

Leisure is “Time Out” for God

Fran Cook

On Monday nights, you can often-if not always-find me at the church until 7:30 or 8:00 o'clock at night. It's not that I'm working diligently on plans for the fall or spring it's volleyball night!

Anywhere from six to 12 of us get together to play; about a third are church members. This is a carry over from my Winston-Salem days. I love volleyball and enjoyed playing on a city league team there. We did well during my first season, coming in second. But as we moved up a division, we did not do as well. The teams were more challenging, more experienced, and more practiced than we were.

One of the most important elements of our game became the time out. We used the time out both defensively and offensively-to either shake up the opposing team or to shape up ourselves. For us, it was a time to gain perspective, to receive pointers, and, sometimes, to just relax, maybe even tell a joke. The time out was an essential part of our game.

Time out, leisure time, is an essential part of life. Many of you have already taken your time out, your vacation. I just returned from mine last Sunday. Several months ago, as I looked forward to the summer and fall months, I recognized that in order to keep up the pace and to serve most effectively, I needed to take some time out, time to rest, re-group, re-energize. Granted a vacation, I began making preparations to go out West-to Colorado. You need to understand that I am drawn to Colorado and the mountains like some people are drawn to the city and its malls. More than anything, I feel at home among the rugged mountains and crystal streams, the tall aspens and open skies.

Whether in the mountains of Colorado or the hills of our own Boyce Park, I cannot help but appreciate and ponder the wonder of it all and the God, the Master Designer, who created not only a world filled with beauty but also a human sensitive enough to enjoy it. I agree whole-heartedly with Alice Walker's Shug when she says to Celie in *The Color Purple*, "Listen, God love everything you love-and a mess of stuff you don't. But more than anything else, God loves admiration, just wanting to share a good thing. I think it ticks God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it."

Take time out to notice, time out to appreciate, time out to contemplate. This is leisure time, time unencumbered by have-to's and ought-to's. It is time free from designated responsibilities. By definition then, leisure means freedom. Not just freedom "from," but freedom "to." Free from our demanding responsibilities at work, school, or home, we are free to appreciate and to contemplate, to pray and to listen, to worship and to grow, to reflect and to write.

Christ speaks of freedom in John 8:32 when he says “the truth will make you free.” The truth to which he refers is saving truth-truth that frees humanity from sin and its slavery. But the question is, how do we as Christians continue in this truth that makes us free and how do non-Christians come to know this truth?

Jesus says, “If ye continue in my word ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:31-32, KJV). It’s the conditional “if” that has always stood out to me. Hence, my argument for leisure: if we do not allow ourselves time to hear the truth, to know the truth and become one with the truth, then the truth can never set us free.

I love to hike. One of the first things I did while on vacation was hike to Lake Chasm at the base of Longs Peak-an exhausting and thrilling accomplishment. I delight in the challenge and the strain, the peace and the quiet a hike can offer. A hike is a freeing experience in which I struggle with truth and commune with God.

Over the years, I have found that hikers and hiking styles are very distinct. Some hikers are like mules-they have the endurance and can pull the long haul and they want to absorb their environment. Others are like cheetahs-with speed and agility, but only in bursts, these hikers want to conquer their environment. Let me give you an example.

A truly holy moment occurred unexpectedly for me one evening in the middle of my vacation. I arrived at the southern rim of the Grand Canyon just in time to watch the sunset. I had never seen the canyon before and then to see it for the first time as the sky and canyon turned shades of yellow, red, orange, brown, and, ultimately, black was tremendous. It was holy. I felt I was in God’s sanctuary. After attempting to capture a few shots of the setting sun on film, I sat still and, in the quiet, watched night fall, lost in my thoughts. My reverie was soon disrupted by three young women. Apparently, this was their first visit to the canyon as well. They gleefully had someone take their picture, with the canyon and setting sun as a backdrop, then left without even a glance into the canyon. They had no time to share with the canyon or its Creator. They came not to absorb but to conquer, cheetahs fast and furious. Places to go, things to do, people to see-schedules to keep. They took no time to be holy.

Strangely enough, I was reminded of the church and of the movie “Vacation,” starring Chevy Chase, both, really, for the same reason. Sometimes we are driving so hard that we are driven to distraction. Chase and his family, like these three women, were too caught up in their itinerary to appreciate their trip, the canyon at sunset. The church is also oftentimes too caught up in *its* task to appreciate its true purpose. We fail to reflect upon why and in whose name we serve. We have the routine down. We know what we are supposed to do, but we have forgotten why we do it. We have forgotten whose example we are following. Truth eludes us. We snap our picture, proof that we were there, and never stop to contemplate the truth-never stop to recognize freedom. We take no time to be holy.

The person fortunate enough to have or to make leisure time has the opportunity to look at the world, to see the relationship among its various parts, to contemplate God's role and their role in the world, and to ponder upon their purpose in the world. The luxury of leisure, however, does not mean a time to escape responsibility. We must learn to distinguish leisure from idleness.

Leisure is discretionary time, freedom-of-choice time; idleness is, simply, doing nothing when you should be doing something. Leisure means time to appreciate our world, our God, and become excited about both; idleness does not allow for this. It's dead, useless time.

Unfortunately, we have tended to associate idleness and irresponsibility with leisure and free time. This assimilation is a result of our Puritan heritage and the Protestant work ethic.

Our Puritan ancestors had little respite from their labors in the "new world." This was necessary for survival and was even reinforced by Puritan leaders with the Biblical text—for example:

"Yet a little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to sleep: So shall thy poverty come as one that travelleth, and thy want as an armed man" (Pro. 6:10-11, KJV).

The Protestant work ethic came from their drive to subdue and conquer the land. Free time evolved to simply mean unproductive time. As a result, we don't get away from our work. We can't take the time for leisure—it's unproductive.

Am I suggesting that we all quit working in order to lead more contemplative lives? No, far from it. In his second letter to the Thessalonians, Paul speaks directly to those who have stopped working and are living off others' generosity because they believe "the end" is near. He tells them to get back to work and to earn their own living. He does not tell them never take a vacation, crack a joke, or read a best seller.

In other words, we need to be responsible stewards of our time. People need to and should work, but that work should not be all consuming. There is more to life than just work, and work itself does not necessitate misery. Work brings the self-satisfaction of a job well done; work provides funds for the necessary and the not-so-necessary things in this world; work can evoke feelings of self-worth.

Just as work is not all bad, neither is leisure. Leisure provides that time to be creative, to dream and to imagine, to enjoy life, to play and to think, to be with God, to listen and be heard. Leisure provides that time to search for truth and to find freedom in that discovery. In Genesis, we see a God who took the time to imagine and create a world; we see a God who enjoyed walking in a garden. We have a God who recognized and recognizes the importance of both work and rest. God commands it for His people; Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy—work six days but rest on the seventh, a sabbath to God.

Work and leisure are compatible and both are necessary ingredients for a full and meaningful life, a life of truth and freedom. A poet takes the time to reflect upon God's creative work and humanity's God-given dignity before writing:

"I often think of the heavens your hands have made, and of the moon and stars you put in place. Then I ask, 'Why do you care about us humans? Why are you concerned for us weaklings?' You made us a little lower than you yourself, and you have crowned us with glory and honor"(Ps. 8:3-5, CEV)

Here is leisure at its best-contemplation and enjoyment of life and the recognition of and gratitude to the God who makes it all possible. Taking time out to notice, to appreciate, to contemplate. Without any time out, without the leisure to think, to question, to study, and to challenge, knowledge would be unattainable and the truth that sets us free unreachable.

Time out is an essential part of the life of a Christian. Life in Christ demands purposeful and intentional leisure: time out for God and with God, time out to grow in the Spirit, time out to be holy, time out to know the truth that sets us free.

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