LEISURE AND THE LIFE OF THE MIND

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Cicero, banished from Roman political life and dwelling at his beloved Sabine farm, defined his retirement as Otium cum dignitate, "leisure with dignity." [1] Our Dean of Studies, Larry Ryan, reminds the Fromm classes at the Open Houses that the Latin word for business is negotium, which is literally "not leisure." Leisure is literally "not business," that is, leisure is free time, time free of the demands of daily duties, time open to do what one wills to do, not what one must do. Leisure is not laziness, lethargy or lassitude. What is it then? This lecture is about leisure—in particular, one type of leisure, the leisure of the mind.

Professor Ryan recently gave me a copy of a book I had read and treasured years ago: Joseph Pieper's wonderful study, Leisure. The Basis of Culture.[2] This little book, based on lectures delivered in Bonn, Germany in 1947, by a distinguished German philosopher, stimulated me to reflect on a subject that most of us dream of, hope for, and find always elusive. We are students at Fromm because we now have the leisure that we could not have enjoyed when we were engaged, if not swamped, by the demands and pressures of parenting, doctoring, lawyering, brokering, teaching, and all the pulls and pushes of daily life. We attend Fromm Institute to use our new found leisure by indulging the life of the mind. The purpose of this lecture is to link these two ideas, leisure and the life of the mind, more closely together, so that we can all appreciate how wise our choice is.

Leisurely thinking generates very special questions. They are not the questions that make the brain bustle in the search for solutions: how do I get my promotion, how do I pay my bills, how do I plan for dinner. They are not the anxious questions that circle around how to find the right job, the right school, handle a rebellious teen or an unreliable colleague, how to prepare for the future. They are not the agonizing, terrifying questions, uttered in tragedy, "why should this happen to me? How can I ever recover from this loss?" No, the questions of the leisured mind are questions of curiosity and of wonder.

Many of you have taken courses given by the talented Dr. Tom Lewis, neuroscientist from UCSF. His courses are in Technicolor: he shows pictures taken by functional Magnetic Resonance Imagining of the human brain in action. As problems are set to test subjects, as they are exposed to various emotional experiences, and as they perceive stimuli of all sorts, the wondrous organ lights up to show what neurological segments and neural paths are engaged. Red, purple, green and yellow flashes trace the brain's processing of stimuli into what we experience as feelings and thoughts. Dr. Lewis shows the brain as a very busy place.

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[1] Cicero, *Ad Fam*. 1.9; *Pro Sestio* 96.
[2] Josef Pieper, *Leisure the Basis of Culture*. New York: Pantheon, 1952.

I do not know whether Dr. Lewis and his neuroimaging colleagues have scanned brains at leisure. They have scanned the brains of Buddhist monks in meditation; those quiet brains show slow downs in the regions associated with seeking stimuli: just what a Buddhist monk would be hoping for. If I were to image leisure, I hope I would find an expansive white space, spreading across the cerebral cortex (I don't simply mean the brain tissue of neural fibers that actually lay beneath our "little grey cells," as Hercule Poirot used to say.) The busy brain below this brilliant white spread might continue its buzzing and fussing, but it would be enveloped in this whiteness, without spots of stimuli.

Several years ago, a film appeared with the title, "The Endless Sunshine of the Spotless Mind." I did not see that film, which was about a company that specialized in erasing unhappy memories, but I love the title. It is untimely ripped from Alexander Pope's poem, Eloise and Abelard. I have described the leisured mind as a spread of brilliant white; perhaps better, it is a place of endless sunshine. That bright light is emitted by its own sun, which is not round, but has the shape of a great question mark. The space is otherwise spotless, since it contains none of the derelict projects or unsolved problems that clutter our working minds. White space or eternal sunshine: these are my neuroimages for the leisured life of the mind.

When we mention that lofty subject, the life of the mind, we must inevitably think of the great questions that instigate serious investigations in the sciences or plunge into the daunting problems of public policy. All of these questions are driven by the need for answers, large answers that promise us progress and survival. The life of the mind produces books and plays and poetry. It issues in ingenious inventions. When the life of the mind is operating in leisure mode, it may not be interested in answers. At least it is not compelled to find them. The questions generated in leisure are questions that do not need to be answered. They are questions for their own sake, quiet questions that satisfy merely by being noticed, lingering long past any urgent moment to come up with the right answer. I have already named them questions of curiosity and of wonder. Most of our reflections today will center on these two kinds of questions.

First, those delightful questions that are merely curious. There are questions of simple curiosity, questions for which you really don't need answers, but would enjoy having them. These questions of curiosity, and curiosity itself, are the first signs of a leisured mind. You look into corners, not to find something you've lost but just to see if anything is there. It may be curiosity that summons us into museums and book stores. Many a nineteenth century parlor held a curiosity cabinet, filled with odd stones and strange bones. Curiosity does not follow a system, is not confined by the rigors of a method: it rambles about and it happily discovers. Its success is not expanded understanding, as is the success of scientific research. Its success is insight: a delightful spark of the mind that says, aha, I didn't know that before, I see it, as I didn't see it before.

One of the greatest thinkers of history is Charles Darwin. It might be strange to classify this creative scholar among the curious, yet his mind was a paragon of curiosity. He began his scientific career as did most natural philosophers of his day, as a collector of

curiosities. He became a great scientist, but a scientist who did not work out of a structured system of hypotheses. Undoubtedly, his mind was always busy with new questions but it was, at root, a leisured mind: he was not driven by the need to answer, he was delighted by the insights of discovery. His books, The Voyage of the Beagle, The Origin of the Species, and The Descent of Man are fascinating to read, because they expose a mind that followed its questions of curiosity until those questions converged on his great insight, natural selection as the explanation of evolution.

Questions of curiosity, the mark of the leisured mind, may of course be converted into questions of inquiry, that is, structured exploration of a set of problems in search of a systematic answer. Every plan of action, in daily life, exemplifies this in miniature: planning to buy a new home, to take a vacation, to study for a degree. In large, the systematic questions of inquiry also go on to produce all of the sciences and all of the arts, all formulations of policy in politics and of strategy in warfare. In all of this, questions of curiosity coalesce into questions of inquiry, producing in the end an organized picture of how to proceed. Needless to say, that organized picture can be distorted and misleading, but it will always be a pattern, or patchwork of questions and answers.

Questions of inquiry must put off the delightful rambles of pure curiosity and take on a certain austerity. Scientific investigations or clinical examinations or litigation cannot wander at will: they must have the discipline to distinguish relevant from irrelevant, the cogent argument from the clever one. Answers to questions, in these activities, are mandatory. All of our formal educational activities, from kindergarten to post-graduate studies, are designed to teach us how to inquire about the world in profitable ways.

However, questions of curiosity and questions of inquiry may guide the mind to questions of wonder. Wonder is the ultimate activity of the leisured mind. In English we use the word “wonder” in several rather different ways. We can say, “I wonder if it will rain today,” a preface to an question that hopes for an answer. We also say, “I wonder at the genius that could create The David, or the Brandenberg Concerti.” Here we expect no answer, we simply admire the wonderful. Questions of wondering are not stimulated by puzzles, problems and paradoxes, as are the questions of the busy brain. The interrogation marks for questions of wonder are like Spanish question marks, placed not only at the end of an asking sentence but also at the beginning. Questions of wonder come before all curiosity and inquiry; they are the original questions that start the mind moving and give it a perpetual energy to ask all other questions and push it toward all practical answers. Questions of wonder come at the end of restless inquiry and are the final, quiet musings over the deeps of life, beauty, love, sacrifice and generosity.

So what do these kinds of questions, of curiosity and of wonder, have to do with leisure and in what way do they enliven the mind. Certainly, when you decided to attend Fromm, you knew that you wanted to enliven your minds. You were attracted by teachers who would lead you through a subject you had never studied before, or that you had studied and long forgotten. You were lured by the lists of books that would direct the reading

that you had always intended or had thought you had read before. This might actually be the time to get past the first four chapters of War and Peace.

It was the quest of questioning that brought you to Fromm Hall. So now I tell you that all this questioning and answering is just busy work, that you are really here so that the busy mind of your mundane life, or the lazy mind of your retired life can be turned off, tuned out? Would this not transform Fromm Hall into the meditation hall of a Zen monastery, where we would all sit, humming a mantra until the enlightenment of emptiness settled upon us?

If you had sought this quiet state of zazen, you would have gone elsewhere; perhaps you do. But obviously the life of the mind promised by Fromm is exciting, challenging, exploring. What is this life of the leisured mind, this fanciful white space illumined by its single central question mark?

You all know what leisure is, or what you expect it to be. How many days off have you chipped out of your busy lives? How many vacations have you taken to distance yourselves away from daily duties? In these, leisure was your aim: time to do what you wanted, not what others demanded. Time to see the sights, to ramble, as the English say, to read the books that have piled on your bed table. Remember the leisurely days before cell phones and faxes? And now, of course, the great leisure: retirement. Job requirements drop away, along with paychecks; calendars open up; children are on their own, and perhaps too busy with their own lives to bother much with yours. These leisures, however, are often transitory and illusory. How many vacations turn into the hectic chaos of "if it's Tuesday, this must be Padua." The vision of endless golf games or bridge games dims into boredom; the eternally open calendar starts to clutter with volunteer services, with sitting grandkids, with doctor visits. Where has all the leisure gone?

Leisure is more than absence of business, more than a fullness of free time. Any absence is negative but leisure is positive. When Professor Ryan tells the incoming Fromm Class that *negotium* is the opposite of *otium*, it is negotium that is the negative term; it is leisure that is positive. The ancients of our culture took this for granted. Aristotle wrote, "we are unleisurely so that we may be leisurely." In another place, he makes the remarkable, counter-intuitive statement (to us modern Americans, at least) that, "leisure is the first principle of all action. Occupation and leisure are both necessary, but leisure is better than occupation and is its end"(*Politics*, 8.3, 1337b). And Cicero, whose words, "retirement is leisure with dignity" I quoted, clearly believed that the business of the world of politics and finance was a distraction from the true value of life, leisure. We look forward to leisure as a break from work, as a time for refreshment, but always as a restorative to return more vigorously to work. We would never think of saying that leisure is the first principle of all action, or that the reason why we work is to have leisure. That sounds like a lazy person's credo. And laziness is among the most base of vices. I suggest that the difference between laziness and leisure is clear: the lazy person simply has no questions; the leisured person is a living question.

Now, of course, I have nothing at all against all the leisures that we can enjoy: the sporting leisure of the golf course or tennis court, the focused leisure of a bridge game, the leisure of strolling Crissy field and the leisure of just kicking back without a care. But the leisure I seek is the life of the mind. This is the leisure that is the first principle of all action; in Aristotle's words, the leisure for the sake of which we do all other work. Again, we need clarification about "the life of the mind." Everyone has a life of the mind from the moments in infancy when sensations convert into concepts and concepts can be clothed with words. The life of the mind is put to work, not left at leisure, by parental instruction and by schooling. It labors to learn alphabets and numbers, geography and geometry, how to play games, trick other kids, fool parents and con teachers: all these and more are the mind at work, figuring out how to maneuver through the world. In college, the mind really comes to life, we hope, when theories and systems and methods are integrated. Scientists' and scholars' minds are alive with connected facts, intricate theories, and unending footnotes that are the tools of their trade. So our minds live through life, engaged mainly in tracing and enlarging the map of human intercourse and shedding light on the darkness of ignorance.

What has leisure to do with this active intellectual work? Not much, it would seem. Learning consumes the strengths of the mind, making experience and memory serve analysis and calculation and planning. The questions of this active learning are drives toward answers: every test is a barrage of questions of which each has an answer and you better know it. Every course, presumably, prepares the mind for some feature of life in which answers must be ready.

In this active intellectual life, every question must lead to an answer. Nothing would be sillier than to fill up texts and treatises with piles of questions without answers. Doubtless, many questions are hard to answer but the purpose of asking them is to initiate the routes of discovery that will eventually find the answer. Some questions are too badly framed, too fuzzily posited to point in clear directions, but then it is precisely the scholars' duty to reframe them and defuzz them so that they can serve as useful indicators.

The rhetoricians of ancient Greece and Rome—rhetoric was the indispensable discipline that taught statesmen and scholars to speak straight and eloquently—proposed that every good speech should be built around six questions: Who? What? When? Where? Why? How? All the facts of a case, and all the arguments in favor or against a course of action, could be systematically formatted into these questions. They linger on into our own time as the format of the detective story. Every Agatha Christie and John Le Carre novel is built around the search for answers to these questions. We know that the "Who Done It?" cannot be answered until the What, When, Where, Why and How questions are nailed down. It might be said that every inquiry, from simple to complex, and every proposition, from profound public policy to daily planning, hang from these questions.

But notice that when you come to Fromm, the answers no longer have much practical utility. You do not take a course in order to pass a test; you do not listen to lectures in order to master a subject that will promote you to graduation. You come to find the

leisure of the life of the mind. Most of what you learn here you will never use for any practical purpose. Certainly, you may attend Professor Mayer's course to improve your investment acumen; you may sign up for Professor Minninger to sell a short story to Vanity Fair, but for the most part, you listen, appreciate, enjoy, argue perhaps, and ask yourself and the professor questions that arise largely from curiosity, not necessity. You don't need the answer in order to achieve, or to do, or to program.

The first words of Aristotle's magisterial work, *The Metaphysics*, are "All humans by nature desire to know." This desire to know is the stimulus, the impetus for every question. This is a primordial desire that precedes any particular question, that does not need to be set off by the sort of partial experience that solicits the query, "what's that? "who said that?" "where is it?" or "how much?" It is simply the great question, behind all particular questions, the desire that starts off the who, what, when, where and why. Aristotle begins his great inquiry into the nature of the world and of humans, with just such a primordial question. We all, even without realizing it, have been propelled from infancy to seniority, from ignorance to wisdom, by that question.

Socrates was, of course, the master of questions. In the first dialogue, called *Charmides*, Socrates arrives back from the wars and visits his health club. After greeting his old friends, he sits down and, as Plato tells us, "began to ask questions about matters at home—about the state of philosophy and about the young people." On being introduced to a handsome youth named Charmides, he asks him whether, given his good looks and attractive personality, he also possessed the virtue of self-control. Charmides says he thinks he does, but then Socrates presses on: if you are temperate, you must be able to define what temperance is. Charmides is baffled. Several other seniors join the discussion and after a long debate, all must admit that while they might be able to recognize temperance, they cannot define it. All of the dialogues of Socrates follow the same pattern: generals are asked, to no avail, what strategy is; educators are asked, fruitlessly, what learning is; politicians are asked, without success, what statecraft is; doctors cannot define health; sons cannot define parental respect nor parents their duties to children.[3] The first philosopher of western culture never answers a question, with one exception. When on trial for misleading the youth of Athens by his relentless questions, he does answer, "what I do know is that I know nothing." This is, for Socrates and for the divine spirit that he says guides him, true wisdom.

We are not Socrates, nor even Socratic philosophers. We live outside these literary dialogues in the rounds of daily life. We do have questions of all sorts, all the time and many of them are urgent; their answers are instrumental to getting on in life. These are the busy questions.

In the daily world of questioning humans, questions pile upon questions. Many questions lead to answers that are only preludes to other questions. In the binomial world of the computer, every Q must have an A, even if non-geeks don't know where to find it. Trace a perfectly good question and you will see it stop here and there for an answer but rapidly

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[3] Plato, *Charmides or Temperance*. In B. Jowett (trans.) *The Dialogues of Plato*. New York: Random House, vol. 1

produce another question. Answers are stopping points; questions are streams. Take, for instance, the question, "what has caused the terrible financial turmoil of today? Read the pundits' answers, and you will see them translated into new questions, questions without end. The pundits will say, "well, there are more questions than answers. I even heard one pundit sagely say, "there are so many questions that, even if I knew them, I couldn't tell you."

It must be noted that there is a dangerous detour in this trail of questions. It is marked "skepticism." Because every statement can be turned into a question by changing its period into a question mark, because every affirmation can be followed by a "why" ad infinitum, some philosophers, and some ordinary folk, have assumed that no answer can every stop a series of questions. An ancient sect of philosophers were called the Skeptics, literally, those who keep looking. One of its most noted members, Pyrrho of Elis, affirmed that no statement of fact could be taken as certain: everything was a maybe. His students, it is said, had to regularly rescue him from danger, because he refused to believe that oncoming chariots would certainly run him down. Yes, he had been bowled over by the last three speeding chariots, but he wasn't certain that this next one would do the same. This form of congenital questioning, without any stopping places for certainty, is a philosophical oddity, easily disproved—for after all, the proposition that certainty is impossible certainly cannot be certain—but it is a practice engaged in, occasionally, by intellectually careless folk. Despite the continual flow of questions, there are eddys around certain ones, asked and debated over centuries, that build up atolls of answers, building certainties out of probabilities. The questions will continue to flow on but the former skeptic will now have an island to stand on.

Questions of curiosity need not grow into questions of inquiry. They may not be formulated by the intellectual work of hypothesis formation and testing, questions that flow out of the tight deductive logic of investigation. Rather curiosity may raise questions quite naturally, spontaneously, as the mind roams through a new field of words, ideas, pictures and music. This sort of question need not lead to an answer nor inspire the design of a system of inquiry. It may simply roll into another, and then another question, much as the waves of the ocean roll long before they break on the beach. In this way, questions of curiosity are transformed into questions of wonder.

The leading mind of the Enlightenment, Immanuel Kant, concluded his meticulously argued book on the fundamentals of thinking, Critique of Pure Reason (1781) with words, not of inquiry, but of wonder. He wrote, "Two things fill the mind with increasing wonder and awe, the more often and the more intensely the mind is drawn to them, the starry skies above me and the moral law within me."[4]

Questions of wonder hover over the deepest aspects of human existence, love, beauty, generosity and sacrifice. Wonder can be expressed as a question but it has no straight route to an answer. Its answers are at best partial efforts to express the question of wonder itself. Elizabeth Barrett Browning's 43rd Sonnett from the Portugese begins with

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[4] I. Kant. *Critique of Pure Reason*

a question: "How do I love thee? Let me count the ways. I love thee to the depth and breadth and height My soul can reach" It goes on to tell the occasions for love in every moment of life ends, as questions of wonder often do, by soaring into eternity. "I love thee with the breath, smiles, tears, of all my life!—and if God choose, I shall but love thee better after death."[5] The wondering question, "How do I love thee?" cannot be satisfied with answers from scientific inquiry or mere curiosity. It must range through the entire experience of living and even beyond.

The leisured mind, and its questions of curiosity and wonder, is not divorced necessarily from the busy mind, or the inquiring mind. It is possible to think about many practical matters, and to investigate deep matters, and still, at bottom, have a leisured mind. That leisured mind reveals itself when the busy or inquiring person faces an affirmation of certainty or absoluteness. The leisured mind will stop at such blockades, consider them, and then move on with further questions of curiosity. The leisured mind will flow around rocks of absoluteness. It will be open to discovering a new route of curiosity or inquiry. Does this not offend the pragmatic minds of modern Americans like us? We have lived in a culture that honored solutions. Our finest American philosophers, Ralph Waldo Emerson, William James and John Dewey, created philosophies that terminated, not in understanding, but in action. Yet this American pragmatism is, I think, short sighted. The experience of questioning, even without answering, is at the deepest root of human life.

Questioning of all sorts is the great leveler of humankind. Certainly, some questioners win the title of genius. Archimedes questioned and discovered the physics of buoyancy; Newton questioned and discovered the physics of gravity; Hawkins questioned and illuminated the origin of time. Philosophers and theologians, poets and princes questioned and created summas and systems, plays and politics. But questioning is not confined to those who change the world of thought or society. Everyone questions, asks what they should do tomorrow, why their lives are as they are and whether they could be otherwise. The stream of questions runs from the difficult events of everyone's daily lives to the puzzled queries of where to go next or what to do better. Questions are the commonplaces of the common people. Educators may hope to turn questions into inquiry, but they must begin with the simplest of questions. Questions are the equalizers of humankind.

It is not unreasonable to ask whether, if questions are so important, must there not be a final answer. Of course, there are many answers to the many questions of life: we settle our affairs, make our plans, resolve our problems with answers, some good, some bad. But what of this primordial question, the disinterested desire to know, does it have an answer? For many, faith in God is the answer. The great Michel de Montaigne was a thorough skeptic. Every answer, for him, was partial and reversible. He inscribed his motto, "Que sais-je?" " What do I know?" on the timbers of his study in the Dordogne. But he lived happily among all his unanswered questions, his incessant questions of curiosity, because he professed an unshakable faith in the God of his Christian, Catholic

[5] Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Sonnet 43, Sonnets from the Portuguese*.

faith. For Montaigne, faith was a stand-in for knowledge, or a place where his mind could find standing apart from the always shaky knowledge of human affairs..

But others in his own Catholic tradition saw faith not as a substitute for knowledge, but as one more example of the primordial question. Saint Anselm firmly asserted "fides quaerens intellectum," faith is a question seeking an answer. Also, it is not a bit presumptious to see God as The Answer, for our lives have so many questions at such different times: to which of these might God be The Answer? Perhaps Gertrude Stein was most wise when, on her deathbed, she asked, "what is the answer?" Then, after a moment's silence, she whispered, "But what is the question?" Still, recognition of the primordial question that originates all questions is, in my view, the ground of faith, of belief, for it, alone among our experiences, is transcendant, always moving beyond the particular moments, answers, experience.

Perhaps this primordial question does not have any answer at all. Perhaps the questions of wonder expand into a wondrous realization that is not an answer to any question, but is the beginning of wisdom. Wisdom is a mysterious state. It is supposed to belong to the aged and the ancient, but we know that we aged and ancients do not have it, at least not as far as we know. In some cultures, wisdom is attributed to certain classes of persons, the sages and the mystics. But perhaps wisdom grows within the leisured mind that has grown in simple wonder. We have just heard Immanuel Kant's words of wonder about the starry skies and the moral world. Another 18th century German philosopher, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, posed the essential formulation of a question of wonder, a question that very likely has no answer but, in its asking, may evoke wonder: "why is there something, rather than nothing?"

The questions of curiosity and wonder precede, anticipate and energize all questions that have practical purpose. Without them, no practical question could even be asked. For--. and this is my thesis today-- the very essence of human existence is the detached, disinterested, pure desire to know, as the great Jesuit philosopher Bernard Lonergan claimed. This is existence conceived as the single, central, illuminating question mark. To be is to question, not about a particular problem, but about being. Questioning is the only human activity that cannot be turned off: every question that is given an answer, can be followed by another question. It is never silly or irrelevant to ask, "Why?" The most memorable question in our literature, "To be or not to be: that is the question" is a wondering of this sort. It is not a question about suicide, as is often supposed, but a question about existence itself.

The leisured mind, then, is the essence of human existence, although its power is almost always hidden beneath the continual flurry and noise of the practical questions that make life move and survive. The questions of wonder run quietly, like the motor of a Bentley. Yet they radiate power into all questions and all answers, all theories, plans and above all into all poetry and philosophy. Without this pervasive wonder, there would be no culture, as philosopher Joseph Pieper claimed, nor would there be creativity of any sort.

More than anything, however, without the questions of wonder that emanate from the leisured mind, there would be no meaning in any experience nor in life itself. Meaning is usually thought of as an answer, an ultimate answer. I do not see it that way. I see meaning as the recognition of the moving question of wonder, permeating each and all experience. To ask, “what is the meaning of this?” is to seek the relationship of a single experience or of the experience of life to something beyond the instant. The unquenchable question of wonder always points beyond any experience or any answer. It points into transcendence. It may be that the life of the leisured mind brings us most closely into ourselves and takes us most beyond ourselves.