

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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Leisure's Role in Voluntary Simplicity

Better is an handful with quietness, than both the hands full with travail and vexation of spirit – Ecclesiastes 4:6

Half our life is spent trying to find something to do with the time we have rushed through life trying to save – Will Rogers, *Autobiography*

These quotations tell something about the spirit of voluntary simplicity, which today, energizes a growing social movement that goes by the same name. In a book entitled *Voluntary Simplicity* Duane Elgin (1981), who was heavily influenced by Ghandi, writes that, among other things, it is

...□a way of living that accepts the responsibility for developing our human potentials, as well as for contributing to the well-being of the world of which we are an inseparable part; a paring back of the superficial aspects of our lives so as to allow more time and energy to develop the heartfelt aspects of our lives.

The voluntary simplicity movement, which also goes by the denominations of, among others, 'simple living' and 'creative simplicity', was launched in the mid-1930s with an article written by Richard Gregg (See Elgin, 1981, pp. 297-298, for bibliographic information on the several reprinted versions of this article). Still, the two epigraphs above suggest that need for the movement is centuries old.

Given that, in pursuing either serious leisure or project-based leisure, participants make many contributions to the community (the 'world' in the Elgin quotation) and that these two forms offer two avenues for realizing human potential, it is reasonable to interpret participation in such leisure as consistent with the principles of voluntary simplicity. Note, however, that since its adherents also espouse many other principles, this way of living is by no means identical with serious leisure. Nevertheless, the two do share the common ground of encouraging and fostering self-fulfillment through realizing individual human potential while contributing to the well-being of the wider community. For the typical, true devotee of voluntary simplicity, this also means, often, paring back work activity, where such activity generates more money than needed for a simple lifestyle and uses up time that could be spent in self-fulfilling leisure.

In setting out the essence of a proper simplistic lifestyle, Elgin's definition marginalizes, if not depreciates, casual leisure ('paring back of the superficial aspects of our lives'), while championing serious and project-based leisure. This conception squares, in part, with the serious

leisure perspective (Stebbins, 2006), since it portrays both the serious and the project-based forms as offering their participants the highly valued possibility of self-fulfillment. But, as will be evident shortly, the serious leisure perspective also paints casual leisure in attractive colours. (Project-based leisure is a short-term, moderately complicated, either one-off or occasional, though infrequent, creative undertaking carried out in free time. It requires considerable planning, effort, and sometimes skill or knowledge, but for all that is neither serious leisure nor intended by the participant to develop into such, Stebbins, 2005a.)

This conception of voluntary simplicity contains at least two further implications for the role of leisure, both being of considerable import. First, paring back the superficial aspects of life is different from eliminating them. In fact, as casual leisure, these aspects are perhaps less superficial than Elgin realizes. In this regard I have written elsewhere about the benefits of casual leisure (Stebbins 2001a). Thus, one lasting benefit of casual leisure is the creativity and discovery it sometimes engenders. Serendipity, 'the quintessential form of informal experimentation, accidental discovery, and spontaneous invention' (Stebbins, 2001b), usually underlies these two processes, suggesting that serendipity and casual leisure are at times closely aligned.

Another benefit springs from what has recently come to be known as *edutainment*. Nahrstedt (2000) holds that this benefit of casual leisure comes from consuming such mass entertainment as films and television programs, popular music, and popular books and articles. Theme parks and museums are also considered sources of edutainment. While consuming media or frequenting places of this sort, these participants inadvertently learn something of lasting value about the social and physical world in which they live. They are, in a word, entertained and educated in the same breath.

Third, casual leisure affords regeneration, or recreation, possibly even more so than its counterpart, serious leisure, since the latter can sometimes be intense. A fourth benefit that may flow from participation in casual leisure originates in the development and maintenance of interpersonal relationships. One of its types, the sociable conversation, is particularly fecund in this respect, but other types, when shared, as sometimes happens during sensory stimulation and passive and active entertainment, can also have the same effect. The interpersonal relationships in question are many and varied, and encompass those that form between friends, spouses, and members of families. Such relationships, Hutchinson and Kleiber (2005) note, can foster personal psychological growth by promoting new shared interests and, in the course of this process, new positive appraisals of self.

Well-being is still another benefit that can flow from engaging in a certain amount of casual leisure. Speaking only for the realm of leisure, perhaps the greatest sense of well-being is achieved when a person develops an *optimal*

leisure lifestyle. Such a lifestyle is 'the deeply satisfying pursuit during free time of one or more substantial, absorbing forms of serious leisure, complemented by judicious amounts of casual leisure or project-based leisure, if not both' (with modifications from Stebbins, 2000). People find optimal leisure lifestyles by partaking of the three forms of leisure activities that separately and in combination realize human potential and enhance quality of life and well-being. A study of kayakers, snowboarders, and mountain and ice climbers (Stebbins, 2005b) revealed that the vast majority of the three samples used various forms of casual leisure to optimally round out their use of free time. For them their serious leisure was a central life interest, but their casual leisure contributed to overall well-being by allowing for relaxation, regeneration, sociability, entertainment, and other activities less intense than their serious leisure. These hobbyists, however, devoted rather little time of project-based leisure.

Still, well-being, as achieved during free time, is more than this, as Hutchinson and Kleiber (2005) found in the previously-mentioned set of studies of some of the benefits of casual leisure. They observed that this kind of leisure can contribute to self-protection, such as by buffering stress and sustaining coping efforts. Casual leisure can also preserve or restore a sense of self. This was sometimes achieved in their samples, when subjects said they rediscovered in casual leisure fundamental personal or familial values or a view of themselves as caring people.

Increase in Non-work Obligation

Let us turn, now, to the second implication of Elgin's conception of voluntary simplicity. It is that, in effecting a lifestyle truly consistent with the tenets of voluntary simplicity, devotees of this lifestyle also appear destined both to increase their list of non-work obligations and to reduce the amount of free time in which 'heartfelt' leisure might be pursued. Non-work obligations are activities that must be engaged in outside the spheres of work and free time. In principle such an obligation can be agreeable, and

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given that it is not part of work or economic activity, it is, in that state, defined by some people as essentially leisure (e.g., walking the family dog, watering the household plants, baby-sitting the grandchildren). Yet many non-work obligations are downright unpleasant: most people dislike shovelling snow off sidewalks, going to the dentist, driving in city traffic (in this discussion, beyond that done in relation to work), and for some, doing health-promoting exercises. Non-work obligation is terribly understudied (much of it falls under heading of family and/or domestic life, but there are also disagreeable communal involvements), but hardly irrelevant in a discussion of voluntary simplicity and balance in lifestyle.

Consider that living simply might require a person to, for instance, walk and use public transit (in lieu of driving a car), take recyclable trash to a recycling depot (in lieu of sending it to the municipal landfill), grow vegetables or bake bread (in lieu of buying these items at a supermarket), and acquire and use wood for home heating (in lieu of purchasing gas or oil for this purpose). Some of these simple living obligations might well be seen by some people as pleasant, as essentially leisure, including tending a garden, baking bread, and even chopping wood for home heating. But all such activities take time, which is to be found in the weekly hours of free time the person has. But when the activity is disagreeable, this robbing of Peter to pay Paul cuts into the hours that could be used for self-fulfilling free-time activities. It also cuts into time for casual leisure, consequently weakening access to, or the experience of, the previously-mentioned benefits it can offer, besides leaving fewer of these activities for rounding out an optimal leisure lifestyle. What is more people, to the extent they are absorbed with both work and non-work obligations, now have, when it comes to trying to organise their daily lives, significantly less room for manoeuvre.

Conclusions

The voluntary simplicity movement is a sign that life in the West has grown much too complex for many people, and that it has been this way for some time. Gregg first broached the subject in modern times in the mid-1930s. He was influenced by the early twentieth century writings of Gandhi, however, while before that, in the first half of the nineteenth century, Henry David Thoreau wrote, in distinctive Thoreauvian style, about simplicity. Somewhat more recently, in 1959, Julie London popularized the song 'Give Me the Simple Life' and, in 1961 in London, the musical 'Stop the World, I want to get off' opened, leading eventually to a run of 555 shows. These authors and artists as well as the writers of the two epigraphs show that long before it became the popular movement it is today voluntary simplicity was on the minds of many an individual thinker.

One logical conclusion of voluntary simplicity would have us minimize the so-called superficial, casual-leisure aspects of life. Still, as I have argued here, casual leisure

has its important benefits, while also serving as an indispensable element in the personal formula leading to an optimal leisure lifestyle. In other words, to put in proper focus the movement's advised reduction of life's superficialities, the serious leisure perspective suggests that voluntary simplicity have as one of its primary goals development of an optimal leisure lifestyle. A finely nuanced understanding of voluntary simplicity, such as just suggested, is no trifle. Personal fulfillment and well-being are universal human values, which in part, stand out because so many people the world over fail to attain them. And, now, with the wolf of global warming at the door, this movement becomes all the more important for the central role it can play in helping combat some of the causes of this portentous environmental condition.

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