

# Over the wall ...

**Alan Maley**  
sits back and puts  
his feet up.

Looking back, it is amazing just how much ink has been spilt in the celebration of idleness. English literature alone is littered with loiterers. Back in 1758, Samuel Johnson published his articles for *The Idler*, claiming that 'he who embarks on the voyage of life will always wish to advance rather by the impulse of the wind than by the strokes of the oar'. Robert Louis Stevenson's 1885 essay *An Apology for Idlers* is a muscular and impassioned defence of a free-wheeling existence as opposed to the narrowly-constrained life of institutional education and mind-destroying work. He complains that 'extreme busyness ... is a symptom of deficient vitality, and a faculty for idleness implies a catholic appetite and a strong sense of identity'. Idlers in literature include Mark Twain's Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn. (The way Tom turns the painting of his aunt's fence into a fun activity – by others – is a classic example of the transformation of work into play.) And in 19th-century Germany, Joseph Freiherr von Eichendorff published *From the Life of a Good-for-nothing*. Probably the greatest literary idler ever was *Oblomov*, in Ivan Goncharov's 19th-century novel of the same name, a man for whom the effort of getting out of bed was too much, and

who could not face marriage because it involved so much work and disruption. 'What would be the good of it?' he asks about any expenditure of effort.

More recently, the light-hearted chapter *On Being Idle*, in Jerome K



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Jerome's *Idle Thoughts of an Idle Fellow*, extols the virtues of leisure. Interestingly, though, he wants to be idle so as to have the time to do what he enjoys. As he says: 'There is no fun in doing nothing when you have nothing to do.' This echoes Stevenson's comment that idleness 'does not consist in doing nothing but in doing a great deal not recognized by the dogmatic formularies of the ruling class'.

So there is nothing new in books extolling the virtues of idleness and leisure.

## *In Praise of Idleness*

Bertrand Russell's essay *In Praise of Idleness*, first published in 1935, is chiefly an historical-economic argument for a reduction in the hours of work. Russell is incensed by the fundamental inequity of a system where 'we have no economic justice, so that a large proportion of the total produce goes to a small minority of the population, many of whom do no work at all ... we produce hosts of things that are not wanted. We keep a large proportion of the working population idle, because we can dispense with their labour by making the others overwork'. He claims that 'if the ordinary wage-earner worked four hours a day, there would be enough for everybody and no unemployment ...'. The leisure produced in this way would then be available for education and for becoming more interesting and fulfilled people. The idea that we need to be idle in order to use our time differently is one we shall return to later. Russell's essay has particular resonance in the current global crisis. It is hopelessly idealistic, yet contains the germs of ideas which, if taken up, could radically change people's lives for the better. His highly unorthodox views are expressed with the trenchant clarity we would expect from the razor-sharp

intellect of this socially-committed philosopher. It is worth reading for the English written style alone.

## The Play Ethic

Pat Kane's *The Play Ethic* is a more recent attempt to propose an alternative to the work ethic. It takes itself very seriously and is a good deal too long at 354 pages, plus over 80 pages of notes and references. The main idea is simple: that we need to make time for ourselves to play in and that in a connected world, the conditions are ripe for a play ethic to replace the work ethic which currently stifles our creativity and humanity. There are ten chapters, each dealing with play in a different domain, including the net, male-female and family relationships, education, the arts, business, politics and spirituality. Sadly, it is written in a style which this reader found almost impenetrable: massively repetitious, portentous, ponderous, self-indulgent, self-consciously hip and seriously infected with 'logorrhoea'. Reading it was like trying to cut up molasses with a chainsaw. This is a pity. There are some important ideas buried in this labyrinth of words – the need to reduce working hours, the possibility of instituting a citizen's wage, the need to balance the right to play with the obligation to care for others, the desirability of dissolving the work-play division so that work becomes play and play is work, etc. To save time, try Chapter 2, *A General Theory of Play*, and Chapter 6, on education. There is also a *Play Ethic* website.

## How to be Idle

Much more entertaining is *How to be Idle* by Tom Hodgkinson. This book takes us through the 24 hours of a day, each hour having a chapter devoted to a different aspect of idleness – for example, 10 am *Sleeping In*, 1 pm *The Death of Lunch*, 3 pm *The Nap*, 4 pm *Time for Tea*, 6 pm *First Drink of the Day*, 7 pm *On Fishing*, 2 am *The Art of Conversation*, and so on. The treatment is light-hearted and humorous, drawing on a wide spectrum of sources, ranging from the Bible and Dr Johnson to Charles Lamb, G K Chesterton, Izaak Walton and Oscar Wilde. Here is a small sample of quotes which give something of the flavour of the book: '*Long periods of languor, indolence and staring at the ceiling are needed by any creative person in order to develop ideas.*' '*The pedestrian ... walks*

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*for pleasure, he observes but does not interfere, he is not in a hurry, he is happy in the company of his own mind, he wanders detached, wise and merry, godlike. He is free.*' '*Walking may seem like a waste of time to your man of business, but to the creative spirit it is a fertile activity, for it is when walking that the flaneur thinks and generates ideas.*' '*... fishing is a superb way of doing nothing. It legitimises idleness ... what lies at its heart is perfect stillness and inactivity.*' '*Other readily available forms of meditation include hill-walking, sitting by the fire, listening to music with your eyes closed, fishing, smoking, and even long periods of motorway driving ...*' '*We are more interested in our new cars than in the contents of our own heads.*' However, beneath the boisterous and irreverent tone, there is a serious intent. Idleness is being promoted for two purposes: at the level of society, to resist the forces of consumerist capitalism, and at the personal level, to take back control of time so as to be able to use it creatively in the service of 'being' rather than 'getting' and 'doing'. I was reminded of Wordsworth's sonnet:


*The world is too much with us;  
late and soon,  
Getting and spending, we lay waste  
our powers.*

Whether or not we agree with Hodgkinson's arguments, this is a delightful read, witty and deliberately iconoclastic and provocative.



As teachers, perhaps we need to review our extreme busyness and reflect on the benefits of doing less. This would apply within the classroom as we teach, when we might get used to doing less and thinking more. Teaching harder does not necessarily lead to students learning harder. As someone once said, '*Don't just do something; stand there!*' We might

also reflect on the benefits of creating a more playful space in our classes.

The advantages of idleness also apply to our lives *outside* the classroom. The health benefits of periods of reflective inactivity are well-attested. It is also true that many artistic and scientific breakthroughs occur in moments of reverie rather than fevered action. Subconscious mental activity thrives on a diet of rest. The brain needs time and leisure to incubate. In the words of Virginia Woolf, '*It is in our idleness, in our dreams, that the submerged truth sometimes comes to the top.*' 

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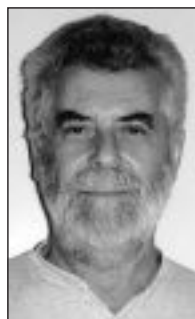
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(see also [www.grammar.about.com/classicessays/a/apologystevenson.htm](http://www.grammar.about.com/classicessays/a/apologystevenson.htm))

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