

Hermann Hesse on Breaking the Trance of Busyness by Maria Popova

“Of all ridiculous things the most ridiculous seems to me, to be busy — to be a man who is brisk about his food and his work,” Kierkegaard admonished in 1843 as he contemplated our greatest source of unhappiness. It’s a sobering sentiment against the backdrop of modern life, where the cult of busyness and productivity plays out as the chief drama of our existence — a drama we persistently lament as singular to our time. We reflexively blame on the Internet our corrosive compulsion for doing at the cost of being, forgetting that every technology is a symptom and not, or at least not at first, a cause of our desires and pathologies. Our intentions are the basic infrastructure of our lives, out of which all of our inventions and actions arise. Any real relief from our self-inflicted maladies, therefore, must come not from combatting the symptoms but from inquiring into and rewiring the causes that have tilted the human spirit toward those pathologies — causes as evident to Kierkegaard long ago as to any contemporary person who crumbles into bed at night having completed the day’s lengthy to-do list yet feeling like a thoroughly incomplete human being.

How to heal that aching spirit is what Hermann Hesse (July 2, 1877–August 9, 1962) addresses in a spectacular 1905 essay titled “On Little Joys,” found in *My Belief: Essays on Life and Art* (public library) — the out-of-print treasure that gave us the beloved writer and Nobel laureate on the three types of readers and why the book will never lose its magic.

More than a century before our present whirlpool of streaming urgencies, Hesse writes:

Great masses of people these days live out their lives in a dull and loveless stupor. Sensitive persons find our inartistic manner of existence oppressive and painful, and they withdraw from sight... I believe what we lack is joy. The ardor that a heightened awareness imparts to life, the conception of life as a happy thing, as a festival... But the high value put upon every minute of time, the idea of hurry-hurry as the most important objective of living, is unquestionably the most dangerous enemy of joy.

Decades before the German philosopher Josef Pieper made his prescient case for liberating leisure and human dignity from the clutch of workaholism, Hesse laments how modern life’s “aggressive haste” — and what a perfect phrase that is — has “done away with what meager leisure we had.” He writes:

Our ways of enjoying ourselves are hardly less irritating and nerve-racking than the pressure of our work. “As much as possible, as fast as possible” is the motto. And so there

is more and more entertainment and less and less joy... This morbid pursuit of enjoyment [is] spurred on by constant dissatisfaction and yet perpetually satiated.

Noting that he doesn't have a silver bullet for the problem, Hesse offers:

I would simply like to reclaim an old and, alas, quite unfashionable private formula: Moderate enjoyment is double enjoyment. And: Do not overlook the little joys!

A century before psychoanalyst Adam Phillips made his compelling case for the art of missing out and the paradoxical value of our unlived lives, Hesse considers what moderation looks like in the face of seemingly unlimited possibilities for what to do with one's time, and although the options available have changed in the hundred-some years since, the principle still holds with a firm grip:

In certain circles [moderation] requires courage to miss a première. In wider circles it takes courage not to have read a new publication several weeks after its appearance. In the widest circles of all, one is an object of ridicule if one has not read the daily paper. But I know people who feel no regret at exercising this courage.

Let not the man* who subscribes to a weekly theater series feel that he is losing something if he makes use of it only every other week. I guarantee: he will gain.

Let anyone who is accustomed to looking at a great many pictures in an exhibition try just once, if he is still capable of it, spending an hour or more in front of a single masterpiece and content himself with that for the day. He will be the gainer by it.

Let the omnivorous reader try the same sort of thing. Sometimes he will be annoyed at not being able to join in conversation about some publication; occasionally he will cause smiles. But soon he will know better and do the smiling himself. And let any man who cannot bring himself to use any other kind of restraint try to make a habit of going to bed at ten o'clock at least once a week. He will be amazed at how richly this small sacrifice of time and pleasure will be rewarded.

Learning this difference between binging on stimulation and savoring enjoyment in small doses, Hesse argues, is what sets part those who live with a sense of fulfillment from those who romp through life perpetually dissatisfied. He writes:

The ability to cherish the "little joy" is intimately connected with the habit of moderation. For this ability, originally natural to every man, presupposes certain things which in modern daily life have largely become obscured or lost, mainly a measure of cheerfulness, of love, and of poesy. These little joys ... are so inconspicuous and scattered so liberally throughout our daily lives that the dull minds of countless workers hardly notice them. They are not outstanding, they are not advertised, they cost no money!

Illustration by Maurice Sendak from *Open House for Butterflies* by Ruth Krauss

He points to the most readily available, most habitually overlooked of those joys — our everyday contact with nature. A century before throngs of screen zombies began swarming the sidewalks of modern cities, Hesse writes:

Our eyes, above all those misused, overstrained eyes of modern man, can be, if only we are willing, an inexhaustible source of pleasure. When I walk to work in the morning I see many workers who have just crawled sleepily out of bed, hurrying in both directions, shivering along the streets. Most of them walk fast and keep their eyes on the pavement, or at most on the clothes and faces of the passers-by. Heads up, dear friends!

Hesse offers his prescription for breaking this trance of busyness and inattention:

Just try it once — a tree, or at least a considerable section of sky, is to be seen anywhere. It does not even have to be blue sky; in some way or another the light of the sun always makes itself felt. Accustom yourself every morning to look for a moment at the sky and suddenly you will be aware of the air around you, the scent of morning freshness that is bestowed on you between sleep and labor. You will find every day that the gable of every house has its own particular look, its own special lighting. Pay it some heed if you will have for the rest of the day a remnant of satisfaction and a touch of coexistence with nature. Gradually and without effort the eye trains itself to transmit many small delights, to contemplate nature and the city streets, to appreciate the inexhaustible fun of daily life. From there on to the fully trained artistic eye is the smaller half of the journey; the principal thing is the beginning, the opening of the eyes.

In a sentiment which Annie Dillard would come to echo many decades later in her beautiful meditation on reclaiming our capacity for joy and wonder, Hesse adds:

A stretch of sky, a garden wall overhung by green branches, a strong horse, a handsome dog, a group of children, a beautiful face — why should we be willing to be robbed of all this? Whoever has acquired the knack can in the space of a block see precious things without losing a minute's time... All things have their vivid aspects, even the uninteresting or ugly; one must only want to see.

And with seeing come cheerfulness and love and poesy. The man who for the first time picks a small flower so that he can have it near him while he works has taken a step toward joy in life.

Illustration by Sydney Smith from *Sidewalk Flowers* by JonArno Lawson, a wordless ode to living with presence

Noting that these small joys take the form of different things for each of us, Hesse adds:

[There are] many other small joys, perhaps the especially delightful one of smelling a flower or a piece of fruit, of listening to one's own or others' voices, of hearkening to the prattle of children. And a tune being hummed or whistled in the distance, and a thousand other tiny things from which one can weave a bright necklace of little pleasures for one's life.

He ends with an offering of counsel as valid and vitalizing today as it was a century ago, perhaps even more:

My advice to the person suffering from lack of time and from apathy is this: Seek out each day as many as possible of the small joys, and thriftily save up the larger, more demanding pleasures for holidays and appropriate hours. It is the small joys first of all that are granted us for recreation, for daily relief and disburdenment, not the great ones.

Complement this particular portion of Hesse's wholly transcendent *My Belief* with philosopher Alan Watts on how to live with presence, cognitive scientist Alexandra Horowitz on the art of looking with attentive awareness, and this lovely wordless picture-book about living attentively