

Vacation, Shmaycation

Running Away to Come Home

BY CARRIE GROSSMAN

Everyone loves a good vacation: sunshine, lazy days, and ample time to find fault with our family members. Finally, after countless months with our nose to the grindstone, we can kick our alarm clock to the curb. No more rush hour traffic, email exhaustion, or evening chores. For a little while, we can let all of that go and do nothing but play with the tiny, useless umbrella in our drink.

Whether we escape to a tropical paradise, mountain dwelling, or chic city, vacations snap us out of our monotonous routine. Such getaways provide a welcome relief from the stress of daily life. Even if they never pan out the way we hope, vacations give us something to cling to when everything else sucks. Somehow, our demanding jobs and countless bills seem manageable when we know we can get away from them. Never mind that we may spend hours swatting mosquitoes and soothing a sunburn on our island adventure—these nuisances seem far better than waking up to a blaring leaf blower.

Vacations give us a passport to do nothing at all. For once we don't need to feel guilty about reading a book or lying in the sand, because we've *earned* it. Unlike day-to-day existence, where we have to follow certain rules of the road, on vacation we don't have to sign on the dotted line of our "shoulds." We can swim, or not. Scale a mountain, or not. We don't have to clock in at the beach or scarf down our sandwich beneath a flock of fluorescent lights. Instead, we can relax sans guilt.

For most of us, the Puritan work ethic is so deeply ingrained that we often feel bad if we're not busy. Idleness is a vice, we are told, and work is the Holy Grail. Without our jobs and

hobbies, we're not quite sure who we are, or if we're worthy of ... anything. In a society that values productivity over peace, we're trained to believe that we have to *do* something to be loved. Our simple existence just isn't enough. But what credentials do newborn babies have when they enter this world? Their pure being alone makes them deserving of love and care, not their accomplishments.

While of course work provides important meaning and purpose in life, it can also lead to burnout. Today, employees in many occupations experience extreme levels of stress. Such stress contributes to a host of other issues like ill health, workplace violence, and poor performance. But it's not new knowledge that constant stress is a rotten recipe for wellness. In the mid-19th century, educational reformers like Horace Mann created the summer



break so that students wouldn't run the risk of nervous disorders and depression from over-schooling.

In some sense our desire for vacation is really a desire to fall in love. We want to be smitten by a new place, an exotic dish, or an unknown part of ourselves. We want to be mesmerized by something fresh and mysterious. But what we really need is to fall in love with life *now*,

not once we step off an airplane.

The word "vacation" comes from the Latin root *vacare*, meaning "empty or free." Isn't freedom precisely what we desire when we go on holiday? We desperately want release from our burdens, but whether we travel to a Himalayan village or a snazzy resort, how free are we, really? Most of the time, even when we liberate our body from the humdrum habits of daily life, our mind continues to run far away from wherever we are. Sitting by the sea with a daiquiri and a lover by our side, we may still be the most miserable person on earth. That's because true contentment doesn't come from external conditions. If it did, we'd all subsist on dessert and never get sick. But do things contain happiness, or does happiness come from the mind of the enjoyer?

When we base our happiness on external circumstances, thinking that a person or place is the cause of our contentment, we set ourselves up to be disappointed. Sure, we may feel joyful in the presence of a good friend, but suppose that friend suddenly starts swearing at us—our good cheer may vanish in an instant. If that's the case, any happiness we experience must come from our own mind, not from what we interact with. As William Arthur Ward said, "Happiness is an inside job."

Great sages from many traditions have told us time and again that what we seek is within, but we don't believe them. If we do recognize the truth of their words, it still seems like a hell of a journey to arrive at that bubbling spring of bliss inside, so why not head to Jamaica instead? Of course, there's nothing wrong with going to Jamaica—sometimes we really do need a change of perspective—but, in truth, the lush beauty that we seek on foreign shores lives in our very own heart.

Rumi asks, "Why are you so enchanted by this world, when a mine of gold lies within you?" It's an excellent question. After all, there is much to be enchanted by in this wondrous world.

But if we believe that fulfillment exists somewhere else, we will remain unfulfilled forever. What we truly need is a vacation from our noisy, crowded mind. For that, no travel is necessary. When the mind is quiet and the heart awake, true rest and rejuvenation become our reality, wherever our body may be. 🐾

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