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## **IDLING: WHY IT IS SO IMPORTANT NOT TO BE BUSY ALL THE TIME \***

*by Mortimer J. Adler*

**M**ost of us think being busy consists in doing some form of work, whether we do it to earn a living or for some other purpose. The time we spend when we are not working or busy most of us devote to some form of play. We also use such words as “recreation” and “leisure” for the activities that occupy the time we are

not busy or working.

What remains of the time of our lives (the hours of each day throughout the whole of our lives not occupied by work, play, and leisure) is occupied in part by sleeping and other biologically necessary activities, such as eating, drinking, cleansing, exercising, and eliminating, or it is filled with mere idleness.

What I call “idling” is not what is generally meant by idleness—empty time or mere time-killing pastimes. Idling is a very useful form of activity that should be a part of everyone’s life. To make it a part of one’s life requires not trying always to be busy while awake, or even to be indulging in the pursuits of play and leisure.

There are, in my view of the matter, six parts of life: sleeping, toiling, playing, leisuring, idling, and resting. They are activities that can occupy the time of our lives. None is mere idleness—empty time or pastimes. In order to explain the two parts of life that are not generally recognized and properly understood—idling and rest—it is first necessary to distinguish work from play and then to distinguish two forms of work. There is no need to explain the one of the six parts which consists in biologically necessary activities, for which I use the word “sleeping.”

### ***Work and Play***

Work consists of all the serious activities that we perform for some purpose—for some end that the work serves as a means of achieving. The purpose may be to earn a living. In that case, the work is economically necessary, just as sleep is biologically necessary. The purpose may be some form of self-improvement. In that case, the work is morally necessary, for we are obliged to do what we can in the direction of self-development. But in either case, work is never done for its own sake, but always for the sake of some good that it serves as a

means of obtaining.

In sharp contrast, play is an activity that we engage in for its own sake—solely for the pleasure we enjoy in the act of playing itself. If, for example, we swim, jog, or engage in other forms of exercise for the sake of our health, and perhaps even without enjoying the activity itself, then it is not play. It belongs with sleep and other biologically useful activities.

Those who engage professionally in various sports, such as football, basketball, baseball, and tennis, and earn money thereby—often a great deal of it—may be playing as well as working, but only if they derive some pleasure from doing so. When their sole interest in the game they play is the money they earn, then it is purely work and not play.

Pure play is something we do for the sake of the pleasure inherent in the activity and for no other reason. When play is recreational in the literal sense of serving to provide relaxation from the fatigue, the strains and stresses, of work and to recreate the energy we need to go on working, then it is like the playing we do for our health's sake. It is utilitarian play, not pure play, because in addition to the pleasure inherent in the activity itself, which makes it play, there is also some ulterior purpose at work—some end to be served beyond the pleasure enjoyed.

### ***The Two Forms of Work***

There are some jobs that people take solely for the purpose of earning a living. Since they do not have independent means and need a livelihood, they must work to obtain it. But the work they do, they do solely for the sake of the livelihood they must earn. If they could earn a living any other way, they would give up such jobs. If, by good fortune, they inherited enough wealth to exempt them from the need to earn a living,

they would never spend a moment more doing such work.

That kind of work should be called “toil.” Toil is the kind of work that no one would do except for the extrinsic compensation—the pay or wages obtained by doing it. Exempt from the need to earn a living or given the opportunity to earn a living by some other form of work, no one in his or her right mind would go on toiling.

What shall we call that other form of work, work which is not toil? The only word I know that serves to designate it properly is the word “leisure.” To explain why I hold this strange view, I must deal with the current misuse of the word “leisure” and also with its etymology and its background in the tradition of Western thought.

Of all the words in our daily vocabulary, “leisure” is among the most misused. First of all, it is used as a synonym for “free time—time that is not occupied by work. When, in this sense, we speak of our leisure time, we are using the word as an adjective. But the word should be used as a verb, like the other words that name activities. Play consists in playing, toil in toiling, sleep in sleeping. So, too, leisure consists in leisuring.

Secondly, we misuse the word “leisure” when we identify leisuring with playing. Most people, when asked how they spend their free time, the time not occupied by working and sleeping, respond by saying that they spend it in the recreational or playful activities that they think of as pursuits of leisure. Boating, fishing, hiking, mountain climbing, all sorts of games, athletic or otherwise, are, for them, leisure pursuits.”

Because they have made the first mistake of identifying leisure with free time, they are led to make the second mistake of identifying leisure with any

activity that occupies their free time. Since it is not work, it must be play.

The ancients distinguished play from work and leisure from toil. The Greek word that we translate by the English word “leisure” was the word “*skole*”, from which we derive the word “school.” An essential note in the connotation of “*skole*” was learning—whatever resulted in human development, mental, moral, or spiritual.

The English word “leisure” derives from the Latin “*licere*” and the French “*loisir*”, meaning what is permissible or not mandatory. In the sense in which sleep is biologically necessary and in which toil is economically necessary for those who cannot obtain a livelihood in any other way, leisure is optional or permissible. Yet, as we shall see, it is also morally necessary for those who recognize their obligation to make as much of themselves as possible—to improve themselves, to achieve self-development.

Many persons earn a living by teaching, by nursing, by scientific research, by writing books, by composing music or performing it, by painting pictures or sculpturing, and so on. If they would continue to engage in such activities even if they had no need to earn a living, then such activities have the aspect of leisure. If they would discontinue such activities the moment their need to earn a living ceased for them, then what they are doing is pure toil for them, with no aspect of leisure.

Work is often a mixture of toiling and leisuring. Work can also be pure leisure, even when it is compensated by some form of payment, if it is done for the sake of self-improvement or for the benefit of society. And when such work is done solely for self-improvement or for the benefit of society, it is pure leisuring devoid of any extrinsic monetary compensation. We engage in such leisuring when we read in order to learn, when we

perform the duties of citizenship, when we engage in acts of friendship or love, or when we employ our skills creatively in any form of artistic production.

A famous book written by an American economist, Thorstein Veblen, was mistitled *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. What Veblen wrote about was the idle rich, those with enough wealth to spend the whole of their waking life either in play or idleness, with little or no leisure in it.

### ***Idling Is Not Idleness***

I said that there are six parts of life. In addition to the four parts of life already discussed—sleeping, playing, toiling, and leisuring—there are idling and resting.

Rest or resting is not the same as sleeping. Most people who say “Go take a rest” mean “Lie down and go to sleep.” But this can hardly be meant by those who understand what the Bible means when it says that, after creating the universe, God rested on the seventh day; or by those who talk of heavenly rest; or by those who observe the Sabbath as a day of rest, exempt from working, playing, and even leisuring.

The way in which members of Orthodox religions observe the Sabbath as a day of rest indicates the meaning of that term. They spend the day in synagogue or church, praying and contemplating God. Such rest lifts them out of and above the ordinary pursuits of daily life. It transcends the exigencies of all other worldly pursuits. For the nonreligious, an analogous experience, which has an aspect of rest, occurs in the contemplation of beauty, either in nature or in works of art.

Finally, we come to idling and its benefits. All of us understand what is meant by saying that a motorcar is idling. Its engine is turning over, but it is not in gear and so it is not going anywhere. In a similar sense, we are

idling when, while awake, we stop toiling, leisuring, and playing, and let our minds turn over without using them purposefully in one direction or another. What almost always happens then is that things pop into our minds that are worth considering—things that would not have occurred to us if we persisted in keeping busy by toiling or leisuring, or by engaging in play.

Why does this usually happen? The answer is that during the hours of work, either toiling or leisuring, many things enter our minds that we push aside or repress because they do not directly serve the purpose at hand. Though they are pushed aside or repressed, they are not totally discarded or annihilated. They remain in our subconscious waiting for the time of idling when they can pop up into our waking but purposeless minds.

To speak of minds that are awake but purposeless is to analogize them with motorcars with engines turning over but not in gear and so going nowhere. If we insist upon being busy all of the time, either in work or at play, we lose the spontaneous creativity that comes from idling.

The most profitable idling is the idling that occurs in the waking hours after work is done, especially if that work has a large component of leisuring and is not mere toil. We may do such idling while walking home from work, while driving, or while taking some other form of transportation. But if in that process we read newspapers or magazines, listen to music, or watch television, we prevent ourselves from idling.

The same holds for the time spent at home after work and before dinner. If, the moment we have left work behind and have nothing to do until we sit down to dinner, we keep ourselves busy by reading, watching television, or even chitchatting, then we deprive ourselves of the advantages to be derived from idling.

A life is poorer by this deprivation, just as it is poorer if it is not enriched by the pleasure of play, the profit of leisure, and the joy of rest. A poor life is one consumed by toil and sleep, with little or no play in it and little or no leisure, not to mention idling and rest. A rich life is one that has little or no toil in it, a great deal of leisure (both compensated and uncompensated), a moderate amount of play, and enough moments of idling and rest to enjoy the benefits that can be derived from those two very special parts of a human life.

\* From VIEWPOINT Vol. 4, published by Britannica Home Library Service (1985)

### ***RECOMMENDED READINGS***

*Encyclopaedia Britannica*: "Automation," Vol. 14

\_\_\_\_: "Work and Employment," Vol. 29

Aristotle: *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book X, in Great Books of the Western World, Vol. 9

Mortimer J. Adler: *The Time of Our Lives*, Part One

\_\_\_\_: *A Vision of the Future*, Chapter 2

Eric Gill: *Work and Leisure*

Yves Simon: *Three Lectures on Work*

Thorstein Veblen: *The Theory of the Leisure Class*

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## **LETTERS TO THE EDITOR**

Hi Max,

Thanks for all that you have done for me. I was looking/listening to the TGI tapes again these last few



weeks and they are great! I was always in awe around Dr. Adler, and with him no longer here to mentor us, these serve a wonderful purpose to remind as to what I can be as a human being. Without you, I would not have these tapes much less have had the opportunity to meet and learn from Dr. Adler.

Semper Fi,

Dr. Carl Scott

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Dear Max,

The picture of Mortimer J. Adler on the first page of the reading (#153 GREAT IDEAS ONLINE) reminded me of the chapter “Iron” in the book “The Periodic Table” written by Primo Levi (1984).

From the last paragraph:

“Today I know that it is a hopeless task to try to dress a man in words, make him live again on the printed page, especially a man like Sandro. He was not the sort of person you can tell stories about, nor to whom one erects monuments—he who laughed at all monuments: he lived completely in his deeds, and when they were over nothing of him remains—nothing but words, precisely.”

Bob Mitchell

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