



The Joy of A Simple Preoccupation

Summer, the traditional season for relaxation and recovery, is upon us. As you plan for vacation with family and friends be sure and add yourself to the equation. This summer discover or revisit the joy that comes from a simple preoccupation that is just for you. (Reading time 180 seconds).

This past weekend I excessively immersed myself in my simple preoccupation. I trekked to an area of the world that has 40 miles of ocean coastline without a road or electricity. Communication with the civilized world was non-existent; no internet or cell phone connectivity. I was on a 4-night adventure in one of the more isolated places on earth. I was pursuing one of my great simple pleasures. Amongst the fourteen thousand remote islands on the salt water side of the Florida Everglades I was making camp and going fishing.

Now the aim of this article is not to encourage you to take a fishing trip. If I were to relate half of the challenges and encounters we faced with water, fuel, bugs, crocodiles, sharks, storms, fires or equipment failure in preparing for and completing this trip, I expect that such a fishing excursion would not make your bucket list. This trip was just a more exotic version of what for me is usually a quick, simple and easy diversion and joy – taking a rod and reel, or sometimes a cane pole to any sort of water and casting a line and lure.

My purpose instead is to emphasize the great value that is derived from discovering and taking time for your own simple preoccupation; a diversion from the other expectations, opportunities and anxieties of modern life. Having such a personally engaging pastime provides a valuable and needed source of relaxation, rest, and renewal.

This was brought home even more to me the day after my return from the Everglades. I was in New York working with a group of executives. A CEO attending echoed a common refrain I hear at all levels in organizations. “I need to find a play activity I do just for me. I don’t have any.” Discussing this often repeated lament on the heels of my exquisite renewal in the wilderness made the value of having a simple personal pre-occupation again very clear to me. If it’s not clear to you...I encourage you to think about it.

You may already know what I mean. You have a simple preoccupation that captivates you, or did at one time. If that’s the case, why not revisit it today or start planning to do so in the near future. The anticipation of a passionate pastime can put a smile in your being sometimes as much as the actual doing of it can.

Great Options

If you don’t have such an engaging pursuit the options are numerous: Gardening, fishing, hiking or golf all take you outside to not only engage in the activity but to let nature stimulate all your senses. Studies, beginning with one over 20 years ago in Science magazine, have linked the restorative benefits of nature to more rapid recovery from illness and surgery, lower blood pressure, boosting of the immune system and reductions in stress.

Knitting, wood-working, painting and other crafts engage your imagination and relax your mind. Research at the Harvard Medical School Mind/Body Institute has found that when an individual is knitting their heart rate can drop 11 beats a minute and their blood pressure drops as well. The repetitive actions required for knitting result in a “relaxation response” that is similar to how the mind and body respond to the relaxation techniques that are part of repetitive meditation, prayer or yoga.

More physical activities such as basketball, soccer, tennis or hockey impart an adrenaline high and can improve your physical and psychological well-being. A Scandinavian Journal of Medicine and Science study found untrained middle-aged men and women who played soccer for an hour two or three times a week as well as elderly men (63-78 years) exposed to lifelong soccer had marked mental, physiological, and social health benefits including improved cardiovascular health, better bone density as well as a reported “sense of flow,” a psychological state with positive carryover into all aspects of your life.

In choosing, remember the primary joy of the right simple preoccupation for you comes from its pursuit, not necessarily its outcome. The key benefit is not in catching a big fish or knitting a sweater that is beautiful or in winning the game. The outcomes are tertiary – good ones are just sweeter icing on the cake. Instead the objective is to be absorbed - taken away – preoccupied in the doing. To be so in the moment, so engaged but relaxed, that you are released from the other decisions and cares in life, replacing them with an awareness of this simple, pleasurable interest that now preoccupies and benefits you.

Escaping from Others

Sometimes we need to take a break away from everyone... even our favorite people. Your simple preoccupation should provide you that outlet. It should be a pastime primarily for

you, even if at times you enjoy sharing the activity with others. The best pursuits will appeal to you even if done solo - practicing jump shots, or skating or fishing alone.

What simple preoccupation captivates you...the thing you do just for you?

A positive sense of being can be found everywhere and in everything we do, not just in our personal hobby. But engaging in a simple preoccupation that is for you alone can renew you in ways that make you more connected, positive and passionate about all aspects of life.

So if you have such a positive pursuit, don't feel guilty about engaging in it. Anticipate, plan and act on it. Doing so serves an important purpose in promoting both your achievement and enjoyment in life. Give yourself permission to immerse yourself on a more regular basis.

If you don't have one, I encourage you to seek one out. At a minimum it provides a needed respite from both the mental intensity of the richer opportunities of life as well as the tediously boring and mundane. At its best pursuing your healthy preoccupation generates a special joy and passion for living that radiates through you into everything you do and everyone you encounter.

So this summer plan some regular vacation time for your own personal simple preoccupation. It will make you smile more.

Jim Bird
Publisher

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Quotes by Henry David Thoreau

"Wealth is the ability to fully experience life."

"This world is but a canvas to our imagination."

"There are moments when all anxiety and stated toil are becalmed in the infinite leisure and repose of nature."

"To affect the quality of the day, that is the highest of arts."

Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) Thoreau, a classical American writer, taught school, lectured, served as a surveyor for the town of Concord, did odd jobs, worked as Ralph Waldo Emerson's handyman, and helped him edit the Dial, for which he wrote extensively.

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Vacations shouldn't be limited to a few times a year. Find a hobby or interest that can take you away mentally or physically in short intervals; 30 minutes here, an hour or two there. That way you can take a vacation every day when you want to.

Work-Life Balance Lessons

By Lisa Braman

My work-life balance challenges are probably no different from anyone else's - I want to do my best at work and at home. I don't use any magical powers or special talents for this - I just work hard all day, both on and off the job. Giving the same amount of commitment and focus to both areas allows me to support my husband, who also works in the construction industry, and our two very active children.

We seem to have a system that works well enough that most days, I enjoy a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction. Here's what works for us:

It takes a village, so invest the time to build yours.

My children are very active in sports, but my husband and I can't always transport them to practices or games, so we barter for help with a network of parents we've met through their activities. For example, I drive one of my son's friends to the bus stop and his mother takes the boys home from lacrosse practice. Because most of the parents in our "village" also work outside the home, we're all grateful for the extra help.

Don't be afraid to ask for what you need. Last year, my daughter's soccer coach was able to pick up both her daughter and mine after school and drive them to practice. When my daughter was assigned to a different team this year, I requested a re-assignment to last year's coach so we could stay with a system that worked. The new coach was happy to oblige.

Wear blinders. I am so focused on my priorities at work that it sometimes feels to me - and seems to others, probably - like I'm wearing blinders. Without this single-mindedness that allows me to tune out distractions, I'd be far less effective and much more frustrated at the end of the day. My priorities are clear and I work through them daily.

Give your family the opportunity to contribute.

I always ask in advance when I need a little extra help from my family on days when the schedule is tight or different. They understand that we're part of a team. When we accomplish what we need to, we celebrate with a high-five for a job well done.

Take time for yourself. I'm a social person, so I try to squeeze in a quick lunch with colleagues as much as possible. I exercise with a class at least once a week and watch TV with my daughter later in the evening to unwind. Even a little bit of "me time" helps me feel more balanced.

Lisa Braman is a project engineer in the Milford, CT business unit.