

Nothing doing: Staring off into space

by [Gordon Atkinson](#) in the [April 17, 2007](#) issue

I always assumed that people who lived in prehistoric times had it rough. Bad housing, no toothbrushes, scratchy clothes and no protection from wild animals or marauding bands of thieves. I imagined a person from the ancient world working all day just to gather some edible roots and maybe kill a weasel to eat, only to be killed himself by a hungry saber-toothed cat or someone who wanted his campsite and the weasel dinner.

So I was surprised to learn that anthropologists believe these primitive people lived lives of relative leisure. With thousands of years of tradition behind them and honed instincts, humans were in perfect balance with their world and had lots of free time. I'm not saying they didn't face challenges, but the notion that their lives were filled with constant work, intense fear and violent death isn't true either.

The average hunter-gatherer worked about two to four hours a day to secure food and shelter, then spent the rest of his time swimming, telling stories, singing, playing games with his children and lazily staring off into space. Sometimes I tell stories or swim or play with my children, but that's once or twice a week—in a good week. As for lazily staring off into space, I've had no experience with that whatsoever, at least not since I've been an adult.

Like many people in the modern world, I am a busy person—a pastor, a writer, a blogger, a husband, father and homeowner. My life consists of a never-ending flow of tasks and duties. And while I go about the business of my day, I am constantly bombarded with noise, advertising, news, music and conversation.

Even my leisure time is filled with bustling activity and incoming streams of information. When I'm not working, I like to read, watch movies or work around the house. In the car I listen to National Public Radio or music. A restaurant I frequent has the sports page from our local newspaper tacked to the wall above the urinal in the men's room. That way even the time we take to urinate can be put to use. It pains me to admit this, but I like reading the sports section in the restroom. I thought it was a clever idea.

An honest evaluation of the way I spend my time is frightening. Exceptions to the above activities are so infrequent that I might as well say they do not exist. I've been told that this kind of living is unhealthy, but I don't know how to live any other way.

A friend of mine escapes the noise and work by going once a year to a monastery where no one talks to anyone else. The lack of talking wouldn't bother me as long as I had my computer and some good books, but he doesn't bring any of that. He goes alone, with just clothes and a toothbrush.

That scares me. What if I got bored? I avoid boredom like ancient people avoided lepers. I won't even stand next to a bored person in case his boredom is catching. So, that's my life. It's busy; I admit that. But it's a good life, as modern lives go. I've never complained about it. I like learning things and listening to things, and I like getting things done.

But something happened on a recent Saturday that has caused me to rethink some things. I did nothing. For an hour, I did nothing at all.

I was doing Saturday work, the work that I enjoy doing but can't do during the week because I'm busy with my professional work. On this particular Saturday I worked on the grounds at our church with some other men, then came home to work in my own yard. I carried about 80 gallons of crushed granite to our backyard, where my wife and I are laying pavers to create an area where we can relax, sip cold drinks and chat with friends around a barbeque grill.

We don't actually do these things, of course. Our weekends are too busy for leisurely barbeques, but perhaps the people who one day buy our home will enjoy our new patio.

By the end of the day I was bone tired. I had removed the rear seat of our minivan so I could haul the granite, and I sat down in on the seat, leaned my head back and stared at the sky.

I could have watched TV. I could have listened to music on my iPod. I could have read a book. But none of these were handy, so I sat and stared upwards for an hour or so. The sky was blue, and I thought about how stunning it must have appeared to people in the ancient world, where bright colors were in short supply.

Occasionally I stared at a cloud, and I found myself thinking in a kind of blissful, free-association way. I felt my breathing. I rubbed my thumb back and forth over the leather of the seat because I liked the way it felt. A mosquito bit me. I blew him off my arm and scratched the bump he left behind.

That hour was not like other hours. During that hour, my time was without form and void, and blueness was over the face of the earth. I don't know if the Spirit of God moved across the expanse of my emptiness, but I can tell you that it felt good.

I clung to my little island of peace and nothingness for a full 60 minutes. I didn't want to go back to the noisy world. Boredom? In that hour, the word held no meaning for me. Boredom only happens when you are hoping to get something done or be entertained.

In that hour, I experienced something prayerful. I wasn't trying to talk to God at all. I wasn't even trying to listen to God. I was simply existing—open, quiet and still. If Elijah is to be believed, God is often found in quiet, still moments of emptiness.

I could only sustain this kind of radical living for an hour. Then I became restless and went inside. My instinct toward busy living has great inertia. It will take many such hours to nudge me off course, but the first blow has been struck. I've been changed a little.

One day during the next week I lay down on the back porch of our church and stared at the trees. I heard one of the parishioners come around a corner. Presumably he saw me lying there and slowly backed away. I wonder what he thought?

I'm still all for doing things. But now I see that there is more—or perhaps I should say less—to life than doing.