

In Praise of Downtime

LAST YEAR, I FINALLY SUCCUMBED. Yes, I was one of those who avoided, for what seemed to be a long time, the purchase of a BlackBerry, one of those fancy e-mail/Internet browser/phone contraptions. What finally pushed me over the edge? Why did I do it? Am I now bringing work with me wherever I go? Am I just trying to enhance my efficiency? Has it increased or decreased my stress levels? Or is it just because the firm I work for pays for it?

I've been accused of having succumbed to the dangerous crackberry disease. Fortunately, I don't check my e-mail in the middle of a meeting like some who suffer a severe version of it—at least I don't think I do. But it can definitely be addictive; I'm not sure how I'd live without it now. Just like those nights in the 1970s when I couldn't seem to go to sleep without a last nightly joust with Space Invaders.

My personal justification is that I simply got tired of too frequently feeling compelled to check into my e-mail on my laptop, but I'm not sure. Maybe I still don't have my work/personal life priorities quite straight. Possibly it's because I don't force myself to take sufficient downtime. I try to spend as much time as possible with my family. I try to stay in reasonable physical (and mental) shape, although I am afraid that the ultramarathons I did a long time ago are a thing of the past. But I'm sure I can do better.

Everyone seems to be stressed out or overworked these days. It seems that every working actuary I talk with is very busy. At least no one admits to having lots of free time. It reminds me of an observation by Sloan Wilson in his 1955 novel *Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*: "They seemed to me to be pursuing neither ideals nor happiness, they were pursuing a routine. For a long while I thought I was on the sidelines watching the parade, and it was quite a shock to glance down and see that I too was wearing a gray flannel suit."

Have things really changed, at least in America? Maybe some people have exchanged business casual for the suit, but is it still true that in most big firms, as Mr. Wilson observed a half century ago, "you're not going to go far unless you're a workaholic." He said his four children "are terribly



overworked: it is the nature of young, ambitious people." But I don't think it is only a disease of the young, although as we age we certainly apply different coping mechanisms.

But is this inevitable? I don't think so. I believe there is more than one parade we can join. The one I most want to emphasize is the one in which the use of downtime is praised and fun is common, an ideal that should be strived for and be lived. Everyone needs it, yet many can't seem to grab hold of it and implement it themselves. Strive for a good work/home life balance. Just do it! Be proactive and plan for it, don't let it lay dormant until it's too late. Don't be afraid to tell your boss that you'll take some time off. I'll continue to strive to enhance my balance—I hope you do, too.

And by the way, a brief follow-up report regarding my father, whom I described in the November/December 2005 *EndPaper* titled "A Tribute to My Father." He's now 94, and he was quite pleased (read *overjoyed*) this fall to have been asked back for another year of teaching LEGOs to first through sixth graders at his local elementary school in Clearwater, Fla. I was fortunate enough to visit him recently, and I was a little humbled by experiencing his teaching skills in action.

I'm sure I'm a bit biased, but he seemed to use just the right blend of encouragement and direction when needed, all tailored to the needs of each student. And when his kids failed in a LEGO task, he was wise enough to let them learn from it. I hope that a little of his great qualities have rubbed off on me. He now hopes to continue for another year and a half, until he's 95½. I hope he does it!

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DREAMSLINE/BONOTOM STUDIO