

Writings on the Imagination

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Empty Cups And Secret Lanterns: The Rewards Of Idleness

Ellen Dissanayake

Along with the overabundance of consumer goods on display in the malls and supermarkets of contemporary America, we are offered a lavish array of imaginary experiences from films, television, and now CD-ROMs. We can travel vicariously to other lands, other centuries, even other planets; without leaving home we can see fabulous life forms, like scarlet-toed frogs, and unfamiliar ways of life, like those of desert nomads or swidden farmers.

The wonders available in videoland and cyberspace are magical indeed, but against a rising tide I would like to put in an old-fashioned word for the rewards of idleness. This may sound like heresy in the classrooms and neighborhoods of America, where idle children are time bombs of inattention, vagrancy, and vandalism. Keep them busy, we think, or they'll get into trouble.

Still, it seems to me that, ironically, the more people are given things to do and things to learn about, the less they are able to find things to do and learn about on their own. There is a difference and maybe an inverse relationship between passively consuming imaginary ideas or experiences and actively creating them. Along with computer literacy, we might teach young people another valuable competence: how to access a kind of software that doesn't require diskettes or even electricity — their own inherent powers of imagination.

I come to this revolutionary suggestion from my own experiences in two other societies — one in the modern West (Scotland) and the other in South Asia (Sri Lanka) — that I will recount. I will introduce these with a brief description of what may be a unfamiliar sociohistorical

frame of reference, one that leads me to view this century's headlong and heedless race into the future with some misgivings.

A Paleolithic Perspective

Although we consider ourselves to be sophisticated citizens of the world, familiar with jet travel, pocket calculators, antibiotics, recombinant DNA, faxes, and the far reaches of matter and the cosmos, we are in our inner selves not so very far from our Paleolithic ancestors. For fewer than twenty generations out of eight hundred have we lived in what sociologists call a 'modernized' society — gradually moving away from the sort of 'traditional' ways of life that sustained the previous 780 generations.¹ In these amazing social and intellectual changes from hunter-gatherer to simple agricultural societies, and now in our accelerated journey from Industrial Revolution to postmodern global society, we appear to have forsaken some things that have been and still are essential to our human nature.

For hundreds of thousands of years, people lived, with unbreakable ties to others, in small face-to-face societies in which we each had a known place. We performed appropriate life-sustaining work, valued by others, using hands-on knowledge for making what was needed for our lives. Despite the inevitable pain, illness, lack, and loss that life on earth brings, we held common compelling beliefs about the way the world was and how uncertainties could be dealt with. When we cared about something — the outcome of an endeavor, a valued person or possession, an important occasion (e.g., a feast, courtship, or funeral) — we tended to make things associated with it special, as in ceremonies, with embellishments, elaborations, dressing up, special words, sounds, and movements.

To be sure, contemporary life provides a multitude of comforts and conveniences; it also provides much stimulation, knowledge, and many opportunities unknown to

people in the past. But can we really say that we are more emotionally, psychologically, or spiritually fulfilled than premodern people? We live in societies filled with strangers; our ties to others are often ephemeral, and our sense of personal worth requires continual validation. Our work may bring many extrinsic satisfactions (money to buy the comforts and pleasures), but does it bring intrinsic satisfaction in the doing? The more we have, the more bored or unsatisfied we are: after ripping the paper off a dozen Christmas or birthday gifts, today's child is apt to say 'Is that all?', just as today's shopper is likely to have 'nothing to wear' in a closet crammed with clothes. In a complex society, there are few if any common beliefs or agreed-upon courses of action to provide emotional security that the paths we choose are inarguably the 'right' ones. We don't have the time to make our experience special or to discover, know, and savor the many varieties of specialness that are to be found everywhere. We purchase and consume our experiences, rather than finding and making them, just as we purchase and consume our food, clothing, and other possessions, and even our knowledge.

I am not saying that we should return to being hunters and gatherers; I do think that insofar as we feel unfulfilled, it is with regard to the psychological certainties and emotional satisfactions that were inherent in premodern and traditional existence, but that our present way of life largely ignores.

Lessons of Idleness and Solitude

When I first went to Sri Lanka in the late 1960s, I had help with household, garden, and children, but few friends or social activities. I soon found that I was 'bored'. There were no jobs for foreigners. There was no television in the country at that time; radio reception was poor and the programs awful, in any case. Women didn't go 'out' alone, but even if they could, there was nowhere to go — no shopping to speak of, and movies were mostly local

language melodramas or Singapore kung fu. At first I did all the things I had always said I would do 'when I had time': I caught up on my sleep, wrote letters to everyone I knew, played the piano for hours, read everything in sight, took walks. There were still hours of the day when I had 'nothing to do'. I knew one American woman who went home because she couldn't stand it.

What I learned from this enforced idleness, however, was that once I gave in to it, got over the feeling that it was necessary to 'do something', and just sat quietly, looking at the sky, the plants, the birds, my mind began to fill up like a well. Eventually, I took pen and paper and thought I'd try to describe what I saw: the coconut tree in a storm was like a madwoman tossing her hair; the kittens' faces looking out of their basket were like a bouquet of flowers; the little orange-breasted blue flycatchers sounded like Papageno's flute melody played in reverse. I decided to try to write a poem every day, starting from a thought or incident. Some were more successful than others, but I found that just setting down a small kernel was enough to start something that might go . . . anywhere. After forty-some consecutive poems, I realized that once I gave in to the idleness and solitude, there was an infinitude of things I could describe or connect. It was like a secret possession that made me feel good and even safe to bring to mind — rather like the enduring knowledge of a religious revelation or a secret love that is always there, providing inner strength and enrichment.

I've heard people speak of the 'danger' of 'escaping' into fantasy — the worlds of monsters, superheroes, soap operas, romance novels. This position resembles Freud's view of art, that it was a wish fulfillment or substitute for what one could not have or a sublimation of what one dared not think or do. Others, like Dickens's Mr. Gradgrind, dismiss imagination as idle because it is not 'real', factual, or immediately pragmatic. This criticism resembles those that consider art to be 'mere' embellish-

ment, a superfluous decoration, a sort of frivolous ornamentation.

Yet one finds that in many premodern societies, the extra-ordinary world of the imagination (or spirit) is usually as real as the ordinary world of everyday life. Or, better, that ordinary life is suffused with the extra-ordinary: one need only let oneself become aware of it. Communication with mysterious powers is available to all. Decoration or adornment is hardly 'mere', but rather a way of demonstrating (to the self as well as others) that a person cares about his or her life, and chooses to participate in the social and moral order. These are manifested or embodied in the arts. Not elaborating one's experience would be tantamount to not valuing it and those with whom one shares it.

In many premodern and traditional societies, the communal fantasy world may be made by others (usually long ago) and transfused into the life of the community with little amendment by individuals. It is full of monsters, superheroes, and the dramatic primal themes of love and death, loss and fulfillment, conflict and resolution that immediately and effortlessly engage human attention. Yet unlike the similar culturally transmitted fantasies of today, this extra-ordinary world is regularly and actively reanimated in social ceremonies where its power is memorably demonstrated to and shared by all, reinforcing their communality. It is not passively absorbed alone in front of a computer or television screen. To me, the 'danger' of MTV or videogames is not that they provide wish-fulfillment or sublimation, but that they fill the mind with an endless and random or interchangeable stream of disconnected information and high-impact thrills that often serve little purpose than to be an escape from boredom and loneliness.

Unlike loneliness, idleness and solitude can both be considered gifts — anything but boring. But modern society does not easily let us know that. As my solitary life in Sri Lanka was enriched and given shape by my cultivating the life of the imagination, so do I think today's children,

who often feel isolate and ineffectual, can benefit from discovering their own inner treasure, apart from all the manufactured fantasy that is a pressed button away.

In this regard, I'd like to copy a well-known short poem from A Child's Garden of Verses:

When I was down beside the sea
A wooden spade they gave to me
To dig the sandy shore.

My holes were empty like a cup.
In every hole the sea came up,
Till it could come no more.

The Exultation of a Secret Lantern

When I lived in Scotland, I found a society that some have called abstemious, frugal, even severe. I came to love the spareness and simplicity, especially compared to American greed, vulgarity, and affluence, and decided that a better way of describing the Scottish temper was to view it as nonmaterialistic. At first I also found Scots to be somewhat unimaginative — this went along with plainness, practicality, and pragmatism. Yet I think this impression was wrong, or — like calling Scots 'frugal' — did not go far enough.

Robert Louis Stevenson, who wrote the poem above, was a Scotsman, known as the author of *Treasure Island*, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, and many other works. The year that I was in Scotland, 1994, was the centenary of his death. In a review of a book about Stevenson,² I came across a description of a childhood game that he played with other boys in the evenings at Dunbar, on the coast of Lothian (the region whose major city is Edinburgh). Each boy secretly wore a lit tin bulls-eye lantern under his coat. The only point of this game was "to walk by yourself in the black night . . . not a ray escaping, a mere pillar of

blackness in the dark; and all the while . . . to know you had a bulls eye at your belt, and to exult and sing over the knowledge."

How many children would play this kind of 'pointless' game today? The reviewer, Elaine Showalter, tells us that for Stevenson the lantern represented the "mysterious inwards of psychology," the magical bird or enchanted nightingale that sings in the forest of realism. In the pages of the realist, according to Stevenson, we find a picture of life insofar as it consists of mud and of old iron, cheap desires and cheap fears, that which we are ashamed to remember and that which we are careless whether we forget. In realism and naturalism, "life falls dead like dough," for "no man lives in the external truth, among salts and acids, but in the warm phantasmagoric chamber of his brain, with the painted windows and the storied walls."

I love these images of a hidden lantern known only to oneself, of an enchanted nightingale invisibly singing in the forest of realism, of a warm phantasmagoric chamber with painted windows and storied walls. They tell us that inside a plain, unpromising exterior may be a radiant secret core. They suggest that as much as activity and 'stimulation', children may need idleness, as I did in Sri Lanka, to realize their latent or concealed imaginative resources. Rather than deluge them with things to play with, or exhort them to fill their time profitably or even for fun or relaxation, can we not find ways to give them wooden spades to dig empty cups for the sea of imagination to fill?

Unfortunately, today's boys and girls in Lothian, as in London, Louisville, and Los Angeles, have substituted flickering screens inside their houses for lanterns under their coats. The images of their inner lives are neither exultantly their own (as for Stevenson) or powerfully and communally shared (as for premodern children). Instead their fantasies are for the most part created by others, shared with millions, yet viewed alone — thereby belonging at

the same time to everyone and no one. Their idleness, stained and pitted by the acids and salts of neglect, triviality, and phoniness, too easily becomes mischief or despair.

The much-vaunted 'virtual reality' available on the computer screen may well seem preferable to the anxiety and hopelessness that characterize 'real life' for all too many modern children (and adults). But let us realize that we could also help them to find bulls-eye lanterns and wooden spades that make possible the secret illumination or the unstoppable ocean of their very own imagination. Ever alight under one's coat, or available for digging holes on the shore, these special implements are there to be known by oneself for oneself, and (by those who, like Stevenson, are moved to share them) for others.

1. This is an excessively large fraction. Taking a generation as 25 years (four per century), twenty generations goes back 500 years to the High Renaissance, the beginning of 'modern society'. Modernization typically refers specifically to the changes that accompany industrialization (e.g., greater economic specialization and social stratification, mechanization, individualism, secularism, and rationalism than premodern or traditional societies), which occurred some ten generations ago in the West and more recently elsewhere. Eight hundred generations is 20,000 years ago, in the Upper Paleolithic, about the time of the cave paintings in France and Spain when one might speculate that cultural diversity became important. (Until then, and indeed until the development of settled agricultural communities 10,000 years ago, all humans lived as hunter-gatherers.) Hominid evolution took place, of course, over several million years, so that in actual fact, our present way of life has characterized humankind for less than 1 percent of its entire history. Twenty out of 800 generations is thus a greatly conservative estimate: it is really more accurate to say 20 generations out of 160,000.
2. Elaine Showalter. Review in Times (London) Literary Supplement #4791 (January 27, 1995) of Books by Michel Le Bris about Robert Louis Stevenson, pp. 4-5.