

It's Time To Stop Our Busy, Busy Lives

By MEG PETERSON

MY friend, a lawyer, takes his briefcase to the ball game. He even takes it to a cocktail party. He works a minimum of 70 hours a week and is proud of it. The word "leisure" is not in his vocabulary. "Can't waste a minute, you know," he says over his martini. "Time is money. If you're gonna make it big, you'd better get started."

I used to think it was wonderful to be so busy. Busy meant dynamic. Busy meant heavily involved in the mainstream of life. Busy meant accomplishment, and it was a time when we measured our worth by the sum of our accomplishments. Busy meant important.

It was exciting to have phones attached to both ears, and be interrupted by an insistent "call waiting" that heralded communications from around the world. Unlike my friend, I wasn't paid much for what I did, but that didn't matter. I was always busy, with influential, interesting people crowding into my day, leaving me

A lawyer friend works 70 hours a week.

exhausted and delighted and, so I was convinced, fulfilled.

For the last eight years I've been executive director of a nonprofit organization and gather busy people of diverse backgrounds around me, who share their research and participate in meetings held at exciting locations.

After the fourth meeting I began to see a disturbing similarity in many of these people, which seeped through the shell of my own busyness and finally reached my consciousness. These people were very important and doing very important things. If you didn't believe it, just ask them.

But were they really doing something lasting and substantial or merely impersonating themselves? If they were so superior, why did they have to keep telling me so? Was their busyness a necessary part of the process of reaching a higher goal or had it become their goal? Was it, in fact, merely a frantic facade whose underlying aim was to impress?

I soon became convinced that "busy" is a form of pompous self-importance. Whenever I call one of my closest friends, a professor at a Midwestern university, she invariably answers the phone with a sigh and the predictable, "I'm exhausted. I've been working since 6 A.M. You can't imagine how busy I am. I can't go on this way."

This is followed by a litany of her accomplishments, highly seasoned with laments about the pressure of her many-faceted job, and its deleterious effect on a body racked with illness and pain. When, finally, she asks why I called, I say: "Oh, nothing important. Just wanted to see how you are, but now I know — busy."

I no longer call her. I am tired of hearing how wonderful she is!

"You don't understand," said another friend, a harassed department head at a state university. "I didn't want to be the chairperson again, but my dean convinced me that I was the only one could do the job. It's just one of those things. If you want a job done right..." She looked sheepish.

"No free will?" I asked. "What a shame. So this is your lot in life — to be buffeted about and forced to suffer bravely, and, I might add, loudly? You're right. I don't understand you. Every time you have an opportunity, to pare down, you add. You say you hate being busy, so why not start subtracting?"

Busyness now masquerades as perseverance, dedication to excellence. But could it be, instead, a cover for lack of solid accomplishment? Or loneliness? Or fear of change? Or unwillingness to let go? It certainly keeps many of us from dealing with the real issues in our life. Convenient as this may be, busyness is not the easy solution to problems nor the definitive answer to boredom.

I was introduced to busyness early, in my childhood. My mother was always busy, always overwhelmed, always "jammed up." There never seemed to be a few moments in the day when work was set aside and she could say with a clear conscience: "I'm relaxing. I'm quietly enjoying life. I'm finished with 'busy' for the day." She is now an old lady, senile and subdued, but whenever I do break through to her she says: "Oh, dear, I can't talk long. I'm so busy. I just can't ever seem to get finished, and I still don't get anything done."

Over the years, I became like my mother — the quintessence of busy. I was full of my children, full of my work, thriving on doing three activities at the same time and, secretly, feeling sorry for those calm creatures who could deal with only one subject at a time and fell behind in a conversation.

Little did I know how obnoxious I had become — until an old friend dropped into my office, swallowed his timidity and confronted me.

"I'm sick of hearing how busy you are," he said.

"What do you mean?" I sputtered.

"If you don't want to see me, then say so, but don't try to impress me

My mother was always overwhelmed.

with all you're doing and make me feel like a dropout from the fast lane," he said.

"I have this deadline. I can't just stop everything because you want to have a cup of coffee," I said, very much shaken.

"Do you know how phony you sound? How disgustingly 'with it?'" he continued. "Sounds to me as if you have the latest disease: TBS — terminal busy syndrome. Watch out for it. It's sweeping America. Oh, by the way, will you have any time in the next 30 days? Just wondering. Thought we might grab a 15 minute cup of coffee."

I was devastated. Here was someone who wasn't envious, he wasn't judgmental, he simply loved me enough to be honest. This happened three years ago and I haven't been "busy" since then. I bite my tongue whenever the word crops up. I still race around. I still have lots to do. But whenever anyone asserts that I'm probably too busy to take time for this or that, I correct him: "I have lots of time. Just ask me."

Meg Peterson lives in Watchung.