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Why being too busy makes us feel so good

By Brigid Schulte, Published: March 14

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One man says he works 72 hours a week because everyone else at his office does; he's thinking about cutting back on sleep so he can be more productive. A woman says the last time she had a moment for herself was when she went for her annual mammogram. Another says she has decided that life is too hectic to have kids — ever.

Then a woman bursts in, apologizing for being late to this focus group convened precisely to discuss the fast pace of modern life. She got stuck in traffic, she explains.

I look out the window from our perch at the bar of the 18-story Radisson Hotel and see just a handful of cars at a stoplight. Beyond that, acres of cornfields. We are not in New York, Washington, Los Angeles or another frenetic, Type A city.

We're in Fargo, N.D.

I had been searching for bright spots, for places where the too-muchness of life hadn't taken hold, and I had figured that rural America might breathe a little easier. I was wrong. "Life is stressful in Fargo," Ann Burnett, a researcher who convened the focus group, told me. "People are going nuts.''

Somewhere around the end of the 20th century, busyness became not just a way of life but a badge of honor. And life, sociologists say, became an exhausting everydayathon. People now tell pollsters that they're too busy to register to vote, too busy to date, to make friends outside the office, to take a vacation, to sleep, to have sex. As for multitasking, one 2012 survey found that 38 million Americans shop on their smartphones while sitting on the toilet. And another found that the compulsion to multitask was making us as stupid as if we were stoned.

Burnett, a communications professor at North Dakota State University, has studied a trove of holiday letters she's collected stretching back to the 1960s that serves as an archive of the rise of American busyness. Words and phrases that began surfacing in the 1970s and 1980s — "hectic," "whirlwind," "consumed," "crazy," "constantly on the run" and "way too fast" — now appear with astonishing frequency.

People compete over being busy; it's about showing status. "If you're busy, you're important. You're leading a full and worthy life," Burnett says. Keeping up with the Joneses used to be about money, cars and homes.

Now, she explains, “if you’re not as busy as the Joneses, you’d better get cracking.”

Even as neuroscience is beginning to show that at our most idle, our brains are most open to inspiration and creativity — and history proves that great works of art, philosophy and invention were created during leisure time — we resist taking time off. Psychologists treat burned-out clients who can’t shake the notion that the busier you are, the faster you work, and the more you multitask, the more you are considered competent, smart, successful. It’s the Protestant work ethic in overdrive.

In the Middle Ages, this kind of frenzy — called acedia, the opposite of sloth — was one of Catholicism’s seven deadly sins. But today, busyness is seen as so valuable that people are actually happier when they’re busy, says Christopher Hsee, a psychologist and professor of behavioral science at the University of Chicago. “If people remain idle, they are miserable,” he wrote in Psychological Science in 2010. “If idle people become busy, they will be happier.”

Life in the early 21st century wasn’t supposed to be so hectic. In a 1930 essay, economist John Maynard Keynes predicted a 15-hour workweek by 2030, when we’d all have time to enjoy “the hour and the day virtuously and well.” During the 1950s, the post-World War II boom in productivity, along with rising incomes and standards of living, led economists and politicians to predict that by 1990, Americans would work 22 hours a week, six months a year, and retire before age 40.

While accepting the Republican Party’s nomination for president in 1956, Dwight D. Eisenhower envisioned a world where “leisure . . . will be abundant, so that all can develop the life of the spirit, of reflection, of religion, of the arts, of the full realization of the good things of the world.”

At the time, the idea that leisure would soon be meant for all, rather than just a wealthy elite, was quite radical. A 1959 article in the Harvard Business Review warned that “boredom, which used to bother only aristocrats, had become a common curse.” In the early 1960s, when TV broadcaster Eric Sevareid was asked what he considered the gravest crisis facing Americans, he said: “the rise of leisure.”

Leisure for all was exactly what the U.S. labor movement had been pursuing for more than a century. As late as 1923, the steel industry required 12-hour shifts, seven days a week. Finally, it seemed, workers were about to savor shorter, saner work hours. So, what happened?

First: Life got more expensive, and wages failed to keep up. College tuition alone jumped 1,120 percent from 1978 to 2012. Child Care Aware of America reports that child care is more expensive than public college in dozens of states. The Kaiser Family Foundation says that health-care premiums increased 97 percent between 2002 and 2012. At the same time, wages have fallen to record lows as a share of America’s gross domestic product. Until 1975, wages made up 50 percent of GDP; in 2012, they were 43.5 percent. And, as a recent obnoxious Cadillac commercial boasts, we work hard to buy more things: The Commerce Department reports that consumers spent $1.2 trillion in 2011 on unnecessary stuff, 11.2 percent of all consumer spending, way up from 4 percent in 1959.

Second: Jobs have become less mechanical and work more creative. New York University sociologist Dalton Conley argues that today’s knowledge-economy professions in art, technology, engineering and academics are similar to the pursuits of the mind that the ancient Greek philosophers envisioned as leisure. So, we work a lot because we enjoy it.

That’s true in part, but the rise in working hours for the creative class in the 1970s and 1980s was

accompanied by an increase in job insecurity for those same workers, according to the General Social Survey. And the 1938 Fair Labor Standards Act, which protects employees from working too many hours, applies only to hourly, not salaried, workers. In the crudest sense, U.S. law allows employers to work professionals harder without paying them overtime or hiring more people to share the load.

Perhaps we have no choice, then, as a matter of survival, to give greater value to the work that we are compelled to do all the time.

"Work has become central in our lives, answering the religious questions of 'Who are you?' and 'How do you find meaning and purpose in your life?' " Ben Hunnicutt, one of the few leisure scholars in America, tells me. "Leisure has been trivialized — something only silly girls want, to have time to shop and gossip."

Taking time for yourself is tantamount to weakness. One man in Burnett's focus group, who works two jobs and juggles caring for two special-needs children, says he longs to go canoeing but feels he just can't. "Leisure sometimes just feels . . . wrong."

Back in Fargo, Ann Burnett has scrawled a big letter "A" across the top of only a handful of holiday letters from her collection. These, she says, are "authentic," written by people who have stepped off the hamster wheel long enough to savor everyday moments. And in each, there is a realization that their time on Earth is limited.

Maybe that's the attraction of busyness. If we never take a moment to stop and think, we don't have to face that hard truth.

And without time to reflect, our drive to show status can mean we create busyness even when it doesn't exist — like the idea of a traffic jam in Fargo.

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