

The Value of “Nonbusy” Time

Imagine this scenario, one that I’ve had many a time in my past few years here at Harvard. You’re walking towards the yard and you see a friend. You give a brief smile and your friend says, “Hey, how are you?” Noting the cold weather, you say, “good, busy! On my way to a meeting.” Your friend gives a similar response and you both walk briskly to your next appointment.

We’ve all experienced this conversation. At Harvard, there are an incredible number of opportunities. I feel like I’m always making the decision between working on a paper, going to hear an awesome speaker, or taking a fun study break and getting Pinkberry with my roommate-- all the possibilities sound so great but what do I do? At Harvard, being busy is a given, and often a good thing. However, I want to challenge you all to think about the time in our day that I’d like to call our “nonbusy” time.

What is “nonbusy” time? It’s that time in your day that you don’t have scheduled. It’s when you’re not in class or not in a meeting -- what you wouldn’t normally put on your calendar. It’s the time in your life when the your schedule allows for spontaneity.

During finals week, my friend and I were having lunch in this very dhall. Another friend joined us and mentioned that he was almost done with finals and was going to relax over the next few days. Intrigued (and admittedly, a little jealous), my friend and I asked him what he was going to do with this precious time. I imagined a time of watching movies, relaxing, or hanging out in the dhall. Instead, I noticed my friend looking a little guilty and he responded, “Oh, I’ll work on a website. I’m a CS concentrator so I should start doing that before recruiting starts in the spring.” My heart sank a little. The wheels in my head started turning as I thought, “Are we allowed to just say we want to relax and do absolutely nothing?” Would my Harvard classmates judge me if I said that I wasn’t busy? Would they think my time is less valuable?” At Harvard especially, sometimes it’s difficult to just be okay with our “nonbusy” time.

The first time I really tried to schedule this “nonbusy”/rest time was in my sophomore year. After a crazy freshman year, where I was faced with decisions all the time of what to do, I decided I needed a time in my week where I could just “rest”. I blocked off a 24 hour period (from 6 pm on Saturdays to 6 pm on Sundays) in my week where I would not do “work” that I considered my Sabbath time. It sounds nice- but don’t get me wrong- it was extremely challenging every week to look at my calendar and not schedule something into that rest time. In the end, however, it ended up being such a life-changing decision. During that time, I felt genuinely free to rest without that guilty feeling connected with long to-do lists lingering in the back of my head. This Sabbath time really helped me refresh and think about my own life. As a senior now, I’ve adjusted my Sabbath time from a “24-hour no work” time to few hours of sweet, silent reflective and solitude time that I designate after church on Sundays. I use that time to journal and rest. It’s hard to do, but I’m realizing that it’s invaluable in the end and gives me time to think about the past week and recharge for the next.

Even though it's hard to have "nonbusy time" in my schedule, I realize now, that my most valuable memories come from my "nonbusy time" more than appointments in my schedule. Even during one of the nights that I had scheduled to spend working on this speech, I ended up talking with one of my friends. In light of the purpose behind Lowell speeches, we started talking about the times we spend reflecting. She felt inspired to show me a list of meaningful quotations she's been keeping over the past year- a list that she's has never showed anyone else. Through reading, talking (and of course, laughing) through the quotations, I got to know her a lot better. Even though I had originally dedicated that time to work on my senior thesis and this speech, I am thrilled I changed it to "nonbusy" time to hang out with her. It's these moments that I will treasure.

For some of you in the audience, you may think that this sounds nice- but your practical side is yearning for efficiency and productivity. I understand that. But my last point tonight is how "nonbusy time" actually increases the value of the time spent working. I saw how my Sabbath time helped me be more efficient because I knew that in order to enjoy this set aside day of rest, I would also need to actively finish my work in 6 days rather than spread through the week. Having this recharge "nonbusy" time ended up increasing not just the positive, meaningful experiences in the end, but also makes me more productive- which is counterintuitive because I'm not putting that time necessarily to "work". This is worth trying for all of us. Don't wait until senior year. Change a "scheduled time" in your calendar to flexible, "nonbusy time". And for seniors like myself, this idea of "nonbusy time" is something we can all take with us in years to come.

So, the next time you're walking to class, and you see someone who asks you, "how are you", instead of exchanging a quick hello as you walk to your next appointment-- slow down, take a breath, and give a real response. Engage in this unscheduled, "nonbusy" time and be surprised by what it may bring.