

Leisure, the Basis of Culture: An Obscure German Philosopher's Timely 1948 Manifesto for Reclaiming Our Human Dignity in a Culture of Workaholism

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“Leisure lives on affirmation. It is not the same as the absence of activity ... or even as an inner quiet. It is rather like the stillness in the conversation of lovers, which is fed by their oneness.”

“We get such a kick out of looking forward to pleasures and rushing ahead to meet them that we can't slow down enough to enjoy them when they come,” Alan Watts observed in 1970, aptly declaring us “a civilization which suffers from chronic disappointment.” Two millennia earlier, Aristotle asserted: “This is the main question, with what activity one's leisure is filled.”

Today, in our culture of productivity-fetishism, we have succumbed to the tyrannical notion of “work/life balance” and have come to see the very notion of “leisure” not as essential to the human spirit but as self-indulgent luxury reserved for the privileged or deplorable idleness reserved for the lazy. And yet the most significant human achievements between Aristotle's time and our own — our greatest art, the most enduring ideas of philosophy, the spark for every technological breakthrough — originated in leisure, in moments of unburdened contemplation, of absolute presence with the universe within one's own mind and absolute attentiveness to life without, be it Galileo inventing modern timekeeping after watching a pendulum swing in a cathedral or Oliver Sacks illuminating music's incredible effects on the mind while hiking in a Norwegian fjord.

So how did we end up so conflicted about cultivating a culture of leisure? In 1948, only a year after the word “workaholic” was coined in Canada and a year before an American career counselor issued the first concentrated countercultural clarion call for rethinking work, the German philosopher Josef Pieper (May 4, 1904–November 6, 1997) penned *Leisure, the Basis of Culture* (public library) — a magnificent manifesto for reclaiming human dignity in a culture of compulsive workaholism, triply timely today, in an age when we have commodified our aliveness so much as to mistake making a living for having a life.



Decades before the great Benedictine monk David Steindl-Rast came to contemplate why we lost leisure and how to reclaim it, Pieper traces the notion of leisure to its ancient roots and illustrates how astonishingly distorted, even inverted, its original meaning has become over time: The Greek word for “leisure,” σχολη, produced the Latin *scola*, which in turn gave us the English school — our institutions of learning, presently preparation for a lifetime of industrialized conformity, were once intended as a mecca of “leisure” and contemplative activity. Pieper writes:

The original meaning of the concept of “leisure” has practically been forgotten in today’s leisureless culture of “total work”: in order to win our way to a real understanding of leisure, we must confront the contradiction that rises from our overemphasis on that world of work.

[...]

The very fact of this difference, of our inability to recover the original meaning of “leisure,” will strike us all the more when we realize how extensively the opposing idea of “work” has invaded and taken over the whole realm of human action and of human existence as a whole.

Pieper traces the origin of the paradigm of the “worker” to the Green Cynic philosopher Antisthenes, a friend of Plato’s and a disciple of Socrates. Being the first to equate effort with goodness and virtue, Pieper argues, he became the original “workaholic”:

As an ethicist of independence, this Antisthenes had no feeling for cultic celebration, which he preferred attacking with “enlightened” wit; he was “a-musical” (a foe of the Muses: poetry only interested him for its moral content); he felt no responsiveness to Eros (he said he “would like to kill Aphrodite”); as a flat Realist, he had no belief in immortality (what really matters, he said, was to live rightly “on this earth”). This collection of character traits appears almost purposely designed to illustrate the very “type” of the modern “workaholic.”

Work in contemporary culture encompasses “hand work,” which consists of menial and technical labor, and “intellectual work,” which Pieper defines as “intellectual activity as social service, as contribution to the common utility.” Together, they compose what he calls “total work” — “a series of conquests made by the ‘imperial figure’ of the ‘worker’” as an archetype pioneered by Antisthenes. Under the tyranny of total work, the human being is reduced to a functionary and her work becomes the be-all-end-all of existence. Pieper considers how contemporary culture has normalized this spiritual narrowing:

What is normal is work, and the normal day is the working day. But the question is this: can the world of man be exhausted in being “the working world”? Can the human being be satisfied with being a functionary, a “worker”? Can human existence be fulfilled in being exclusively a work-a-day existence?

The answer to this rhetorical question requires a journey to another turning point in the history of our evolving — or, as it were, devolving — understanding of “leisure.” Echoing Kierkegaard’s terrific defense of idleness as spiritual nourishment, Pieper writes:

The code of life in the High Middle Ages [held] that it was precisely lack of leisure, an inability to be at leisure, that went together with idleness; that the restlessness of work-for-work’s-sake arose from nothing other than idleness. There is a curious connection in the fact that the restlessness of a self-destructive work-fanaticism should take its rise from the absence of a will to accomplish something.

[...]

Idleness, for the older code of behavior, meant especially this: that the human being had given up on the very responsibility that comes with his dignity... The metaphysical-theological concept of idleness means, then, that man finally does not agree with his own existence; that behind all his energetic activity, he is not at one with himself; that, as the Middle Ages expressed it, sadness has seized him in the face of the divine Goodness that lives within him.

We see glimmers of this recognition today, in sorely needed yet still-fringe notions like the theology of rest, but Pieper points to the Latin word *acedia* — loosely translated as “despair of listlessness” — as the earliest and most apt formulation of the complaint against this self-destructive state. He considers the counterpoint:

The opposite of *acedia* is not the industrious spirit of the daily effort to make a living, but rather the cheerful affirmation by man of his own existence, of the world as a whole, and of God — of Love, that is, from which arises that special freshness of action, which would never be confused by anyone [who has] any experience with the narrow activity of the “workaholic.”

[...]

Leisure, then, is a condition of the soul — (and we must firmly keep this assumption, since leisure is not necessarily present in all the external things like “breaks,” “time off,” “weekend,” “vacation,” and so on — it is a condition of the soul) — leisure is precisely the counterpoise to the image for the “worker.”

But Pieper’s most piercing insight, one of tremendous psychological and practical value today, is his model of the three types of work — work as activity, work as effort, and work as social contribution — and how against the contrast of each a different core aspect of leisure is revealed. He begins with the first:

Against the exclusiveness of the paradigm of work as activity ... there is leisure as “non-activity” — an inner absence of preoccupation, a calm, an ability to let things go, to be quiet.

In a sentiment Pico Iyer would come to echo more than half a century later in his excellent treatise on the art of stillness, Pieper adds:

Leisure is a form of that stillness that is necessary preparation for accepting reality; only the person who is still can hear, and whoever is not still, cannot hear. Such stillness is not mere soundlessness or a dead muteness; it means, rather, that the soul’s power, as real, of responding to the real — a co-respondence, eternally established in nature — has not yet descended into words. Leisure is the disposition of perceptive understanding, of contemplative beholding, and immersion — in the real.

But there is something else, something larger, in this conception of leisure as “non-activity” — an invitation to commune with the immutable mystery of being. Pieper writes:

In leisure, there is ... something of the serenity of “not-being- able-to-grasp,” of the recognition of the mysterious character of the world, and the confidence of blind faith, which can let things go as they will.

[...]

Leisure is not the attitude of the one who intervenes but of the one who opens himself; not of someone who seizes but of one who lets go, who lets himself go, and “go under,” almost as someone who falls asleep must let himself go... The surge of new life that flows out to us when we give ourselves to the contemplation of a blossoming rose, a sleeping child, or of a divine mystery — is this not like the surge of life that comes from deep, dreamless sleep?

This passage calls to mind Jeanette Winterson’s beautiful meditation on art as a function of “active surrender” — a parallel quite poignant in light of the fact that leisure is the seedbed of the creative impulse, absolutely necessary for making art and doubly so for enjoying it.

Pieper turns to the second face of work, as acquisitive effort or industriousness, and how the negative space around it silhouettes another core aspect of leisure:

Against the exclusiveness of the paradigm of work as effort, leisure is the condition of considering things in a celebrating spirit. The inner joyfulness of the person who is celebrating belongs to the very core of what we mean by leisure... Leisure is only possible in the assumption that man is not only in harmony with himself ... but also he is in agreement with the world and its meaning. Leisure lives on affirmation. It is not the same as the absence of activity; it is not the same thing as quiet, or even as an inner quiet. It is rather like the stillness in the conversation of lovers, which is fed by their oneness.

With this, Pieper turns to the third and final type of work, that of social contribution:

Leisure stands opposed to the exclusiveness of the paradigm of work as social function.

The simple “break” from work — the kind that lasts an hour, or the kind that lasts a week or longer — is part and parcel of daily working life. It is something that has been built into the whole working process, a part of the schedule. The “break” is there for the sake of work. It is supposed to provide “new strength” for “new work,” as the word “refreshment” indicates: one is refreshed for work through being refreshed from work.

Leisure stands in a perpendicular position with respect to the working process... Leisure is not there for the sake of work, no matter how much new strength the one who resumes working may gain from it; leisure in our sense is not justified by providing bodily renewal or even mental refreshment to lend new vigor to further work... Nobody who wants leisure merely for the sake of “refreshment” will experience its authentic fruit, the deep refreshment that comes from a deep sleep.

Illustration by Maurice Sendak for the fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm. [Click image for more.](#)

To reclaim this higher purpose of leisure, Pieper argues, is to reclaim our very humanity — an understanding all the more urgently needed today, in an era where we speak of vacations as “digital detox” — the implication being that we recuperate from, while also fortifying ourselves for, more zealous digital retox, so to speak, which we are bound to resume upon our return.

He writes:

Leisure is not justified in making the functionary as “trouble-free” in operation as possible, with minimum “downtime,” but rather in keeping the functionary human ... and this means that the human being does not disappear into the parceled-out world of his limited work-a-day function, but instead remains capable of taking in the world as a whole, and thereby to realize himself as a being who is oriented toward the whole of existence.

This is why the ability to be “at leisure” is one of the basic powers of the human soul. Like the gift of contemplative self-immersion in Being, and the ability to uplift one’s spirits in festivity, the power to be at leisure is the power to step beyond the working world and win contact with those superhuman, life-giving forces that can send us, renewed and alive again, into the busy world of work...

In leisure ... the truly human is rescued and preserved precisely because the area of the “just human” is left behind... [But] the condition of utmost exertion is more easily to be realized than the condition of relaxation and detachment, even though the latter is effortless: this is the paradox that reigns over the attainment of leisure, which is at once a human and super-human condition.

This, perhaps, is why when we take a real vacation — in the true sense of “holiday,” time marked by holiness, a sacred period of respite — our sense of time gets completely warped. Unmoored from work-time and set free, if temporarily, from the tyranny of schedules, we come to experience life exactly as it unfolds, with its full ebb and flow of dynamism — sometimes slow and silken, like the quiet hours spent luxuriating in the hammock with a good book; sometimes fast and fervent, like a dance festival under a summer sky.

Leisure, the Basis of Culture is a terrific read in its totality, made all the more relevant by the gallop of time between Pieper’s era and our own. Complement it with David Whyte on reconciling the paradox of “work/life balance,” Pico Iyer on the art of stillness, Wendell Berry on the spiritual rewards of solitude, and Annie Dillard on reclaiming our everyday capacity for joy and wonder.