



## Down Time:

When It Comes To Work, Less Is Often More • By Kevin Madigan

**N**ever let it be said that the British are a lazy lot. Quite the contrary: This is, after all, where the Industrial Revolution sprang up and begat the regular job, leading to all manner of structured endeavor. Then it all started going down hill, according to Tom Hodgkinson, an Englishman who has made it his mission to advise the rest of us unfortunate slobs on the vital need for more idleness, more enjoyment of life and less mindless toil. Not for him that silly

old maxim "Work Before Play." Best known as the publisher of a UK magazine called, fittingly, *The Idler*, Hodgkinson has written a very funny and succinct analysis on what we're doing wrong and how to put it right.

Easier said than done, apparently. "The way of the idler is a chaotic one," he writes. "He attempts to escape from programs, theories, formal spiritual practice, order, discipline. Routine irks him, as do rigid systems of thought." Hodgkinson does

recognize that the general populace is obligated to work, at least some of the time, in order to pay the bills and thus keep the creditors at bay. It's the way you go about it that counts. All this scurrying about is simply not healthy for body or soul. There has to be a better balance between the routine of work and the need for inactivity.

While not advocating a complete descent into mere sloth (heaven forbid), Hodgkinson is quite emphatic: "Avoid any useful activity," he advises, boldly. A good bit of indolence never hurt anyone. He derides Thomas Edison for having invented the light bulb, thus making it possible for people to work at night, when they should be resting, at the very least. Edison, we are informed, regarded sleep as a colossal waste of time. "The fact that he is portrayed as a great man, a paragon of American industriousness, tells us much about the decay of Western civilization in its journey from art and life to work and death." As it happens, Edison appears to have been something of a hypocrite, claiming to need hardly any sleep at night, yet he was often caught taking furtive naps during the day. Hodgkinson then praises Albert Einstein—"whose achievements exceeded Edison's"—for always getting his 10 hours of sleep each night. Even Winston Churchill, who deplored laziness, always took an afternoon nap, even at the height of World War II. Hodgkinson is a firm believer in "The Nap." "If you know there's a nap to come later in the day, then you can banish for ever that terrible sense of doom one feels at 9 a.m. with eight hours of straight toil ahead."

Time is money, we are constantly told. Well, no, it is not. It is nothing of the kind. Time is, in fact, time, and should be used for whatever you please. How grotesque it is that some shops are open 24 hours a day! This is very American and is absurd. Who in their right mind needs to shop at 4 a.m.? Lamentably, these dreadful follies are spreading to other countries. How very insidious.

The chapter on "The Death of Lunch" rips to shreds the modern proclivity towards fast food joints and scoffs at the likes of the ubiquitous Starbucks for its "unpleasant aroma of efficiency."

The book also covers such crucial issues as how best to deal with a hangover, suggesting ways to ameliorate its more

dastardly effects. The author pauses to consider whether William Blake was under the influence of a hangover when he saw the universe in a grain of sand. He quotes Oscar Wilde (a great idler, he calls him) at length and draws from the works of ancient Chinese philosophers to make his case, and especially likes Lin Yutang, who, referring to the art of conversation, wrote: "[It] exists only in a society of men imbued in the spirit of leisure, with its ease, its humor, and its appreciation of light nuances. For there is an evident distinction between mere talking and conversation as such...The discourse is more chatty and leisurely and the topics of conversation are more trivial and less business-like."

Hodgkinson bemoans the advent of pills that cure your ailments so quickly that the idea of convalescing is rendered quaint and old fashioned. "Are you ill? Take a pill. That is the solution of the medical orthodoxy. Drug companies make vast profits out of magic beans which promise to deliver us from torment and return us to the desk." He believes that doctors should prescribe more time off instead of more drugs. "The final battle must be with our own sense of guilt about taking time off. ...Remember that soldiering on is a slaves' way of thinking."

This book is considerably more than just an apologist exercise for slackers. Reasoned arguments and ample references are made, in addition to precedents and examples of the joys of wanton lethargy. Stating that "the idler enjoys earthly pleasures," Hodgkinson is both a practitioner of meditation at odd moments and a spokesman for the good life, but not in the ways of the idle rich. That is something else entirely. No, this is the kind of idleness that is within reach of us ordinary mortals.

Humor is never out of reach in Hodgkinson's world. Dispelling entrenched notions of established work ethics is serious business, to be sure, but he has a knack for getting to the point with wit and sharp doses of levity, delivering the goods with alacrity, while denying the long-held belief that idleness breeds sedition. This is a man who knows how to make the perfect paper airplane and does so with relish. What's more, he wants to show you how as well.

We're talking about more than just having fun. In fact, that word is rarely,

if ever, used here. It's invariably more complicated than that, and we are given ample proof. Each chapter cleverly denotes a time of day and a specific (non) activity, with titles like 8 a.m.: "Waking Up is Hard to Do" or 5 p.m.: "The Ramble." In the latter, we learn that Walt Whitman was a great believer in the subtle art of escapism. He once wrote: "Give me your calm, steady philosophic son of indolence...he belongs to that ancient and honorable fraternity, whom I venerate above all your upstarts, your dandies, and your political oracles."

There's plenty of good common sense here. "Time should be savored, not endured," writes Hodgkinson. This would be a good time to lie down and take a nice nap. ☛

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