

FROM NOVEMBER 2022: AVOID PEOPLE WHO HAVE NO HOBBIES

Posted on December 26, 2023



“The part that we live is really small. All the rest of existence is not life but merely time.” People with no hobbies read Seneca’s words as a kind of profit and loss spreadsheet.

Categories: [Editors’ Picks](#), [Essay](#)

Tags: [games](#), [hobbies](#), [Itxu Díaz](#), [leisure](#), [work](#)

Aristotle liked to go for walks in the countryside. He also liked to hunt for bugs and dissect them. Columbus, even as a child, was enthusiastic about the sea and sailing—and it seems likely his childhood passion took him further than his mother ever expected it to. Playing billiards was a distraction for Mozart. And playing the violin was Einstein’s way to unwind.

Archaeology tells us that humans have been playing games for at least 4,000 years; my own theory is that Adam relished sampling different kinds of apples, undeterred by the fact that his hobby would be the last truly fulfilling one in mankind’s history. Be that as it may, ‘killing time’ has always been a healthy human preoccupation, perhaps because in the mythological origin of the expression, he who dethroned Chronos—Time—became the god of gods: Zeus.

Of all the moral epidemics of our time, perhaps the most pernicious is the silent plague afflicting people who have no hobbies. They are people who live to work. Nothing else. Every single moment of their lives is pure obligation, pure transcendence; even if they have managed to find a certain pleasure in fulfilling their routine duties—perhaps in a slightly less unpleasant job than usual, or a new client, or tearing pages out of a calendar—this twinge of satisfaction can scarcely be called ‘happiness.’ The man with hobbies often fails to understand just how incredibly rich his life is in comparison with the fabulously anodyne existence of those who consider all forms of leisure a waste of time.

G. K. Chesterton, a king among those who find deep enjoyment in the smaller things of life, had no doubts: "Lying in bed would be an altogether perfect and supreme experience if only one had a colored pencil long enough to draw on the ceiling." He was perpetually searching for fun with the childlike gaze he always wore, and he was grateful for the small pleasures he found. "You say grace before meals," he wrote. "All right. But I say grace before the concert and the opera, and grace before the play and pantomime, and grace before I open a book, and grace before sketching, painting, swimming, fencing, boxing, walking, playing, dancing and grace before I dip the pen in the ink."

Prehistoric hobbies

Lewis chessmen, late 12th century Scandinavian walrus ivory carvings found on the Isle of Lewis in 1831. Photos: Wikimedia UK and the National Museum of Scotland, CC BY-SA 4.0.

What we call hobbies are not a thing of our time, but of all times. When researchers found, deep in the tomb of the pharaoh Reny-Seneb, a board game (Hounds and Jackals), carved in ebony and dating from about 1800 BC., what bothered them most was not that their discovery was a vulgar pastime, but that they did not know the rules. On the island of Lewis, in the Outer Hebrides of Scotland, archeologists uncovered several Scandinavian chess pieces from the 12th century, intricately made of walrus' and whale's teeth. In the Middle Ages—so dark and dull according to contemporary commentators—people had a great time playing dice, chess, and backgammon.

Besides criticizing our neighbors, the world's oldest known pastime involved 49 tokens, found at the Bronze Age burial site of Basur Höyük near the Turkish city of Siirt. Made of stone, these tokens are of different colors: some are spheres, some are pyramids, others evoke dogs and wild boars. The same site also gave us rudimentary dice, and if archeologists had looked more closely, they probably would have found bottles of whiskey, a wad of banknotes, and a few half-smoked cigars.

We can be certain that since prehistoric times, mankind has played games, found hobbies and pastimes, and has reasonably balanced work—hunting mammoths and cleaning the cave—with leisure—going out for a drink or a game with friends.

In *Submission*, Houellebecq's main character François reflects on his own emptiness: "You have to take an interest in something in life, I told myself. I wondered what could interest me, now that I was finished with love. I could take a course in wine tasting, maybe, or start collecting model aeroplanes." François may or may not be a prototypical modern man with no hobbies; regardless, but the fact that his only entertainment was love (and by love, he mostly means sex) leads him to consider leisure activities randomly and with disdain, more out of obligation than out of enjoyment. François' listless consideration of hobbies reveals that there might be something worse than people with no hobbies: people who impose hobbies upon themselves in a desperate search to feel alive. These are people —perhaps overstimulated, perhaps stunted—who no longer feel, no longer know how to be amazed, who seek a hobby only because their therapist tells them to, who walk the paths of leisure like strangers in a hostile land and soon abandon their futile endeavor.

Life offers us as many hobbies and pastimes as there are people in the world—maybe more. There is collecting, the arts, whether practiced or contemplated, sports, reading, learning subjects and skills as a hobby, aperitifs and beers, scheduled dinners and get-togethers, and so many other things. In the end, each person has the potential to become a hobby in and of himself, for himself and for others. All men, without exception, need to have fun; and I am not suggesting that we all go and get drunk at the same time, even though it would not be a despicable plan. The richness of our inner self is an inhospitable and wild garden, and cultivating it is a hobby to last a lifetime.

When Hernán Cortés arrived at Moctezuma's palace, his great surprise was to find there an area dedicated to displaying exotic animals from remote places. There is a whole literature on the history of collecting, a literature which itself abounds with allusions to the tastes of kings and the wealthy. These collections range from the wild animals of the *menageries* of Lorenzo de Medici to—excuse the leap—the bonsais that the Spanish president Felipe González lovingly pruned in La Moncloa, the same place where Aznar

popularized his paddle tennis court, where he practiced with friends and journalists.

These kings and nobles knew what so many of us have forgotten: there is a kind of fulfillment derived from the enjoyment of leisure that cannot be equated with any job satisfaction. The top manager may find great professional success irrelevant compared to winning his weekly soccer match with colleagues, while the most famous scientist on the planet may care most, more than any other discovery, about getting his hands on a prized piece for his stamp collection.

Have you ever enjoyed a concert so much it made you tremble? Have you lost track of time reading a good novel? Have you ever gone to work sleepy from watching a cinematic masterpiece the night before? Have you ever had to leave your city on a weekday to watch your team play in a European competition abroad? Then you know the humane allure of hobbies.

The flaw of not knowing how to procrastinate

"The Death of Seneca" (1871), a 270 x 450 cm oil on canvas by Manuel Domínguez Sánchez (1840-1906), located in Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid.

People without hobbies perform worse at work, sleep poorly, exhibit bad physical health, and tend to get entangled in the dark maze of depression. Big Tech hipsters became famous a few years ago when it came to light that their office buildings had game rooms with ping-pong tables, foosball tables, and the like. These companies were trying to be subversive, according to their tiresome habit; the set-up may seem like a perversion of leisure, an attempt to confine leisure within the walls of the office to squeeze more hours out of the employee. But whatever its merits, their attempt demonstrated something important: such 'play' improves worker performance.

Hobbies change over the course of a lifetime. As a child I used to play soccer constantly. I

dedicated long days to fishing in summer, and I prolonged for years two great passions from which I still suffer after-effects: ornithology and astronomy. Of the former, I maintain the ability to remember the names of birds that no one has ever heard of, which is very useful for flirting with biologists but for little else. And from years of intense love for astronomy I'm left with insomnia, although I have never known if insomnia came first and prompted the decision to study the skies or the other way around.

Over the years, my hobbies have changed, and decreased, but I associate my periods of better mental health with those seasons in which I have been able to devote more time to doing nothing of much importance. We all carry more weight on our shoulders than we should: by unlocking the cell phone we encounter the world in all its horror but little of its genuine delight. Contemporary humankind has serious problems when it comes to really having fun.

These words from Seneca hang over our heads like a sword swinging to the rhythm of the second hand of the clock: "The part that we live is really small. All the rest of existence is not life but merely time." The Roman philosopher was challenging those who believed that life is short, so that they would understand that by making good use of time we can do many things. People with no hobbies read Seneca's words as a kind of profit and loss spreadsheet. He means nothing of the sort. To make the most of time is to waste it well.

I have heard people boast that they have found their perfect partner: the one who lacks hobbies and personal tastes. "That way I can be his only source of fun," a friend of mine—God protect her—told me enthusiastically a few days ago.

I don't think there is a more terrifying nightmare than this: to be entangled in a relationship with someone for whom you are his or her only hobby. From a sociological point of view, people without hobbies are dangerous. Many of the conflicts of our time stem from too many people who have nothing to do except stew on their own dissatisfaction. This is guaranteed unhappiness. Love—what a thing!—lasts longer than three days, and as the years go by, most normal people want the other person to go off for a while and do whatever. This desire to see a spouse flourish in a hobby does not erode the

sentimental bond. In fact, hobbies safeguards that bond.

A good friend of mine has been playing tennis twice a week for more than ten years. One day I asked him about his commitment, wondering if he was planning to leave the management of his company to win the Davis Cup, and he told me, "It relaxes me and keeps me busy. Otherwise, there's no one who can stand me." This attack of sincerity contains a beautiful lesson for everyone: there is something charitable in dedicating oneself madly and stubbornly to the joys of a hobby and leaving the rest of the world alone for a little while. There are not all that many important things in life, but one of them, without a doubt, is to try not to be too much of a torment to others.