

Keeping a Personal Diary: Making Time for Relaxing Contemplation



Robert A. Stebbins

Professor Robert A. Stebbins, with 40 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 47 books and monographs in several areas of social science, his most recent works bearing on these ideas include: *Between Work and Leisure* (Transaction, 2004); *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); *Serious Leisure and Nature: Sustainable Consumption in the Outdoors* (Palgrave Macmillan 2011, with Lee Davidson); *The Idea of Leisure: First Principles* (Transaction, 2012); and *Work and Leisure in the Middle East* (Transaction, 2013). He was elected Fellow of the Academy of Leisure Sciences in 1996, Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada in 1999, and Senior Fellow of the World Leisure Academy in 2010. He 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, most recently 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.

Website (personal): <http://www.ucalgary.ca/~stebbins>

Website (perspective): <http://www.seriousleisure.net>

Research on diary writing as a leisure activity is non-existent. In contrast, there is a sizeable literature on the use of diaries as a data collection procedure (time-diary studies are especially well-represented), as a genre of personal documentation to be content analysed, as a means of chronicling eating or exercise habits and the like (self-report studies), as a way of understanding historical figures based on their diaries, among other interests. The joy of keeping a diary, an autobiographical project, is fully missed in all this. Yet, such activity is immensely popular, has been so for centuries and was pursued by scores of famous people (e.g., Anne Frank, James Agate, and Samuel Pepys (<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/161674/diary>, retrieved 7 September 2013)).

As far as we know these diarists and others writing for personal reasons did so because they were attracted to such autobiographical expression. In this article I examine the nature of this kind of leisure, first as a kind of relaxation, then as a way of viewing one's life course and finally as a form of contemplation. Diarial writing is casual leisure, which however, generates some unique benefits for the author. But first what more precisely is the diary treated of in this article?

What is a Diary?

The OED (5th ed., 2002) defines diary as 'a daily record of events, transactions, thoughts, etc., esp. ones involving the writer'. It is common to think of diaries as personal documents, which is the approach of the present article, but they may also be institutional (sometimes under other headings), as in Hansard or a business ledger, or specialized (e.g., travel, diet, workout). For a list of types see <http://www.slideshare.net/dchest/types-of-diaries> (retrieved 7 September 2013). Keeping a personal diary, as just defined, is a leisure activity usually it appears of the casual type. More particularly it is relaxing activity; there is a kind of pleasure to be found in jotting down and interpreting the day's personally significant events, transactions, thoughts and so on.

Mac Diary, an online site that supplies software for diarists, has published an article on blogging versus keeping a personal diary (<http://www.mac-diary.com/2010/04/personal-diary-vs-blogging.html>, retrieved 8 September 2013). In it the writer explains why the latter may be preferred over the former:

First, logically, there is the element of privacy. While some people are not bothered by making every thought and action public on a blog, most people have some reservations about it. Even if you like to share most of your everyday life with your friends, it is likely that there are many things you want to keep private. You may also not like the idea of people whom you do not even know having access to your online blog.

A private diary solves this problem. Whether you choose a ready-made diary or a simple notebook, you can reasonably expect that whatever you write does not go any further than your own eyes. Even if you have an online blog, you might

like to have a personal diary also, for this reason.

Second, a diary can be preserved. You might want to look back on what you have written, or pass your diary on to your children or grandchildren. Famous people have done this for generations. Even if you do not become famous, having something special, which you yourself have created, is important. You do not have this security with online blogging. It is not something that you can hold in your hand, or tuck away for the future.

This Mac Diary article holds that almost everyone likes to write about themselves, doing so about such interests as activities, hopes and dreams, and accomplishments. Further, diarists may want to jot down their thoughts on these subjects. Still, the article misses the fact that writing at the level of detail and interpretation needed for satisfying diary work is not available to everyone. That is, personal diary writing, though relaxing casual leisure, nevertheless requires as a certain level of literary competence. Some people — the world's dropouts — never finish high school where this measure of competence is commonly reached. And, apart from the requirement of competence, lies the one of finding satisfaction in writing, whatever its content. In short, many people may like writing about themselves, but the number who avoid this is still far from negligible.

Relaxation

According to the OED relaxation is, in the sense of the word most appropriate to this discussion, release from mental or physical tension, especially by recreation or rest. Kleiber (2000) salvaged relaxation from the dustbin of frivolity by singling out a number of its virtues. Even while it is often easy to relax, he observed, that is to engage in the relaxing activity itself, it is also important at times to do precisely that. Kleiber was inspired by Josef Pieper's (1952) celebrated treatise on leisure, in which the latter stresses the importance of relaxation as context for contemplation. Kleiber reflects on the contemporary relevance of Pieper's observations about relaxation.

Pieper's conception of leisure seems even more elusive as we begin this new century. Being the productive society we are, we celebrate effort and value relaxation primarily for its role in recharging that effort. A more mature view sees the importance of relaxation for reflection and planning, for gaining the kind of perspective that leads to an effective change in direction, acceleration of efforts in some direction and deceleration of effort in others. But such considerations seem somehow to be recessed in our high-speed, technologically-charged existence, and rarely find their way into prescriptions for optimizing life's opportunities. (Kleiber, 2000, p. 83)

Relaxation is sought by way of a number of leisure activities, which we do intentionally. Some relaxing activities are purely that, with idling, napping, and lounging or resting being prime examples. But enjoying passive entertainment

and some kinds of sensory stimulation can produce the same effect (e.g., listening to music, watching a flowing river). Physiologically, relaxation is the release of tension from muscles, physically lengthening the muscles, leading thereby to a state of reduced stress and anxiety (Jonas, 2005). Psychologically, it is the state of mind opposite that of stress and tension. Thus activities like strolling and the stretching exercises, though they demand some use of our muscles, do so in a relaxing way.

Casual contemplation also fits here, exemplified in daydreaming, reminiscing, and maintaining a diary. It is relaxing to describe the important thoughts and events of the day, perhaps along with some conclusions about what each one means. Note, however, that contemplation can be serious when used to solve a difficult problem or reach a spiritual goal.

Diary Keeping as Contemplation

For the purposes of this article, contemplation and reflection are treated as synonyms; both terms referring to the act of intensely thinking about something (Stebbins, 2006). When contemplating (reflecting) we make thought on a particular subject the center of our attention; such thought is the dominant activity of the moment. It is an activity that endures over time, running in length from a few seconds to possibly an hour or more. It is largely mental, however, even though the contemplator may physically manipulate related objects during this period, including preparing a diary. The 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. It follows that writing in a diary calls for solitude. Today it requires time alone away from the social media, the television set and the hubbub of urban (and sometimes even domestic) life.

Contemplation can occur as casual leisure. 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, an activity having particular attraction for intellectuals and writers, is another instance of casual leisure contemplation. This is also the classificatory home of diary writing.

Be that as it may, it is when considering the writing of diaries as contemplation that the classification of this activity as casual leisure may drift in the direction of serious leisure. In this respect Ouellette and Carrette (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. Writing in a diary is another. 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' (re-creation). Through either process we get recharged to carry out life's obligatory activities as well as its more complex freely-chosen pursuits. 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 the extent that keeping a diary reaches this level of personal depth, it now becomes a part of serious leisure contemplation (a hobby).

Diaries and the Life Course

Unlike career, linked as it is to particular roles, the life course is much broader, covering multiple roles as they evolve, interweave, and are assumed or abandoned across the lifetime of a person (Bush and Simmons, 1981, pp. 155–157). Furthermore, the life course, when viewed sociologically, centres on age-graded roles and generational effects. Thus it has a historical dimension as well as links to social structure based on the statuses associated with each role.

The life course is also broader than the related idea of family life cycle, in that the latter is limited to family matters. Additionally, family life cycle, although chronological as career and the life course are, is not, however, essentially processual. Process is a continuous series of actions, events, and changes, and in the social sciences, includes the assumption that these actions and the like emerge from, or are influenced by, each other in seamless fashion. Moreover, this influence can have past (retrospective), present (immediate), and future (prospective) components. The family life cycle, on the other hand, deals with historically arrayed, discrete slices of time, often called phases, and within each, events and actions are typically treated of as static.

Moreover, both career and life course, by dint of their emergent qualities, encourage people to take stock of what has happened in a particular career or in one's life up to the point of stock-taking. The 'life review' (Butler, 1963), said to be common among the elderly, exemplifies stock-taking of the life course variety. It involves returning to past experiences and unresolved conflicts to make new interpretations of both, the aim being to reintegrate them into life as it has since unfolded. Successful reintegration can bring new significance and meaning to the life course of the subject and prepare this person for death. Likewise, careers in particular roles seem to encourage at various points in time both retrospective and prospective reviews of how they have gone and how they will or could go in the future. Strategizing on what to do with reference to one's career in the present or the future is part of this stock-taking. As for diaries and the life course, they can serve as repositories of these reviews, handily available for revisiting years later to see how matters have changed or remained the same.

Conclusion

There is a reasonable amount of advice on diary writing, evident in Wikipedia's list of 13 books the subject published between 1934 and 2007 (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_

Forthcoming in LSA Newsletter No. 98 (July 2014): Robert Stebbins's *Leisure Reflections No. 36* on "Experience as Knowledge: Its Place in Leisure"

[of_books_on_diaries_and_journals](#), retrieved 7 September 2013). Some of this advice is artistic, for diary keeping may include decorating the written or printed pages as well as perhaps adding drawings or photos. Diaries can be embellished using scrapbooking practices. Mac Diary offers software for video diaries. All this pushes diary work toward a kind of hobbyist serious leisure (making and tinkering), and why not if that is the author's wont.

So diary writing is a free-time outlet for literary, and where the inclination exists, artistic expression. From another angle keeping diaries is a kind of informational undertaking. Marcia J. Bates (1999, p. 1044) defines the field of library and information science as 'the study of the gathering, organizing, storing, retrieving, and dissemination of information'. Diarists, in their leisure, do all of these activities, including even dissemination to the extent that they pass on their diaries to intimates or share parts of them in the blogosphere. And, to the extent that keeping a diary nurtures an interest in creative writing, it is possible that this genre of casual leisure could develop into an amateur pursuit of the literary kind. These are among the questions worthy of systematic consideration emerging from the study of the personal diary as leisure.

References

- Bates, M.J. (1999) 'The invisible substrate of information science', *Journal of the American Society for Information Science*, 50(12): 1043–1050.
- Bush, D.M. and Simmons, R.G. (1990) 'Socialization processes over the life course', in M. Rosenberg and R.H. Turner (eds.), *Social psychology*, Brunswick, NJ: Transaction.
- Butler, R.N. (1963) 'The life review: An interpretation of reminiscence in the aged', *Psychiatry*, 26: 65–76.
- Jonas, W. (2005) *Mosby's dictionary of complementary and alternative medicine*, Amsterdam: Elsevier/Mosby.
- Kleiber, D.A. (2000) 'The neglect of relaxation', *Journal of Leisure Research*, 32: 82–86.
- Ouellette, P. and Carrette, P. (2004) 'Les motivations et les effets d'une retraite individuelle dans un monastère bénédictin', Moncton, Canada : Ecole de kinésiologie et de récréologie, Université de Moncton.
- Pieper, J. (1963) *Leisure: The basis of culture*, trans A. Dru, New York: New American Library.
- Stebbins, R.A. (2006) 'Contemplation as leisure and non-leisure', *LSA Newsletter*, 73 (March): 21–23 (also available at <http://www.seriousleisure.net/digital-library.html>, Leisure Reflections No. 11).

Bob Stebbins, University of Calgary
stebbins@ucalgary.ca

Website (personal):

<http://soci.ucalgary.ca/profiles/robert-stebbins>

Website (Perspective): www.seriousleisure.net