



LUKENOTES

SAINT LUKE INSTITUTE INC. • 8901 NEW HAMPSHIRE AVENUE • SILVER SPRING MD 20903

LUKENOTES is a bi-monthly publication of Saint Luke Institute • Tel. (301)445-7970 • lukenotes@sl.org • www.sl.org

"Icon of St. Luke" - Copyright© 1985 by Monastery Icons

Busyness

Lynn M. Levo, CSJ, Ph.D.

Vol. 9, No. 3

May/June , 2005

We seem to be living more hectic and less healthy lives despite the technological advances that have made life easier, increased productivity and enhanced our ability to communicate. Ever more driven by our calendars and our to-do lists, we seem to accept busyness as the hallmark of our age. Busyness is now usual. We are not only ruled by what Charles Hummel calls the "tyranny of the urgent," we are also intoxicated by the array of distracting activities and trivial pursuits available to us. According to a Lou Harris survey, the amount of leisure time for the average American has shrunk thirty-seven percent since 1973. Free time is almost a misnomer; time itself has become a valuable possession. Why are we so busy? Do we have a choice? What are the consequences of living in such a frenetic manner? Is there an antidote to our busyness?

Being Busy: What, How and Why

There is nothing wrong with living full, productive lives and taking on new challenges. As adults, we have real and right obligations and responsibilities. Tracy Wiebe describes three types of busyness. **Do-able busyness**, which is invigorating, manageable and healthy: **Seasonal busyness**, that comes in spurts at various times of life (e.g., a transition, a crisis), is a temporary state that we get through, knowing that things will slow down later: **Perpetual busyness**, when our life style is controlling us and we are not really living a balanced life, is the real problem that more people are increasingly experiencing. It is this type of busyness that is taking its toll on us physically, emotionally and spiritually.

Busyness, the activity disease, has many facets. It often manifests itself in compulsive work, workaholism, and sometimes in binge activities, where the activity numbs one to feelings, to questions and doubts, and to one's pain. Busyness can also be a more closeted activity, as when individuals appear balanced but in reality are obsessed and not able to rest their minds or to relax. It is easy today to feel pressure to be productive, be on time, make a good impression, meet others' expectations or reform some facet of the world. Even the procrastinator is obsessed with activity, albeit its avoidance.

Why are we so busy? What is driving many of us to live so urgently, so frantically, so chaotically? Several factors underlie our busyness. First, busyness is esteemed in our

culture; efficiency is admired and valued. In addition, technology (cell phones, laptop computers and PDAs) often makes it harder to relax because it enables us to be doing something every minute. Multi-tasking is now normative even though research demonstrates that it can take fifty percent longer to complete two tasks attempted simultaneously than if each were done singly.

Regardless of external circumstances or pressures, the real root of busyness lies with each person. Janet Ruffing proposes that "busyness is a state of mind and a habit of the heart rather than merely the result of the number of tasks to be accomplished." Unrealistic expectations, desires to feel important, and the need for security can drive over-activity. Perfectionism, believing that saying no is a weakness, and low self-esteem may also encourage busyness as a means of feeling better about oneself. Caving in to feelings of guilt may prompt overdoing based on the belief that one has no choice but to say yes to requests, demands or invitations. In addition, being busy is exhilarating for many individuals, creating a sense of power and importance which helps them to avoid uncomfortable and vulnerable feelings such as anxiety, loneliness and sadness.

The Fallout

Busyness is not without physical, emotional and spiritual consequences for individuals and those with whom they relate. Medical personnel estimate that well over fifty percent of all illnesses can be attributed to stress-related origins. Over-activity is producing a deep fatigue that even extended rest seems unable to alleviate. Many individuals report that busyness is contributing to their cutting corners on sleep, exercise and healthy eating.

Busyness can impact our awareness of self and others. We can lose track of who we are, what we think, feel and value. In addition, we can become so insensitive to others and their needs, wants, and desires, that we cross boundaries or ask too much of them as well. Irritability, frustration, and excessive anger seem to be the norm when individuals are multi-tasking and are too busy. Over-activity produces disconnections with others, often resulting in a profound loneliness as well. There is no time to develop deep, meaningful intimate relationships.

Technology has also increased competition. With the increased need to do and perform, there also seems to be an increased temptation to misuse power to move things along, to get things done.

Finally, busyness also gets in the way of one's relationship with God. Our lives have become filled with activity that we are losing our capacity for and commitment to contemplation, prayer and reflection.

Possible Antidotes

What will restore us to better versions of ourselves? First, we need to realize that we have choices. We also need to be clear about what really matters and to refocus our lives so that we

are spending time on what we value most. Relationships with self, others and God need to be a priority. Living more simply, letting go of our unrealistic expectations of self and others, and balancing work and play, activity and leisure will also help us to reclaim our lives.

Lynn M. Levo, CSJ, Ph.D., is a licensed psychologist and the Director of Education and Editor of Lukenotes at SLI.

LUKENOTES is a bimonthly publication of Saint Luke Institute. Permission to use these materials must be requested in writing by contacting Lukenotes@sli.org.

Telephone (301) 422-5499 • Fax (301) 422-5519 • www.sli.org

Copyright © 2008 Saint Luke Institute, Inc. All rights reserved.