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SPECIAL ISSUE PAPER

Why leisure education?

The Hillel Ruskin Memorial Scholar Lecture, 2010¹

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To be able to fill leisure intelligently is the last product of civilisation, and at present very few people have reached this level. (Bertrand Russell, 1930)

Introduction

Many people argue that leisure should be the realm free of any intervention, any external training and for sure, free from any kind of educational intercession. Leisure should be left to personal decision and personal use of freedom. Leisure benefits from the universal recognition of the legitimacy to be individual and free.

Why should we interfere, if, by definition, leisure is freedom and even happiness?

We understand that having some free time doesn't mean that we are in the era of leisure, experiencing personal freedom and personal autonomy. Very often, free time is only empty time, which, like any vacuum, tends to be filled with any activity presently available.

And if we are aware of the universal recognition of human rights, most of us do not really know how to find the personal path leading to the significant harmonious life we all aspire to, either consciously or unconsciously. We will argue that leisure space and the leisure state of mind can contribute in this sense, but we must be prepared for it.

Here comes the pivotal role of leisure education (Cohen-Gewerc & Stebbins, 2007). We will show how the growing free time, which is the dark side of unknown life, becomes a sort of no man's land abandoned to anything and to any whim, and thereby opening the door to insecurity.

Yet leisure time can be a precious opportunity, a second chance to create our genuine individuality and weaken the "ready to wear" identity, an individuality based on inner resources which can be the response to external uncertainties.

The dark side of life

Kant said that, "Man can only become a man by education." The question is what "man," and for what purpose?

In general, nearly all training efforts are focused on socialisation and more specifically on professional habilitation. In other words, we are still in a mood that life is work and obligations with some breaks in-between for rest and distractions. Educational systems are valorised for their achievements, for showing how much

their pupils succeed in the challenging sorting process, which leads to the most praised professions, generally backed by high incomes.

But what happens to a man or woman constrained nowadays to deal with large sequences of free time in the multiple and wide global world?

Abandoned to themselves, people get lost within the multitude of situations, reactions, emotions, and thoughts; thoughts to which they tend to belong more than the thoughts belong to them. “[The i]ndividual is then, a screen on which appears desires, needs, fantastic worlds produced by new media industries” (Touraine, 2005, p. 165). This occurs, basically, during unstructured time.

Of course, we know that we have the option to find numerous answers in our personal computers. It is true that, for most of us, a tremendous amount of information is available, in detail (and with its price: a large quantity of information about ourselves) but with a fragile comprehensive understanding (Lipovetsky & Serroy, 2008, p. 20).

It is true that we are invited to choose at any instant, but that choice can demand quite a high price in personal responsibility. So it’s cheaper to do as everybody used to do and adhere to the casual fads that are passing through. In this *modular conformism*, one is wrapped in a banal and “up-to-date” self, one seems to sense a real sharing at very low cost: some vague accountability. One can seem to be part of virtual communities without any real involvement.

To this we can add what Lipovetsky and Serroy (2008) call “the dictatorship of the short term.” Without commitment to the past, the future is a succession of short presents in which man tries to be available for all opportunities and becomes a fan of euphoric virtual contacts. Around me I hear how youngsters, and the seniors following them, begin a phone conversation not by saying “How do you do?” or “What do you do?” but by the anxious expectation “What’s happening?” perhaps being ready to jump in and join any exciting event occurring within the next minutes, hours or at most a few days.

It seems that the more one is free and theoretically in control of oneself, the more one appears as vulnerable, fragile, and disarmed in one’s inner self (Lipovetsky & Serroy, 2008, p. 59). The process of hyper-individualisation and what Lipovetsky and Serroy call “market culture” (a recent evolution of the economic market) tends to disrupt on a large scale the consciences, the way of life, the existences themselves. “The hypermodern world is disoriented, insecure, destabilised, not only casually but in daily life, in a structured and chronic way” (p. 19), and “while the feeling of void is growing, more and more exiting ways appear to escape the darkness of a night without values, an abyss without aim and signification” (p. 33).

All of our education and quite all of our socialisation have been focused on learning and training about how to work, how to accomplish our several social roles, but almost nothing about how to fulfil our free time. Like the dark side of the moon, formal institutions tend to ignore this part of life in which everyone has to be by themselves; a space where knowledge and skills of social functioning are not helpful enough and sometimes not at all. Thirty years ago, as a secondary school principal, I presented some conclusions about all the pedagogical work we had achieved during the semester and I remember the remark of one colleague: “These things we accomplish during class time are great, but do you know into what world we send our pupils every afternoon? We are only concerned with the daylight hours of the

different curricula, but what about the dark side of the day when most of these pupils are abandoned to themselves?"

For centuries, only a few privileged persons could enjoy some privacy such as that provided by a personal room; most people lived together in limited spaces and quite all their vigil time was "occupied" by numerous roles "performed" in the presence of another, including the rare moments of collective leisure.

Nowadays the private room, private media devices and plenty of time alone and without surveillance are the "canonical" standard. What do we know about this growing space of aloneness? Are we ready to step through the dark side of "time out?" Do we know how to discern the inner light looking for real opportunities of self realisation, within the blinding illumination of the multitude of leisure industries and mass faddish trends?

Apparently we have all of what technology offers: more and more diversity, options, choices, opportunities, possibilities, and freedom; so many means. But do we know what to do with so many choices when we don't know what is/are the objective(s)?

Are we entering a new individualism which becomes a sort of conception of life consumed "à la carte," focused on a narrow and narcissistic hedonist hyper-individualism?

This state of mind combines with globalisation and, above all, the global culture of consumption; and as we know this concerns also, and in a significant proportion, leisure consumption.

In the "shady side" of life, we are not only at the mercy of dangers and obstacles around us; we are also mainly at the mercy of all our weaknesses and our fragilities.

As witnesses to these processes, we know that this is not a fatality but a wild process in which most of us should be better prepared to use the infinite opportunities and avoid misuses and abuses inherent to this dynamic reality. In a word, we are required to illuminate this dark space, behind the scenes, because these short breaks between canonic activities are growing into large periods of free time.

Yet anyone can sense, in theory, more autonomy, less dependence on any kind of authority but also less support, less patronage.

The narrow perspective of conventional education fits perhaps other previous times when families and communities were solid organisations and the paths toward the future seemed to be certain and determined. It fits life which takes place quite exclusively inside defined communities. Most of the people were closely accompanied, essentially at the crucial crossroads when a decision had to be taken. They were free by definition but were hardly ever expected to really decide by themselves. Their existence – that is, identity, belonging, security – was woven in and by the expectations and view of their relevant and perhaps authoritative "partners." In this context the path used to be obvious, and personal freedom was quite useless. Social pressure and continuous supervision were constraining, but communitarian membership could have its conveniences. One gained twice: first avoiding possible dilemmas and above all "sharing" only a small part of the responsibility. The "chosen" option belonged to all members of the relevant group or at least to the conditioning tradition. Most of the time, one could say that choosing what one did was what one had to do, i.e. one really did not have a choice. Sometimes people could simply explain their actions by claiming "This is the way 'we' do it," thereby diluting their part in responsibility for their actions by sharing it with this undefined "we."

Moreover, on the social stage, a person feels that his existence has to be justified at all times, and only a functional role can do that. On the stage of life one must have a role, even as a passive presence without a line to speak.

Nowadays the weakened “we” tends to dim into ephemeral trends leaving us alone with our own fate; a loneliness which becomes omnipresent essentially during our “dark” free time.

The social ties are weakened and most of them are broken. All patterns of authority are less and less obvious, more and more fragile. In any case, with the growing awareness of individual rights, the hierarchical power based on what the Romans called *potestas* (in opposition to *auctoritas*) seems to be quite obsolete. A few weeks ago, I met my next door neighbour and her two little daughters. The younger daughter tore two pages out of a beautiful (probably expensive) notebook, and to her mother’s question, “Why did you tear out those pages?” the older daughter (seven years old) quite frankly declared: “It’s her notebook; she has the right to do whatever she wants with it!” Such a statement means assuming personal determination but, in theory, entails total responsibility.

Individually recognised rights means that a person does not belong and even is not automatically part of any social structure; they are free to quit at any time and to adhere to something else. They see themselves as free to move at any time, to any other place, organisation, country, etc. without serious dilemmas concerning their actual social connections.

Individualism exceeds social and personal commitments yet, on the other hand, individuals are burdened with numerous problems of being alone without the ancient support of communitarian frameworks. Crossing out the entrance of their professional roles, people feel lonely, isolated, and very often sense a lack of backing from family, community, and establishment. This creates a large void quickly occupied by innumerable entrepreneurs who wish to sell all manners of time-fillers – from household management to spiritual serenity.

Nevertheless, free time, this apparent no man’s land, is no more than some insignificant part of life. Leisure space merits more attention, for it has consistent potential for the personal improvement of any individual and for new conceptions of human communities.

Leisure, the second chance

In 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson introduced the idea of the “Great Society” in a famous speech at the University of Michigan, in which he stated:

The Great Society is a place where every child can find knowledge to enrich his mind and to enlarge his talents. It is a place where leisure is a welcome chance to build and reflect, not a feared cause of boredom and restlessness. It is a place where the city of man serves not only the needs of the body and the demands of commerce but the desire for beauty and the hunger for community. It is a place where man can renew contact with nature. It is a place which honors creation for its own sake and for what it adds to the understanding of the race. It is a place where men are more concerned with the quality of their goals than the quantity of their goods. (in Miles, 2011, p.127)

This is a statement in opposition to the “tacit belief that people are motivated only by external rewards” (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 2).

Let us remember that free time, leisure time, can be a second chance. Beyond the skills and the talents we must develop and improve upon to justify our place and fill our roles among all our social partners, we do have aptitudes and aspirations which do not fit habitually the social demands. The case of *Séraphine de Senlis*, the naïve style painter (1864–1942), can be seen as an eloquent and extreme example. For most of us, the opportunity to realise hidden talent(s), deep and neglected will, a dream, an ideal, can spring out during the free and open horizon of leisure. In other words, leisure space can offer a moving meeting with our intimate and neglected self. Albert Camus (1954, p. 68) wrote: “In the depth of winter, I finally learned that within me there lay an invincible summer.”

The human aspiration with its treasures of sensitivity is still there, lying sometimes in the depths, far from our insipient awareness, waiting for some singular crossroad at which we can be blessed by a momentous encounter with ourselves, an encounter which can appear as the threshold of gaining access to being a subject. “One who becomes subject faces up to himself, in what gives meaning to his life, creates his freedom and his hope” (Touraine, 2005, p. 189). The crucial point is that we have to make a personal effort, and as Camus told us, we finally can learn.

Leisure education

Directives, expectations, manipulations, and supervisions show us what we should feel, think, and do. This “obvious” part of life makes freedom to be quite virtual and our personal decisions are the expected ones. Yet, in real free time, open to all the opportunities, people are confronted with their personal freedom, i.e. their personal accountability for what he or she chooses to do.

Therefore leisure education’s aim must be to teach and essentially train people how to choose, that is, how to distinguish the elements they will need to realise what they want to do, or in others words what they aspire to be. Such education must offer opportunities to sense, discern, catch, learn, and then understand. Doing so, trainees will be able to comprehend the concept of liberty present in the meaningful encounters between the inner self and the world.

Leisure space with its unusual stimuli should invite us, thanks to new discoveries, to undertake, by ourselves, our own metamorphosis. Rather than being a manipulated object, victims of the growing trend of individualism/hyper-individualism, a prepared woman or man could become a subject capable of taking initiatives, responding, and deciding. That is, to sense and to understand, to be separate and together, to decide while all paths are still open, to live without burning out one’s vitality, to be and become. Much of this occurs within artistic experience.

Leisure education can be the adequate space in which one can try new possibilities to create, at very low cost and with no vital risks, a new personal perspective. This will be a training inspired by the world of arts, in keeping with Buber (1983, p. 283): “Mercy lies in the hands of human beings; the prerogative to come and begin again; to go back always, to return and start ever anew.” Time does not cease to present opportunities (in Hebrew, the words “time” זמן and “opportunity” הזדמנות have the same root), without regard to place, age, or situation, but only with regard to the readiness of our spirit.

Artistic creation is an attempt towards uniqueness. It appears as a complete thing, an absolute presence, and at the same time it belongs to a complex network of links. It issues from independent deed, it realises a superior and free dream, but it funnels in all the energies of civilisations. It is material and it is spirit, it is shape and it is content. (Focillon, 1943, p. 1)

Just like an artist who is able to view all the colours available for his or her future creation emerging in his or her mind, individuals can see the many opportunities offered within free time like an infinite palette from which they can choose the tonalities which fit their own and intimate selves. Thus, they can aspire toward their personal fulfilment.

Leisure education enables people to meet all the potentialities of life, as life runs in every direction, with all its connections and unknown futures. In a word, leisure education goes beyond educating and shaping people for roles, professions, social acceptance, and so on. Thanks to the extraterritorial space of leisure, leisure education can also empower the individual as a whole and autonomous being, and reverse the common saying “the role makes the person” into “the individual fills and shapes the role.”

Saying that the role makes the person means that clear-cut behaviours and expected attitudes work as a kind of baby walker, the purpose of which is to ensure that life keeps going on in its predetermined fashion. Yet, free time, this open space outside the boundaries of the known roles, has no baby walkers and one must gather one’s proper means to find one’s way through this dark side of life time. This is the real challenge of leisure education.

Leisure education has to offer opportunities to discover and acquire talents, aspirations which were not needed or relevant for professional and social functioning.

Leisure education has to offer the chance to discover and acquire essential elements with which one will be able to accomplish new realisations that were – until now – out of focus in roles’ activities, genuine aspirations which are now more reachable. This can be what used to be called “the second chance.” How many people declare, “When I have enough leisure time, I will go, do, undertake ...”? It seems that leisure space and state of mind give the legitimate opportunity to simply be oneself, regardless of any specific role.

In this sense, leisure education will be a new kind of initiation (Spector & Cohen-Gewerc, 2001), an accompaniment and individual attention, a process supporting one’s willingness to improve, which is ultimately the growth of one’s uniqueness.

In essence, leisure education has to be the empowering process able to offer every man and woman the occasion to become familiar with a fascinating world full of stimuli and courses of action, a vast palette in which he or she will discover the elements for his or her personal and conscious becoming.

In the realm of leisure – an open space without obligations except the commitment to ourselves – we can choose the brushstrokes of our inner self. In a word, thanks to this new initiation, we can learn and be able to go behind the scenes and enter into the workshop of life, without getting lost. The aim of this new initiation is to go further and in a different direction than common socialisation. Its essence is an encouragement of and accompaniment to the paths of life’s adventure, with all its facets and their innumerable echoes that one can perceive in one’s inner self. In free time, as in initiation, one has the opportunity to

meet oneself. The experience itself is the realisation, and the realisation is not performance orientated; it is a powerful process of further discovery, expanded growth and greater capacity to choose, judge alternatives and take responsibility upon oneself. Leisure space, being free of any kind of instrumentality, can be the privileged moment to undertake this journey towards our whole self, a journey which includes a new training beyond simple socialisation.

In this leisure training, trainees – like artists who do not know in advance which colours will ultimately be found on their empty canvas – will experience this open creative adventure knowing that they will participate in a fruitful dialogue with the numerous and unlimited colours lying on the palette of existence.

The first step in leisure education will be the rehabilitation of the sense of sight and its creative cycle. First we see; then we look. Next, something focuses our contemplation, which enriches our wider vision.

This spiral process realised in a leisure state of mind can be free from any instrumental need, from any preconceived patterns. It runs beyond and stimulates us to open the mind.

Let's think about the deep and essential difference between the medieval copyist totally focused on the clear-cut mission of reproducing an accurate copy of a canonic book, and the artist whose aspiration is to create something new and unique (Cohen-Gewerc & Stebbins, 2007).

The great challenge of education, especially of leisure education, is to offer a comprehensive training in the problematic field of personal freedom. The individual has to choose. They must choose from the multiplicity of stimuli and processes, from the chaos in and around themselves, in order to create a new order, a unique composition: the single text of their personal existence.

Sometimes a sudden sense of intimate freedom flows further than the wrappings hiding the blandness of the passive action that composes regular life. Then a palpable aspiration for something new appears, as a truly stimulating motivation. This will be a new openness to the deep whispers of existence, broadening the view to the many faces and a refinement of attention to the many voices in it. "When our being in the world, that has been taken for granted, has become unsettled . . . something else shows itself, an announcement of the possibilities that have been inactive" (Mansikka, 2008, p. 266).

Leisure education can accompany us in those open perspectives when we try to enlarge our vision. Memory and recognition, which could be enough in the known roles, are now insufficient. We need all our faculties: observation, discernment, imagination, intuition, and even prophecy. The leisure open realm invites us to discover the innumerable aspects of every moment, with its multiple associations and potential links.

Leisure training can be an adequate way to wean us from the nostalgic obvious world and equip us while we enter into the tumultuous reality we all know so well. Cezanne expressed it, from his artistic experience: "There is only one emotion: the sensation of strangeness; there is only one lyricism: the one which arises from renovating existence" (cited in Cachin & Rishel, 1995, p. 34).

Once inspired by the openness of free time, we must understand that our days, weeks, and years are not standard and duplicated items. Each new moment is a concrete challenge for innovation. Innovation flourishes at the meeting point between all the elements we discover around us and the echo within our inner self

to which the innovation corresponds. Furthermore, innovation is not necessarily “showy” change; rather, it can be some nuance added to personal awareness, one tiny, humble step in one’s growing consciousness, one’s growing presence.

Indeed, at the second and significant step after rehabilitating the “sight,” leisure education entails a consistent training of our capacity to be present, entirely present.

We do understand we are now far, far, away from leisure as distraction, from casual and passive entertainment in which one can waste his or her free time which is a significant part of his or her life. “Time does not get lost, but rather the life of one who wastes time gets lost” (Gonzalez-Pecotche, 1976, p. 20).

Leisure, serious leisure, so well explored by Robert Stebbins (2007), implies another vision of existence. Leisure education has much to do with quality and uniqueness, and less with quantitative and existing consumption that feeds a poor and shallow individualism.

Leisure education’s aim tends also to prepare people for their crucial re-encounter with themselves, with their entire being. That includes not only the instinctive rights to enjoy and have fun, but the spiritual aspiration to sense our partnership with humankind.

When prepared to step freely onto the multiple paths of the leisure realm, we are able to perceive a special echo effect in our human aspirations and can promote in our inner self a new vision of solidarity, which goes far beyond political, ethnic, and other kinds of sectarian belonging. From this perspective, leisure education has nothing to do with the reduced mission of learning and training for social roles; it opens the way to enhanced individuality, an ability to share with human partners and to be totally present in every circumstance.

We must stress once again that individual free time or unwatched space leads, sooner or later, either to freedom, which means consciousness and accountability, or to permissiveness with its escorts – ignorance and irresponsibility. The second option requires no training and entails the “fruitful” and lucrative field of leisure industries and an easy ground for consumption harassment.

This places additional demands on leisure educators. Marketing campaigns know how to absorb the freed resources of people: free money and free time. However, we observe that, as more and more individuals become aware of the sterile track of hyper-consumption and hyper-individualism, they start looking for something better. Leisure education can be the response. It may allow these people to be involved in all aspects of their chaotic, open, and transparent lives without losing their intimate humanity. This aim can be accomplished if we know how to be familiar not only with what is going on around us but also, and above all else, within our inner selves.

When human faculties break through the barriers of internal submission, man conquers freedom of conscience, mobilises his reason and acquires confidence in the elaboration of his judgments; a confidence that protects him against any deceit, against any mystification, wherever it may come from. (Gonzalez-Pecotche, 1998, p. 86)

Who are the teachers capable of fostering the blossoming of this authentic and fruitful freedom? Such teachers are *masters*. And “all masters are foremost masters of humanity” (Gusdorf, 1963, p. 45). By their very existence, they show us the way to be human. A master assumes the mission of guiding another person toward self-realisation as a human being, toward a sort of Promised Land found in the person’s internal world. In this world we find peace, because we find our serene selves. We are

told that a good master has to be an example, a model to be copied. Leisure education will promote other kinds of trainers, trainers/masters who will be a source of inspiration. Those trainers will be a live testimony to a rich and creative use of time, and especially leisure time.

Common opinion sees leisure time as the time to escape, to fly not only from everyday life but also and mainly from oneself. On the contrary, leisure time – free of all our regular obligations directed to external living – invites us to enter into our inner world. One who is conscious of his or her internal world will never be alone; he or she becomes immune to this modern pathology – loneliness which can turn into alienation.

Every part of leisure time is a potential opportunity for discovery, realisation, and improvement, thanks to what occurs and what we make happen. In the same way, we discover more facets and more personal talents doing our professional and social tasks, due to what we learn about ourselves during our presence in leisure. Experiencing this free and present walk in the different portions of time, we are taught that time is more than the sum of the events within it. The added value of leisure time enriches our vision of work time and obligations and vice versa.

Thanks to leisure education, individuals can emancipate themselves from the conventional division of time into the sacred and secular, sensing every minute of their lives as a unique and significant one. One of the benefits will be our capacity to appreciate all of our different times, the different moments of our lives either fulfilling roles and obligations or enjoying leisure.

When one acquires, in every moment, the certainty of being conscious of what he thinks about, of what one does and observes, life takes on a new meaning: it ceases to be what it was to become something that is lived by thinking, which provides one's conscience with what is living. (Gonzalez-Pecotche, 1998, p. 437)

Leisure education should enhance not only what we do but essentially what we are thinking about. "Man is simply a reed – the weakest in nature; however he is a thinking reed. . . . All of our dignity consists thus of our thoughts. Here we are supposedly revealed. . . . We must, therefore, work hard in order to think well . . ." (Pascal, 1670/1972, p. 347). To think well is not to speculate with ideas and theories. To think well has to be a spiral process while one is concretely involved in a path leading from learning to understanding, from understanding to experiencing consciously and then to consistent knowledge, which is enlarged by means of learning, understanding, and so on.

The world of leisure is, from this perspective, the privileged space in which we can realise our intimate aspirations with no pressure of any kind. Thus one can stroll with ease into the leisure sphere, rather than being thrown into it. The leisure domain ceases to be the dark side of life and we are able to move serenely all over the diverse spaces of our whole life.

Conclusion

In many aspects we can say that we live in a privileged period of prosperity and facilities. In the huge supermarket of our global world, so many things are reachable, so many options are open, so many opportunities appear around us, all of which we must and can learn to administer.

All the ingredients seem to be there: infinite sources of information, innumerable nets for available human contacts, multiple possibilities to express and be the self author of our uniqueness. Of course, hyper-individualism is also present, attractive, and ready for us to use, having all the means to dim the potential individuality which needs to be created and continually improved. We have to opt.

The leisure state of mind can promote, beyond the instinctive reaction of escapism supported and encouraged by leisure industries, a moving re-encounter with our intimate self, towards a fruitful dialogue with life as a whole.

Leisure education is not and cannot be a mass intervention, a mass fashion. It has to be an immense enterprise of individuals accompanying individuals, an enterprise shared by men and women of goodwill all around.

The moral and spiritual reserves are still there but they are hard to appreciate because of the great and invasive noises which permeate all the spheres; however I do believe that in some rare moments inbetween circumstantial waves of restlessness, many individuals can and will be interested, paying careful attention to the serene message presented by leisure education.

We are far behind the triumphant conquests of hyper-individualism but numerous individuals, conscious of their improving individuality, are already there, continuing, in their intimate being, the great struggle for human dignity. Leisure space is also the realm of innumerable islands of human realisations, of voluntarism, fruitful collaborations, and sincere commitments which have emerged during privileged leisure states of mind.

These islands are the evidence of possible worthy humanism. Yet these islands must be enlarged into regions, countries, continents; this is the “Why” of leisure education.

Leisure education can expand the quorum and offer the opportunity to so many women and men who aspire but still have not the tools, the stimuli, and the required support for their personal take-off.

Leisure education has to be vigilant not to fall into the trap of conventional socialisation, the purpose of which is limited to how to succeed *in life roles*. Leisure education’s mission is to enlarge the vision towards success *in life as a whole*.

Note

1. This is a near verbatim presentation of the lecture given by Dr Cohen-Gewerc following receipt of the Hillel Ruskin Memorial Scholar Award at the 11th World Leisure Congress, ChunCheon, South Korea, 2010.

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