
Leisure Reflections

Robert A. Stebbins



Professor Robert A. Stebbins, with over 30 years in leisure studies, has pioneered the ideas of 'serious leisure', 'casual leisure', 'project-based leisure' and 'optimal leisure'. He is currently Faculty Professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of Calgary. Author of 30 books and monographs in several areas of social science, his most important recent works bearing on these ideas include: *Amateurs, Professionals, and Serious Leisure* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992); *After Work The Search for an Optimal Leisure Lifestyle* (Detselig, 1998); *New Directions in the Theory and Research of Serious Leisure* (Edwin Mellen, 2001); *The Organizational Basis of Leisure Participation: A Motivational Exploration* (Venture, 2002); *Volunteering as Leisure/Leisure as Volunteering* (CABI, 2004, edited with M. Graham); and *Between Work and Leisure* (Transaction, 2004). Forthcoming books include *Challenging Mountain Nature* (Detselig) and *A Dictionary of Nonprofit Terms and Concepts* (Indiana University Press, with D.H. Smith and M. Dover). He was elected Fellow of the Academy of Leisure Sciences in 1996 and, in 1999, elected Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada; and has been a member of LSA since 1995.

Stebbins's main leisure interests lie in amateur music, where he is a jazz and classical double bassist, and in various outdoor hobbyist pursuits, notably cross-country skiing, snowshoeing, and hiking and mountain scrambling (hiking to mountain tops). He is also an active volunteer in the Calgary French community, primarily as Past-President of the Société d'accueil francophone (an organization that helps French-speaking immigrants settle in Calgary). And, to be sure, casual leisure counts as well. For Stebbins it consists mainly of evening conversations with friends and family and dining out in Calgary's restaurants.

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CONTEMPLATION AS LEISURE AND NON-LEISURE¹

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For the purposes of this article, contemplation and reflection are treated as synonyms; both terms referring to the act of intensely thinking about something. When contemplating (reflecting) we make thought on a particular subject the center of our attention, the dominant activity of the moment. As an activity that endures over time, running in length from a few seconds to possibly an hour or more, it is however largely mental, even though the contemplator may manipulate related objects during this period. Contemplation may be intense and relatively impermeable, as expressed in the phrase 'lost in thought', or it may be relatively permeable, where a person's thoughts are easily interrupted by environmental stimuli.

My informal observations suggest that contemplation comes in at least four types. One is *obligatory contemplation*, a process forced on us from time to time, as we try in certain areas of life to solve problems from which we cannot escape. This type commonly occurs in conjunction with either a work or a non-work obligation, and on these two occasions, the problems reflected on are legion: how to approach the boss for a raise, smooth over soured relations with a spouse, most effectively fill in the annual tax return, to mention a few. Two, *casual leisure contemplation* is, by contrast, not coerced, but is rather taken up as a form of casual leisure of the play variety. This is reflection, or speculation, for the fun of it, as exemplified in the lyrics of the song 'If I were a Rich Man' from the Broadway show *Fiddler on the Roof*. How many of us have speculated about what we might do with the money gained from winning the lottery? Playing with ideas, as sometimes happens even in intellectual circles, is another instance of casual leisure contemplation.

Three, there is also *serious leisure as contemplation*, or reflection devoted to solving a problem arising with regard to a serious leisure activity. Though this is not play, it is nevertheless uncoerced, in that the activity itself is uncoerced. This kind of reflection occurs when, for example, a participant considers the best training approach for an upcoming

marathon, ponders which of two musical instruments to buy or reflects on the pros and cons of a prospective volunteer role. Four, *contemplation as serious leisure* is the classificatory home of complex reflective activity engaged in for its own sake. The activity is complex, for if a participant is to learn how to execute it, he or she must acquire special skills and a body of knowledge to go with them. This type — sometimes called 'meditation' — is exemplified by such systems as Yoga, Tai Chi and Transcendental Meditation. Meditation, or contemplation, in search of spirituality as guided by the Christian religion is a further example (Doohan, 1990, examines the link between leisure and spirituality, cited in Ouellette, 2003). Some forms of specifically religious meditation, to be effective, require, in addition to knowledge of technique, knowledge of the religious system from which the first receives its inspiration.

Contemplation as serious leisure would seem to be most accurately classified as a hobby of the activity participant variety. Activity participation is the classificatory home of noncompetitive, rule-based, pursuits, and there are certainly many rules and procedures incorporated in the meditative systems mentioned in the preceding paragraph. Further, in every such system, rules abound on how to behave with reference to other people and objects in the settings in which meditation occurs. Serious leisure contemplation is similar to what Tanqueray (1924) called 'acquired contemplation', in contradistinction to 'infused contemplation', or that instilled in a person by God.

The social and physical situations in which contemplation takes place are many and varied. Thus, we are capable of reflecting, to some extent, in a crowded, noisy room, providing that we can nevertheless keep our attention focused on our line of thought. It is likely, however, that most contemplation in this situation is of the casual type. Otherwise, most serious reflection (types 1, 3, and 4) seems most effectively carried out while alone, as in one's own study or bedroom, out in nature, or at an institutional retreat. I have argued that one of the main benefits of aloneness, or solitude, is to place the individual in this optimal social state where intense, uninterrupted thought can occur (Stebbins, 1993, chap. 9). And it follows from what has been said so far that repairing to one's room, to nature or to an institutionalized retreat for contemplative reasons is not necessarily a leisure activity. When not leisure, the retreat may have been coerced into trying to solve, through reflection, a nagging, unpleasant problem. However obligatory and unpleasant the problem to be solved (if that is why solitude is sought), monastic retreats can be still be pleasant places, given the quiet found there, the beauty of the architecture, chanting of the monks, agreeableness of the natural setting and the like.

How does contemplation relate to spirituality? Whatever else it might be, spirituality is, evidently, a mental state, specifically one of profound regard for the spiritual, for the nonmaterial. This is one

sense of the concept. For spirituality is also an important product, or outcome, of some, though not all, contemplation. It appears to be, most clearly, a product of certain sessions of casual leisure contemplation as well as all sessions of serious leisure as contemplation, whereas the other two types are too problem oriented to be qualified as spiritual. Thus, we might casually think about the vastness, beauty, or purpose of breathtaking scenery, finding in the process, a kind of spirituality. And the spirituality reached through serious leisure meditation, for example, is part of the intended result of such activity.

Contemplation in Leisure Studies

Today, in leisure studies, contemplation, as a distinct, free-time activity, seems to have become largely forgotten. Yet, in the philosophic backdrop to the field, contemplation had been an important player. Aristotle (1915) is widely recognized for his observation that finding time for leisurely contemplation is a main goal of work; that the reason for working is to sustain life thus giving us an opportunity to contemplate. Much more recently Pieper (1963), a Catholic philosopher who followed Aristotle's line of reasoning, viewed contemplation as a special form of leisure, during which the individual is enabled to think about and communicate with God. And all leisure was undertaken for intrinsic reasons. About the same time de Grazia (1962, p. 18) held that 'the man in contemplation is a free man. He needs nothing. Therefore nothing determines or distorts his thought. He does whatever he loves to do, and what he does is done for its own sake'. Neulinger (1974, p. 5) observed that, gradually in philosophic thought, the ideal of contemplation gave way to a search for understanding using nature's laws, at first through astrology, but later by way of medicine.

This change in intellectual orientation seems still in effect in that the idea of contemplation is not often discussed. Still, a few exceptions exist, among them the ideas of Doohan mentioned earlier. Moreover Paddick (1982) lamented the paltry amount of time that modern humankind commonly sets aside for 'contemplation of ends'. He blamed 'education for leisure' for this sad situation, since such education tends to stress popular activities, of which contemplation is certainly no example. Ouellette and Carette (2004) studied a sample of 521 men who spent up to seven days in contemplation, among other activities, during a personal retreat at a Canadian monastery, the Abbaye Saint-Benoît, in Québec (see also Ouellette, Kaplan and Kaplan, 2005). Their findings show that, for most of those who answered the questionnaire, the contemplation engaged in at the monastery (the authors used the term 'reflection') may be classified, using the scheme developed in the present article, as obligatory. As such it is questionable whether it is leisure. Nonetheless the pressing need to reflect on a difficult problem sometimes emerged in the pleasant monastic environment, only after the

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retreater had developed a relaxed frame of mind. Here leisure may be transformed into an activity driven by a felt obligation to try to solve a problem. Interest in this paper, and another issuing from the same project (Ouellette, Heintzman and Carette, 2005), centers primarily on 'psychological restoration', a central concept in Attention Restoration Theory (e.g., Kaplan, 1995). And unlike the leisure aspect of contemplation, its restorative benefits have generated a noticeable amount of thought and research (see Ouellette, Heintzman and Carette, 2005, for a partial review of this literature).

Conclusion

The leisure nature of contemplation deserves closer consideration than we have given it in leisure studies. We need to balance the problem-centered, instrumental orientation of attention restoration theory with theory and research on the intrinsic, leisure-like nature of contemplation as set out in types 2, 3 and 4. Here contemplation is both a process and a product endowed with immense inherent value. Ouellette (2003) underscores its importance for the elderly, arguing that contemplation is as important for them as physical, civic, and cultural activities.

In this respect Ouellette and Carette (2004) make a crucial point, namely, that it is important to find time for reflection that leads to personal revitalization achieved by getting to know oneself better. For them the monastery offers an ideal opportunity for pursuing this goal. By the same token, however practical this quest may sometimes be, it is also likely to be experienced as leisure. For personal revitalization is very much akin to what we refer to in leisure studies as 'recreation'. Through either process we get recharged to carry out life's obligatory activities. Meanwhile 'getting to know oneself relates closely to self-fulfillment, to learning what, as individuals, we are capable of, have an aptitude for and hold a background preparation to do. To be sure such learning is practical, but more importantly, it is also, in the end, the ultimate payoff of the various serious leisure pursuits, in general, and the contemplation types 3 and 4, in particular.

The challenge for the individual, assuming he or she seeks contemplation as a leisure pursuit of the sort just described, is to find time and place to do it. For many people finding the time may well be the more difficult of these two. In such time there is escape from disturbance, from jarring noise, distracting music, shouting people, blaring television sets, and other annoyances. For a multitude of city people these situations are all too present in their everyday existence. For them, finding the quiet and solitude needed for effective, fulfilling contemplation, will therefore require some substantial restructuring of that existence. Furthermore, to find such quiet and solitude, could well require the cooperation of particular others (e.g., friends, spouses, other family members). It could turn out to be more difficult to make these sorts of arrangements for contemplation for the purposes of leisure than for solving a difficult problem. After all, these others might reason that, whereas problems may be pressing matters demanding solutions, contemplation done as leisure is simply and merely 'fun'. No need in case of the second, they could argue, to bend or inconvenience oneself.

I should imagine that eighteenth century poet John Gay had in mind taking leisure in a quiet place when he wrote:

'Give me, kind Heaven, a private station,
A mind serene for contemplation!
Title and profit I resign;
The post of honor shall be mine.

Fables, pt. II 1738), *The vulture, the sparrow, and other birds*.

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Note

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