"Another View"

Op-Ed essays

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Laptops limit our leisure

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CENTER VALLEY (March 11, 2007) – The young lady in the picture was clad in a bathing suit and lounging cozily on a beach chair, with the sun shining brightly overhead and the surf gently splashing nearby. Ensnared by our wintry weather, this scene looks enticing. But the focal point of this photo displays something more, a notebook computer prominently placed on the lady’s lap. Peaceful repose gives way to an announcement of wireless service available even there.

This advertisement greeted visitors to our hotel in Arizona last week. There to participate in the annual rituals of Spring training, our team and our fans delighted in the prospect of enjoying eight days of nothing but baseball. What better way to enjoy a break from the doldrums of winter than by partaking in what A. Bartlett Giamatti once called the “festive sensibility” characteristic of all sport.

But there was no escaping the electronic environment in which we all live. Even in the desert the world wide web has spread its fibers. The desire to stay connected has corrupted the simplest of pleasures. Rest no longer brings respite when everything is wired.

Laptops were packed along with bats and gloves. It’s a sign of progress, I suppose, to be able to score the game’s action directly into a computer program that generates the stats, averages, and other metrics that devotees of the sport never tire of studying. But the play-by-play scrawled with a pencil brings its own delight.

While playing games may have been the purpose of the trip, keeping in touch with those not on the field seemed a vital necessity. Whether upon awakening or before retiring (or both), everyone had to check his email, and later report the astonishing number of messages received. Counting electronic hits seemed as meaningful as recording those on the diamond.

Notebook computers are a sign of our times. Wireless technology facilitates our ability to make productive use of our time, even when away from home. But laptops also blur the line between labor and leisure. Why is it that we cannot seem to leave them behind, even for just a few days in the sun?
On the one hand, we value work not only as a means of earning our keep, but also as the mode by which we can give meaning to our lives. “Work is a good thing for man,” wrote John Paul II, “a good thing for his humanity – because through work man not only transforms nature, adapting it to his own needs, but he also achieves fulfillment as a human being and indeed, in a sense, becomes ‘more a human being’.”

On the other hand, we may also consider work as an antidote to loneliness. In this vein, we feel as if we “have” to work, because we are afraid of being left behind; we fear being replaced on the job if we fail to keep busy. So we work longer and harder in order to prove (to ourselves or to others) that what we do matters and that we who do it are necessary to the task. This work routine, now made possible round the clock by computer technology, enables us to deal with what the world-renowned psychoanalyst Erich Fromm calls “the deepest need of man … the need to overcome his separateness, to leave the prison of his aloneness.”

That existential drive compels us, however subconsciously, to take the laptop onto the beach or into the desert or across the sea. We never want to lose contact; we desire always to remain connected. Computers give us a new means to achieve this longing for unity.

But work alone cannot fulfill the human person. And technology, however connected it keeps us, cannot substitute for the human spirit. To be fully who we are, to be at peace with ourselves and in harmony with others, we need the experience of leisure. As G.K. Chesterton astutely observes, “There is no obligation on us to be richer, or busier, or more efficient, or more progressive or in any way worldlier or wealthier, if it does not make us happy.”

Sadly, this whimsical Englishman never experienced the happiness of baseball. But he did appreciate the value of leisure, which he describes as encompassing three things: “The first is being allowed to do something. The second is being allowed to do anything. And the third (and perhaps most rare and precious) is being allowed to do nothing.”

That last entails leaving your laptop at home, at least once in a while.