

Doing Nothing or Nothing Doing?

By [Edward Curtin](#)

Theme: [Science and Medicine](#)

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A few years ago I wrote a piece for Labor Day suggesting that it become a “do-nothing day.” It was a bit satirical but of course had a serious point as satire does. I had little hope that my recommendation would be adopted. Now that we are suffering from coronavirus panic and people are being told to shelter in their homes, many are no doubt suffering withdrawal symptoms from having to slow down. After all, how many cookies can you bake, television and movies watch, liquor drink, emails and texts send and receive, toilet paper rolls count, etc.?

I am well aware that this enforced idleness has inflicted enormous economic damage on regular working people world-wide, as I believe it is meant to do. The psychological damage is incalculable. The super-rich will no doubt profit mightily from the coronavirus crisis while the poor and middle-classes, small business owners, and the elderly will suffer greatly. The government will use people’s taxes to bail out big banks and corporations for whom they front. Inflicted suffering has a way of culling the herd and controlling the survivors. It’s an old story continually updated.

Such suffering notwithstanding, I think the points I made in that do-nothing article are worth repeating and so I will repeat them in an edited way in what follows. A do-nothing day has now become weeks. I think it important that we create a chrysalis of light and hope in these dark times. Embracing contemplation might even breed resistance to the evil forces that run the show.

In a country with a Mount Rushmore that celebrates the ruthless and frenetic westward expansion, it might be a bit naïve to suggest do-nothing days are a good thing. I have nothing against laboring men and women working hard and constantly. I am a laborer myself, and national holidays like Labor Day are great – so many sales for stuff no one needs, and far too many people working on an ostensible holiday. But I have this ridiculous dream of a time when everyone just does nothing for a while.

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 a while, 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 and spiritual renewal.

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 or by car, if necessary, to get groceries; 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, except for food, 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. I realize that cemeteries are the only place where the inmates literally do nothing, but we are not there yet. And anyway, as the word's origin attests, the inmates are only sleeping.

Nationally, all businesses would be closed except for food stores; 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 more days to their 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 relearn that old trick of putting one foot in front of the other called walking; 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 they 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 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, I’m told – are tough and sinewy, which is not a 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 the eternal doers go mad on do-nothing days. They will bounce back when the go-go days are reinstated but should eventually get so discouraged if the mandatory days of isolation are reinstated that they will do us the favor of then committing 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 to stop them.

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 the benefits of doing nothing. So I will desist in the name of the law of reversed effort.

I really don’t want to organize a movement to impose this not-doing on people. I don’t want to establish a cult and be a cult leader. We already have one running things. 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, laboring away. Keeping very busy.

Nothing showed me his face. Fear seized me.

Yet here and there I have this dream of do-nothing days. It’s the dream of a ridiculous man, isn’t it?

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