

Sometimes 'doing nothing' is something

By Mark Pavilons

Never underestimate the value of doing nothing, of just going along, listening to the things you can't hear, and not bothering.
A.A. Milne

Il dolce far niente is an Italian phrase, and philosophy, that roughly translates as the sweetness of doing nothing.

To them, it can mean having a cup of coffee with a friend, heading to the beach or sitting idly on a bench watching people go by.

The Dutch call it niksens, literally doing nothing or being idle. They embrace the idea of sitting in a chair and just looking out a window.

How many of us here in hectic southern Ontario have spent much time watching the world go by?

Zhuangzi once said doing nothing is the ultimate happiness.

I concur, and yet who has the time to just chill, or sit at the dock of the bay wasting time?

Maybe some of you enjoyed those moments over the summer, but play time is over!

The crazy thing is the real world, and all of its stresses, is just outside our door. From chemo to car insurance, I have my hands full.

But I do envy our counterparts all over the world, who take advantage of the sweetness of life, and even those mid-day siestas.

Siestas are historically common throughout the Mediterranean and Southern Europe, the Middle East, mainland China and India. The Spanish word siesta derives originally from the Latin phrase hora sexta, sixth counting from dawn, hence mid-day rest.

Sad, but in modern Spain, the mid-day nap during the working week is being gradually abandoned among the adult working population. According to a 2009 survey, 16.2% of Spaniards polled claimed to take a nap daily, whereas 22% did so sometimes, and 58.6% never.

The average Spaniard works longer hours than almost all their European counterparts typically 11-hour days, from 9 a.m. to 8 p.m.

In Southern Italy, the siesta is called controra, a magical time of the day, in which the world comes back into the possession of ghosts and spirits.

In coastal Croatia, the traditional afternoon nap is known as pištol and in Egypt (as with other Middle Eastern countries), government workers typically work for six hours a day, six days a week. Due to this schedule, workers do not eat lunch at work, but instead leave work around 2 p.m. and eat their main meal, which is the heaviest, at lunch time. Following the heavy lunch, they take a taaseela or nap and have tea upon waking up.

In China, taking a nap after lunch, known as noon sleep, is a common practice. Surveys indicate that about two-thirds of the Chinese population habitually takes afternoon naps, with the average duration being approximately 30 minutes.

In over-stressed North America and parts of Europe, we refer to such things as power naps, if we can grab one. Who hasn't felt the urge to nod off at the office?

The timing of sleep-in humans depends upon a balance between homeostatic sleep and the circadian signal for wakefulness.

The good news is the siesta habit has been associated with a 37 per cent reduction in coronary mortality, possibly due to reduced cardiovascular stress mediated by daytime sleep. But concrete findings are still in doubt.

Carrie Snow once wrote that 'no day is so bad it can't be fixed with a nap.'

One American study found that employees' most productive times are between 8 a.m. and 2 p.m. and fall off after that. Some 80% experience an 'afternoon crash,' and 25% admit to falling asleep at work.

More companies are recognizing this and are actually allowing employees to take power naps. Hats off to them!

While doing nothing seems to be counter-intuitive for us busy bees, there's a lot to be said for letting go and doing nothing. All those in favour?

I love the idea, but do see the challenges. In my daily bouts of idleness at home, I will often find something to clean up, pick up or straighten from the couch to the kitchen to the table. Dishes need to be put away.

Millennials are embracing the concept of 'slow living,' a hashtag that encourages a mindful, sustainable, slowing lifestyle. The idea of a four-day work week is also gaining traction, likely sparked by the pandemic.

Some are fighting back against the goal-oriented mind set where we're valued only for our productivity.

Is our time best spent at work churning our widgets, or in our free time with our hobbies, family and pets? The answer is obvious, but maybe not practical.

I know lately, I look forward to returning home and seeing my dogs as they eagerly dash to greet me. Just seeing their faces makes me all the difference in the world.

While dealing with cancer, I've changed my attitude several times. I now make it a point of trying to reach a place - a calm relaxing spot - every day. It can be on the couch, with the TV news turned down low; engaging in my hobby of model airplane building; taking a drive, not for errands but for pleasure. Serenity can be found almost anywhere, you just have to look for it.

I have long thought our European counterparts have figured out life better than us. Aside from siestas, they do tend to take everything a bit slower and easier. They enjoy their meals and soak up camaraderie at every opportunity. They bask in the sunshine. There is more to life than increasing its speed!

Ikigai is a Japanese concept of discovering your purpose through exploring what you love, what you're good at, what the world needs, and what you can be paid for.

'Slow down and everything you are chasing will come around and catch you.' - John DePaola