

The Spotless Mind

Leisure and the Life of the Mind

Albert R. Jonsen

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Cicero, banished from Roman political life and dwelling at his beloved Sabine farm, defined his retirement as *Otium cum dignitate*, “leisure with dignity.” [1] The Latin word for business is *negotium*, which is literally “not leisure.” Leisure is “not business,” that is leisure is free time, time free of the demands of daily duties, time open to do what one wills to do, not what one must do. Leisure is not laziness, lethargy or lassitude. What is it then? This essay is about leisure—in particular, one type of leisure, the leisure of the mind.

Some of us here are, in some sense, retired. We now have the leisure that we could not have enjoyed when we were engaged, if not swamped, by the demands and pressures of parenting, doctoring, lawyering, brokering, teaching, and all the pulls and pushes of daily life. We can use our new found leisure by travelling, by trying, usually in vain, to improve our golf game, or by just loafing. But leisure offers an unprecedented opportunity—one that costs little and benefits greatly-- indulging the life of the mind. We now have time to read the books we wanted to read or thought we had read. We can press beyond the first four chapters of *War and Peace*. We peer at more impressionists than we knew existed. Leisure frees the mind for the liberal, or free, arts.

In our college days, we were walked or marched through the liberal arts, whether we intended to be engineers or investment bankers. Every college had its Western Civ, its English Lit, its list of prerequisites that must be navigated before getting down to the business of our majors. In Jesuit colleges, the prerequisites were requisites: every student was required to take one philosophy course every semester for four years. My teaching career began by expounding such daunting subjects as metaphysics and epistemology to students who were, at that time, mostly vets on the GI bill. I tried in vain to persuade these tough, practical guys such arcane topics were of value. One of my senior, smarter colleagues was in the habit of telling his skeptical students that

these philosophy courses were of no value, that they were the most useless courses they would ever take. He meant, of course, that they would not contribute to their future income. But he was revealing the very nature of the liberal arts: history, literature and philosophy provide no practical or technical skills—save perhaps logic—but they free the mind, and are thus called liberal. They free the mind to inquire beyond the immediate demands of living and working. They free the mind for leisurely thinking.

The life of the mind is, for the most part, not in a leisure mode but in a working mode. Its working mode rehearses daily problems to be solved but also generates the great questions that instigate serious investigations in the sciences or plunge into the daunting problems of public policy. All of these questions are driven by the need for answers, large answers that promise us progress and survival. The working life of the mind devises business plans, produces books and plays and poetry. It issues in ingenious inventions

Leisurely thinking is different. It generates very special questions. They are not the questions that make the brain bustle in the search for solutions: how do I get my promotion? how do I pay my bills? how do I finance this investment? They are not the anxious questions that circle around how to find the right job, the right school, handle a rebellious teen or an unreliable colleague, how to prepare for the future. The questions of the leisured mind are different.

Several years ago, a film appeared with the title, “The Endless Sunshine of the Spotless Mind.” I did not see that film, which was about a company that specialized in erasing unhappy memories, but I love the title. It is drawn from Alexander Pope’s poem, *Eloise and Abelard*. It provides a brilliant metaphor for the leisured mind: it is a place of endless sunshine. That bright light is emitted by its own sun, which is not round, but has the shape of a great question mark. That brilliant space is also spotless, since it contains none of the derelict projects or unsolved problems that clutter our working minds. Even more, it is free of the instant bits of data that speed over our omnipresent electronic devices, seeking a place to nest.

The spotless mind is not blank, white space. The leisured mind is filled with activity which neuroimaging captures in vivid color. Studies of the brains of Buddhist monks at meditation, presumably a high form of leisurely mind, show vital activity of the medial prefrontal cortex and posterior cingulate regions, as the monk’s consciousness retreats from the executive functions and responses to external stimuli to deeper interiority. For what it is worth, the spotless mind is rather a kaleidoscope.

When the life of the mind is operating in leisure mode, it may not be interested in answers. At least it is not compelled to find them. The questions generated in leisure are questions that do not need to be answered. They are questions for their own sake, quiet questions that satisfy merely by being noticed, lingering long past any urgent moment to come up with the right answer. They might be called questions of curiosity, of inquiry and of wondering.

There are some questions of mere, simple curiosity, questions for which you really don't need answers, but would enjoy having them. These questions of curiosity are the first signs of a leisured mind. You look into corners, not to find something you've lost but just to see if anything is there. It may be curiosity that summons us into museums and book stores. Many a nineteenth century parlor held a curiosity cabinet, filled with odd stones and strange bones. Curiosity does not follow a system, is not confined by the rigors of a method: it rambles about and it happily discovers. Its success is not expanded understanding, as is the success of scientific research. Its success is insight: a delightful spark of the mind that says, aha, I didn't know that before, I see it, as I didn't see it before.

Charles Darwin was one of history's greatest thinkers. His mind was the paragon of curiosity. He began his scientific career, as did most natural philosophers of his day, as a collector of curiosities. He became a great scientist, but a scientist who did not work out of a structured system of hypotheses. Undoubtedly, his mind was always busy with new questions but it was, at root, a leisured mind: he was not driven by the need to answer. He was delighted by the insights of discovery. His books, *The Voyage of the Beagle*, *The Origin of the Species*, and *The Descent of Man* are delightful to read, because they expose a mind that followed its questions of curiosity until those questions converged on his great insight, natural selection as the explanation of evolution.

Questions of curiosity, the mark of the leisured mind, may be converted into questions of inquiry, that is, structured exploration of a set of problems in search of a systematic answer. Plans of action in daily life exemplify inquiry in miniature: planning to buy a new home, to take a vacation, to study for a degree. In large, the systematic questions of inquiry also go on to produce all of the sciences and all of the arts, all formulations of policy in politics and of strategy in warfare. Questions of inquiry produce an organized picture of how to proceed. Needless to say, that organized picture can be distorted and misleading, but it will always be a pattern, or patchwork of questions and answers.

Questions of inquiry must put off the delightful rambles of pure curiosity and take on a certain austerity. Scientific investigations or clinical examinations or litigation cannot

wander at will: they must have the discipline to distinguish relevant from irrelevant, the cogent argument from the clever one. Answers to questions, in these activities, are mandatory. Our formal education, even in liberal arts, has become structured around questions of inquiry.

But the great questions of the leisured mind are questions of wonder. They enliven the leisured mind. In English we use the word “wonder” in several rather different ways. We can say, “I wonder if it will rain today,” a preface to a question that hopes for an answer. We also say, “I wonder at the genius that could create The David.” Here we expect no answer, we simply admire the wonderful. Questions of wondering are not stimulated by puzzles, problems and paradoxes, as are the questions of the busy brain. They antecede these stimuli. The question marks for questions of wondering are like Spanish question marks, placed not only at the end of an asking sentence but also at the beginning. Questions of wondering are the original questions that start the mind moving and give it a perpetual energy to ask all other questions and push it toward all practical answers. Questions of wondering also are the final, quiet musings over the deeps of life, beauty, love, sacrifice and generosity, and even the questions of pain and loss: ‘why could this happen to me?’

What do these three kinds of questions, of curiosity, inquiry and of wonder, have to do with leisure and in what way do they enliven the mind? Throughout your life, whether occupied by your business or profession, or rejoicing in retirement, your mind will be filled with questions of curiosity and inquiry. But, among these, the questions of wonder are primordial. Primordial questions may not have any answers. Questions of wonder expand into a wondrous realization that is not an answer to any question, but is the beginning of wisdom. Wisdom is a mysterious state. It is supposed to belong to the aged and the ancient, but we who are aged and ancients know that we do not have it, at least not as far as we know. In some cultures, wisdom is attributed to certain classes of persons, the sages and the mystics. But perhaps wisdom grows within the leisured mind that has encountered simple wonder.

The questions of wonder precede, anticipate and energize all questions that have practical purpose. Without them, no practical question could even be asked. For-- and this is my thesis today-- the very essence of human existence is the primordial question of wonder. One of my own teachers, the great Jesuit philosopher Bernard Lonergan, in his brilliant book *Insight*, called this the “detached, disinterested, pure desire to know.” This is existence conceived as the single, central, illuminating question mark. To be is to question, not about a particular problem, but about being. Questioning is the only human activity that cannot be turned off: every question that is answered can be followed by another question. It is never silly or irrelevant to ask, “Why?” The most

memorable question in our literature, “To be or not to be? That is the question” is not a question about suicide, as often supposed, but a question about existence itself.

The leisured mind, then, is the essence of human existence, although its power almost always lies hidden beneath the continual flurry and noise of the practical questions that make life move and survive. The questions of wonder run quietly, like the motor of a Bentley. Yet they radiate power into all questions and all answers, all theories, plans and above all into all poetry and philosophy.

More than anything, without the questions of wonder that emanate from the leisured mind, there would be neither meaning in any experience nor in life itself. Meaning is usually thought of as an answer, an ultimate answer. I do not see it that way. I see meaning as the recognition of the moving question of wonder, permeating each and all experience. To ask, “what is the meaning of this?” is to seek the relationship of a single experience or of the experience of life to something beyond the instant. The unquenchable question of wonder always points beyond any experience or any answer. It points into transcendence. The life of the leisured mind brings us most closely into ourselves and takes us most beyond ourselves.

The deathbed words of a woman reputed to be wise end our essay. As Gertrude Stein lay dying, she said to those around her “what is the answer? There was silence. She laughed and said, “well then, what is the question?” And then she died.

[1] Cicero, Ad Fam. 1.9; Pro Sestio 96.