The fine art of pottering

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Home: the recovery of an ancient ideal

WHETHER IN SCHOOL, FACTORY OR THE OFFICE, work has become the core of life. Academic league tables for the school or the gross national product for the nation reveal our seriousness and passion for work. That which is useful has become valuable, and the useless has little relevance in the contemporary context. All this is a long way from Aristotle's observation that the most valuable is the least useful, and the least valuable is the most useful.

Perhaps this is why the art of pottering cannot be pursued in the school, factory or office: it has little to do with the useful or with purposeful work which achieves goals. The only safe place to potter is at home. It has become domesticated in order to survive. The very term has an antique ring about it as do those other associated ideas of leisure or Sabbath.

Our need and hunger for these may be so great at present that on a Sunday the Ideal Home Exhibition at Earls Court may draw larger crowds than the churches around it, because the former is associated with home and pottering while the latter means duty and purposeful activity.

The setting for pottering has become almost exclusively the home, and the ancient connotations which come from that place have a new relevance in this new century. As the psychologist Thomas Moore has observed,

> Nothing is more intimate than home, and therefore nothing more proper to the soul. Whatever it takes to call forth the spirit of home, our own lares and penates – ancient Roman household spirits – is worth our effort and expense.[1]

The sacredness of the home is surprisingly returning in a new guise as revealed in the host of magazines in any store which range from *Architectural Digest* to *House and Garden*. The Romans would put their household gods near the hearth and thus the *genius loci*, the spirit of the place, always had a religious connotation. As more of our

buildings become associated with work and achievement (the neighbourhood gym or fitness centre would be a good example), the home has become the refuge for the non-purposeful, for here it is safe merely to potter without any specific goal in mind.

The temple, as the German thinker Josef Pieper mused, was the dwelling place of the gods, and so the only building in the village where useful activity did not take place. This may also be the reason that contemplation is returning to our world of spirituality, if one is to judge by the latest listing of books on prayer by contemporary religious publishers.

The recent interest in the Beguines, lay medieval women in the Low Countries, reveals a spirituality which grew and flowered in a domestic setting. One has only to wander through some of these homes in Belgium or the Netherlands – for many of these have now been returned by civic authorities to their original purpose of housing single women who have an interest in combining a lay life of prayer with service to the community – in order to see the tidy and bright homes where a good deal of pottering takes place.

The homely teachings of Julian of Norwich, which are presently so well read, come from her cell with its cat, which speaks much more of the domestic than the ascetic; from her window on the world she also served as town counsellor.

The home is actually a place where the intensity of living is heightened. In *The poetics of space*, Gaston Bachelard states, 'All really inhabited space bears the essence of the notion of home'.[2] This intensity is possible because the element of play is much greater than purposeful or wilful work. The will often has less function in the home than dreams, fantasy or play. This is well expressed in the Book of Proverbs:

> I was with him forming all things;
> and was delighted every day,
> playing before him at all times;
> playing in the world.
> And my delights were to be with the children of men.
>
> (Prov 8:30–31)

Aquinas refers to this in commenting on Ecclesiastes when he speaks of the appropriateness of calling people home to play because play like wisdom is directed to no end but itself. So also is pottering.

The redefinition of time

As the culture in general – both secular and religious – has abandoned Sabbath, it too has retreated to the privacy of the home. When pottering in a non-purposeful manner one actually goes on a retreat from time as it is usually experienced in life outside the home. When Charles Lamb was retired from his employment, he discovered that the new way of life he found actually restored the personal element in his daily experience.

> For that is the only true Time which a man can properly call his own, that which he has all to himself, the rest, though in some sense he may be said to live it, is other people's Time, not his.[3]

The world of employment, he realized, was one where time was purposeful and pragmatic. The goals, however, meant that the personal seemed to disappear when he acted within the corporate goals set by his employers. As work becomes the defining element within our world then it also becomes the way of self-perception and definition.

In order to heighten productivity it was necessary for him to reflect continually on past effort in order to improve it and project himself into the future to anticipate and predict achievements. This looking backwards and forwards meant that the past and the future crowded out the present. Lamb discovered that retirement from work 'was like passing out of Time into Eternity – for it is a sort of Eternity for a man to have his Time all to himself'.[4]

Strangely, Charles Lamb was to rediscover in the nineteenth century what Brother Lawrence and Pierre de Caussade had found in the seventeenth century; de Caussade termed it 'the sacrament of the present moment'. The practice of living in the past and future which characterizes a world without Sabbath time has led to what W. H. Auden characterized as an age of anxiety.

The constant need to project forward in order to predict productivity has certainly increased prosperity, but this has been purchased at a high price. As 'other people's time' becomes the norm, then the personal retreats to the place where it is free from intrusion – the home. Hence the domestic becomes the setting for the Sabbath time because not only has the secular world abandoned it for material gain but the religious culture has done the same, teaching people to postpone the heavenly until after death. The denial of the pleasurable in the present might sound like a religious value, but it would make Catherine of Siena's observation that 'all the way to heaven is heaven' incomprehensible to the world of religion.

Thus a spirituality of space in the home leads naturally to a spirituality of time because they complement each other. Aristotle's dictum that we do without leisure only to give ourselves leisure can be translated into saying that the present world of work receives its value because it leads one to experience a different sort of time either in retirement or in 'time off' spent in the home.

A recent academic on the television Channel Four reflected that oriental philosophy might bring happiness, but only at the price of prosperity. He was perhaps identifying why so many in the final decades of the last century were attracted to the East, where they perceived the present often has a higher value than in the West.

But it was not always the situation. The Genesis story of creation recounts how God rested on the last day and how this rest is to be commemorated and re-experienced in the ritual celebration of the Sabbath. The academic world has preserved some semblance of the Sabbath tradition when the teacher is given 'time off' in order to renew and recreate him- or herself, but this is negated by the provision that this be a productive time in which a project or work of scholarship must be the outcome of this contemporary sabbatical. The recent repeal of the Sunday trading laws has indicated that work and commerce cannot afford the non-productivity which was part of the traditional practice of observing the day of rest, and a present state of restlessness may be the hidden cost of the venture.

The Jewish practice of the jubilee year meant that this was a time for the forgiveness of debts, and so the heavy burdens of the past were lifted from the poor who were shackled to what had gone before, and were unable to move into the refreshment and sense of newness which comes with living in the present.

Isaiah realized this inherent harmony and rhythmic pattern of seasonal living when he wrote:

> From new moon to new moon,
> and from Sabbath to Sabbath,
> all flesh shall come to worship before me,
> says the Lord. (Isai 66:23)

The ancient Babylonians had a special day of rest for the quieting of the heart, and the Sabbath became a defining practice of Israel and is especially strong in the prophetic writing. Not only was labour prohibited on this day, but it came to be a day of rest and relaxation not only for the Hebrews but for all those under their protection –

foreigners, slaves and even animals. The Sabbath became the sign of God's covenant with his people.

> If you refrain from trampling the Sabbath,
> from pursuing your own interests on my holy day;
> if you call the Sabbath a delight
> and the holy day of the Lord honourable;
> if you honour it, not going your own ways,
> serving your own interests, or pursuing your own affairs;
> then you shall take delight in the Lord,
> and I will make you ride on the heights of the earth. (Isai 58:13–14a)

Mircea Eliade saw in these festivals a liberation from profane time in 'the eternal present' of sacred time, re-enacting the moment when the world came from the creator's hands. Hence there is a relationship between observing the Sabbath and identifying with the creator and the act of creation. This making of the new comes not from the purposeful acts of will necessary in the workplace but in the play which is characteristic of the Sabbath in the home.

This also restores the element of the game which was once the central experience in athletics. The natural rhythms, the boundaries of rules which enhance rather than prohibit freedom, have remained in the play of children although they have disappeared from most professional sport. The very unpredictability of the outcome heightens the sense of delight and the abandonment of a prediction of the resulting score which will occur in the future. As Charles Lamb observed, it is 'like passing out of Time into Eternity', and thus the homely game, the play of the child, the pottering in the domestic setting, all move one out of the realm of the profane into that of the sacred which is the nature of the Sabbath experience.

When Isaiah spoke of the movement of new moon to new moon, of Sabbath to Sabbath, he recognized that the pattern of the rest day is part of the seasonal cycle and that human regeneration exists within that of the larger patterns of the natural world. The harmony of this continual renewal of life contains the human effort and gives it a context in which to flow as the game contains the athlete within its rules. Sport and Sabbath have more in common than a Sunday afternoon football match on television would indicate.

Leisure comes home

In the ancient world one went to school if one did not have to train for a practical trade. Hence 'school' meant 'leisure' and the place for those

who were free from the necessity of making a living. It was for these people to learn the liberal arts – the way free people live – and not the servile arts which were those that served a practical purpose. This view advocated by Aristotle and Cicero had its last great re-statement by Newman in his *Idea of the university.*

In the mid-twentieth century the German philosopher Josef Pieper returned to this theme in order to explore the life of leisure in the light of the political states emerging from the aftermath of the Second World War. In a world where work was becoming the highest value in society he examined the place of leisure within contemporary culture.

> Compared with the exclusive ideal of work as activity, leisure implies (in the first place) an attitude of non-activity, of inward calm, of silence; it means not being 'busy', but letting things happen.[5]

The common root of 'busy' and 'business' indicates that pottering in the home has certainly become counter-cultural. At the same time it seems to claim descent from the long Christian tradition of speaking of contemplation and activity in the guise of Mary and Martha, which extends from Gregory the Great to Thomas Merton, both of whom were deeply influenced by Benedict, who saw his movement as 'the school of the Lord', with all the associations that existed between the school and the place for the leisured in the classical world. Gregory, however, extended the Mary and Martha image by comparing them to Rachel and Leah in the Genesis story and seeing that they are reconciled in the life of Jacob, thus avoiding the artificial dichotomy which was to separate the two spheres in some later Christian thinkers.

Pieper continually probes the relationship between the contemplative life and the state of leisure. He sees that we perceive what is around us in two ways – through what he terms *ratio* and *intellectus*, which might be termed rational analysis and intuition. But just as there is a relationship between the spirituality of space and that of time, so too is there the same in these two ways of knowing. '*Ratio*, in point of fact, used to be compared to time, whereas *intellectus* was compared to eternity, to the eternal now.'[6] The rational intellect perceives parts, and the intuition grasps the whole. In reference to time the Greeks spoke of the former as *chronos* and the latter as *kairos*.

In one of his last talks before his death Thomas Merton spoke of time and prayer:

> If we really want prayer, we'll have to give it time. We must slow down to a human tempo and we'll begin to have time to listen. But for this we have to experience time in a new way . . . The reason why we don't take time is a feeling that we have to keep moving. This is a real sickness. Today time is a commodity . . . we must approach the whole idea of time in a new way. We live in the fullness of time. Every moment is God's own good time. His *kairos*.[7]

The school, the office and factory have all introduced 'time-saving' devices which have increased the speed of life, while the rational and practical dominate the life of the worker. Pieper, however, sees the need of the contemporary person to retain the faculty of grasping the world as a whole and realizing his or her full potentialities as an entity meant to reach wholeness.

The call home

It would be strange if one did not feel somewhat guilty when pottering around the home. The attitude of stillness, of unproductiveness and, as Merton said, 'the need to keep moving' all seem somewhat suspect in our world. So much conspires to bring the business and busyness of the workplace into the home. Yet this is the sacred spot because it remains the best place simply to be rather than to do. Here productive time can be turned into Sabbath time, *chronos* into *kairos*.

When Aristotle and Cicero advocated the leisured life it was only possible for the free male citizen. The recent interest in feminine and lay spirituality may indicate that this is open to all – male and female – in its new location – the home. The need to lift the burden of poverty from those who experience it here and abroad is not to create new customers and consumers for our products but to assist God (in Aquinas' phrase) to call everyone home.

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NOTES

1 Thomas Moore, *The re-enchantment of everyday life* (London, 1997), p 85.
2 Gaston Bachelard, *The poetics of space*, trans Maria Jolas (Boston, 1969), p 5.

3 Charles Lamb, 'The superannuated man', *The last essays of Elia* in *The complete works and lectures*, ed Saxe Commins (New York, 1935), pp 174–175.
4 *Ibid.*, p 175.
5 Josef Pieper, *Leisure: the basis of culture*, trans Alexander Dru (New York, 1963), pp 40–41.
6 *Ibid.*, p 43.
7 Thomas Merton, quoted in Bonnie Thurston, *To everything a season* (New York, 1999), p 109.