

“Wasting” Ordinary Times

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By Lucia A. Silecchia

June 21st is a great day of the year: the start of summer!

When I was a child, summer seemed to last forever. The summer highlight was a family road trip – a week or two, all together in the family station wagon or on my Dad’s beloved long distance trains. Beyond that much-anticipated adventure, my summertime memories are filled with ordinary things: biking in a nearby park, borrowing (a lot!) from the county library, whiling away afternoons with my grandfather, spoiling my cat, spending long evenings in the backyard, eating more ice cream than I should have, and sharing more time with the people I loved.

Summer seems different today. The start of the school year is creeping ever earlier. To some, delaying the school year until after Labor Day seems quaintly old-fashioned. Statistics show that average Americans spend 10% or more of their annual income on their vacations. Social media feeds spread the evidence of these expensive vacations to those whose summers may not be as idyllic. The quest for the “perfect” college choice starts ever earlier, with summers often used to study colleges and participate in intense preparation to boost chances of admission to that “perfect” school. Summer camps involve ever less of what would have been considered “camping” years ago. They now involve high-level academic activities, specialized technology training, intense sporting competition, and career preparation for young cohorts of eager “campers.” Young athletes or athletes-to-be have the chance for intense summer preparation to boost their chances at competitive teams or athletic scholarships. Expensive service trips and formal volunteer activities fill many summer schedules. The increase in telecommunications and the ability to work remotely means that many never truly leave the office for interruption-free summer nights. The pressures to pay for the expenses of summer can fuel the need to work more to play more.

These changes can truly be good things. But, I hope that they will not come at the cost of summer’s ordinary times.

Appreciate the advantage of a good education that takes more weeks than it did before. But, also appreciate that not all wisdom comes from school. So, “waste” an ordinary afternoon listening to elders speak of lessons learned when they came of age and the history learned through their experience.

Appreciate the blessing it is to be able to vacation with loved ones. But also appreciate that recreation, or re-creation, does not always have to happen in an exotic locale. So, “waste” an ordinary day driving with your loved ones to a local park, an historic site, an old church in a neighboring town, or a quiet picnic spot.

Appreciate the enthusiasm with which your friends share their expensive adventures. But also appreciate that these posts can fuel angst in your less fortunate friends. So, “waste” a social media post in praise of a simple pleasure.

Appreciate the possibility that your child may have the chance to go to college and pursue an education that may exceed your own and position him or her enjoy professional success and financial security. But also appreciate that, as important as the future is, the present goes too quickly. So, “waste” your child’s last summer or two with your family and lower the pressure that will come all too soon.

Appreciate the opportunities your child may have to study and learn during the summer at camps that fuel new interests and hone natural skills. But also appreciate that helping a neighbor plant her garden, assisting a grandfather painting his porch, teaching a younger sibling how to read, tagging along on an older sibling’s road trip, and assisting a parent in a family business are also ways to learn. So, encourage those you love to “waste” time in these ways.

Appreciate that athletic talent can be honed in camps, teams, and summer training in ways that might not be matched elsewhere. But also appreciate that an impromptu game with siblings or neighbors can be unpressured fun, volunteering to help a young child learn to pitch can bring unexpected satisfaction, and running, swimming, or biking alone can be a sacred time to reflect in silence. So, “waste” time as an amateur athlete.

Appreciate that service trips and formal service programs can open your eyes to a whole new world of need and awaken the desire to serve and help in new ways. But also appreciate that in your own family and neighborhood there are those who desperately need your help – an elderly aunt unvisited in a nursing home, a neighbor’s child who does not know his dad, a homebound man who aches for companionship, a caregiver who needs a respite, a harried single mother who needs a hand, an understaffed local parish that needs energetic volunteers, and a faraway parent who craves a few more phone calls. So, “waste” time in this service that will go unnoticed.

I hope that this summer holds many great adventures, special times, and cherished memories for you. But I also hope that you will have time to do what the eyes of the world may consider “wasting” some of your summertime. In that, I hope you and your loved ones enjoy the sacred gift of ordinary times.

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