

The Joy of Staying at Home

Please note that this document is parked under the banner of Essays Related to the Early Church. Reason: there are fewer documents here, so it's a matter of space.

The present article is a spin-off of one just before it, **What Do They Do All Day?** also on this homepage. There I had examined the manner of life with regard to a select group of people in a small-ish New England town. That is to say, this town always has had a propensity for attracting people who for lack of a better way of putting it, are known for living on the margins of society. Such persons by no means are considered bums. They aren't frowned upon upon by the locals which says a lot about their tolerant character. This may be more characteristic of former mill towns though I can't confirm it for certain. Thus we have two parallel societies living in relative harmony. Over the years I've heard many people comment upon this distinction but haven't reflected upon it sufficiently or at all. Some of these folks living on the edge have been here longer than others and are spotted quite easily, a fact already spelled out in the previous article. One thing is pretty much certain: they are a relatively small group of older folks equally divided between men and women and form a fairly stable population.

The town in which these people reside has a Goldilocks character about it—not too small, not too big—which may be essential to attracting such folks. On one hand they have just the right amount of space without gaining undue attention and on the other hand aren't overwhelmed as in a city. In other words, they're not street people. Also they have a sense of being protected which is of the utmost importance because they're more vulnerable. These people are rooted in a literal sense compared with the majority population due in large part to their low income. This precludes them from moving around freely. They are grounded by necessity to be in a compact area which is more shabby than run-down. Rarely do you see them step outside it, even over to the neighboring blocks. At the same time this rootedness is an integral part of their identity. They don't seem bothered by it but revel in it. Thus in their relative poverty they have everything, fully conscious of this fact.

In a nutshell, what to they do, the question central to the previous essay? They hang around giving the impression of being idle. However, they do it in a way that's close to impossible to describe, for it has nothing to do with being lazy as commonly understood. There's nothing magical about it. You have to see them up close and personal to know, after which you can draw your own conclusions. The first impression is that they represent a contentedness you must go out of your way to discover, otherwise it'd go by unnoticed. For the most part this out-of-the-way living is right off the main drag down some dingy side streets and a few rundown courtyards. The area is designed just perfectly for them. So by reason of a segregation not imposed but brought on both voluntarily and by circumstances,

they are a hidden treasure right before our eyes. At the same time I don't wish to put them on a pedestal. Although no one speaks ill of these folks, you wouldn't want to live like them nor wish their manner of living on anyone else. Still, somewhere and somehow deep down within we admire them even though we wouldn't want to imitate them. As a friend once put it succinctly, they are worthy of admiration but not imitation.

When or how such people got into this way of life isn't important. If we were to delve into their backgrounds, do interviews and the rest, we might discover a few juicy tidbits but essentially come up empty-handed. It turns out they are better left unexplained in favor of allowing them to speak to us on their own terms. Another factor which contributes to our fascination is, as noted above, these people are older. If they were kids or young adults, we'd pass them off more or less as potential trouble makers. Their age makes them more approachable and far less threatening. In fact, while gaining information about them here as well as for the previous article I had absolutely no first-hand experience. Consider that as a drawback. My sole recourse for information was observation over a period of some forty-five years. So while what's put forth here may have a detached and somewhat amateurish air about them, they're intended as a lead-in to describe another group of people. This group is not entirely unlike them but is far more "acceptable," quotes deliberate. They're the ones I identify as practicing the joy of staying at home.

But before getting into this second group, the so-called marginalized people who are singled out reveal one thing about ourselves, that we're in too much a hurry going about our business. We know this but are unable to get off the treadmill. Our attraction to them as we wonder what they're about makes ask privately who, really, is living a better life? What contributes to defining "better?" Is it in the eyes of the beholder or is there some objective measuring stick? Again, consider how we're attracted to these people as they hang around and make us wish (albeit secretly) we could be part of their world. Objectively speaking, this wouldn't be wise, for we don't know for sure what's going on behind the scenes. At the same time the consistency and certain stability of their lives captivates us, gets under our skin and reveals something we long for intently. As for them looking at us, I wonder if they realize their roles as teachers.

So the folks I'm describing defy any categorization such as being marginalized, poor, simple-minded or downright lazy. Their very bearing precludes them being called fringe people while at the same time it's obvious they lean in that direction. That's the real problem in attempting to describe them. Being older means they have a history of how they got where they are now. Nevertheless, this doesn't preclude using them to describe another group of people with which they have something in common. That is the group I'd identify as home-bodies, mostly those who are not working or who are retired. In sum they and the fringe group are older which makes me wonder sometimes if there's ever any interaction

between the two. Somehow I doubt it. It is to the stay-at-home crowd I apply the adjective joy. This may not be fully accurate, but I'll stand by it for now, equating it with the more precise spirit of contentedness.

In contrast to the group described in the previous article, those of us who are older—and by that I mean retired or out of the main stream one way or other—have achieved certain goals in life. Even if we have fallen short, it doesn't change the fact that we're older. We're stuck where we are, like it or not. By reason of our age we have a greater kinship with the so-called marginalized folks and can sympathize with them more readily. Nevertheless, we are here and they are there, two distinct yet parallel life styles.

Making comparisons between the two is inevitable since they come into their own during the course of work days when the young crowd is at work or at school. The same goes with the possibility...the fear...of ending up like them which looms in the background every time we encounter them. Perhaps they too wonder what they'd turn out to be if they had our resources. However, never over many years have I detected that on their faces. They have an innate pride and contentment many of us lack. Also you wonder what those of a tender age think of these people. For the most part I suspect a tacit sympathy, the two having more in common than you think by reason of a simplicity of spirit and relative confinement: children are under their parents and these folks are unable to leave their limited space.

And so being at home means being in one location as you watch everyone around you rushing off somewhere else. They're headed to work or school and return at evening, a reverse rush. It has a certain appeal from a distance but up close it's a different story as everyone on the proverbial rat-race knows. Once the rush is over, the stage is set from about mid morning to mid afternoon when a special atmosphere prevails, one of calm tinged with a hint of emptiness. You get a glimpse of this as you watch the last school bus does its annoying fits-and-starts at each house. Now the atmosphere is set for the bulk of the day.

Nevertheless, this calm isn't the same as loneliness and for many is an opportunity instead of a hindrance. Those at home who experience it know it's all-pervasive yet subtle enough as to escape immediate attention. The emptiness can bother someone not used to it as when a working person stays home for some reason or other. This is when you realize the temptation to be elsewhere or to do something other than what's at hand is so difficult to relinquish. Yet you have an opportunity to pause and be aware of what lays ahead which consists in some of the most prosaic activities known to modern many, doing errands. One of the first images that catches your attention is the mail man or woman doing his or her familiar thing. On the surface it seems enjoyable, walking around the neighborhood and

enjoying being outdoors while people are off to work, but if you ask one, far from it. Nevertheless, their faithful presence is essential to contributing an air of domesticity.

For working folks the home-body routine is reserved for weekends which for all practical purposes are busier than work days. Because they engage in this for two days only, from their point of view errands are necessary evils detracting from free time which is quite limited. It seems that everyone engages in the same weekend routines: supermarket, cleaner, post office, pharmacy, let alone soccer practice if/when it applies. If it were possible, we'd delegate these errands to someone else...wishful thinking, of course. However, the doing of errands is the most revealing characteristic of what it means to be at home. Doing them during the week and during the weekend are two different animals. They don't even come close.

So let's explore this routine of doing errands. First it's worth mentioning the time before most home-bodies are out, the early morning hours between four and seven when the manly men make their stops at the local convenience store. They are contractors, construction workers and the like who get an early start. Most are dressed the same: work boots, vests, some with a knife and cell phone attached to their large belts and above all else, baseball caps. Many have the logo of their company emblazoned either on front or on back of their shirts or jackets. Just about all go for coffee and above all else, scratch tickets at the check-out counter. God help you if there are even just two ahead in the line. It takes forever as they go through the motions of picking this ticket and then that one, shelling out quite a bit of dough. I wonder if some do this on a daily basis and wouldn't be surprised if the answer is yes. Then the manly men swagger out to their trucks and pickups (obviously) and head off to work. Naturally their trucks have NRA stickers, racks for tools and so forth. Since I write this at the beginning of the 2019 presidential campaign season, more than a few have Vote Trump sticks and the like. By the way, they pause a minute or two in their idling vehicles scratching away their tickets before rumbling (sometimes literally) out.

This atmosphere sets the stage for the older crowd and in its own way is auxiliary to the joys of domestic life. However, it takes place before the time stay-at-homers are doing their thing, for almost never they don't go out in the dark, pre-dawn or the evening. You can see the pleasantness on the faces of convenience store attendants as they engage in small talk with this crew compared with the manly men. Not that the latter are rude...far from it...but there are more of them who have to be processed more quickly. The home-bodies are just as avid buyers of those damn scratch tickets, taking even longer than the manly men as they go through a bewildering amount of choices. Nevertheless, this doesn't distract from the slower pace and quieter atmosphere both within and without the store. The biggest difference is that the customers aren't in a rush as is the case with the manly men, and this

is very palpable. Weekends are in a class by themselves because fewer people are at work and hence is a younger crowd. Quickly you can tell by the clothes they wear which you'd never find on a manly man. As for the time frame when the older folks trundle in, it's approximately is just before eight in the morning.

From the convenience stores you can shift to the other stores, this one coming first and foremost, for signals the beginning of a new day. A favorite spot are those stores with a backroom for playing Keno. I haven't a clue as how this works, but rarely are they empty. If the weather is foul, fewer are out and about. Stop and observe the parking places of such businesses. They're not as crowded as the same time on a weekend. The surrounding streets, similarly not with as much traffic, have a way of enhancing the atmosphere where things are more relaxed. However, the town workers, a version of the manly men are out, checking streets and doing minor repairs. Even the local businesses catering to the daytime crowd aren't as hectic. In sum, the atmosphere may be characterized by a whole bunch of small things going on all at once.

At or around 9 am when the maddening rush hour traffic has subsided and everyone is off at work and school, you may turn on the television before heading out. On most channels you'll find a variety of non-descript programs geared for the stay-at-homers. Should you be waiting in the dentist's office, there they are again, only this time you're unable to escape. Pulling a tooth is more tolerable than being subjected to such torture. And then there's the advertising. For the most part it's geared for elders or those confined to nursing homes, equally non-descript. The same applies to radio programs attempting to fill in time between morning and evening.

A bit later in the day you make your way to the local supermarket, the second most important stop of your routine. Human traffic within the store generally is light and remains so until mid afternoon when people start drifting home from work as well as school. Most folks you encounter are older, retirees and the like along with children too young for school...in other words, grandparents with their grandchildren. People go about their shopping in a rather leisurely way, not rushing from aisle to aisle as the work crowd will do later. Often they stop and chat with friends, not concerned with how long it takes.

As for the most important stop of the day, usually around mid-morning, it is of course, the pharmacy. Time to load up on the daily does of pills to keep one going. Here the delay is longer than waiting for scratch tickets. Often old-timers need the prescriptions to be explained along with some minor paper work. I swear that the pharmacy staff are among the most patient workers around. They take great care making sure their elderly customers understand their prescriptions and never fail to engage in the requisite small talk.

Another enjoyable feature is, despite the perils, foul weather. An old-timer remarked that one of his greatest pleasures is to watch people go to work in the snow. He had done this for over forty years and now sits back and enjoys it with a cup of coffee, even if he must trudge through the snow later in the day. He knows that despite the effort, there's no time clock to punch. Among the most important group of workers are those retirees manning the check-out counters, often grandmothers. They are women earning some extra cash and just as important, using these limited hours to out of the house. They are in a class by themselves, part of the home-body clientele yet part of the work crew. Most have a delightful familiarity with people at the check-out, calling them "dear" or "sweetheart." To be designated as such is a badge of honor. I'd say that at the end of a day, they're small kindnesses are essential to keep you going.

Meanwhile those who at work full time in these familiar places are clearly visible. This group includes people making deliveries, bus drivers and the like, not to mention those manning the stores. While just as busy as the people who have to commute, their work seems preferable. Somehow they know it even if the pay isn't so hot, for they are integral to the whole shebang. A favorite stop is the local post office, a second town hall of sorts. There you're bound to run into more friends and chat with the postal employee on duty. Next stop is the bank where you exchange some more pleasantries. These interactions, while apparently superficial, are far from it. Taken individually they may be considered as such but lump them together at the end of a day, and you have a contentment money can't buy. Much of this is done in a fairly confined area, often walking from one place to another, which is another boon for retirees and stay-at-homers.

The atmosphere you pick up from mid-morning to mid-afternoon is one of less strain or better, people not rushing about. They simply have no reason to run here and there because they're at where they're at. In fact, filling time is part of what these folks are about, a sharp contrast to those at work and school. However, this time of life is no bed of roses. It has taken them the bulk of their lives to get here. Awareness of declining health and death isn't far from their minds. You pick this up in their conversations centered around friend's they've lost and by their close attention to the obituary page. Yet if you ask them if they could be transported back several decades, the answer is a resounding "no." In sum, these people have gained insight into the mysteries of life. They know it, too.

Centering in on this a bit more, the heart of the domestic spirit comes into its own during around noontime, for the stay-at-homers are now in full swing as they about their business. Errands aren't looked upon as a burden but as a spur to get you out and about where you function and socialize at your own pace and schedule. As for socializing, senior centers are quite crowded. Even if you couldn't identify such a place offhand, you can pick them out easily enough. Parked outside is the tell-tale sign of fuddy-duddy looking cars even if

they're new. What makes them such are the preferred boxy-style compared with more streamlined designs. Then later in the day or around mid afternoon or when those dreaded school buses start to prowl the neighborhood for the second time, you feel a nostalgia for what had transpired during the day and look forward to the next one. If it were possible, you'd skip weekends for Monday morning. The pace between the two is very noticeable. All you have to do is go out and experience it. As for looking forward to Monday, the expectation is drawn out even more when, for example, a national holidays rolls around thereby extending the weekend.

With regard to the word "domestic," it implies being at home in the sense of being grounded. That embraces both the physical home and neighborhood. Since those who are out and about are older, their slow pace, even if driving, has a unique way of throwing a blanket over everything. It seems to muffle as well as to put the brakes on any frantic activity that may invade their sacred space. Who can dispute the benefits of that? This overall slower pace affects those who aren't of this age category when, for example, they find themselves at home for a few days. Indeed, they're quick to pick on this domestic atmosphere which goes unnoticed unless they step away from it. In fact, I've heard some middle age folks say they long for retirement so as to enjoy this slower weekday routine instead of rushing here and there.

People bring a different attention to the mid-morning/mid-afternoon hours which they know they have but may not reflection upon. I'd called diffuse awareness. It shouldn't be taken negatively in that people are going about their business mindlessly. Let's call that frame of mind fractured awareness where attention literally is broken into pieces. This implies that once broken...fractured...it can't be put back together. Instead, the people I have in mind who are representative of diffuse awareness are relaxed and take joy in the little things of life, savoring routine encounters as described above. A good place to observe this is the local library, often the center of daytime activity ranging from the very young to old timers along with those who might be considered less fortunate. This is especially true in a small town as I have in mind here. A local library is a combination of church, place to get an Internet connection for those without it and what I'd call unprofessional counseling where people help each other out. The toddlers are downstairs while the elders are upstairs, a clear social separation but one endowed with a harmony you have to experience and wish could extend elsewhere.

Some further reflections with regard to diffuse awareness might be helpful. Throughout life, notably work and juggling responsibilities with it, people are distracted to no end, let alone craving for even a shred of genuine leisure time. With the stay-at-homers the situation is reversed. Some may miss the more frantic pace of work which disguises an inherent loneliness. Also later in life one requires more rest such as taking naps during the

course of a day, now not a luxury but a necessity. Still, one's life can be filled with distractions, but with time, another type of awareness sets in which not necessarily is related to the increasing forgetfulness of older age. One's awareness has become more spread out; in other words, it has become diffused which is part of the normal run of things. Making use of this diffuseness is part of the dynamic involved here. Since older folks aren't able to focus as intensely as they once did, with time and often unconsciously they've moved to a more comprehensive, non-judgmental way of incorporating what comes their way. Such is one benefit reaped from doing errands and the encounters associated with them.

People do errands year round while those at work do the same except for an occasional vacation. Indeed, that's a misnomer because vacations generally are more frantic than work. Summer is the usual time for them. At this time of year the stay-at-homers notice an increase of people in places they frequent and look forward to Labor Day when things get back to normal. Then a few months later before the Christmas season arrives we have November. Traditionally it's the cloudiest month of the year which many people find distressing. However, there's a special charm if you go downtown...a city or small town...and observe what's going on. The overall gloominess is brightened by the rain, the sound of traffic and people going in and out of the various stores. Both the sound of rain enhanced by vehicles and the general cloudiness present an atmosphere you can't replicate anywhere else. As for the old timers, it reminds them of black and white movies, some dating back to pre-World War Two days as well as the 1950s when life was simpler and people conducted business mostly in their neighborhoods. For sure, some old timers are quick to point this out.

Truly one can't help but apply the adjective "domestic" to most activities which are close to where one resides, most likely within walking distance. But then again, who walks nowadays? Usually "domestic" stands in contrast to "foreign." Those going to work may be classified as the latter simply because most people leave their home base. Thus weekdays are divided into two distinct sections, domestic and foreign.

One of the nicest features of going about these domestic activities is an overall sense of peace or better, lack of tension which is natural to the work environment as well as the commute to and from it. However, it doesn't discount personal struggles going on within people, elders included. Many of them may be grappling with long term illnesses and financial problems of which we're not aware. You notice when so-and-so isn't at the post office for extended period, fearful that death has struck. Even that can be mitigated if you focus on your errands. Everyone follows and enjoys a routine which is what this article and the one before it is about, regardless of your state in life. It helps you cope with the

inevitable trials of life. So when you're out and about during a work day, just being among these people makes you glad you're not a part of the hectic world at large.

Carrying on like this sounds attractive, and I know from first-hand experience it can be an inexhaustible source of delight right under our noses. The best part is that it doesn't cost a penny. When doing errands over an extended period of time, you can fall into the same traps as those non-stop activities which working people must endure. However, retirement is the turning point for most folks. The stay-at-home crowd often remarks how in God's name they had held down a job plus doing all the other stuff necessary to keep one's life on track. Now that the two are separated, they can focus on what really counts in life regardless of the burdens of old age.

+