

A Modest Proposal: “A Do Nothing Day”

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In a country with a Mount Rushmore that celebrates the ruthless and frenetic westward expansion, it might be a bit naïve to suggest a Do Nothing Day. I have nothing against laboring men and women having their day too; I am a laborer myself, and national holidays are great – so many sales for stuff no one needs.

To rush less, to idle, and to do nothing sounds so un-American, yet it might be a solution to many of our country’s problems. Quixotic as it may sound, if every person in the country could be convinced to lay aside his compulsive busyness for one day per month, for starters, this not-doing would paradoxically accomplish so much. Nothing is a funny word, as Shakespeare well knew. There is so much to it; “much ado” as he put it. It is the great motivator. While it frightens people, it is also the spur to creativity. Samuel Beckett once astutely said, “Nothing is more real than nothing.” It is the void, the womb, the empty space out of which we come and live out our days. It is the background silence for all our noise. Like the rain, it is purely gratuitous. Such a gift should not be shunned.

By doing nothing I mean the following: no work, just free play; no travel, except by foot or bicycle; no use of technology of any sort except stoves for cooking meals to share; no household repairs or projects; no buying or selling of any kind, including thinking of buying and selling. You get the point. This not-doing doing could be called dreaming or simply being. It’s a tough task indeed, but fitting for the paradoxical creatures that we are. And that’s just for individuals.

Nationally, all businesses would be closed, factories would be idled, planes and trains grounded. Only emergency services – hospitals, police, etc. would be allowed to operate. Quixotic, yes, but our national leaders, Republicans and Democrats alike, are surely apt to agree since it would add one more day to their monthly schedules of doing “nothing.” Making my point in a slightly different way, Mark Twain said, “Suppose you were an idiot and suppose you were a member of Congress. But I repeat myself.”

Think of how much we would accomplish by doing nothing! People might dream and think; they might hear birds singing or even sing themselves; they might have real conversations; they might feel the peace of a wild idleness; our ecological matrix would have a brief chance to catch its breath; a massive amount of energy would be saved and little carbon would be spewed into the atmosphere (a rather startling statistic could be inserted here). The benefits are endless – and all from doing nothing.

The immediate downside would be millions of mental breakdowns of the do-something addicts. Their agony from trying to do nothing would be excruciating. A friend from another country where they still take siestas and celebrate doing nothing was kind enough to suggest a rapid resolution to this mass madness. Kill these do-somethings. Since they are

not good for nothing while alive, she said, and can't help contaminating the earth with their compulsive busyness, why keep them around. She advocated enlisting the help of the Pentagon for this work since killing is their business and they are good at it. While acknowledging the aptness of her suggestion, I told her I thought the Pentagon was much too busy killing foreigners to get involved in a domestic caper at this time. It also raises a number of other practical problems, the biggest being how and where to bury so many busybodies all at once.

Furthermore, people who have so utterly forgotten their childhood's lovely ability to do nothing are far too old and tough and set in their skins to be used as food, as another wag of my acquaintance suggested. Even trying a little tenderizer on their frazzled flesh wouldn't work. After all, when Jonathan Swift had that profound idea of how to solve the Irish famine problem, he was suggesting soft and tender one year olds be slaughtered and sold to the wealthy since they would make "delicious, nourishing, and wholesome food, whether stewed, roasted, baked, or boiled." But older, compulsive, do-something people, set in their ways, while seemingly organic - a good thing these days - are tough and sinewy - a not very appetizing thought. I doubt there would be much demand for their meat.

Therefore, in all due respect, let me suggest another way to proceed. I think it best to let them go mad on Do Nothing Days. They will bounce back on the intervening go-go days but should eventually get so discouraged by having to stop once a month that they will commit suicide. That way they'll get what they didn't want - a quite long stretch of days doing nothing, if eternity has days. And the survivors can live guilt-free, since all they did was nothing.

As you can see, the downsides to Do Nothing Days are small compared to the benefits. But convincing people to adopt my plan won't be easy. Long ago I stopped giving advice to friends and family since whatever I suggested seemed to encourage them to do the opposite. Yet here I go again, suggesting this big Do Nothing Day. So I will desist in the name of the law of reversed effort.

I really don't want to organize a movement to establish particular days for this not-doing. I don't want to establish a cult and be a cult leader. I'm really too busy for that. My schedule is too packed for such a job. Maybe you have time. I have too much to do. I say, "Nothing doing."

I was once rushing to take groceries to my elderly mother when I ran into the sharp metal edge of a stop sign. Stunned and coming to on my back on the pavement with blood dripping down my face, it bemused me to think how fast I was stopped. Ever since, I've been on the go.

Nothing showed me his face.

Yet here and there I have this dream of a Do Nothing Day. It's the dream of a ridiculous man, isn't it?

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