

# Leisure Reflections

## Leisure Reflections No. 26

### Personal Memoirs, Project-Based Leisure and Therapeutic Recreation for Seniors

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Professor Robert A. Stebbins, with over 35 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 37 books and monographs in several areas of social science, his most recent works bearing on these ideas include: *Between Work and Leisure* (Transaction, 2004); *Challenging Mountain Nature* (Detselig, 2005); *A Dictionary of Nonprofit Terms and Concepts* (Indiana University Press, 2006, with D.H. Smith and M. Dover); *Serious Leisure: A Perspective for Our Time* (Transaction, 2007); *Personal Decisions in the Public Square: Beyond Problem Solving into a Positive Sociology* (Transaction, 2009); *Leisure and Consumption* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); and *Social Entrepreneurship for Dummies* (Wiley, 2010, with M. Durieux). 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 President of the *Centre d'accueil pour les nouveaux arrivants francophones* (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.

Seniors, even comparatively young ones at around age 55, have had a wealth of experiences, which some of them would like to describe and evaluate in some public way. Moreover, in our fast-paced, ever changing modern world, as people live into their 80s and 90s, their past increasingly contrasts with the present in which they and their much younger friends and relatives now live. Some seniors are inclined to talk about this disjuncture using such terminology as 'in the (good) old days, when I was your age', 'I can remember when we didn't have . . .', and similar lead-ins to a desire to reminisce. Some younger listeners find these observations interesting, if not edifying, whereas others care little about the past thus revealed.

Seniors face a dilemma when they want to converse this way, while sensing that their observations on a by-gone era may be unwelcome. On the one hand, they can remain silent on such matters, stifling their impulse to contextualize the conversation in what they consider an enlightening way that simultaneously enables them to briefly enjoy the center of attention. On the other hand, they can introduce a comparison such as just described, while risking its rejection by the other interlocutors. One way around this dilemma for seniors is to suppress all or most of the time their spontaneous reminiscences. Alternatively they could write out as a personal memoir in the form of prose or poetry those aspects of their past they want to share with whomever might read what they have written.

#### The Personal Memoir

The *Oxford English Dictionary* (5<sup>th</sup> ed.) defines a *memoir* as: 'a record of events or history from personal knowledge or from special sources of information; an autobiographical account or (occas.) biographical record'. In principle the record referred to here may be written, audio or visual, as in an essay, piece of poetry, recorded oral statement or video-taped account. In practice it is probable that most memoirs are of the essay variety, but with oral and visual types becoming ever more common given advances in and proliferation of facilitative recording equipment. Poetry would seem to be the least popular medium for memoirs, although as shown later, seniors can warm to this way of telling about their past.

Creating a memoir, as just defined and described, is most commonly a kind of project-based leisure.<sup>1</sup> Memoirs differ from impromptu, fleeting oral reminiscences, which in most instances, are best qualified as casual leisure of the sociable conversation type. Memoir-based projects, on the other hand, are free-time activity in which someone works up a record of a major event or, possibly more demanding, of his or her life, an activity that takes time and may require learning certain intellectual and physical skills (project-based leisure is discussed in the next section). The intellectual skills include knowing a language well enough to enable expression of what the person remembers (e.g., sufficient knowledge of vocabulary, sentence construction, paragraph development). The physical skills are evident in an ability to write by hand, use a computer (especially for people unable to write by hand) or operate an audio or video recorder. Nevertheless these kinds of skill and knowledge would be unnecessary to the extent that someone else does the recording and edits for style and readability what gets registered.

We have no idea how many people produce personal memoirs, be they prose or poetry presented in an article, book, or audio or video recording. Moreover only recently has it been recognized that such expression of one's past experiences can be therapeutic. To this end, Carol Adams (2007) organized for seniors a series of workshops during 2005 and 2006 in Ontario,

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Canada the goals of which were to engender a love for poetry, a capacity to write poetically and find 'a healing or therapeutic effect from recording and sharing memories' (Adams, 2007, p. ix). In fact some of the participants wrote prose instead of or in addition to poetry.

Adams describes the therapeutic outcome of the workshops where writing poetry was the principal focus:

- It was clear to me that by the middle of the series, the workshops had helped the participants to become more fully alive.
- Accomplishment was food for our students, indeed as it is for every one of us. Poetry not only makes people more aware of their feelings but also emphasizes their importance. It provides a way to talk about them that is a pleasure to hear. (p. 24)

The poems thus created were often shared with others in the workshops (read by Adams or their authors), leading to friendly exchanges among them, a sense of common interest and experience and an elevated enthusiasm for everyday life.

How does the project-based leisure framework explain the production of such personal memoirs and their therapeutic effect?

#### Project-Based Leisure

Project-based leisure, casual leisure and serious leisure constitute the three main forms of the serious leisure perspective (Stebbins, 2007). Project-based leisure is a short-term, moderately complicated, either one-shot 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 to develop into such (Stebbins, 2005).

Though not serious leisure, project-based leisure is enough like it to justify using the serious leisure framework (set out in Stebbins, 2007, pp. 5-15) to develop a parallel framework for exploring this neglected class of activities. A main difference is that project-based leisure fails to generate a sense of career. Otherwise, however, there is here a need to persevere, some skill or knowledge may be required and, invariably, effort is called for. Also present are recognizable benefits, a special identity, and often a social world of sorts, though it appears one usually less complicated than those surrounding many serious leisure activities. And perhaps it happens at times that, even if not intended at the moment as participation in a type of serious leisure, the skilled, artistic, or intellectual aspects of the project prove so attractive that the participant decides, after the fact, to make a leisure career of their pursuit as a hobby or an amateur activity.

Project-based leisure is also capable of generating many of the rewards experienced in serious leisure (these rewards are discussed in detail in Stebbins, 2007, pp. 13-15). And, as in serious leisure so in project-based leisure: these rewards constitute a main part of the motivational basis for pursuing such highly fulfilling activity:

#### Personal rewards

1. Personal enrichment (cherished experiences)
2. Self-actualization (developing skills, abilities, knowledge)
3. Self-expression (expressing skills, abilities, knowledge already developed)
4. Self-image (known to others as a particular kind of serious leisure participant)

5. Self-gratification (combination of superficial enjoyment and deep fulfillment)
6. Re-creation (regeneration) of oneself through serious leisure after a day's work
7. Financial return (from a serious leisure activity)

#### Social rewards

8. Social attraction (associating with other serious leisure participants, with clients as a volunteer, participating in the social world of the activity)
9. Group accomplishment (group effort in accomplishing a serious leisure project; senses of helping, being needed, being altruistic)
10. Contribution to the maintenance and development of the group (including senses of helping, being needed, being altruistic in making the contribution)

It was noted in the definition presented earlier that project-based leisure is not all the same. Whereas systematic exploration may reveal others, two types of project-based leisure have so far been identified: one-time projects and occasional projects. The two types are presented next using the classificatory framework for amateur, hobbyist and volunteer activities (see Stebbins, 1998, chaps. 2-4). This typology shows where the free-time production of memoirs fits within this form

#### One-Off Projects

In all these projects adolescents generally use the talents and knowledge they have at hand, even though for some projects they may seek beforehand certain instructions. This may include reading a book or taking a short course. And some projects may require a modicum of preliminary conditioning. Always the goal is to undertake successfully the one-off project and nothing more, and sometimes a small amount of background preparation is necessary for this. It is possible that a survey would show that most project-based leisure is hobbyist in character, while its next most common type is a distinctive kind of volunteering. Consider the following hobbyist-like projects:

- Making and tinkering:
  - Interlacing, interlocking, and knot-making from kits
  - Other kit assembly projects (e.g., stereo tuner, craft store projects)
  - Do-it-yourself projects done primarily for fulfillment, some of which may even be undertaken with minimal skill and knowledge (e.g., finish a room in the basement, plant a special garden). This could turn into an irregular series of such projects, spread over many years. They might even transform the participant into a hobbyist.
- Liberal arts:
  - Genealogy (not as ongoing hobby)
  - Tourism: special trip, not as part of an extensive personal tour program, to visit different parts of a region, a continent, or much of the world
- Activity participation: long back-packing trip, canoe trip; one-off mountain ascent (e.g., Fuji, Kilimanjaro), *Guinness Book of Records* project

One-off volunteering projects are also common, though possibly somewhat less so than hobbyist-like projects. And less common than either are the amateur-like projects, which appear to concentrate in the sphere of theater.

- Volunteering
  - Volunteer at a convention or conference (local, national, or international).
  - Volunteer at a sporting competition.

- Volunteer at an arts festival or special exhibition mounted in a museum.
- Volunteer to help restore human life or wildlife after a natural or human-made disaster caused by, for instance, a hurricane, or industrial accident.
- Entertainment Theater: produce a skit or one-off community pageant; prepare a home film or a set of videos or photos; prepare a public talk.

### Occasional Projects

Preliminary observation suggests that occasional projects are more likely than their one-off cousins to originate in or be motivated by agreeable obligation. Examples of occasional projects include the sum of the culinary, decorative, or other creative activities undertaken, for example, at home or at work for a religious occasion or someone's birthday. Likewise, national holidays and similar celebrations sometimes inspire individuals to mount occasional projects consisting of an ensemble of inventive elements.

### Revision of the Project-Based Leisure Typology

The forgoing observations on personal memoirs suggest the need for some revisions to the project-based leisure typology, namely, the subtype subsuming the different entertainment theatre activities. To conceptualize better the range of leisure projects in this category, I would like to propose the following revision:

- Arts projects:
  - Entertainment theatre: produce a skit or one-off community pageant; prepare a home film, video or set of photos.
  - Public speaking: prepare a talk for a reunion, an after-dinner speech, an oral position statement on an issue to be discussed at a community meeting.
  - Memoirs: therapeutic audio, visual and written productions by the elderly; life histories and autobiographies (all ages); accounts of personal events (all ages).

As the subtype of writing memoirs indicates, therapeutic prose and poetry written by the elderly is not the only possible kind of project-based leisure in this area. Literate people of all ages, but especially those who have lived for many years, may want to set out publicly their life history (in leisure studies see Kaplan, 1998). Still even a paraplegic twenty-year old, for example, might want to write down what it was like to live as a child and adolescent in such a condition. Furthermore how many people across the age spectrum put pen to paper to express their participation in and understanding of a major event in life, such as death of a loved one (Palucci, 2008), climbing a mountain peak (e.g., Krakauer, 1999), role in a celebrated labor strike (e.g., Dobbs, 1972) or experiences in a famous military battle (e.g., Harpur, 1980)? All these examples are published books, whereas many authors of memoirs probably write more informally for very small readerships, primarily friends and relatives, or possibly only for themselves and the fulfillment that such activity brings to them.

### Conclusions

Adams's observations on the effects of memoir writing on the seniors in the workshops suggest that they experience the first three rewards listed above: self-enrichment, self-actualization, and self-expression. Social attraction is also a reward for many of them. Moreover, because the seniors must acquire a certain amount of knowledge about writing and possibly some computer skills or those associated with audio recording, the need to persevere is also evident. Eventually, the memoir

project comes to an end, however, for the past events and experiences worth memorializing (as the senior sees it) will have been exhausted. But, then, the writer might continue on as an amateur author of prose or poetry on other themes. In this scenario project-based leisure would foster serious leisure.

This article has concentrated on one kind of therapeutic project-based leisure for the elderly. But note that an interesting casual leisure form of therapy has been observed by Stan Parker who now lives in a care home in London. He writes about what is done there to maintain and improve the mental health of residents:

Every week a quiz is held by a volunteer. Usually about 20 to 30 residents attend, seated at 3 to 4 tables. Each table appoints a scribe (if possible a resident, but occasionally a volunteer) to note that table's agreed answers and mark the score. The 25 questions are on sport, the arts, entertainment, politics and so on. Ten of the questions are on the events and personalities in a particular named year, usually between 1930 and 1960.

Each table works as a team. If a team member offers an answer, the others have to agree or propose a different answer. The majority answer among the team prevails. On request the quiz leader may give a clue to everyone — usually the first letter of the correct answer.

The table with the most correct answers gets a round of applause but no prize. We may conclude that the quiz promotes verbal interaction, adds new knowledge and corrects wrong answers. (Parker, personal note, November, 2010)

Keeping the mind active in old age is crucial to well-being in the senior years. Serious leisure is an obvious avenue along which to pursue this goal. But, in this area of life, never underestimate the salubrious effects of therapeutically-designed casual and project-based leisure.

### Note

- <sup>1</sup> On relatively rare occasions someone writes a book-length memoir that makes the author so much money that it may be considered part of that person's livelihood (e.g., Krakauer, 1999).

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