

The Glorification of Busy



Send him mail.



“Insight for the Young and Unrestrained” is an original weekly column appearing every Thursday at Everything-Voluntary.com, by Gregory V. Diehl. Gregory is a writer, musician, educator, and coach for young people at EnabledYouth.com. Archived columns can be found here. IYU-only RSS feed available here.

When you live your life at warp speed long enough, you forget what slow feels like. The requirements of modern living keep us mentally occupied from task to task, all for the sake of maximum productivity. This is a good problem to have, really, as most parts of the world haven't reached a state of economic advancement where such streamlined behavior is even possible. The blessings of modern living have their price, though. We get so busy getting things done that we easily forget why we are doing them, or if there might be something we'd much rather be doing if only we had the time to wonder.

Children take the most damage from living in a society structured for constant motion. No time ever passes without a plan for its occupation. From the moment they get on board the track of public school, there's supposed to be a plan for how every important development of their lives is going to unfold. Some collectivist voices decided a long time ago that there was a way human beings ought to be brought up in the world they created for us. The details of this plan have changed throughout the years, but the principle remains the same.

By the time most people complete their mandatory schooling, they've yet to experience life on their own terms without some kind of sense of what they were “supposed” to be doing. Since a planned existence is all they have ever known, the majority will simply follow suite with how their life has gone until this moment in time. They go to college, usually not because it's genuinely where their passions guide them, but because it's all part of the plan for a “successful” life. Soon after, they enter a career field with lots of room for easy advancement, simply because it requires the least amount of ingenuity and personal input on their part.

They're doomed now to spend most of their waking lives as “workers.” The individual details discriminating one type from another hardly matter. “Work” can be defined simply as the things a person makes themselves do because they believe it to be necessary for the sustenance of their living standards. This is in opposition to “play,” which is simply the

things they do for the enjoyment brought by the activity itself. They do what they perceive they have to do, so that later there might be some way to get around to doing what they want to do.

The revolutionaries of our age and of ages past talk about the process of “finding oneself,” which is only possible because so many of us are so dreadfully lost. It’s a wonder that, even in a world so well-suited for economic development and technological advancement, it still takes decades of searching to begin to know who we really are. This sacred search which should have happened in the earliest years of youth and adolescence gets postponed by social demands. Some pick it up again a few decades later in life. Many die never even having begun to really live at all.

When growing children don’t get allotted that precious time and space to truly be themselves without restraint, the lingering retrogressive effects can haunt them for the rest of their lives. They can be left with a nagging sense of spiritual emptiness and poor sense of identity. It’s a cruel and terrifying form of psychological child abuse. Progressive thinkers may realize how insane it is to brand a child at birth with religious or political values, or force unnecessary body modification or mutilation upon them. Yet, most of the inhabitants of our planet seem to see it as entirely necessary and healthy to begin telling a toddler exactly how they ought to be living and spending their time from the first moments they begin to comprehend speech.

And when does it end? When do the voices finally stop? Occupational retirement. Maybe a good 60 years down the road when a worn out worker finally has enough capital to not have to worry about living by anyone else’s standards anymore (if they haven’t had a mid-life crisis or mental breakdown before then). Unsurprisingly, they die shortly thereafter. They haven’t a clue or single original idea about who they ought to be or how they ought to spend their time without an imposed action plan. Of all the extremely sad facts about our species, I find this to be among the saddest.

The solution is so mundanely simple that very few will recognize its significance. Let your children spend more time doing nothing... and maybe you’ll learn how to live all your days without complete occupation. It’s true that you are technically always doing something, but there’s an important distinction which comes into play when you let motivation arise naturally from the empty ether of your mind. Sit under a tree for a while. Watch your kid dig a hole with a stick. Stare at a beetle for hours on end. Stop trying to fill yours and their lives with 85 different extracurricular activities because you don’t dare find out what might happen to them when their left to their own juvenile curiosity for too long.

How funny it is that we feel such a strong obligation to have a good answer when someone asks us, “what are you *doing* with your life?” There never seems to be a time when it’s deemed acceptable just to answer, “nothing, really.” This is why vacations don’t work. The

mind can only take about two weeks of relative silence before it needs to feel productive again, so it defaults back to its previous programming. I dare say few men would know how to fill their time without chronic working emergencies to attend to. The leisurely life most people think they would pursue, if only given the option, quickly loses its appeal when it's your day-in and day-out reality. Retirees and lottery winners get depressed and lose direction. Sooner or later, bigger dreams and passions always start to manifest.

We could be using the amazing economy and technology we've built to minimize the number of pressing demands and voices which require our attention. Imagine how much more free space we could allot to asking and answering the scariest question in the world: "What do I *really* want?" I hardly know a single person who can answer this with any real degree of honesty or completeness. People will freeze up or change the subject when you try to ask them this outright, perhaps after slewing off some vague wording about purpose, happiness, comfort, love, or family. It's a scary question because it means you have to know yourself intimately, and it means you have to always be reevaluating the answers you arrive at with even further introspection.

I'd like to believe that one day we'll live in a world where people are more easily able to know themselves and pursue their passions in the fullest. I know such a world would be the most peaceful and economically advanced of all worlds. But all social progress starts with the self, which includes you and the developing egos you've taken the authority to raise. Give them the empty space they need to find their own paths in life. If they have to be tied to a chair or tricked into learning something, you're doing it wrong. But you certainly can't teach them to be self-directed little beings until you've reached this place within yourself. Start today by cutting out the distractions and making the lifestyle changes you need to follow what you really care about. It's not like you're going to get another shot at it.