



LIVING LIFE ON COMPANY TIME

First, I couldn't find my sunglasses. We were headed out the door. Jim was halfway to the car, and I suddenly realized I couldn't find them. They weren't on their normal perch with the car keys in the kitchen, not on the coffee table, not beside the door. It took two extra minutes to search the house top to bottom before I found them, on the nightstand in the bedroom.

I was out the door and headed to the car before I remembered the grocery list. Another trip into the house to grab it off the fridge.

Finally, strapping the seatbelt across my chest, it hit me: "Did I turn down the thermostat?" One last sprint inside to confirm, yes, I had.

Ten minutes after we'd originally set out to leave, we pulled out of the driveway.

I felt like a crazy person. I complained to Jim, "I don't know what the problem is. I remember intending to turn down the heat, but I can't remember the moment when I actually did it. Same with the sunglasses. I remember walking in the house yesterday, but the moment when I set them down is completely gone. What is wrong with me?"

He shrugged back at me. "It's normal. Took me five minutes to remember where I'd put the keys."

And that was that. We went on with the day.



The place to run into people, in our little town, is the post office. It took me a while to adjust to the practice, (part of me was fine being the stranger-not-from-here,) but it's customary to stop and chat with anyone you half-recognize. Mostly you talk about the weather, how quickly this year is passing, whether you're ready for the coming of summer or winter, and, depending on the time of year, whether we're due for rain.

And I've noticed, in my non-scientific polling of post office conversations, that lately the standard answer to "How are you doing?" has changed. I have always relied on that old standby, "Good. How are you?" But I seem to have missed a major shift in word usage, because my "How are you?" is rarely answered with an agreeing "Good" anymore. Now, I'm much more likely to hear, "Oh, you know. Busy." or "Ugh. So Busy." Or a tired sigh and a shrug, suggesting that the "busy" is so obvious, who needs words for it?

I can't fault them for this change. When pressed for details, everyone sounds honestly exhausted. One woman has to take on an extra workload for a recently retired co-worker in the same week when her two children have both come down with some stomach flu. A harried-looking man is taking on every extra work shift he can get, hoping to cover Christmas expenses. Even the quiet older woman sighs and says she's spent 8 hours of every day of the past week babysitting for families around town. They all seem tired, worn down, and beyond caring whether they should answer a "How are you?" with anything but the truth.

I felt a bit harried, myself, on some of those occasions, but mine was typically the privileged busy-ness of having put off a few tasks too long—paying bills, lining up posts for the Blog section of our website, getting the oil changed. I always feel guilty about complaining that I'm "busy," when most of my stress is self-imposed, and then I feel guilty about suggesting that I'm not really busy—not like so many people around me. Isn't it a sort of bragging, after all, to admit to being the one not-that-busy person in the room?

Really, I've been having this same conversation since Elementary School. I can remember so clearly sitting on the Merry-Go-Round, one among a gaggle of little girls, when one girl (the Chief Girl, of course) says, in a perfect pantomime of her mother, "Oh, I'm so tired today. I didn't sleep at all last night." And each other girl rushing to jump in over each other, "I only slept six hours! Four hours! I'm so exhausted I almost fell asleep on the bus! I fell asleep in Math!" And I remember my bewilderment so clearly. Did I want to be tired? Was this a trick? I searched myself for signs of fatigue. Yeah, I was a little sleepy, I guess. But I had slept for most of the night before, had stayed awake through my classes.

Finally, I figured I should just keep my mouth shut. I nodded along with the others and hoped the next topic wouldn't be who could or couldn't do the splits.

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In college, it was an equation of lack of sleep plus number of pages to be written. "Oh God," I'd moan, "I've 20 pages to write today on five hours of sleep. What is this hell?" Cue the one-upmanship:

"You're telling me. I have three different lab reports and I was studying until 7am this morning."

"I have major exams in five different classes in the next two days, and I haven't had the time to a book."

"It turns out I was supposed to start this project a month ago, and it's due tomorrow. Here goes."

"I just realized. Tomorrow I'm supposed defend my senior thesis."

Why do we want to win that battle? To be the busiest, the farthest behind, the most exhausted? What is this cultural cachet we've put on stress and fatigue?

And what, especially, is behind the guilt we feel when we pause to relax?

When critics of the American work culture offer their suggestions to better balance our home and work lives, they often recommend more options for employees to work from home. And, on its face, it's a great suggestion. Workers can fit in the same amount of work, without the commute, and they will have hours more time to spend with their family.

But, for the most part, that isn't how working from home pans out. When a person is given the option of working from home, a level of guilt sets in. "The company is giving me this gift," they think, "a gift of more time with my family. I can't let them think I'm using this as an excuse to slack off. I need to work harder than ever!" And so they end up working longer hours and more days than if they'd kept coming into the office. Their family life is unlikely to improve as much as they'd hoped, given that the office has now followed them home and camped out in their living room, a constant presence, where before it might have been left behind in that hour-long commute. Not to mention, even for office-workers, the company has also camped out on their laptops and their phones, which beep ceaselessly at the worker regardless of whether he is sick, or she is on vacation, or he's just trying to have a moment right now with his kid.

You can't just not answer that phone. What will they think? They'll think you're relaxing on company time—and it's all company time now.

That feeling—constantly having something to prove—has seeped throughout the culture. The need to prove what a good worker bee you are. Each day arrives with its series of tasks, and we bustle about on those tasks until the night comes and we joke darkly about how wonderful it would be to just have

a bath, read a book, drink a glass of wine. Those who work from home, either for a company or else as a stay-at-home parent, push their productivity the most. They press into each conversation the fact that they haven't had time for a shower in days, or a moment to think in months, because they're afraid you might not believe them. They're afraid you might think they've been slacking off on the job—lying around, sleeping, eating regular meals, showering. And they think you will judge them for that.

I feel it myself, because we work on the paper from home. I feel the guilt that accompanies those moments when I'm not "productive." Those moments when Joe or Susan, or whomever, from the post office, might see me and think I'm being lazy. Unfortunately, I'm lazy as a lizard by nature. So the guilt is a frequent companion, and it's assuaged only by spending another few days bustling around, regardless of how many tasks I actually need to complete.

I picture, sometimes, that analogy of the duck on the pond—calm and present above the water, all the activity below the surface. Usually, when I picture it, it's because I feel like the opposite of that duck. It's when I feel as if all my activity is a flurry on the surface—running around, checking off tasks—and below water, I've lost my ability to even work at paying attention to what I'm doing. I run, mid-task, into a room, and then stop, confused as to why I'm there. I'm running to gather myself so that I can leave the house, and I can't find anything and I can't remember clearly anything I've done that morning.

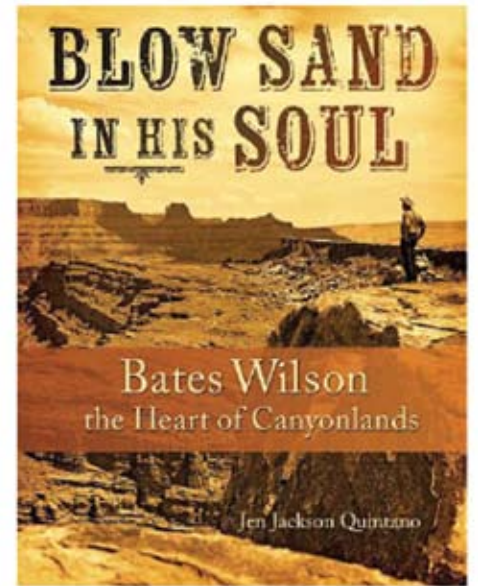
And those are the moments when I have to remind myself that I'm being an idiot. It doesn't matter if I only get three loads of laundry done today. I can do the rest tomorrow. It doesn't really matter that I answer all the emails when I see them, at 9pm. We're not talking about Sacramental Duties, here. They can wait until morning. Getting a few things done each day is a good thing, sure. Making progress on all those tasks feels good in its own way. But all of us need to recognize that some of our time is just that—our time. It belongs to us. And it's unconscionable for the greater world to demand that time too. Not only is there nothing wrong with letting a few of those tasks fall to the next day, to Monday, to when you're back from vacation. It would be considered wrong not to let them.

And what should happen if someone sees you enjoying yourself, stretched out reading a book, taking a nap? Will they judge you? Maybe. But maybe they'll have to think to themselves, "Why is it so decadent, really, to be able to read a book?" And maybe they'll go home and tell their cell phone to stuff it, and finally take that bath.

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