

YOUR SOUL WANTS A PICNIC

Summertime evokes playfulness and refreshment, distinct from the other seasons. And with it comes outdoor activities, dining alfresco and donning shorts and sandals, which sparks a sense of glee.



**DARREN M.
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Last year, I delighted in orchestrating an outing with my sister to the Ravinia Festival — one of the oldest and longest-running outdoor concert festivals, located in suburban Chicago. It is the summer home of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. My sister, a professional flutist and middle-school music teacher, relished Ravinia’s sprawling grounds. Visitors roll in, pulling wagons and carrying lawn chairs and baskets crammed with potato salad, pesto pasta, Bing cherries or sliced summer fruits. Some visitors even bring flowers and candles set in glowing glass jars.

Last summer, after two decades of savoring occasional Ravinia performances, I realized that the experience of communing with loved ones on a quilt strewn across the grass, under a patchwork canopy of uplit tree limbs and glimmering stars, all while surrounded by the sounds of applause for spellbinding classical music performances, epitomizes leisure.

I noticed that I leave the festival grounds with “greatfulness” — a fullness not only in the belly and mind but also a fullness of creativity and beauty.

Early in my first year of seminary, I recall rolling my eyes when I first encountered German Catholic philosopher Josef Pieper’s *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*. While my youthful naïveté found the topic bizarre, if not esoteric, a deeper part of me kindled a significance I could not appreciate decades ago. Wonderfully and mysteriously, Pieper’s serious musings on leisure remained within me all these years, perhaps an indication of its significance.

The term du jour — wellness — strives for a similar set of conditions and individual dispositions that Pieper articulated more than 70 years ago. His insights came when the word “workaholic” entered the lexicon. With the many pressures facing health care workers, stretched thin over long hours in clinical environments and leaders navigating ongoing difficulties, drawing awareness to leisure just might refresh the soul and boost connection to meaning and purpose in one’s work. It may also help us to love our work.

APPRECIATING LEISURE

Leisure smacks of elitism, at least to most modern ears, as it once did to mine. That unfortunate bias is the brunt of the problem. Br. David Steindl-Rast, the near-centenarian Benedictine monk — best known for his meditation practice on gratefulness¹ — rebuts the assumption. He believes few words are as misunderstood as leisure. He writes, “Leisure ... is not the privilege of those who can afford to take time; it is the virtue of those who give to everything they do the time it deserves to

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take.”² Even more, he asserts that rehabilitating a proper understanding of leisure necessitates a long journey in understanding contemplation. My own journey attests to this.

A modern and hyperfixation with fun adds another obstacle to appreciating — never mind

experiencing — leisure properly. Leisure depends on close ties with meaning and purpose, two essential qualities in CHA's definition of ministry formation.³ Both meaning and purpose lend themselves to leisure. For example, take a piece of music. It has no real purpose other than to be played. Yet, during its performance, it has meaning to listeners as it washes over their lives, stirs their minds and intertwines with their feelings and lived experiences.

Likewise, play has no real purpose, and that is the point. Yet, play is chock full of meaning. A granddaughter plays with her grandfather, and she experiences acceptance, confidence, connection and more. Each of these carries great meaning and impact on her developing mind and character.

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THE CONNECTION BETWEEN LEISURE AND WORK

Long before Steindl-Rast, Pieper mined the Greek origins of “leisure,” σχολη, which translated into Latin as *scola*, and then gave us “school” in English. A long, if not strange deviation from contemporary understandings of leisure, these etymological roots suggest institutions and structures that foster growth and learning. Today's idea that leisure stands in stark contrast to work betrays its Greek origins.

Further fueling the contemporary confusion of leisure is Merriam-Webster's notation that it derives from the Old French word *leisir*, which means “to be permitted.” The dictionary highlights freedom or release from activities, especially work or duties. Rather than releasing something or leaving behind one's duties, what we need to do is seek out purposeful work.

Cognizant of this betraying bifurcation between leisure and work, Pieper stitches the two back together. Leisure proves a necessary remedy that redeems our postmodern fetish with work.

Pieper articulates three types of work, and each one reveals an essential pairing to a characteristic of leisure. First, and most commonly, work is an activity and is bolstered by leisure as stillness. This stillness, Pieper muses, “is not mere soundlessness or a dead muteness ... Leisure is the disposition of receptive understanding, of contemplative beholding, and immersion — in the real.”⁴

Second, work is effort, and leisure provides the conditions of celebration. When a big project or event has consumed our planning and effort, a moment of celebration crowns the occasion. In such a scenario, “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.”⁵

For example, a year into quarantining from the

COVID-19 pandemic, when I worked elsewhere, management eliminated a team member's position. Despite the circumstances, a wise colleague stepped in to organize a virtual farewell among the work groups that spent overtime hours and many months of hard-worn collaboration with the departing colleague. She sent calendar holds to the group and had celebratory libations delivered to the departing colleague for a farewell toast. This woman innately understood and embodied leisure as a celebration that follows work's natural effort.

Lastly, work provides a social contribution. This echoes themes in the writing on the *Vocation of the Business Leader*,⁶ wherein work has meaning and purpose when it offers something good to the needs of society and communities. Even with a conscious awareness that one's work contributes to a larger good, like building up the reign of God, one still recognizes a need or even a calling to rest. This implies that leisure enhances work with breaks.⁷

Breaks are not just requirements of union contracts, but they are built into the order of nature. Steindl-Rast reflects on how the rhythms of the human heart include built-in rest. While it is a muscle, the heart ceaselessly works and is in motion all throughout the course of one's life. Yet, unlike other muscles of the upper body that tire after doing several reps of push-ups, it does not tire in the same way. The reason is that rest is a part of

its very work. Steindl-Rast describes this natural phenomenon as the heart working leisurely. And considered more broadly, leisure is at our very center.

Pieper does not view leisure as a parallel function to work, but rather as a perpendicular axis to the working processes. Even more, it is not mere refreshment. It is absolutely necessary for work to be experienced as meaningful and purposeful. It's not that we need to strive for a life balance. Rather, we need to approach our work leisurely and engage in leisure work.

What struck me most about revisiting Pieper's work is his deep observation that leisure is a condition of the soul. Our work impacts the soul, and the soul can come forth in our work, especially when leisure is part of the mix.

'DO NOT SQUANDER THE SUMMER'

A friend and retired formation leader famously implored executives in formation, "Whatever you do, do not squander the summer!" When formation gatherings resumed in autumn, she quizzed with intense seriousness, "So how did you not squander the summer?"

All kidding aside, her earnest admonition conveyed a depth beyond refreshment and summer getaways. Formation is soul work. Soaking in summer's activities forms the contours and conditions of the soul that, with awareness and contemplation, can attune it to a lifestyle of leisure that endures through the year.

"Don't squander the summer" is no mere mantra goading us to get out to lakes, beaches and picnic places. It also tells us not to squander the purpose and meaning hidden underneath summer activities. Don't squander the opportunity to notice and reflect upon how these activities resonate with our innermost depth and calling. They buoy the spirit while propelling the very purpose of our work.

Modernity has duped us into thinking that the only work that counts is work that is outside of us. It overemphasizes productivity, outcomes, and visual and verifiable products of our efforts. On the contrary, leisure, when recast as a condition of the soul, calls us to contemplation. The contemplative attitude moves us

closer to seeing the entangled mutual support of work and leisure.

Leisure is possible when we are in agreement with the world around us. During my Ravinia experience last summer, so many things were in harmony. I was with my sister, and I experienced a Eucharistic-like communing with all kinds of sisters and brothers. St. Francis' brother sun and sister moon were setting and rising in my midst, and in the emerging night sky, stars drew the yearning of the human heart heavenward. Against that backdrop, the melodies of strings and brass, winds and percussion floated harmonies into the evening air. The stillness, pauses and the celebration enfolded the soul, and my awareness awakened to it as leisure.

Summer is upon us. Embrace it with leisureliness, and whatever you do, don't squander it. More importantly, don't squander the necessity of leisure.

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NOTES

1. "Br. David Steindl-Rast," Grateful Living, <https://grateful.org/brother-david/>.
2. David Steindl-Rast, *Essential Writings* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2010).
3. "Defining Leadership Formation," Catholic Health Association, <https://www.chausa.org/ministry-formation/leadershipformation/defining-leadership-formation>.
4. Josef Pieper, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2009).
5. Pieper, *Leisure*.
6. "Vocation of the Business Leader: A Reflection," Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, <https://www.humandevlopment.va/en/risorse/documenti/vocation-of-the-business-leader-a-reflection-5th-edition.html>.
7. Maria Papova, "Leisure, the Basis of Culture: An Obscure German Philosopher's Timely 1948 Manifesto for Reclaiming Our Human Dignity in a Culture of Workaholism," The Marginalian, <https://www.themarginalian.org/2015/08/10/leisure-the-basis-of-culture-josef-pieper/>.

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