

Robert Frost and The Gift of Idle Hours

A talk presented at The Frost Farm in Derry, New Hampshire, July 24, 2011

Idleness has been called "the root of all evil." Yes, other things have been called the root of evil as well... Who knows? Maybe the roots get tangled up under there and it's difficult to make out which root gives rise to which malicious plant. But the gist of it is: *Idleness: bad*. "The devil finds work for idle hands," so they say. I don't know who "they" are, but they seem to have had enormous influence. They've got everyone convinced. To look at how quickly the world goes about its business—almost in a panic—you'd have to think everyone believes a little demon foreman is right behind them with a to-do list, ready to put them to work if they slow down for an instant. There's a genuine fear of quiet time.

There's not an absolute consensus though. There have been and there still are philosophical minds who share a very different opinion. Kierkegaard called idleness "the only true good;" Bertrand Russell published a book titled *In Praise of Idleness*. As far back as the sixteenth century, Montaigne mischievously blamed idleness for causing him to write his enormous book of essays. Samuel Johnson signed his essays "The Idler," and contemporary essayist Sven Birkerts called idleness "The Mother of Possibility." My favorite piece on the subject is Robert Louis Stevenson's "An Apology for Idlers," where he says, for example, "Perpetual devotion to what a man calls his business, is only to be sustained by perpetual neglect of many other things. And it is not by any means certain that a man's business is the most important thing he has to do."

Robert Frost, that most philosophical of poets, made farming his business, but by all accounts he did not show "perpetual devotion to his business." He was that rare kind of farmer, the kind who "sleeps in." But he credited "the five free years" he spent on this farm in Derry with having made it possible for him to write "all his poems." Today I plan to talk about the connection between idleness and the creative impulse while reading poems by Frost and others, including some of my own.

"Let me begin with an objection... Now of all times...is not the time to talk about leisure. We are, after all, busy building our house. Our hands are full and there is work for all. And surely, until our task is done and our house is rebuilt, the only thing that matters is to strain every nerve."

Didn't our president in a recent speech tell us, "The nation that I am most interested in building is our own"? Are we not still slowly recovering from the nation's worst financial crisis since the Great Depression? Are we not faced with a national debt spiraling out of control? This is no time to be sitting on our hands. I should probably cut this speech short so we can all get back to work immediately. We haven't got time for poetry today!

Or ever, apparently. The book I was quoting from was published in 1952, with an introduction by T.S. Eliot. It was written by the philosopher Joseph Pieper, and its title may surprise you, given the little bit that I've read to you so far. Pieper's book is called *Leisure The Basis of Culture*.

That title makes me think the book may be worth looking into, if only to justify our staying here a bit longer, neglecting our chores. If a case can be made for leisure as the basis of culture, we won't be considered derelict in our civic responsibilities: we'll be helping to build the nation simply by whiling away the afternoon together.

Pieper appeals to the Greeks and the Romans to make his argument. They ought to know something about the basis of culture, having laid the foundation of the western world. He points out that the word for leisure "in Greek is *skole*, and in Latin *scola*, the English 'school.'" So "the word we use to designate the place where we educate and teach is derived from a word which means 'leisure.' 'School' does not, properly speaking, mean school, but leisure."

That's to say that the very place where culture is handed on from one generation to another—where the culture is re-generated, so to speak—is the place of leisure. Makes you look at a hammock with new appreciation, doesn't it?

You begin to see how great a value was placed on leisure back in the day. Now I don't have the Greek or Latin to verify Pieper's assertions, but he writes that the word the Greeks used for "ordinary everyday work" was *a-scolia*, unleisurely. They used the negative to describe something that didn't merit a word of its own. These days we do quite the opposite when we refer to vacation time as "time off," meaning time off from work. Somehow between Socrates' era and our own the value of leisure and of work relative to each other has been reversed, upended. We've entered the world of topsy-turvydom, where the things of greater importance are considered of less value. Whenever we find ourselves with time on our hands—time, a thing as precious as gold—we're made to feel immoral for not "doing something" with it!

Let me go off on a tangent—you can do that when there's leisure enough—and read you a favorite passage that I copied out of a book by George Gissing when I left my job in the printing industry a dozen years ago. A legacy late in Gissing's life had freed him from the literary drudge-work that had consumed him; the true value of time impressed him so deeply that he wrote of it in rhapsodic prose. And he got it absolutely right:

"Time is money—says the vulgarest saw known to any age or people. Turn it round about, and you get a precious truth—money is time. I think of it on these dark, most blinded mornings, as I come down to find a glorious fire crackling and leaping in my study. Suppose I were so poor that I could not afford that heartsome blaze, how different the whole day would be! Have I not lost many and many a day of my life for lack of the material comfort which was necessary to put my mind in tune? Money is time. With money I buy for cheerful use the hours which other wise would not in any sense be mine: nay which would make me their miserable bondsman. Money is time, and heaven be thanked, there needs so little of it for this sort of purchase. He

who has overmuch is wont to be as badly off in regard to the true use of money, as he who has not enough. What are we doing all our lives but purchasing, or trying to purchase, time? And most of us having grasped it with one hand throw it away with the other."

You see that Gissing, like Pieper, is concerned with setting to rights a topsy-turvy state of values. It's not "Time is money" —a saying he finds revolting, "the vulgarest...known to any age or people"— but the opposite: "Money is time." It's not "Let's get busy because wasted time is wasted money," but "Hurray, we've got some money; it'll buy us time!" Of course Gissing's consciousness of time's value must have been affected by a heightened sense of mortality—he wrote that passage in the last year of his life—and the realization that at some point sooner than later he would not be able to purchase more time at any price.

I'll read a poem of mine about the impossibility of making that transaction. It's an elegy for an employer.

Wage Earner's Lament

The man whose greeting passed for praise,
With whom I traded time for bread,
The man I fought to get a raise,
The man who bought my days, is dead.

And shall I start before the dawn,
And work till after day is done,
Laboring still when he is gone,
So neither of us sees the sun?

The man to whom I sold my days
Has taken them beneath the earth.
Where in those dark and narrow ways
Will he find gold of equal worth?

The title of my talk today is "Robert Frost and the Gift of Idle Hours." I've hardly said a thing about Robert Frost yet. I wanted first to establish the worth of leisure, to wrest it out of its lowly place in the topsy-turvy measure of things so we might see it for what it is—"the gift of idle hours." Those are, of course, Frost's own words.

Frost, like Gissing, seems to have experienced one period of his life when the value of time impressed itself on him with more than usual emphasis, when he found himself basking in time, when he could feel time almost the way one feels the warmth of the sun. Fortunately for Frost that experience came much earlier in his life, during the years he spent right here on this little farm in Derry. Those years he considered central to his work in poetry. In a letter to Robert Chase in 1952, Frost wrote: "I might say the core of all my writing was probably the five free years I had on the farm down the road a mile or two from Derry Village toward Lawrence. The only thing we had was plenty of time and seclusion. I

couldn't have figured on it in advance. I hadn't that kind of foresight. But it turned out as right as a doctor's prescription."

Think of that: Frost is saying that the "plenty of time" that was all he had when he lived here formed "the core of all [his] writing." All we need do is consider the place we're in, "the farm down the road a mile or two from Derry Village," in connection with this book, *The Collected Poems of Robert Frost*, and we'll have illustrated the truth of Joseph Pieper's title: *Leisure the Basis of Culture*.

The poem Frost chose to appear first in his *Collected Poems* is another way of telling us same thing, another way of pointing to an appreciation of the gift of idle hours as the starting point of all his poetry.

The Pasture

I'm going out to clean the pasture spring.
I'll only stop to rake the leaves away
(And wait to watch the water clear, I may):
I shan't be gone long.—You come too.

I'm going out to fetch the little calf
That's standing by the mother. It's so young,
It totters when she licks it with her tongue.
I shan't be gone long.—You come too.

The gift of idle hours is not only the starting point of Frost's poetry; for a reader it is the entryway. Twice in this short poem he invites the reader, "You come too." Where is he inviting us but to a metaphorical open pasture, a place where things take their own time and there is plenty of time for everything? Twice he assures us, "I shan't be gone long." He knows that, like everyone else, we have trouble letting go of our unleisurely activities. We want to be getting back soon, we think. Until we accept the invitation to enter the poem, thereby committing an act of leisure. Once there, we too may "wait to watch the water clear." Which will do us no practical good—but time will not be money then.

It strikes me that the real difference between work on the one hand and idleness or leisure on the other —I'm using the words interchangeably*— is not whether or not there's something that needs to be done. The gift of idle hours would hardly be a gift if we spent them with our hands tied. Frost set off into the pasture of his poem with a purpose, to clear the spring, to fetch the calf. He might have called it work if he'd been made to do it. He tries to explain that reasoning in his poem, "Two Tramps in Mud Time:" "Two strangers came/
And caught me splitting wood in the yard." *Caught me* splitting wood—as though he'd had his hand in the cookie jar. One of the men drops back, and Frost tells us, "I knew pretty well what he had in mind: / He wanted to take my job for pay."

I had no right to play
With what was another man's work for gain.

My right might be love but theirs was need.
And where the two exist in twain
Theirs was the better right—agreed.

But yield who will to their separation,
My object in living is to unite
My avocation and my vocation
As my two eyes make one sight.
Only where love and need are one,
And the work is play for mortal stakes,
Is the deed ever really done
For Heaven and the future's sakes.

I'm guessing that what makes leisure not-work is not having to answer to a boss. It's a subtler distinction than it appears. Because we end up bossing ourselves as often as not. Who hasn't ruined a vacation by trying to cram too much into it, under pressure to make the most of two weeks? I used to have fun imagining an intense co-worker on vacation, heading down the highway at 90 miles an hour with the wind blowing his hair back, his hands tight on the steering wheel, grinding his teeth and screaming aloud, "I gotta relax!"

Poets are terrible that way. Maybe we're not consciously aware that leisure is the wellspring of poetry—and ought to be kept clear—but surely we sense that poetry takes time. The problem is that time is hard to come by, and as soon as we get a little—maybe rising an hour or two earlier in the morning— we feel as though we'd better get right to work. That's muddying the waters. We forget the simple advice that Robert Frost gave himself loud enough for us to overhear: "A poem begins in delight and ends in wisdom." It doesn't begin with punching the clock.

In a *Paris Review* interview, Kay Ryan, a recent U.S. poet laureate, brought her usual witty insight to bear on this nuisance of self-bossing:

"The problem for me was that I willed my poetry at first. I had too much control. But in time the benevolences of metaphor and rhyme sent me down their rabbit holes, in new directions, so that my will—my intention—was sent hither and yon. And in that mix of intention and diversion, I could get a tiny inkling of things far beyond me."

Isn't it funny that Ryan's way of talking about getting free—getting out from under herself—lands her among the rabbit holes, in a place like Frost's pasture?

This poem is not in any of my books, but it's in the anthology, *Contemporary Poets of New England*.

Salt Marsh

Do the grasses of the marsh ever sleep?
Confused in new light, beginning to stir,

they have the look of just awakening
from dreams slow to lift, slow to drift away.
The sun comes early to visit, and stays
the day. They are good friends, all gathered here.
They have time. They have so much time to spend.
First one trill, then a distant chorus calls
notice to the seconds and half-seconds...
The listener hears and does not hear. Time
is and is not, both at once, everywhere.
See how the wide circle of the sky fades
where it meets the low hills. The long grasses
shimmer from here to there. The sound of birds
trickles from an unseen spring. Sudden
multitudes of wings fan and thrum the air.
The feathers of each wing are made of light.
Green-to-gold, wine red, straw with trembling seeds,
all combed amiss, the grasses of the marsh
jostle and yearn after the coursing wind.
Startled, beneath the tufted hummocks runs
the cocoa-brown mole in his labyrinth.

That poem was a surprise to me when I remembered it while putting this talk together. The salt marsh is a Newburyporter's version of Frost's pasture, "the cocoa-brown mole in his labyrinth" is a cousin to Ryan's rabbit down its rabbit-hole, and the poem speaks of how much time things have. It goes to show that metaphor is far less arbitrary than you might think. Robert Creeley spoke of a young person asking him once, "Is that a real poem or did you just make it up?" The kid was right. You can't just make these things up. They present themselves to us, if we take the time to notice them. A poem can't be in a hurry to get somewhere. It has to take its time and find its own way. Frost was very clear on this point. He wrote that a poem "is but a trick poem and no poem at all if the best of it was thought of first and saved for the last." See, that would put the poet too much in control, would make a boss of him. The poem shouldn't take direction from anyone. No, Frost tells us, the poem "finds its own name as it goes and discovers the best waiting for it in some final phrase at once wise and sad." And he adds, "No surprise for the writer, no surprise for the reader." Why write or read at all, if we already know how it turns out?

It's the difference between a hike in the country and the commute back and forth from work. You'd like to try a new path and see something you haven't seen. Frost is making a huge claim for leisure here. He's demanding time off from work for the poem itself, he's doesn't want the poet to act as overseer.

What's good for the poem is good for the poet too. It's this business—or not-business—of following your nose that defines a poet, according to Frost. As you know, in order to make a living Frost often attached himself to colleges, but never as a professor. He made the distinction between a scholar and a poet this way: "Both work from knowledge; but I suspect they differ most importantly in the way their knowledge is come by. Scholars get

theirs with conscientious thoroughness... Poets [get] theirs cavalierly and as it happens in and out of books. They stick to nothing deliberately, but let what will stick to them like burrs where they walk in the fields. No acquirement is on assignment, or even self-assignment."

Two things I'd like you to notice there. One, Frost has got us back in the fields again; he's got us off the beaten path somewhere where burrs stick to you as you go. Think of that metaphor, knowledge as a burr that sticks to you. You certainly don't go out walking with the intent of collecting burrs on your clothing. You just go walking because you feel like it, and some few burrs stick to you without your willing. You bring home a little something in the way of knowledge, not that you were looking for it.

The second thing is the implicit decree against bosses: "No acquirement is on assignment, or even self-assignment." The idea is to get out from under yourself and roam free.

In a poem ironically titled "Directive," Frost deliberately side-steps the role of knowledgeable guide who knows ahead of time where the poem will take the reader: "The road there," he begins to say, as though he is about to give directions. Then immediately he undermines his own authority : "The road there, *if* you'll let a guide direct you/ Who only has at heart your getting lost..." Can you imagine pulling to the side of the road to question one of the locals, only to hear him tell you, "Sure, I can show you which way to go, if you feel like getting lost"!

People will let you know right up front who they are and whether or not you can trust them. It doesn't matter, because we all hear what we want to hear. When a con man tells us he's a con man, we appreciate his honesty and consider it a sign of his trustworthiness. Frost clearly tells us that he's not interested in setting us straight. He wants to set us crooked. So when he writes a poem that has the feel of a Rudyard Kipling poem— some good, solid, rhymed advice—watch out.

If you can dream - and not make dreams your master;
If you can think - and not make thoughts your aim;
If you can meet with triumph and disaster
And treat those two imposters just the same;

—and so on. That's from Kipling's poem, "If," which is really one of the best poems of its kind, but Frost never wrote a poem of that kind. When Frost seems to be giving us some good sound advice in a poem, we need to look closely at what kind of advice he's giving us. I'm thinking specifically of one of Frost's most famous poems, "The Road Not Taken." Let's read it through together, warily.

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I--
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

Well, that is certainly not a man fighting the rush hour traffic to get to a meeting on time. He comes to a fork in the road; he doesn't check his GPS; he comes to a standstill and gazes ahead for a long while. It's not that he's afraid of taking a wrong turn; ideally, he'd like to be two people at once so he could follow both roads. He doesn't know where either road goes; that's what's got his interest. He's only finally able to choose one road by telling himself he'll come back another day to try the other, but he knows he's kidding himself. Whichever road he takes will lead to other forks and intersections: "way leads on to way." His only regret is that he can't follow them all and be everywhere at once. That accounts for the "sigh" he'll sigh as he tells this "ages and ages hence." That and the realization that his roaming days will be coming to an end.

By the way, he didn't take "the road less traveled by." He told us right up front, "as for that the passing there/ Had worn them really about the same,/ And both that morning equally lay/ In leaves no step had trodden black." On that particular morning the path he chose was the one *more* travelled by, because it's the path he chose! He's the one who trod black the yellow leaves.

See, if we let ourselves be conned and read this poem the way we'd read the Kipling poem, we hear a wise and kindly old man telling his grandchildren that he owes his success in life to a decision he made in his youth. But remember, this man you're looking to for guidance "only has at heart your getting lost." The title of the poem, remember, is "The Road Not Taken." The sigh is for the road not taken—not because it would have been the right choice, but because it too would have branched out and led to a hundred undiscovered crossroads. He'd have sent you both ways if he could.

In fact, there's a little grammatical trick toward the end of the poem. Having told us in the first stanza he was "sorry I could not travel both/ and be one traveler," in the final stanza he says, "Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—/ I took the one less traveled by." He

repeats the first person pronoun. If there are two I's, it may be possible to follow both paths after all! It might be a little difficult to follow him... That's all right, though. This guide can be trusted to get you lost; maybe you get to see something you haven't seen before.

The poem is all about what another great poet, the Polish Noble Laureate Czeslaw Milosz called "the feeling of *potentiality*, of constant unexpectedness, of a mystery one ever pursues." It's not about getting from Point A to Point B with steady purpose. It's not about success. Success is terribly unlesirely.

Gissing wanted to turn that vulgar saying, "Time is money" on its head. There's another, similar phrase, a corollary, and that's "saving time." Saving time means finding ways to get things done quicker, with an eye on the clock. But you can't save time. You can't keep it in a bank account, as a hedge against mortality. Time doesn't need saving. We're the ones who need to be saved—from time. "At my back I always hear/ Time's winged chariot hurrying near." We live under the shadow of the clock.

I'm going to read you a remarkable journal entry written by a courageous young poet, Wilmer Mills, who was born in Louisiana and lives in Sewanee, Tennessee. Mills has been diagnosed with a rare form of cancer which is incurable. Carpenter, furniture maker, sawmill operator, artisan bread baker, basket weaver, farmer, white water raft guide, and poetry teacher at the University of North Carolina, Mills has been forced into idleness by his illness. But he is an extraordinary individual, and—like Gissing—confronted with his mortality, Mills seems to have discovered something about time that had eluded him before. Something that eludes all of us most of the time.

Here is one of the last entries he made to his online journal before he became too weak to write for himself:

Despite my bleak prognosis, I now see everything in front of me as a space of infinite possibility, within certain limitations, with a full and nourishing sense of Time.

For the past ten years or so it seems that all I think about and write about is Time, but something about learning that I have a form of liver cancer that is ultimately incurable has given me an amazing sense of clarity about the subject. As with my mode of writing in traditional metrical verse, the limitation actually leads to the greatest freedom.

Since being ill, I have not been able to shave, and it has surprised me how much my beard has turned gray without my knowing it. This, combined with my sallow eyes and hollow cheeks, leaves me looking like a photograph of a Civil War Soldier's ghost. It's also striking how this makes me resemble old pictures of my own ancestors. Strangely, this is a comforting realization, as if being face-to-face with mortality shows me more clearly who I am. It reminds me of something the southern writer, Andrew Lytle, told me once when I was a student. When he turned ninety-five, I asked him how that felt, and he said that the years didn't mean anything because he had already begun to live in the sense of eternity. I now know what he meant.

He didn't intend to invoke the Christian heaven or anything theological but rather a way of being apart from clocks. In Greek thought there are two ways of viewing time: Chronos and Kairos. Chronos Time is chronological and measurable. Kairos Time is more open-ended and expansive such that one can experience an "eternity" in a brief instant. It is not a cold finality at all. While we mainly live in Chronos Time, it is possible to experience Kairos as a place in which to abide and to breathe deeply without respect to calendars and deadlines. Too often we live only for the clock and fail to notice how, in the absence of incremental time, we would be more able to see the pattern in the rug, how the stained glass windows of our lives make sense as wholes and not as mere pieces.

I have to think that poets in the future may read Wilmer Mills' journal the way we now read the letters of Keats. You see how he brought us full circle back to using Greek terms for things our own language doesn't have names for. Imagine distinguishing between two kinds of time! *Chronos*, or *chronological* time, and *Kairos*, another kind of time, a "space of time" in which to stay put a moment and possibly experience eternity. When Frost comes to where two roads diverged in a wood and tells us, "long I stood/ And looked down one as far as I could," I think he is standing in that space of time called Kairos. I think he stood there longer even than we imagine. I think he stood there an eternity.

Surely Frost was intimately aware of the way that moments of time can break open and blossom as wide as Georgia O'Keefe's poppies, filling the entire canvas of a life. Here's one of my favorite Frost poems:

Happiness Makes Up in Height for What It Lacks In Length

Oh, stormy stormy world,
The days you were not swirled
Around with mist and cloud,
Or wrapped as in a shroud,
And the sun's brilliant ball
Was not in part or all
Obscured from mortal view--
Were days so very few
I can but wonder whence
I get the lasting sense
Of so much warmth and light.
If my mistrust is right
It may be altogether
From one day's perfect weather,
When starting clear at dawn,
The day swept clearly on
To finish clear at eve.
I verily believe
My fair impression may

Be all from that one day
No shadow crossed but ours
As through its blazing flowers
We went from house to wood
For change of solitude.

You see, one day colored an entire life. And what did he accomplish that day? Well, he tells us, we walked from the house to the woods. A mighty productive bit of idleness, don't you think?

I'll close with one more poem of my own, which is also about how the *potentiality* glimpsed in a single moment might cast its rainbow light on a person's whole lifetime.

Aunt Mae

As often as you'd visit with your aunt,
There was a chance she might hark back again,
Glad for the chance, as you were glad to listen:
The story's happy ending was the telling.

As she came home one evening from the factory,
She sensed a man behind her at a distance
Which he kept, walking with a measured step
So as not to overtake her, nor fall back
And disappear behind the darkened buildings.
He stayed with her without his getting closer.
She was still young; this was quite long ago.
What could she do except continue on?
Her heels were worn--before she'd had the time
Even to break them in the proper way--
From walking from the building to the bus.
And at the corner stop he stood beside her;
It was a while before the bus arrived.

He was a man--no need to tell you that,
But she could hardly tell you more than that.
He wore a coat and hat, he was a man,
It was a matter of importance, that.
And when he spoke he was a courteous man,
Despite her never having known a man
Who spoke to her; despite--she does not say--
Her looks. Her acquiescent, homely face.
Which must have been what drew him to her, no?
He must have been just such a homely man,
Who asked if he might take the seat beside her.
And she declined to give him her permission,

As it was after dark.
 And long ago.
But the light fills her eyes in the retelling.
And you are one to notice things, her favorite.
“There was a man who liked me,” she begins.
She pours the little cups half full of tea,
And stirs until the cubes of sugar melt,
Then pours in milk. And lovely scenes are painted
On the cups. This, too,
 This too is long ago.

Now you alone recall that courteous man,
Aunt Mae’s one paramour, of whom she spoke
Admiringly, as if that word still meant
To view with wonder and surprise--not him, but
Herself with him, that once. “A man liked me,”
She’d say--setting out toast with sweet preserves--
With nothing like regret; but something like
A prism she suspended in the light
Of memory, that cast its rainbow colors
On the white napkins and the tablecloth,
A thing a girl your age was quick to notice:
The bright, small petals scattered in the snow.

For Aunt Mae, the road not taken made all the difference.

I hope you've found today's talk useful, but not *too* useful. I suppose I'll leave you with one practical thing to take home with you. Here's a ready response for the next time you hear someone say, "The devil finds work for idle hands." You can say in reply, "One could do worse than be a swinger of birches."

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*Pieper makes a distinction between leisure and idleness, associating the latter with sloth and restlessness. He points out that sloth used to be recognized as the source of restlessness, "the ultimate cause of work for work's sake." Idleness of that kind would be the antithesis of leisure. In this talk, though, I use "idleness" to mean what it means in the phrase taken from Robert Frost's "After Mowing." Leisure seems to me very aptly described as "the gift of idle hours."

—Alfred Nicol