

Wisdom, Leisure, and Choices

Walter G. Moss

The [1964 report](#) that recommended the creation of the National Endowment for the Humanities spoke to the three key words in the title of the present essay: wisdom, leisure, choices. It stated, "Democracy demands wisdom of the average man. Without the exercise of wisdom free institutions and personal liberty are inevitably imperiled. To know the best that has been thought and said in former times can make us wiser than we otherwise might be, and in this respect the humanities [literature, arts, history, religion, and philosophy] are not merely our, but the world's, best hope."

About leisure and choices, it added:

A novel and serious challenge to Americans is posed by the remarkable increase in their leisure time. The forty-hour week and the likelihood of a shorter one, the greater life-expectancy and the earlier ages of retirement, have combined to make the blessing of leisure a source of personal and community concern. 'What shall I do with my spare time' all-too-quickly becomes the question 'Who am I? What shall I make of my life?' When men and women find nothing within themselves but emptiness they turn to trivial and narcotic amusements, and the society of which they are a part becomes socially delinquent and potentially unstable. The humanities are the immemorial answer to man's questioning and to his need for self-expression; they are uniquely equipped to fill the 'abyss of leisure.' "

Six years after this report Alan Toffler's [Future Shock](#) recognized that technology was accelerating changes in people's leisure-time choices. He also wrote about "information overload" and the stress, "increasing malaise," and disorientation that people were already experiencing as a result of it and other technological changes. At the end of his section on such "overload" he concluded, "What consequences this may have for mental health in the techno-societies has yet to be determined." But he predicted that for the remainder of the twentieth century, many people in such societies would "find it increasingly painful to keep up" with change.

In his [A Guide for the Perplexed](#) (1977) E.F. Schumacher, still in the early days of information overload, indicated the difficulty of dealing with the choices of his day and suggested how we might deal with them.

Ortega y Gasset once remarked that "Life is fired at us, point-blank." We cannot say: "Hold it! I am not quite ready. Wait until I have sorted things out." Decisions have to be taken that we are not ready for . . . aims have to be chosen that we cannot see clearly. This is very strange and, on the face of it, quite irrational. Human beings, it seems, are insufficiently "programmed." Not only are they utterly helpless when they are born and remain so for a long time . . . even when fully grown, they do not move and act with the surefootedness of animals. They hesitate, doubt, change their minds, run hither and thither, uncertain not simply of how to get what they want but above all of *what* they want.

Questions like "What should I do?" or "What must I do to be saved?" are strange questions because they relate to ends, not simply to means. No technical answer will do, such as "Tell me precisely what you want and I shall tell you how to get it." The whole

point is that I do not know what I want. Maybe all I want is to be happy. . . . Perhaps someone says: “For happiness you need wisdom” . . . but what is wisdom?

Fast forward to the twenty-first century, and what do we find regarding wisdom, leisure, and choices? In 2005 an [essay](#) by psychologist Barry Schwartz referred to “choice overload” in various areas of our life and provided numerous examples pertaining to our cultural activities, most of which fell into the leisure category. And today, eight years later, there are more leisure choices than ever. There are more materials of all sorts available—data, images, entertainment (including sports)—and more devices and services to access it all— smartphones, e-readers, tablets, app stores, and more.

A 2012 *New York Times* essay, [“The Age of Big Data,”](#) cited research indicating that data was “more than doubling every two years.” Columnist David Brooks recently [wrote](#), “If you asked me to describe the rising philosophy of the day, I’d say it is data-ism.” On June 19, 2013 a *Times* blog featured more than a dozen articles on Big Data including [“Sizing Up Big Data, Broadening Beyond the Internet”](#) and [“New Ways Marketers Are Manipulating Data to Influence You.”](#) We have more TV channels and material on the Internet. Which channel do I watch? What do I record? What should I do on my computer or smart phone? Check my email, text a friend, go on Facebook, play a game, look at art work from some of the world’s great museums, shop on eBay or some other online shopping site, or check out the latest baseball scores? Or do I leave all my media gadgets at home and go to the gym or for a walk in the woods?

How does one decide? And how do we do it wisely? Before Toffler, Dostoevsky understood that too many choices, too much freedom in a sense, can create anxiety. In his “The Grand Inquisitor” chapter in [The Brothers Karamazov](#) he depicted a fictional head of the sixteenth-century Spanish Catholic Inquisition criticizing Jesus, who miraculously had come back to earth, for giving people freedom and for not realizing they wanted happiness not freedom. The Inquisitor insists that “men in their simplicity and their natural unruliness cannot even understand [freedom], which they fear and dread—for nothing has ever been more insupportable for a man and a human society than freedom.” During World War II Erich Fromm, a German Jewish immigrant to the United States, tried to explain the appeal of Nazism and other totalitarian beliefs in his book [Escape from Freedom](#). In a new preface to a 1965 printing he wrote that “modern man still is anxious and tempted to surrender his freedom to dictators of all kinds, or to lose it by transforming himself into a small cog in the machine, well fed, and well clothed, yet not a free man but an automaton.”

But like it or not, most of us have at least some leisure choices to make every day. Granted, the amount of free time we have can vary widely. Married couples with two full-time jobs and young children might think they have little leisure time, but may have at least an hour to themselves at night after the children go to sleep—or at least to their rooms. Conversely, retirees may have ample free hours. So, the question remains, “How do we spend the free time, little or much, that we do have?” And how can we decide wisely?

Wisdom

To begin with, we should note that making wise decisions extends far beyond the realm of leisure. In [another essay](#) I have dealt with the importance of wisdom as it relates to choosing a profession and a spouse or life partner. And an excellent book, *Practical Wisdom* (reviewed [here](#)) speaks to the importance of applying wisdom in our work or profession, whether it be as a custodian, doctor, lawyer, teacher, banker, or some other occupation. Schumacher also wrote insightfully about wisdom and work, not only in his book mentioned above but also in two others: *Small Is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered* (1973) and *Good Work* (1979).¹ But here we shall concentrate on it as it relates to leisure. Before zeroing in on leisure, however, we must first define wisdom and indicate how it helps us decide on how best to apportion our time between work and leisure.

The Oxford English Dictionary (2d ed., 1989) defines wisdom as “the capacity for judging rightly in matters relating to life and conduct; soundness of judgment in the choice of means and ends.” It also implies having good values such as love, compassion, empathy, tolerance, and respect for truth, goodness, and beauty, as well as the ability to prioritize these values wisely (see [here](#) for more on wisdom values). And it involves acting and feeling as well as thinking. Psychologist Robert Sternberg [has written](#): “People are wise to the extent that they use their intelligence to seek a common good. They do so by balancing, in their courses of action, their own interests with those of others and those of larger entities, like their school, their community, their country, even God.” In the same article Sternberg has argued that “smart and well educated people” are often unwise because of four fallacies, which he labels the egocentrism, omniscience, omnipotence, and invulnerability fallacies. All four are tied up with too big an ego and with overestimating one’s own and powers.

Striking the right balance is crucial in deciding how to best allocate our time. On Sundays, for example, a young college professor might have to choose between professional duties, like preparing lectures or doing research work, or a family outing. Articles and books about the agonizing choices that ambitious professional women have to make on dividing their time wisely between their careers and family are plentiful (see, e.g., [here](#) and [here](#)). After one is retired, there are more choices to be made, especially since 40 hours or so a week are no longer spent working at a paying job. Do I do some volunteer work, take up a new hobby, do more work around the house, play more golf, spend more time with the grandkids? Or maybe, I choose to do all these things. But then in what proportions?

If the way to begin deciding on how best to apportion our time is by applying wisdom to our choices, then some prioritizing of our values is necessary. In his work [The Wisdom of Life](#), the nineteenth philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer wrote that “the wise man will, above all, strive after freedom from pain and annoyance, quiet and leisure, consequently a tranquil, modest life, with as few encounters as may be; and so, after a little experience of his so-called fellowmen, he will elect to live in retirement, or even, if he is a man of great intellect, in solitude. For the more a man has in himself, the less he

will want from other people, —the less, indeed, other people can be to him. This is why a high degree of intellect tends to make a man unsocial.”

Schopenhauer even thought that his countryman Goethe, who many thought one of the wisest men of his day, had displayed “a great piece of folly” by giving up his “quiet, leisure and independence for splendor, rank, pomp, titles and honor.” Schopenhauer was apparently thinking of the great writer’s work as chief advisor to the Duke of Saxe-Weimar-Eisenach and the many offices he held in the Weimar government, including President of the Treasury and Overseer of the Mines. For almost a decade he served on the duke’s small Privy Council, which met about 600 times and averaged about 30 agenda items for each meeting. In 1782 Emperor Joseph II conferred knighthood on him.

But Schopenhauer’s prescription for leading a wise life reflect his values and indicates, at least in his wisdom essay, that he does not place love or public service like that Goethe performed, very high among them. Contrast his view of the first value with that of another philosopher, his contemporary Søren Kierkegaard, who emphasized the importance of love for exercising true wisdom in his *Works of Love* (1847).

Or take the example of Dorothy Day, who devoted most of her life to helping the poor. She greatly valued literature, music (especially opera), and nature, and had once been a friend of playwright Eugene O’Neill. One of her biographers wrote that “she was profoundly attentive to beauty and managed to find it in places where it was often overlooked.”² But love was an even more important value to her. In a 1958 letter she wrote: “If we could only learn that the only important thing is love, and that we will be judged on love—to keep on loving, and showing that love, and expressing that love, over and over, whether we feel it or not, seventy times seven, to mothers-in-law, to husbands, to children—and to be oblivious of insult, or hurt, or injury—not to see them, not to hear them. . . . not judge, not do anything, but love, love, love.” Because she felt this way, she went contrary to Schopenhauer’s wisdom advice to “strive after freedom from pain and annoyance, quiet and leisure, consequently a tranquil, modest life, with as few encounters as may be”—she did, however, live modestly, embracing voluntary poverty. But she also led the life of an activist, running the Catholic Worker movement, overseeing and writing for its paper, opening and directing hospitality houses for the poor, and constantly campaigning and protesting for her pacifist views. All of this left little time for the leisure so valued by Schopenhauer.

Who is wiser, one who devotes most of her/his time to helping the poor or one who retires, as Schopenhauer recommends, to a life of quiet and leisure? In fairness to the philosopher, he did believe that one could use one’s leisure to achieve “what no other could achieve, by producing some work which contributes to the general good, and redounds to the honor of humanity at large.” The question is further complicated if we realize that drawing a boundary line between a philosopher’s work and leisure is no easy task.

Nevertheless, I would argue that one could not go wrong in placing love at the top of one's values and letting it be the chief criteria for determining the allocation of our time. Acting in this manner would also be in keeping with Sternberg's wisdom advice of using our "intelligence to seek a common good," of balancing our "own interests with those of others." Thus in deciding the proper balance between work and leisure the chief question we might ask ourselves would be what course of action would be the most loving, would contribute most to the common good.

Before diving deeper into the whole subject of leisure and wisdom, however, one more observation is necessary. In his wisdom advice, Schopenhauer pays insufficient attention to individual personality differences and talents. In his [Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?](#) Harold Bloom, one of America's leading literary critics, wrote that "Christians who believe, Muslims who submit, Jews who trust—all in or to God's will—have their own criteria for wisdom, yet each needs to realize those norms individually if the words of God are to enlighten or comfort. Secularists take on a different kind of responsibility, and their turn to wisdom literature sometimes is considerably more wistful or anguished, depending on temperament." And not only religious differences, but countless other variances affect our own individual paths to wisdom and the choices each one of makes in order to live the wisest life possible. But we shall explore individuality more specifically as we examine our leisure choices.

Leisure

Like wisdom, leisure can be defined in different ways. An Oxford dictionary [defines](#) it as "time when one is not working or occupied; free time." Philosopher Joseph Pieper in his [Leisure: The Basis of Culture](#) provides a narrower definition:

Leisure, it must be clearly understood, is a mental and spiritual attitude—it is not simply the result of external factors, it is not the inevitable result of spare time, a holiday, a weekend or a vacation. It is, in the first place, an attitude of mind, a condition of the soul, and as such utterly contrary to the idea of "worker" in each and every one of the three aspects under which it was analyzed: work as activity, as toil, as social function.

Compared with the exclusive ideal of work as activity, leisure implies (in the first place) an attitude of non-activity, of inward calm, of silence; it means not being "busy," but letting things happen.

Here, however, we shall use the term more as defined in the Oxford way. Thus, it does *not* have to imply "an attitude of non-activity" or "inward calm," but can include playing all sorts of intense games like tennis or watching a baseball or football game in which we hope fervently that our favorite team wins. But we will not use leisure to include many household chores or family obligations, although they are separate from our paid work. In keeping with Oxford terms, we are "occupied" when doing them, not exercising "free time." Sometimes, however, there is a thin line between work and leisure. If we enjoy gardening a great deal, is it work or a leisure activity? How about going to a shopping mall? In deciding how to classify such activities, Pieper's insight about attitude is important. *How* we approach a particular activity, in what spirit and mindset, might help to determine whether it is leisure or not.

Our main concern here, however, is what are our choices in our “free time” and how do we best decide among them. Before the twentieth century, people usually spent most of the leisure they had with family or friends. They walked; went boating; visited each other; talked; went to taverns; played music, sports, and games of chance; sang and danced; and attended available entertainment such as concerts, vaudeville, circuses, or puppet shows. Those who were literate spent some time reading papers, magazines, or books. Although those choices are still available, they have to compete with all the new ones modern technology has made available.

Four Assumptions

In choosing what to do with our leisure, I will proceed with four assumptions. First, adults have a right to engage in any leisure activities they wish, as long as they’re legal, though parents do have responsibility for supervising their non-adult children’s pastimes. Second, deciding what is best of two activities is not completely subjective. Some free time activities *are* better than others. Listening to a beautiful piece of music or walking along a beach at sunset, for example, is a better activity than watching an arranged fight between two pit bulls or (in Shakespeare’s time) [bear baiting](#). Third, however, individuality or subjectivity does matter. In an objective sense, viewing Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* might be a better leisure choice than watching a *Seinfeld* rerun on TV, but individual circumstances matter. How old is the viewer? How educated? How much time does he/she have? How much in need of some laughs? Fourth, it is better to attempt to select our leisure activities wisely than to do so based on whims, inclinations, or just following the example of others around us. It is better to act based on a core of inner values than to be a conformist like the poet Auden’s [“Unknown Citizen”](#) (1939).

And our Social Psychology workers found
That he was popular with his mates and liked a drink.
The Press are convinced that he bought a paper every day
And that his reactions to advertisements were normal in every way.
.....
[He] had everything necessary to the Modern Man,
A phonograph, a radio, a car and a frigidaire.
Our researchers into Public Opinion are content
That he held the proper opinions for the time of year

As a corollary to choosing wisely, activities that contribute to increasing our wisdom have special value.

Television and Digital Media

In helping us decide which activities to pursue, there is no shortage of advice. For over a half century, various commentators have told us not to spend too much time in front of the TV.

In 1961, the chairman of the U.S Federal Communication Commission (FCC), Newton Minow said:

But when television is bad, nothing is worse. I invite you to sit down in front of your television set when your station goes on the air and stay there without a book, magazine, newspaper, profit-and-loss sheet or rating book to distract you—and keep your eyes glued to that set until the station signs off. I can assure you that you will observe a vast wasteland.

You will see a procession of game shows, violence, audience participation shows, formula comedies about totally unbelievable families, blood and thunder, mayhem, violence, sadism, murder, western bad men, western good men, private eyes, gangsters, more violence and cartoons. And, endlessly, commercials—many screaming, cajoling and offending. And most of all, boredom.³

In another speech 30 years later, while acknowledging some positive developments, he still believed that U. S. television had in general not served the public interest well. He cited one source that stated by age 18, a U.S. child would have seen 25,000 murders on TV, and he quoted Bob Keeshan, TV's Captain Kangaroo, as saying that in the USA “television is not a tool for nurturing. It is a tool for selling.”⁴

In 1985 Neil Postman warned us that we were, thanks mainly to television, [Amusing Ourselves to Death](#), that “our politics, religion, news, athletics, education, and commerce have been transformed into congenial adjuncts of show business,” and that Las Vegas had become “a metaphor of our national character and aspiration.” (See [here](#) for more on Las Vegas and U.S. culture.) In 1990, Bill McKibben did something like Minow had suggested. As reported in his [The Age of Missing Information](#), he “collected on videotape nearly every minute of television that came across the enormous Fairfax [Va.] cable system from one morning to the next, and then watched it all,” taking him more than a thousand hours. He contrasted what that day of TV offered compared to a day he spent “camped on a mountaintop by a small pond,” where he “awoke, took a day hike up a neighboring peak, returned for a swim, made supper, and watched the stars” until he fell asleep. He clearly thought the day he spent amidst nature superior to a day of TV offerings.

One of the reasons he thought his camping day was more worthwhile was it brought him more in touch with reality and utilized more of his senses. The same year that his book appeared, another one, the novel [Immortality](#), by Milan Kundera, was first published. In it he wrote that “for contemporary man reality is a continent visited less and less often.” Reality was being replaced by what he called imagology, the pseudo reality created by TV and image makers: “advertising agencies; political campaign managers; designers who devise the shape of everything from cars to gym equipment; fashion stylists; barbers; show-business stars dictating the norms of physical beauty that all branches of imagology obey.” He added that “imagology is stronger than reality, which has anyway long ceased to be what it was for my grandmother, who lived in a Moravian village and still knew everything through her own experience: how bread is baked, how a house is built, how a pig is slaughtered and the meat smoked, what quilts

are made of, what the priest and the schoolteacher think about the world; she met the whole village every day.”

In 2000, the philosopher Thomas Langan wrote along similar lines about the world of “virtual reality” we were increasingly creating on TV and other media. He stated that “the present flight into virtual reality also distracts masses of people from more earthy realities and hence increases still further the component of unproductive fantasy in our society.”⁵

By 2012, according to a [Nielsen report](#), the average American was watching almost five hours of video each day, 98 percent of which was on a TV set, as opposed to other devices like smart phones.

In his [The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains](#), Nicholas Carr cites a 2009 report that “most Americans, no matter what their age, spend at least eight and a half hours a day looking at a television, a computer monitor, or the screen of their mobile phone. Frequently, they use two or even all three of the devices simultaneously.” In an “Afterword to the Paperback Edition,” written in May of 2011, he wrote: “In the months since I completed *The Shallows*, Facebook membership has doubled from 300 million to 600 million; the number of text messages processed every month by the typical American teen has jumped from 2,300 to 3,300.” He bemoans the decline in reading print publications including books and states that “young adults between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-four, who are among the most avid Net users, were reading printed works for a total of just forty-nine minutes a week in 2008.”

Like Marshall McLuhan and Neil Postman decades ago, Carr is primarily concerned with what a medium is doing to our thought process. But while his predecessors were mainly concerned with TV’s affects, he focuses on those of the Internet: “What the Net seems to be doing is chipping away my capacity for concentration and contemplation. . . . When I mention my troubles with reading to friends, many say they’re suffering from similar afflictions. The more you use the Web, the more you have to fight to stay focused on long pieces of writing. . . . Calm, focused, undistracted, the linear mind is being pushed aside by a new kind of mind that wants and needs . . . information in short, disjointed, often overlapping bursts—the faster, the better.”

While recognizing that critics raise important questions about the negative effects of both the content and mediums of TV and the Internet, there is also much to say in their defense. Carr himself recognizes all the ways that he as a writer is indebted to the Internet. And few would deny that for those who can afford cable, especially premium cable where ads will not disrupt the continuity of a program or film, many fine programs are available including science, nature, and history programming, as well as films. The streaming or rental of films from companies like Netflix or connecting our computers to our TVs offer additional ways to view materials. Later in this essay, we shall address the subject of films and sports, both offered in abundance on TV, but it is appropriate here to offer just a few words in defense of high quality sitcoms like *Mash*, *Seinfeld*, and *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. After a day at work, many people need some relaxation afterwards.

Wisdom also values humor and laughter (see, e.g., [here](#)), and half-hour sitcoms like the three mentioned here offered (and sometimes continue to offer as reruns) healthy doses of such medicine. In addition, TV dramas such as *The Sopranos* offer not only good entertainment but insights into some complexities of human life.

Increased Exposure to Advertising

By the end of the twentieth century, it was estimated that the average person in the USA was bombarded by 1 million commercials by age twenty. So ubiquitous have ads become on TV, the Internet, and elsewhere that many of us naively believe we just ignore them all. But if this is so, companies like those who spent about \$3.8 million for a 30-second ad during the 2013 Super Bowl were foolish, which [The Wall Street Journal](#) insists they were not.

Part of the mental cost of watching TV and surfing the Internet, as opposed for example to reading a book or taking a nature hike, is more exposure to ads. It is difficult to see how such increased exposure can be wise unless greatly mitigated and outweighed by greater goods that TV and the Net might offer. Mitigating our exposure can be accomplished by muting commercials, recording programs and then fast-forwarding through ads (my preferred method of watching many sporting events), watching cable or PBS channels that are ad free (unless you count promos for future programming or thanks to sponsors as ads), and skipping whatever ads can be skipped on the Internet. Since I have written [elsewhere](#) on how advertising often violates higher wisdom values like truth and beauty, I will only add here that wisdom suggests that in choosing between various leisure activities, we consider to what extent they expose us to a bombardment of ads.

Enjoying Nature

In McKibben's *The Age of Missing Information*, he clearly makes the case for preferring time spent amidst nature versus being plunked down in front of a TV. Glorifying what nature has to offer has a long tradition of which the Romantic poets, Emerson, Thoreau, and John Muir are a part. Consider, for example, Wordsworth's "The Tables Turned."

Up! up! my Friend, and quit your books;
Or surely you'll grow double:
Up! up! my Friend, and clear your looks;
Why all this toil and trouble?

The sun above the mountain's head,
A freshening lustre mellow
Through all the long green fields has spread,
His first sweet evening yellow.

Books! 'tis a dull and endless strife:
Come, hear the woodland linnet,
How sweet his music! on my life,
There's more of wisdom in it.

And hark! how blithe the throstle sings!
He, too, is no mean preacher:
Come forth into the light of things,
Let Nature be your teacher.

She has a world of ready wealth,
Our minds and hearts to bless—
Spontaneous wisdom breathed by health,
Truth breathed by cheerfulness.

One impulse from a vernal wood
May teach you more of man,
Of moral evil and of good,
Than all the sages can.

Sweet is the lore which Nature brings;
Our meddling intellect
Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things:—
We murder to dissect.

Enough of Science and of Art;
Close up those barren leaves;
Come forth, and bring with you a heart
That watches and receives.

If the poet were living today, he probably would have probably started his poem, “Up! up! my Friend, and quit all your electronic devices”—but, of course, rendering the thought more poetically.

In his essay “[Nature](#)” Emerson devoted a section to beauty, the enjoyment of which is an important wisdom value. He wrote: “The world thus exists to the soul to satisfy the desire of beauty. This element I call an ultimate end. No reason can be asked or given why the soul seeks beauty. Beauty, in its largest and profoundest sense, is one expression for the universe. God is the all-fair. Truth, and goodness, and beauty, are but different faces of the same All. But beauty in nature is not ultimate. It is the herald of inward and eternal beauty, and is not alone a solid and satisfactory good.”

Thoreau is best known for *Walden*, describing his retreat to nature, which *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* [states](#) “has been admired by a larger world audience than any other book written by an American author.” This same entry also observes that “for Thoreau, it was the work of a lifetime to cultivate one's receptivity to the beauty of the universe. Believing that ‘the perception of beauty is a moral test’ (*Journal*, 6/21/52), Thoreau frequently chastises himself or humanity in general for failing in this respect. ‘How much of beauty—of color, as well as form—on which our eyes daily rest goes unperceived by us,’ he laments (*Journal*, 8/1/60).”

Influenced by both Emerson and Thoreau, naturalist John Muir (1838-1914), [founder of the Sierra Club](#) and advocate for safeguarding and establishing more National Parks, wrote in 1908:

For everybody needs beauty as well as bread, places to play in and pray in, where Nature may heal and cheer and give strength to body and soul. This natural beauty-hunger is displayed in poor folks' window-gardens made up of a few geranium slips in broken cups, as well as in the costly lily gardens of the rich, the thousands of spacious city parks and botanical gardens, and in our magnificent National parks—the Yellowstone, Yosemite, Sequoia, etc.—Nature's own wonderlands, the admiration and joy of the world. Nevertheless, like everything else worth while, however sacred and precious and well-guarded, they have always been subject to attack, mostly by despoiling gainseekers,—mischief-makers of every degree from Satan to supervisors, lumbermen, cattlemen, farmers, etc., eagerly trying to make everything dollarable.

In writing about beauty in nature, Emerson indicates that it has a transcendental value. His contemporary Schopenhauer also emphasized the importance of achieving transcendence by various means including the perception of beauty, whether directly in nature or through literature, art, or music. Such perception can help us achieve, in the [words](#) of psychologist Abraham Maslow, “transcendence of ego, self, selfishness, ego-centering . . . a kind of Taoistic attitude. The phrase ‘being in harmony with nature’ implies this ability to yield.” If Sternberg is correct (see above) that overcoming egoism is essential for achieving wisdom, then becoming more in tune with nature by realizing our humble place within it is a vital necessity.

Another advantage that enjoying nature brings is that it is often combined with exercise, such as when hiking or walking along a beach, as opposed to sitting in front of a TV or computer screen. Although one can ride a stationary bike or engage in some other type of workout while viewing a TV program, exercise less commonly occurs in front of a television than amidst nature.

Exercise, Sports, and Play

A half century or so ago, one rarely saw anyone running in their neighborhood streets. Today it is common. Certainly, we are now much more aware of the value of exercise for health than we were in the past. In deciding how to mix our leisure activities, wisdom would seem to dictate mixing in ample time for exercise. Not only does it contribute to our physical health, but numerous studies indicate it is also conducive to mental health. Too much time spent sitting in front of screens of whatever type not only wreaks havoc on our bodies, but can deprive our minds of the refreshing pauses and stimulation that exercise seems to provide them.

As indicated early in this essay, any consideration of how best to apply wisdom to apportioning leisure activities must factor in subjective factors. In my own case, I have always found ample time for playing sports, mainly basketball and tennis in my younger and middle years and golf in my more senior years. As a student and then history professor who spent much time sitting while researching and writing, I found that playing such sports offered a welcome change and contrast. Now in retirement, but still reading and writing much of the time, golf with my friends twice a week (we walk the 18 holes)

still offers not only exercise but social interaction and much more. Of course, a great deal depends on how one approaches any sport. But if played with a healthy mindset, sports can be part of a wise mix of leisure activities (see [here](#) for more reflections on wisdom and golf). The social aspect of golf also applies to playing many other sports and games such as cards, where the social interaction with others is an important benefit.

The Dutch historian Johan Huizinga (1872-1945) in his [*Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*](#) wrote insightfully on the nature of play. “Into an imperfect world and into the confusion of life it brings a temporary, a limited perfection. Play demands order absolute and supreme. The least deviation from it ‘spoils the game,’ robs it of its character and makes it worthless. . . . Play has a tendency to be beautiful. . . . The words we use to denote the elements of play belong for the most part to aesthetics, terms with which we try to describe the effects of beauty: tension, poise, balance, contrast, variation, solution, resolution, etc. Play casts a spell over us; it is ‘enchancing,’ ‘captivating.’ It is invested with the noblest qualities we are capable of perceiving in things: rhythm and harmony.”

But Huizinga believed already in his day that “with the increasing systematization and regimentation of sport, something of the pure play-quality is inevitably lost. . . . The spirit of the professional is no longer the true play-spirit; it is lacking in spontaneity and carelessness.” His words suggest we should be careful about identifying today’s professional sports too closely with *play*. And watching sports, as most of us do, via television is a different sort of pastime than Huizinga’s *playing*. Viewing sports can be done without any exercise or athletic skills, and one is usually bombarded with commercials as one sits there trying to enjoy a game or contest. A year ago consumer activist Ralph Nader [protested](#) against all the ads that one radio station carried when it broadcast New York Yankee baseball games. He cited, for example, “ads that sponsored the pitching matchup (Chock Full o’ Nuts), pitch count (5-hour Energy), rally moment of the game (Rally BMW), game-time temperature (Peerless Boilers), national anthem (Mutual of America Life Insurance), call to the bullpen (Honda), and 15th out of the game (Geico).” Such ads have also become more common and numerous on TV. Of the major golf tournaments, I enjoy watching the Masters the most, partly because they feature fewer ads.

There is no doubt that professional athletes can and often do demonstrate a special kind of beauty. And fans share a certain sense of community that is worthwhile. No one has argued more thoroughly regarding the beauty and value of watching sports than philosopher Michael Novak in his [*The Joy of Sports*](#): “God is a sports fan. Certainly He is, if He likes to see humans straining to their utmost to be the best He made them, making moments of imperishable beauty. Sports have to be among His glories. I do not pretend to speak for Him but, looking everywhere for signs, I am often reminded of Him, not least by deeds of excellence and beauty” (from the Preface of the 1993 revised edition).

Although his zeal seems excessive to me, he helps us to understand the broad appeal of sports to so many fans across the country. The following quotes illustrate both his enthusiasm and why I think he goes too far.

What I had just seen [a TV baseball game] was somehow more important than my other work, was deeper in my being than most of what I did, spoke to me of beauty, excellence, imagination, and animal vitality— was *true* in a way few things in life are true. My love for sports was deeper than any theory that I had. The reality is better than its intellectual defense. . . .

The basic reality of all human life is play, games, sport; these are the realities from which the basic metaphors for all that is important in the rest of life are drawn. Work, politics, and history are the illusory, misleading, false world. *Being, beauty, truth, excellence, transcendence*—these words, grown in the soil of play, wither in the sand of work. Art, prayer, worship, love, civilization: these thrive in the field of play. Play belongs to the Kingdom of Ends, work to the Kingdom of Means. Barbarians play in order to work; the civilized work in order to play. . . .

The severe Puritan bias of America leads us to undervalue sports. . . .

Sports are religious in the sense that they are organized institutions, disciplines, and liturgies; and also in the sense that they teach religious qualities of heart and soul. . . .

Sports are our chief civilizing agent. Sports are our most universal art form. Sports tutor us in the basic lived experiences of the humanist tradition. . . .

Sports, in a word, are a form of godliness. . . .

Sports belong in the category of religion. . . .

Sports constitute the primary lived world of the vast majority of Americans. . . .

Sports are the high point of civilization—along with the arts, but more powerfully than the arts, which are special in taste and execution and appeal. . . .

I have never met a person who disliked sports, or who absented himself or herself entirely from them, who did not at the same time seem to me deficient in humanity. . . . Such persons seem to me a danger to civilization. . . .

The victories of sport are ritual triumphs of grace, agility, perfection, and beauty over death. . . .

Sports are at their heart a spiritual activity, a natural religion, a tribute to grace, beauty, and excellence.⁶

When Novak states “What the person of wisdom needs to derive from every sphere of life is its inherent beauty, attraction, power, force,” he writes wisely. As Sternberg has written, however, wisdom also requires balance and the reduction of egoism. And I fear that Novak does not strike the proper balance regarding sports. For example, he admits that “next New Year’s Day, again, I will watch three football games” and “I find I cannot bear to have someone talk to me when I am concentrating on a [football] game” and when his nine-year-old asked him a reasonable question he would “hiss him into silence.”⁷

Nor does he speak adequately to the ego dangers involved in being a sports fan. I am often struck by images of sports fans extending a finger and shouting "We're number one!" If you live in Miami and the Heat have just won the NBA championship, LeBron James and his teammates may legitimately claim to be the best team in basketball, but if you believe that the Heat victory somehow elevates your own worthwhileness just because you are a Miami fan, you have an ego problem.

I write this criticism not as someone who is innocent of such feelings. I have been a Cincinnati Reds fan since childhood, a Hoya basketball fan ever since my graduate school days at Georgetown, and even a Dallas Cowboy fan when Roger Staubach, who attended the same Cincinnati high school as I did, was the team's quarterback. And I am sure there were moments when I thought Pete Rose, Patrick Ewing, and Staubach performed heroically and somehow ennobled my own existence.

Like Novak, I have often been upset when my team loses a game. I remember a woman once telling me how the day after a cross-town football game her husband ripped a paper up while reading about his team's loss the day before. But whereas Novak finds little fault with investing such emotion in sports, I think for fans, it is unbalanced, whether demonstrated by myself or someone else.

Novak is correct that much beauty can be viewed in watching sports, but *how*, in what spirit, we watch and how often are crucial in determining how wise such viewing is. My own opinion is that when our children were small watching back-to-back Sunday football games was not as wise as spending at least some of that time outdoors with them.

The Arts and Humanities: Literature, Drama, Film, History, Music, Art, Philosophy, and Religion

Just as a distinction exists between playing sports and viewing them, a similar one exists between writing, playing music, or painting as opposed to reading, listening, or viewing literature, music, or art. In the first set of activities we are more creative, and creativity is highly valued by wise people. Writing a poem, playing the piano or guitar, painting a picture can be very enjoyable and transcending. My mother played the piano, and not only did it give pleasure to her but also to her family. Some of my happiest childhood memories were of her playing and relatives gathered around singing. One of my friends has taken up painting since his retirement and spends many happy hours at his new hobby.

When I think of what people did in the evenings before TV, one of the first images that comes to mind is people standing around a piano singing. To the extent that we do it less today than when I was a young child, I think something valuable has been lost.

Considering the humanities brings us back to the 1964 report mentioned at the beginning of this essay and its contention that they "are uniquely equipped to fill the 'abyss of leisure.'" In Bloom's *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?* (see above) his answer to where seems to be among the writings of various writers and philosophers of the past

and in religious works. Schumacher believed similarly but took a broader approach regarding religion and philosophy, including that of the East as well as the West. As for wise writers, he emphasized primarily pre-modern ones like Dante and Shakespeare, though he also had a great appreciation of Goethe.

Since I have often written on wisdom and literature and specifically on the wisdom of various writers (e.g., Anton Chekhov, Carl Sandburg, W. H. Auden, and Edith Pearlman), various literary works (e.g., *Les Misérables*, *Anna Karenina*, *The Dream of the Celt*), and the pleasures literature has given wise people (e.g., Dorothy Day), I will simply refer interested readers to a [list](#) containing links to such essays and provide here a very brief summary.

Let's start with fiction. In reading it we vicariously *experience* what the characters undergo, and by doing so we can become wiser. Some characters, such as Pierre Bezukhov in *War and Peace*, Konstantin Levin in *Anna Karenina*, and Wilhelm Meister in Goethe's two novels featuring him, seek for answers to life's mysteries, and we can learn by their trials, errors, and discoveries.

Fiction is also a wonderful means of helping us transcend our cultural and temporal limitations. Growing up in the 1940s and 1950s amidst a consumer culture in which advertising was increasing its sway, literature offered me and others an alternate cultural vision. In 1950, Henry Steele Commager, one of America's most prominent historians, wrote: "Who, in the half century from [Presidents] Cleveland to Franklin Roosevelt, celebrated business enterprise or the acquisitive society . . . ? Almost all the major writers were critical of those standards or contemptuous of them. . . . Most authors portrayed an economic system disorderly and ruthless, wasteful and inhuman, unjust alike to workingmen, investors, and consumers, politically corrupt and morally corrupting." These writers, especially the novelists, "exposed the inequities of business, romanticized labor, lamented the slums, and denounced corruption." The literature of the 1920s, reflected "aversion to Mammon, . . . distaste for the standards of the market place and the country club," and "hatred of vulgarity." Writings of the 1930s, after the Depression had struck, "pulsed with anger and pity—anger against an economy that wasted the resources, paralyzed the energies, and corrupted the spirits of the people, pity for the victims of that economy." Even in what remained of the first half century, even with victory in World War II, very few novelists revised "the judgment which had been passed on the acquisitive society. . . . The novelists remained irreconcilable."⁸ In the 1950s novelists such as J. D. Salinger and Jack Kerouac continued this questioning rebellious tradition, and the 1960s introduced the whole counter-cultural challenge.

To help students understand what it might have been like to be an African victim of Western imperialism around 1900, I used to have them read the novel *Things Fall Apart* (1959), by Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe. To give them some idea of what it meant to live in Russian revolutionary times, I chose Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago*. John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) helped more affluent Americans empathize with poor migrants from Oklahoma. Ralph Ellison's *The Invisible Man* (1952) aided whites to better understand what it was like to be black when segregation and

widespread discrimination were still prevalent. If you're a man, reading the fiction of writers such as Doris Lessing, Alice Munro, Marge Piercy, and Edith Pearlman can give you better insight into women.

Reading or listening to poetry can also help us become wiser and provide great enjoyment and other benefits. It can simultaneously delight the ear, the imaginative eye, and the mind, while also appealing to our sense of mystery and awe. In his "A Defence of Poetry" Shelley wrote that "a great poem is a fountain forever overflowing with the waters of wisdom and delight," and that a poet "is the author to others of the highest wisdom, pleasure, virtue, and glory." And Robert Frost stated that a poem "begins in delight and ends in wisdom."⁹ More than one scholar, has declared Shakespeare to be the wisest of the English writers (see, e.g., [here](#) on his wisdom), and he was, of course, both a poet and a dramatist. Emerson in an essay on "Shakespeare, or the Poet" [wrote](#) that he dealt with "questions which knock for answer at every heart,—on life and death, on love, on wealth and poverty, on the prizes of life and the ways whereby we come at them; on the characters of men, and the influences, occult and open, which affect their fortunes." Like Tolstoy writing about death in his novella *The Death of Ivan Ilych* and like much great literature, whatever the genre, what Shakespeare has to say about such subjects as death or love is often timeless.

And poetry often offers us wisdom and beauty in its tersest forms. Frost's *complete* poem, "The Span of Life" consists of two lines: "The old dog barks backwards without getting up. / I can remember when he was a pup." These simple lines convey much, especially to those of us who have watched frisky puppies grow into arthritic old dogs that eventually had to be put to "sleep." To those of us who love the beauties of nature, but fear what we humans are doing to it, Gerald Manley Hopkins's lines from "[God's Grandeur](#)" still resonate with us.

Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;

And in this "Information Age" poet T. S. Eliot's 1930's brief lines from "The Rock" seem more pertinent than ever: "Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? / Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?"

For over a half century, reading and rereading some of my favorite poets (e.g. Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Pushkin, Yeats, Sandburg, and Auden) has provided me with many moments of beauty and transcendence. Sandburg's leading biographer wrote that "for Sandburg, poetry was the supreme myth, which enables human beings to endure reality, to survive it, even to transcend it."¹⁰ Watching sports might offer more drama and excitement, and even some beauty, but not as many moments of sublimity, at least for me, as reading my favorite poems.

About other forms of literature—biography, autobiography, essays, drama, even some history—much could be said, but suffice it to say here that they can also help us transcend cultural limits, make us wiser, and provide countless hours of enjoyment. Like the heroes of novels such as Jean Valjean in *Les Misérables*, the subjects of biographies and autobiographies can offer us heroic examples of noble behavior, even role models of a sort. About drama, I have written in some detail about the plays of Chekhov and about what Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* can teach young people (see [here](#) and [here](#)). Films and some TV shows are closely related to drama and can also offer high-quality ways to fill leisure hours—see [links](#) to my reflections on Russian-made films, as well as on *The Last Station*, Spielberg's *War Horse*, *Les Misérables*, and *Anna Karenina*, and TV dramas such as *Borgen*.

I have known many people who love to read history during their free time. The number of Civil War buffs alone in this country is certainly high, including many who visit our nation's battlefields. And we can benefit in many ways from reading history (see [here](#) and [here](#) on its importance).

Appreciating music has given countless people pleasure and moments of transcendence. The French philosopher and dramatist Gabriel Marcel (1889-1973) believed that music, especially classical music, and, to a lesser extent, poetry can help us transcend our limited egos and temporal conditions and put us in touch with the eternal. To Marcel music was one of humans great means of experiencing the mystery and awe that transcends everyday existence.

What happiness music can provide was best demonstrated to me by a colleague who lived the final years of his life a quadriplegic after a terrible automobile accident. I had already witnessed his love for classical music before his accident when I travelled with him and students in Europe and attended concerts and operas. But after his accident, his great solace in addition to his family was listening to the likes of Mozart and Beethoven.

Some of the happiest and wisest people I have known or studied were great appreciators of music. Two that have already been mentioned were Dorothy Day and Carl Sandburg. In addition to being primarily a poet and multi-volume biographer of Abraham Lincoln, the latter was an early collector of American folk songs, which appeared in his *The American Songbag* (1927) and *The New American Songbag* (1950), and which he often sang as he toured the country with a guitar. His friend Illinois Governor and Democratic presidential candidate in 1952 and 1956 Adlai Stevenson once recalled, "Among my most pleasant recollections are parties in Chicago in the twenties and thirties where I listened to him [Sandburg] sing from his songbag to the inimitable accompaniment of his guitar, and happy evenings with him . . . where anecdotes, Lincoln and music took us far into the night."

From a long novel that he wrote, *Remembrance Rock* (1948), Sandburg liked to quote a few sentences written by a wise judge to his grandson: "You may become the witnesses

of the finest and brightest era known to mankind. You shall have music, the nations over the globe shall have music, music instead of murder. It is possible. That is my hope and prayer—for you and for the nations." At age 74, after having played the guitar for decades, Sandburg began taking occasional lessons from Spain's famous classical guitarist Andre Segovia. In his final years, Sandburg loved to listen to classical music on his record player, especially that of Chopin.

Just as music was a great solace in the hard times my colleague faced after becoming a quadriplegic, so too was it to many Leningraders during the German siege of their city that lasted from September 1941 to January 1944, a siege that led to the deaths, mainly from starvation, of a million or so Leningraders. During that time an opera star recalled attending Peter Tchaikovsky's opera *Queen of Spades*, where the emaciated musicians, singers, and audience inspired her to reflect that "man does not live by bread alone." Another woman described in her diary an old man getting out his violin and playing a beautiful melody in a bomb-shelter as German bombs exploded outside. She thought that the terror people had been feeling lost its grip, replaced by an "extraordinary sense of belonging." The most famous musical performance was that of native son Dmitri Shostakovich's Seventh (Leningrad) Symphony in August 1942. Before a mixed crowd—soldiers and civilians, emaciated and adequately-fed—the orchestra played in the city's Philharmonic Hall, but the radio also carried the music to apartments and trenches. When the symphony was over people stood and cried, and the conductor believed that at that moment Leningraders knew they would triumph "over the soulless Nazi war machine."

Viewing art can also bring us great enjoyment and transcendent moments. In his poem "Musée des Beaux Arts" Auden reflects on Brueghel's *Icarus* and the truth it depicts about suffering (see [here](#) for links to the painting and poem, as well as to other paintings and poems by other poets). Although I have visited some of the great art museums of the world (e.g., the Vatican Museums, the [Louvre](#) in Paris, and the [Hermitage](#) in St. Petersburg), I perhaps never appreciated art as much as I did during an eight-day stay at a rehab facility (Heartland of Boca Raton), after breaking my hip almost a decade ago. Lining the halls of the facility were more than one hundred paintings, prints, and artistic and historical reproductions. I cannot remember the names of any of the works but do remember that frequently at night, unable to sleep well, I would grab my walker and amble down the halls looking with great pleasure at the men, women, children, seacoasts, streams, and mountains displayed on the walls.

Although the philosopher Schopenhauer was not always wise when writing about leisure, he did emphasize that enjoying music and art could provide some tranquility and transcendence in a world full of woe (see [here](#) for a brief analysis of his thoughts on the subject).

Complexities in Choosing

So far we have dealt with wisdom and various leisure activities while indicating some of the positive and negative effects of possible free-time pursuits. But it's now time for

more specificity about actually choosing what to do among the almost innumerable possibilities our times offer. In an essay mentioned above by Barry Schwartz he deals extensively with cultural choices and in his [*The Paradox of Choice: Why More Is Less*](#) he treats choices in a much broader context. In both works he makes clear his belief that our choices should reflect our overall individual goals and values, a belief that coincides with wisdom thinking.

But he also clarifies some of the difficulties in making choices, including those that fall within the leisure category we have examined here. In his [essay](#) he makes a distinction between “choosers” and “pickers.” “Choosers’ are active: they interrogate their own goals and critically evaluate how well the various options enable them to meet those goals. ‘Picking’ is much more passive. You lie on your couch as options come by on a metaphorical conveyor belt, and you pick one that appeals to you. Pickers won’t be interrogating their goals. . . . We are all pickers some of the time, when, for example, after a hard day of work, we flop on the couch and channel surf until we find something tolerable to watch.”

Schwartz’s “fear is that overwhelming options turns all of us into pickers, at least much of the time. . . . The paradox is that the more diverse and vibrant cultural offerings become, the more passive and stereotyped the selectors of those offerings become.” To deal with the innumerable leisure options that we have we also often resort to what he calls “branding.” In his book, he writes, “When products are essentially equivalent, people go with what’s familiar, even if it’s only familiar because they know its name from advertising.”

Another interesting Schwartz observation in his essay relates to filters: “Based upon . . . how paralyzing unlimited choice can be, my suspicion is that in the realm of culture, the more options there are, the more driven most people will be to settle on the most choice-simplifying filters they can find.” As I see it, our filters should reflect our values. If one of my wisdom values is tolerance, as it is, then I will generally filter out reading any racist works. In selecting movies, the filters I usually use are reviews by critics whose reviewing I have come to trust—now that Roger Ebert has died I have one less trustworthy reviewer.

It has been observed that in our Internet age people rely less than in earlier times on the judgments of scholars or professional critics and more on popularity ratings, sales, and mass media lists. For example, many more people, especially members of her book club, bought books based on the recommendations of talk-show host Oprah Winfrey than on those of any literary critic—within two weeks of her recommending Tolstoy’s nineteenth-century novel *Anna Karenina* (in the early twenty-first century), it shot up to the top of *New York Times* bestseller list. What criteria we select, whether conscious or unconscious, to establish our filters also reflects upon our wisdom, or lack thereof.

But if Schwartz recognizes the need for filters, he also indicates in his essay that “the twin phenomena of buying only the culture that you want, or relying on filters to tell you what you should want, is becoming pervasive—a response, I believe, to overwhelming

choice in the world of culture. There are now so many magazines narrowly tailored to particular interests that there is no need, ever, to read about something that lies outside your existing worldview.” He fears that this phenomenon is contributing to political polarization and a breaking down of common values.

If our wisdom values include, however, tolerance, openness, and empathy, we will resist the temptation of narrow-mindedness. The [advice](#) that President Obama gave to University of Michigan graduates in 2010 is worth considering.

Today’s 24/7 echo-chamber amplifies the most inflammatory soundbites louder and faster than ever before. And it’s also, however, given us unprecedented choice. Whereas most Americans used to get their news from the same three networks over dinner, or a few influential papers on Sunday morning, we now have the option to get our information from any number of blogs or websites or cable news shows. And this can have both a good and bad development for democracy. For if we choose only to expose ourselves to opinions and viewpoints that are in line with our own, studies suggest that we become more polarized, more set in our ways. That will only reinforce and even deepen the political divides in this country.

But if we choose to actively seek out information that challenges our assumptions and our beliefs, perhaps we can begin to understand where the people who disagree with us are coming from. . . .

. . . If you’re somebody who only reads the editorial page of the *New York Times*, try glancing at the page of the *Wall Street Journal* once in a while. If you’re a fan of Glenn Beck or Rush Limbaugh, try reading a few columns on the Huffington Post website. It may make your blood boil; your mind may not be changed. But the practice of listening to opposing views is essential for effective citizenship. It is essential for our democracy.

The final chapter of Schwartz’s book is entitled “What to Do About Choice.” He tells us there that “the key thing to appreciate . . . is that what is most important to us, most of the time, is not the objective results of decisions, but the subjective results.” In other words, how much stress the decision-making process inflicts on us and how we feel about our decisions after we have made them. He also offers some worthwhile advice on choices in general.

As the number of choices we face increases, freedom of choice eventually becomes a tyranny of choice. Routine decisions take so much time and attention that it becomes difficult to get through the day. In circumstances like this, we should learn to view limits on the possibilities we face as liberating not constraining. Society provides rules, standards, and norms for making choices, and individual experience creates habits. By deciding to follow a rule (for example, always wear a seat belt; never drink more than two glasses of wine in one evening), we avoid having to make a deliberate decision again and again. This kind of rule-following frees up time and attention that can be devoted to thinking about choices and decisions to which rules don’t apply.

“Focus on what makes you happy, and what gives meaning to your life,” is Schwartz’s advice. We should “decide which choices in our lives really matter and focus our time and energy there, letting many other opportunities pass us by.” To put it colloquially, “Don’t sweat the small stuff.” He counsels us to “think carefully” about our “goals and aspirations.” After stressing out about which long-distance phone service to select, he realized the decision did not deserve the time he was putting into it, did not involve his central core values, and so he simplified his decision-making process. “One day I went

out to replace a toaster. One store, two brands, two models, done. As I walked home, it occurred to me that I could, if I wanted to, pick my long-distance service in the same way. I breathed a sigh of relief, I did it, and I haven't thought about it since."

Another way to make choices easier is to adopt a "good enough" philosophy in regard to many non-essential matters. Stop thinking, Schwartz suggests, that every decision has to be perfect. And avoid the temptation after making one of regretting it and thinking (in my words) "if only I had decided otherwise." And, he writes, "stop paying so much attention to how others around you are doing."

Conclusion

Choosing our leisure activities wisely means that we should do so based on prioritizing and balancing positive values such as love, compassion, empathy, tolerance, and respect for truth, goodness, and beauty. This means, to use Schwartz's terms, we should be more active "choosers" than passive "pickers." Our choices should be more inner-directed, springing from our own values and life goals, rather than from any outside influences like peer pressure or advertising.

Recognizing the uniqueness of individuals means that what works for one of us might not work for another. It is fine to recognize that reading Shakespeare or viewing his plays might in some objective sense be a superior leisure activity to reading a trashy novel. But what if a person doesn't like Shakespeare, finds his poetry and plays confusing and boring?

What is the wisest leisure activity at any particular time for any particular person can vary widely depending on a whole range of subjective elements, such as one's values, health, age, education, cultural background, and psychological makeup. Nevertheless, a leisure activity cannot be wise for anyone if it is based on negative values. Torturing animals, for example, cannot be wise whatever the individual circumstances.

Regarding age, a few more words are appropriate here. Parents and schools have a special responsibility for helping young people develop interests and skills that will enable them to enjoy fruitful leisure activities for many years to come. Learning to play the piano, guitar, tennis, golf, or appreciate music, art, and/or poetry when young can provide the foundation for a lifetime of enjoyment. While it is understandable that colleges and universities wish to prepare students so that they can obtain good jobs, it is a mistake to ignore future free-time preparation. I will forever be grateful for the Introduction to Poetry class I took in college, and even today sometimes read some of the poems contained in the anthology we used for that course.

While our leisure activities may demonstrate great consistencies over the years, openness to new experiences and free-time pursuits can also be valuable. Some retired people, for example, enjoy taking up new hobbies or studying new subjects that they didn't have time for when still employed. Increased travel is also a favorite activity of

many retirees. Openness, a zest for life, and a commitment to life-time learning are characteristics that many wise people share.

In considering the relationship of wisdom to leisure, we should also remember that leisure overlaps with play and spontaneity. Pieper's statement that "it means not being 'busy,' but letting things happen" implies a certain lightness of spirit. The English writer G. K. Chesterton [wrote](#) about humor: "[it] not only refuses to be defined, but in a sense boasts of being undefinable; and it would commonly be regarded as a deficiency in humor to search for a definition of humor." And the poet W. B. Yeats's lines, "Wisdom is a butterfly / And not a gloomy bird of prey" (from his 1918 poem "Tom O'Roughley") is also germane. Pieper writes that "leisure is not the attitude of mind of those who actively intervene, but of those who are open to everything; not of those who grab and grab hold, but of those who leave the reins loose and who are free and easy themselves." If our approach to leisure becomes too intense and overly serious, we threaten to transform any leisure activity into work. A [New York Times series](#) on "When Exercise Becomes an Addiction" suggests just such a danger.

Certainly, one of the values of leisure can be that it helps to "recharge" us for work, whether that work be the occupation or profession we get paid for or work at home involving family duties.

Some leisure activities like playing sports and other games involve interacting with friends or other people, while other leisure pursuits like reading are more solitary. The value of social interaction should not be underestimated, but neither should more solitary moments, including those given to contemplation and meditation.

Once again, Sternberg's emphasis on balance seems important here, but not only between our "own interests with those of others," but also between work and leisure, the mental and physical, and the social and the solitary.

¹ See <http://www.wisdompage.com/SchumacherEssay.pdf> for more on Schumacher and wisdom.

² See http://www.wisdompage.com/2012%20Articles/Dorothy_Day_Wisdom_Essay%202d_Moss.pdf for the source of this quote and more on Day's wisdom. For the position that love is the most important wisdom virtue see <http://www.wisdompage.com/reviews/2012%20Reviews/Love%20The%20Greatest%20Wisdom%20Virtue%20Moss%20April%202013.pdf>.

³Newton N. Minow and Craig L. LaMay, *Abandoned in the Wasteland: Children, Television, and the First Amendment* (New York, 1996), 188.

⁴Ibid., 201-02.

⁵Thomas Langan, *Surviving the Age of Virtual Reality* (Columbia, MO, 2000), 13, n. 2, 122-25.

⁶ *The Joy of Sports* (New York: Basic Books, 1976), xi, xii, 21, 27, 33, 34, 42, 44, 48, 338.

⁷⁷ Ibid., xiii, 81.

⁸ Henry Steele Commager, *The American Mind: An Interpretation of American Thought and Character since the 1880s* (New Haven, 1950), 247-50.

⁹ Shelley, "A Defence of Poetry," at <http://www.bartleby.com/27/23.html>; Frost, "The Figure a Poem Makes," at <http://www.mrbauld.com/frostfig.html>.

¹⁰ See <http://www.wisdompage.com/SandburgEssay.pdf> for this quote and others by or about Sandburg.