philosopher of sports fishing, Isaak Walton, drew a nice distinction between idleness and recreation in *The Compleat Angler*. A friend of his, he wrote, was wont to say that angling “was an employment for his idle time, which was then not idly spent.” If we think of recreation as employing idle time, it is clear that indiscriminate television-viewing is not a recreation. Like the printed word, TV can be engrossing and stimulating when taken in selective doses. But if it is watched just because it is there, it does not “re-create” people in the sense of sending them back to their normal concerns with refreshed minds.

In *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, author Neil Postman discusses the baneful influence of TV on public affairs through its trivialization of politics and social issues. He first broached the thesis behind his book in a speech he gave in 1984 to a seminar at the Frankfurt Book Fair. The theme was the work of George Orwell, whose novel *1984* depicted a future in which people’s minds are controlled by a psychological police state. Postman noted that the horrors Orwell envisaged when he wrote the book in 1948 had not been realized in the western democracies.

But, he said, “alongside Orwell’s dark vision, there was another vision – slightly older, somewhat less well-known, equally chilling. I refer to Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* ... Huxley and Orwell did not prophesy the same thing. Orwell warned that we will be overcome by an externally imposed oppression. But in Huxley’s vision (published in 1932), no Big Brother or Ministry of Truth is required to deprive people of their autonomy,

maturity, and history. As Huxley saw it, people will come to love their oppression, to adore the technologies that undo their capacities to think.”

While Orwell worried that books would be banned, Huxley worked on the assumption that books would disappear because people would become so shallow-minded that no one would want to read them. In *1984*, the populace is controlled by inflicting pain; in *Brave New World* people are controlled “by inflicting pleasure,” in Postman’s words. He believes that television today is the equivalent of the soma in Huxley’s fictional benevolent dictatorship – a universally used drug which comfortably smothers thoughts or feelings that do not conform to social norms.

But the denizens of the *Brave New World* are not “couch potatoes.” They enthusiastically participated in all sorts of activities, including “electro-magnetic obstacle golf” and “centrifugal bumble-puppy,” both played with complicated high-tech gear. Comments about bumble-puppy by the “Director of Hatcheries and Conditioning” in Huxley’s satire anticipated today’s multi-billion-dollar recreation industry, which is forever presenting us with new and increasingly costly ways of spending time.

In his book *Waiting for the Weekend*, McGill University professor and author Witold Rybczynski joins Huxley in expressing concern at the over-organization of modern life and its extension into recreation. He fears that we have become “enslaved” by the weekend as a social institution, which dictates, how we will use our leisure and exposes it to the same conformity that weighs on our working lives.

Rybczynski maintains that we have turned the concept of recreation inside-out, so that “the freedom to do something has become the obligation to do something” – usually something strenuous and/or difficult.

In the name of high performance, men and women attend “camps” to improve their horsemanship or tennis, and “work” with professionals at “clinics” to rectify flaws in their golf strokes. The social pressure is on for everyone to use expensive, professional-calibre equipment: hence hobby cooks boast arrays of utensils that would do justice to the great chefs of Europe, and suburbanites may be

Variety is essential
in our pastimes
lest they become
“too much
like work”

seen pedaling multi-gearped bicycles more suited to the Tour de France than to the local bike path.

Not only are you expected to be like a professional, you must look like a professional. There is a costume – a uniform, really – for every conceivable leisure activity, complete with the requisite footwear, such as special boots for “street hiking.” Laughably

As the opportunity for recreation has grown, so has the need for it

high-priced running shoes have become de rigeur for everyone from retirement age joggers to boys playing pick-up basketball in a playground. The tyranny of fashion has long since come to dominate the ski slopes, where people who appear with obsolescent clothing are subject to smirks.

The gung ho, self-improving attitude towards recreation leaves little room for the good-natured amateur who likes to follow a sport or hobby for relaxation. Yacht clubs to which people once went just to “mess about in boats” are now given over to racing in which the competition is fierce. In everything from bread-baking to wind-surfing to playing Monopoly, each year brings more contests and tournaments. Even in the tranquil avocation of vegetable gardening, there are now championships ranging up to world class, and gardeners assiduously compete to have grotesquely swollen (and no doubt inedible) cucumbers and turnips entered into record books.

Along with aggressive competitiveness where none existed before, the money motive has arrived in various recreations. The current North American craze for collecting baseball cards does not arise out of a love of the game or boyish admiration of the players, but out of the fact that there are profits to be made. Contests are now common in which the object is not to savour the “gentle art of angling,” but to catch the biggest fish and so win the biggest cash prize, using the latest in submarine technology.

Striking a balance

All this has taken some of the graciousness out of life, belittling the spirit of amateurism in which activities are undertaken for the satisfaction they give, not to win or make money. If recreations become so competitive or so mercenary that they are really only extensions of dog-eat-dog business life, they have no purpose of their own.

On the other hand, if recreation is seen as an end in itself which dominates a person’s life, it is equally meaningless. If it is strictly a matter of individual enjoyment or vanity, how can it be taken seriously?

And yet, as members of society, we must take it seriously, if only because it uses up natural and economic resources. The amount of resources consumed is bound to grow in line with the population, particularly in the relatively prosperous regions of the world.

The allocation of physical space for recreation has already become a political issue in some communities: should there be a golf course here, or should it be kept as farmland? Should Canada’s national parks be open to commercial recreational development, or should they be restricted to nature-loving recreation-seekers who would cause less ecological wear and tear than tourists and skiers would?

When we move on to economic resources, questions of their use for recreational purposes arise on a global scale. Are the populations of the rich nations spending too much money on recreation while the poor go begging? Or do those same poor populations stand to benefit as high-spending tourists, sports enthusiasts and hobbyists take their recreations worldwide? Considering the role recreation plays in fitness for work, is the present level of expenditure on it in the developed countries genuinely necessary for the social or economic well-being of their populations?

There are no firm answers to these questions, but they call for serious thought. In the end the question of whether our use of leisure time will improve or detract from the quality of life depends on whether we collectively allow it to control us, as in *Brave New World*, or whether we control it and use it to its healthiest advantage. Thus far in history, people have derived great good out of having constructive things to do when they are not coping with the necessities of life. Recreation has been an excellent servant, but it would make a bad master. There is a definite threat that – with the increasing wealth in the wealthy countries – it could get out of hand in terms of human priorities. We must try to see it for what it is: as a means to a full life. As a society concerned with its own future, we must try to keep recreation in its place.



First published in February 1992, by Royal Bank of Canada. Current editions of the Royal Bank Letter are also available on the Royal Bank Financial Group web site at www.royalbank.com/news.