The uses of leisure

by Roger Kimball

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I might have subtitled this reflection: "what you never learned about school at school."

In a famous passage of his History of the Peloponnesian War, the Greek general and historian Thucydides describes the frightful anomie that spread throughout the Hellenic world in the aftermath of the revolution in Corcyra. "To fit in with the change of events," Thucydides wrote, "words, too, had to change their usual meanings."

Important words like "virtue," "prudence," "loyalty," "cowardice," and "courage" all underwent a revolution. They came to denote activities and attitudes that were perverted versions of their original meanings. A revolution in the meanings of words generally instigates a revolution in philosophy.

Despite what many modern philosophers say, philosophy is not about words. ("What is philosophy?" one wit said. "People saying things.") Ultimately philosophy will always be about the realities that language points to but never captures: knowledge, the Good, the ultimate vocation of mankind.

Nevertheless, words are philosophy’s primary medium of exchange. And language, like currency, can undergo inflationary and deflationary pressure; it can be debased; it can be used profligately, or carelessly, or ignorantly. Thucydides noticed that the pressure of events changed the meanings of words.

There is also a countervailing pressure: when words change their meanings, our understanding of the world tends to change as well. This one reason that a careful use of language is a moral as well as a grammatical obligation: a sloppy or insidious use of language is often an invitation to sloppiness or insidiousness in life.
It would be possible to write an entire book detailing how such changes in language turned up in changed attitudes: a sort of dictionary of disillusionment. Consider what has happened to such words as "disinterested," "manly," "respectable," or "virtue": how drastically they have altered in the last generation or so!

"Disinterested" is regularly used as a synonym for "uninterested," "manly" can hardly be used at all in polite society, and "respectable" has become what one writer calls a "smile word" a word in the process of disintegration or inversion, so that when we call something or someone respectable to day, we usually mean "apparently respectable, but not really so."

As for "virtue," it has long been observed that a word that started off meaning the manliness of a man has largely contracted to describe the chastity of a woman. One can learn a lot about a culture from the words and ideas it pushes into early retirement. Our own age, as the examples just cited suggests, is rich in such conceptual emeriti.

One of the greatest casualties resulting from this policy of premature superannuation concerns the word "leisure," an idea that for the Greeks and for the doctors of the Church was inextricably bound up with the highest aspirations of humanity.

For Plato, for Aristotle, for Aquinas, we live most fully when we are most fully at leisure. In the Politics, Aristotle noted that "The first principle of all action is leisure. Both are required, but leisure is better than occupation and is its end."

Leisure in the sense intended by Aristotle--the Greek word is schole, whence our word "school"--meant the opposite of "downtime." Leisure is not idleness, but activity undertaken for its own sake: philosophy, aesthetic delectation, and religious worship are models.

It is significant that in both Greek and Latin, the words for leisure--schole and otium--are positive while the corresponding terms for "busyness"--ascolia and negotium (whence our "negotiate")--are privative: not at leisure, i.e., busy, occupied, engaged. And for us? Of course, we still have the word "leisure." But it lives on in a pale, desiccated form, a shadow of its former self. Think for example of the phrase--and the odious object it names--"leisure suit": it goes quite far in epitomizing the unhappy fate of leisure in our society.

At first blush, it might seem odd that leisure should survive predominantly in such degraded form today. After all, the United States and Western Europe have never been richer or more concerned with "quality of life" issues.

By every objective measure, we can certainly afford leisure. (The real question is whether we can afford to lose sight of it.) We are daily confronted by an army of experts and a library of self-help books urging us to salvage "quality time" for ourselves, our family, our friends.

What time could be of higher quality than leisure, understood as Aristotle understood it?
(Cardinal Newman was right when he observed that, about many subjects, "to think correctly is to think like Aristotle.") But all such remedial gestures serve to underscore the extent to which our society has devoted itself to defeating genuine leisure, replacing it where possible with mere entertainment and disparaging efforts to preserve oases of leisure as the pernicious indulgence of an outmoded elite.

Probably the most profound meditation on the meaning of leisure is a little book by the German neo-Thomist philosopher Josef Pieper called in English Leisure, the Basis of Culture, first published in the late 1940s and recently reissued. Pieper not only wrote about leisure. He was also a writer whose work requires leisure (I do not mean simply "spare time") if it is to be properly read.

Not that he is "difficult" or overly technical. On the contrary, Pieper wrote with a glittering simplicity--for once a genuinely "deceptive simplicity"--but the tintinnabulation of unleisured life deafens us to such quiet dignity. We must stop to listen if we are to hear these arguments, and stopping and listening are among the most difficult things to accomplish in a world that rejects leisure. Pieper’s simplicity is the hard-won simplicity that comes at the end of an intellectual journey.

Defending leisure is always an audacious undertaking. It was particularly audacious in 1947 when a war-torn Germany was desperately trying to mend its ravaged physical and moral fabric. Especially at such times, leisure is likely to seem a luxury, a dispensable indulgence that distracts from the necessary work at hand. Pieper acknowledges the force of this objection. "We are engaged in the re-building of a house, and our hands are full. Shouldn’t all our efforts be directed to nothing other than the completion of that house?"

The answer is that the task of building or rebuilding is never merely a problem of engineering. If it were, human life could likewise be reduced to a problem of animal husbandry. Something more is needed: a vision of society, of the vocation of humanity. And the preservation of that vision is intimately bound up with the preservation of leisure. Even at a time of emergency such as faced Europe in the aftermath of World War II--perhaps especially at such times--the task of rebuilding requires a hiatus in which we can confront and reaffirm our humanity. The name of that hiatus is leisure.

"To build our house," Pieper writes, "implies not only securing survival, but also putting in order again our entire moral and intellectual heritage. And before any detailed plan along these lines can succeed, our new beginning, our re-foundation, calls out for a defense of leisure."

It is fitting that in this encomium to leisure, Pieper does not seek "to give advice or provide guidelines for action but only to encourage reflection." To the question "What is to be done?" the first answer must be: nothing. "There are certain things which one cannot do ‘in order to . . .’ do something else. One either does not do them at all or one does them because they are meaningful in themselves."

In his introduction to the reissue of Pieper’s book, the English philosopher Roger Scruton cites "an
American president" (I wish I knew which one) who answered a fussy official with the command "Don't just do something; stand there!" It is a bit of advice that all of us should learn to take seriously.

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