Slice of life

Taking care of busyness

Paul Johnson has some time on his hands. Illustration by **Timothy McEvenue**

My sons are always talking about creating an app and selling it for a lot of money. In an effort to connect with them, I created an app called 'The Meaning of Life,' but they doubted it would sell because apparently apps have something to do with computers and can't be written on a Starbucks napkin. They also questioned the maths behind my fulfillment formula, asking whether I could mathematically prove my theory that happiness was 50 per cent being famous, 20 per cent being beautiful, 20 per cent being rich, and 10 per cent always being in the bathroom when the group bill arrives. (According to this formula I'm only 37 per cent fulfilled.)

To be honest, I'm not sure what the purpose of life is – and if I did know I would sell the secret for a whole lot more than the 20RMB I'm currently charging for my napkin app – but more and more I suspect it has something to do with keeping busy. It seems every time I ask someone 'How have you been?' the answer is always, 'Busy.' Nobody ever says 'I've been so happy,' or 'I've been a bit down,' but rather 'I've been so busy.' Busyness is the new happiness.

People seem to wear their busyness like a badge of honour, but why is being busy supposed to be impressive? I would be much more impressed if you had achieved a station in life that allowed you to stay in your pyjamas and eat frosting all day.

I used to think I was happy, but social media has forced me to reconsider. Instagram, WeChat, and Facebook parade an endless stream of smiling people filling every minute of their lives with activities: concerts, birthday parties, bar openings, farewell parties, art exhibits, plays, sporting events, craft markets, fitness challenges, and tourist trap pilgrimages. They all look so happy. And drunk. But happy.

I guess I understand the seductive appeal in measuring fulfillment by quantity of activities. Whenever I sense I could be a better dad, I rush to plan a string of classic father-son activities like playing catch, or going to the batting cages, or building bow and arrows and shooting rats down at the Bund. At the end of a week I can quantify my efforts as a father in terms of activities. Whether my relationship with my kids has any real emotional depth is hard to measure, but total quantity of activities is not. Counting activities helps me sleep at night.

> **If thinking were important, it would make for a better selfie**

Besides, if thinking were important, it would make for a better selfie. Writing in a journal does not make a good selfie, and do you really want everyone to see your terrible handwriting? Reading or staring out the window or having a thoughtful conversation with one person instead of a loud drunken group do not make good selfies. It's too hard to take a good picture of mindfulness.

I've resisted being busy for far too long. I'm ready to give in and learn to love overscheduling. Shanghai is a city that makes it easy to be busy – you're not anybody in this city until you've organised an event or thrown yourself a week-long birthday party – but I suspect if we really set our minds to it we could be even busier. The biggest busyness inefficiency comes when a friend invites you to an undesirable activity, and you tell him you're going to be sick that night, but that means you can't go out at all that night and risk someone taking a picture of you not being sick and posting it on Instagram. That means you have to stay home, and staying home is a waste of potential busyness. If we do go to a bad event, it is usually as a form of quid pro quo: you pay 200RMB to see my terrible community play and I'll pay to hear you imitate an iPod Shuffle and call it DJing.

That's why I'm proposing an events/activities exchange. If you come to see my son's school play in my place, you get a voucher, and you can redeem this to make me attend a Gay Pride event in your place. Or even a Straight Pride event. The more undesirable the event, the more vouchers will be awarded according to how much it cost, how terrible it was, and how long it lasted. This will ensure your friends and family will always get support at their events, albeit not from you, and nobody will ever have to stay home a single night and waste potential busyness.

Or on the other hand, what if we rented the convention and exhibition centre in Pudong and held a year's worth of events all in one location during one epic weekend? I envision a combination music festival, beer festival, international school fair, performance art exhibition, standup comedy, birthday dinner, wine tasting, DJ party, craft market, pub crawl, youth sports league, community theatre, comedy improv, and art-house movie screening event. We lock the doors and nobody is allowed to leave or to sleep for 48 hours. Maybe we'd reach such an elevated state of Zen busyness that the reservoir of fulfillment might last an entire year.

And what would we do those other 51 weekends? Well, I'm busy working on that right now.

Next month Your ultimate Shanghai bucket list

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