

Taking Time for Life

Loosening the stranglehold of work on our days

By Marjorie Kelly

As I write this, it is shortly before Labor Day weekend—the collective American ritual marking the end of summer—and the whole idea of work and leisure is very much in the air. I started this summer to recover from a four-year bout with workaholism—otherwise known as launching a start-up business—and suddenly I see signs of leisure, or its lack, everywhere. I’m something like the person who wants to buy a red Volkswagen and suddenly sees red Volkswagens at every turn.

There’s Richard, for instance. He’s an old friend of mine who took it into his head two years ago to simply quit working. Formerly a well-paid statistician, Richard now lives in a house on the Wisconsin River and plays all day: building a string maze in the forest (“The Amazing Mazomanie Maze”), amusing himself with fractal equations on his computer, writing a historical brochure about the river. Mostly sleeping late and walking around in the woods, I suspect. His partner Juliana provides the financial support; Richard did the same for her while she was in school, so he figures now it’s his turn.

I saw Richard not long ago—stepped out of my own harried existence into his lazy days, and we had a long talk over breakfast one morning about things that have since stayed on my mind: about what slaves we are to work, and how it’s possible to live another way, if we set our minds to it.

But it isn’t easy. What Richard has done is almost inconceivable to me, to most of us, I imagine. Richard has taken two years off, when most days I feel guilty just taking the afternoon off.

Something in us, in our culture, militates against genuine leisure: resents it as an intrusion upon the sacred truth that work is the substance of life. I’m thinking, for example, of the huff the press is in about George Bush’s adamant vacationing in the midst of the Kuwait crisis. It looks bad, they say, for Bush to be running around the golf course when Saddam Hussein has the world on the edge of war. But in the next breath, the same journalists applaud Bush’s “nearly flawless” handling of the crisis.

I, for one, wonder whether the two facts might have something to do with one another: whether a relaxed psyche might be less likely to make an agitated and imprudent response; whether better

decisions might naturally emerge from a leisured setting, rather than a formal and austere one.

Psychologists might agree on the abstract truth of that, but our culture can’t comfortably give permission even to the president of the United States to put it into action—so convinced are we that leisure is frivolous.

“The American chintziness about vacations is absurd,” observes Michael Kinsley, writing in *Time*, August 20. Recalling a stint he did at the *Economist* in London, he notes that employees there routinely take five weeks of vacation every year, plus two weeks at Christmas and one at Easter. The French by law get five weeks vacation, the Germans, six.

We do grant the necessity of leisure in our culture, but we tend to justify it in terms of work. We don’t say, “Vacation is fun.” We say: “Vacation leaves us less stressed and better able to focus on work.” We don’t say, “Overtime is unpleasant because there’s so much more to life.” We say: “Productivity drops after forty hours.” It’s a ritual in business journalism to justify every humane action a company takes in terms of economics. I suspect I’ll wait in vain for the day the *Wall Street Journal* reports that a company opened an employee gymnasium for no good reason at all—“because the CEO had a sudden whim.”

I take these issues personally, because I have a fantasy I’m cultivating about taking naps at work. I’d love to bring a couch or cot to the office, so I could stretch out for an hour some afternoons. And it helps that a new book, *Losing Sleep: How Your Sleeping Habits Affect Your Life*, by Lydia Dotto, advocates just that. As *The New York Times* said in reviewing it: “Employers already recognize certain limitations of the human body by putting bathrooms and snack machines within everyone’s reach. But they need to supply beds or bunks, too, because naps are more basic than coffee breaks. And all of us need to drop our prejudicial equation of sleeping with laziness.”

It’s all fine and good to say so in *The New York Times Book Review*. But how would you react if you called my office one day and were told, “I’m sorry, Marjorie can’t come to the phone right now, she’s taking a nap”? I suspect many would be convinced I was in a serious depression, or had gone off the professional deep end.

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Since when did work become our master? Our culture today tends to look back on the Victorians as overly rigid and stern, but what about us—when taking a daily nap seems as radical an act as the Boston Tea Party?

What's at work here, I think, is something to do with self-esteem: our personal esteem, and the esteem of our culture as "the most advanced on earth." There's a theory that there are two kinds of self-esteem: one based on efficacy, the ability to get things done in the world; the other based simply on being OK, no matter what we can or cannot do. Our culture values the former at the expense of the latter.

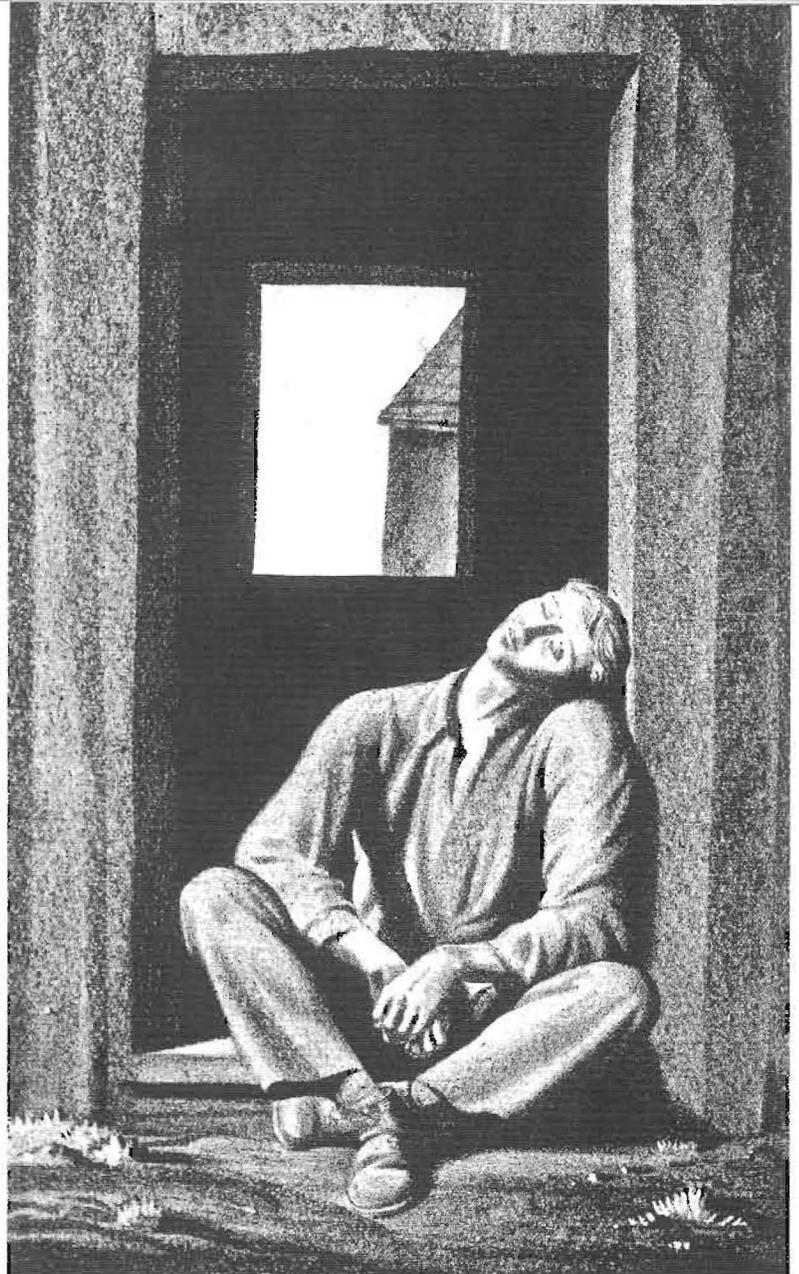
I know I'm personally caught in the efficacy trap. When I'm not working hard—especially those weekdays when I'm really not working at all—I feel listless, not good for much. I ask myself sometimes, What am I trying to prove, and to whom? It's as though I'm trying to earn the right to exist. As though it's a perilous right, easily lost.

The virtue of our work ethic is how important it makes us feel, how valuable it assures us we are. I remember one day having a fight with my partner in the morning, working furiously all day, and finding in the evening I was reluctant to leave the office. The calmness of the sunset outside my window seemed somehow frightening. Because you see, the truth about leisure and relaxation is that it's not all smiles and picnics; it's a time we come face to face with our feelings, with the messiness of life, beyond the comforting edifice of work with its orderly structure and measurable results.

The quiet and calm of daily existence is a time of coming back to our fundamental self: the self we were in childhood, and will be again in old age, and are every evening—the self without a title or business suit or mask. It's a time of coming down from the urgent and self-important stratosphere of business to put our feet back on the earth.

The danger of not doing so is driven home by Valerie Andrews, in her remarkable new book, *A Passion for This Earth*. "When I was working as a journalist," she writes, "I pushed myself well beyond my limits, putting in fourteen-hour days with no time out for renewal"—until a series of infections paralyzed her immune system, for four years. Andrews ended up moving to upstate New York with her husband, making a long ritual of honoring again her connection with her body, and with the earth. The word for "earth," she tells us, comes from the same Indo-European root which gives us "humus" and "humility."

"Honoring our connection to the earth, then, is a way of humbling ourselves," Andrews suggests. "And it provides an antidote for the inflated spirit of our times."



To loosen the stranglehold work has on our lives, perhaps we need most of all to connect with our own humility—which is also to say our birthright: the simple way we belong on this earth, as all creatures do, in a way we need not earn. We need not prove our worth to anyone, but simply to embrace it, as one embraces a warm summer day.

If we have been "cut off from the eros of the moment," as Andrews says, one solution is to reconnect with it: to see our days not as packages of accomplishments, but as moments of being. I recall the poignant entry from Virginia Woolf's diary of 1932: "If one does not lie back and sum up and say to the moment, this very moment, stay you are so fair, what will be one's gain, dying? No: Stay this moment. No one ever says that enough." ✕

Marjorie Kelly is editor of Business Ethics and president of its parent company, Mavis Publications, Inc.

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