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Rethinking Idleness, Productivity, and Time Management: A Call to Do Nothing, More

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Our world is filled with distractions. We are incessantly “connected” via cell phone and e-mail, smartphones and laptop computers, and computer websites such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter, which all make Google seem like a blast from the past. Social networking sites are touted as a good way to get and stay connected with people. We have taken to sending and receiving text messages (“texting”) instead of talking to one another. These instantaneous and ever-present communication tools make idle time non-existent. Every moment is a possible moment to check e-mail, tweet, text, or surf, taking away from time to be idle and do nothing or, just as bad, interrupting us from meaningful work and real connections with others. Equally as important is the knowledge that each moment could be interrupted by someone else—at any time—an unwanted text, e-mail, or phone call, which interferes with our current thoughts; it stops them dead in their tracks, often never to surface again.

I am advocating for more idle time. I suggest that we do nothing more. Being idle or doing nothing does not mean talking on the phone, watching television, reading a book, writing or responding to e-mail, or engaging in any other activity that takes us away from being still with our thoughts. My use of the term “idle” does not include the more negative uses such as lazy, unemployed, or without purpose. For me and for the purpose of this commentary, it means being alone, quiet, and reflective. I suppose that my own thoughts come from my recent reflections upon such movements as the slow food movement, ecopsychology, and simple living; and on my recent readings of Virginia Woolf’s (1929) *A Room of One’s Own*, Carl Honoré’s (2004) *In Praise of Slowness: Challenging the Cult of Speed*,

Andy Fisher’s (2002) *Radical Ecopsychology: Psychology in the Service of Life*, and Duane Elgin’s (1998) *Voluntary Simplicity: Toward a Way of Life that is Outwardly Simple, Inwardly Rich*.

Deep thought and reflection require idle time. Would more idle time lead us to great discoveries and great understandings of the world and of ourselves? Would more idle time improve our physical and mental health? Would more idle time lessen our anxieties and depression by freeing ourselves from the constant interruptions of our “connected,” technology-laden lifestyles? Would it increase our creativity? Would it make us more effective at work? A cursory review of the literature lends some support to my thesis that idle time (i.e., time spent being quiet, alone, reflective, and thoughtful) is useful. This time “doing nothing” can be called many things and can be helpful for nurses, educators, and patients. Reflection (or reflective practice, reflective learning, reflective thinking, or guided reflection) can be useful to nurses in practice and in education (Duffy, 2007; Husu, Toom, & Patrikainen, 2008). Quiet time has been found to improve sleep in acute care patient populations (Gardner, Collins, Osborne, Henderson, & Eastwood, 2009). Locke (2009) advocates for the usefulness of introspection in therapy and therapeutic relationships. Mindful meditation can improve wellness and decrease symptoms of stress (Carmody & Baer, 2008). These methods of idle time must be done without interruption, however interruptions are often endless.

How do we control these interruptions to ensure that we have more time to do nothing? Would we have more idle time if our work time were less interrupted? Interestingly, as I am sitting on my couch in my living room at home, writing this column on my laptop, my partner who wants to discuss the purchase of a coffee grinder interrupts me. I retort that, ironically, I am writing about avoiding interruptions. Then, I stop writing (I am in the “common space” not in a “room of one’s own”) and a conversation ensues about coffee grinders. As we are talking about coffee grinders, I stop to make a note for this column, in effect, interrupting our conversation. After several minutes of discussion, I am back to work on this column, but not before checking my e-mail, for who knows

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what type of e-mailed communication might further distract me from my task at hand. You see, some interruptions we do to ourselves.

Back to the question: How do we control these interruptions so that we can spend more time being idle? First, we need to get away—physically—from our technologies, even if for a short period of time. The time away or distance from our cell phones, laptops/computers, and televisions allow us the space to engage in idle contemplative thought. For me, this technology-free space is crucial. I cannot even be near my phone (a smartphone, I hate to admit) because I am so easily distracted by the red blinking light, which signals an e-mail or text that seems to call at me, compulsively, until I attend to it. When I am working on my computer, for example when I am writing, I must close my web browser so that I am not distracted by incoming e-mail messages. I have long ago learned to disable the e-mail notifier that used to interrupt me every time an e-mail arrived. We need to prioritize idleness even though doing nothing is difficult. I realize that we live in a world that is focused on productivity. What is the purpose? Do we work too hard, watch too much television, spend too much time on the computer and on our phones at the expense of being still, quiet, and contemplative, in other words, idle? We live in a society that wants us to do more, faster. There is little that supports idleness. Maybe it is

time to reevaluate how we spend our time. We need to take it back, manage the interruptions, and perhaps, do nothing more.

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