

# BOREDOM, BRAINSTORMS, AND BOMBS

By CLIFTON FADIMAN

ONE of the marks identifying a revolutionary period is the speed with which a shocking statement changes to a boring one. It has taken us only about five years not merely to become used to, but to yawn over, the repeated announcement that—barring war, revolution, or economic bust—the age of leisure is at our doorstep. It is all so accepted: the thirty-hour work week is around the corner; the twenty-hour work week is around the next corner; automation is solving the problem of production; Father Time is sitting expectantly on our hands.

There is a certain danger in everybody all at once hearing about something as crucial as the imminence of leisure. This danger was less dire in former days when communication was subject to normal and perhaps advantageous delays. Now there is a tendency to absorb the instantaneously received idea, mentally file it, and proceed to the next message transmitted by the tireless mass-communicators. With so many signals crowding in upon us there is no time, and soon no inclination, to arrange them in order of importance, reflect upon them, and take proper action. Eventually the alert reception of the

signal suffices. We delude ourselves into thinking that because we know a thing we have done something about it: our equivalent of the primitive's belief that to name is to control.

Perhaps we might be stirred to more useful action if it were made clear that wholesale leisure is not only an opportunity but a peril. Just because the word leisure has traditionally pleasant connotations we may fail to realize that it presents us with a critical as well as a novel state of affairs. It is like peace. Peace is associated with calm, rest, harmony: it sounds like a passive state. But if we should ever really be pitchforked into a universal peace we would in a daze wake up to the fact that it is a dynamic state, and that the proper use of peace necessitates the calling forth on a vast scale of human energies that have hardly been stimulated, much less tapped.

Some of the vastest changes in man's wayward career have swiveled on a shift in the meaning of a word. When we decided that God meant not Many but One we grew into different human beings. It is such shifts that make the dictionary an absorbing historical work, more a story of the life of man than a column of word-correspondences.

Upon an acute understanding of the

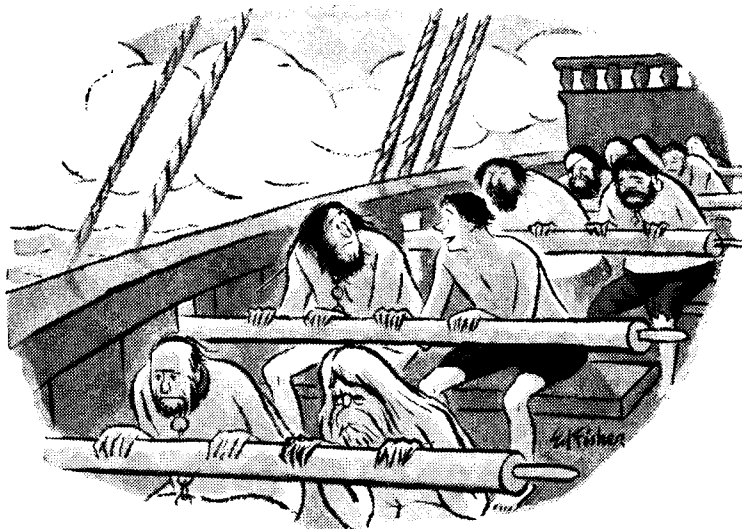
meaning of the word *leisure* our lives during the next hundred years may well in part depend. For words are not only words. They are motors, often prime motors.

For twenty years I have felt vaguely that *leisure* is a much bigger word than is commonly thought; that it is not necessarily identical with *recreation*, in the sense that playing golf is recreation; that it involves the opposite of rest; and that if mankind ever truly engaged in it he would become a different animal, just as he did after the Fall of Man, when seemingly unto Eternity he forsook leisure, and went to work.

But it was not until I came across an essay by the distinguished philosopher and educator Mortimer J. Adler that I began to understand myself. This essay is called "Labor, Leisure, and Liberal Education" and appeared originally in *The Journal of General Education*, October 1951.

MR. ADLER'S main concern is, first, with the distinction between *labor* and *leisure*, and, second, with the proposition flowing from that distinction: that in an industrial democracy like ours adult liberal education, from which we graduate with our final breath, is to be understood *only* in terms of leisure. By liberal





"Actually, I'm just working my passage—it's part of the University of Salamanca Student Exchange Program."

education for free men Mr. Adler means something distinct from "vocational training," which is the education of slaves or workers. (Since Adam's Fall and up to Automation's Rise the human race has been composed mainly of slaves or workers.) Liberal education is a large, high-ceilinged word: it includes physical training, which liberates the body; moral training, producing good moral habits or virtues; and intellectual training, producing the free mind.

To understand the tie between liberal education and leisure we must now ask ourselves what leisure is. It is important for us to come up with the right answer because ours is the first era in which it is possible to ask the question. Up to now most of us have spent our lives in labor, engaged in for purposes of bodily survival or profit, sleep, and other biological necessities, such as elimination, washing, hygienic exercise, nourishment, sexual intercourse (considered as a need rather than an art). The time left is free time or spare time.

Now free time can be used in two ways. One is *play*, which includes all ways of killing time. The other is engagement in leisure activities. Mr. Adler includes among these leisure activities "such things as thinking or learning, reading or writing, conversation or correspondence, love and acts of friendship, political activity, domestic activity, artistic and esthetic activity." I should add creative travel, which is a kind of conversation with what is past or new or alien. These things are engaged in *for their own sakes*—that is why they are not labor. Work is done under compulsion. Leisure activities, however, we engage in freely; they are not "externally compensated."

In redefining leisure Mr. Adler is really going back to its original meaning, which we have obscured by confusing it with amusement or diversion or recreation—all excellent things that have little to do with true leisure. In Greek the word *leisure* is *scole*. Sounds like "school"? Exactly. In ancient Greece the word *scole* had two meanings. Primarily it meant time free from labor. The second meaning tells us what men should do with this free time—and, strangely enough, that meant learning and discussing. "School" and *scole* are related.

Now learning or study, says Mr. Adler, is neither play nor work. Play is pleasant but static. No change in the human being flows from it. To engage in it to excess, as children do by nature, is a kind of regression to childhood. Nor is leisure work; work is compulsory, for the sake of leisure.

Thus, briefly, Mr. Adler's argument, which he caps with a demonstration that leisure activities, in this sense, *are the same as virtue*. Only in the one-class leisure society lying in our immediate future does a qualified Utopia become more than a dream. Or, as Mr. Adler puts it in his perspective-opening essay, "The Capitalist Revolution," "The ultimate aim of pure capitalism, beyond the establishment of economic justice, is the enjoyment of leisure for all men in the major portion of their life's time."

**F**ROM the severities of Mr. Adler's logic I should like to rescue only one word. That word is *play*, which (perhaps because he is himself a strenuous mental athlete) he is not inclined to use as an honorific. And yet I should imagine that even he would admit that the notion of mental play

is involved in most of the leisure activities he mentions. With this shift in accent my thesis now marches with Mr. Adler's: that an important key to the use of leisure lies in the large-scale production of mental players or—let us take the bull by the horns—of both professional and amateur intellectuals. There lies the paradox: the one country that has gone all out for the production of material goods is now, as a consequence of this same productive genius, forced to go all out for the production of nonmaterial goods. We who have proved magnificently that any number can work are now compelled to prove that any number can play.

I plead for the play of the mind not on the ground that it is pleasant but on the ground that it is necessary. And, if this seems to verge on the puritanical, we might consider that a certain infusion of puritanism was helpful in both the founding and the development of our country. No great pioneering effort is devoid of a tincture of seriousness; and the kind of wholesale, pervasive mental exercise I am talking about is in the exact sense pioneering.

I said it was necessary, and I believe it to be so, unless we are prepared to accept tedium as an integral part of our lives, just as the Russians accept domination as an integral part of theirs. For we are indeed beginning to be afflicted with a new kind of tedium. It may make us quite ill. To prevent or cure it will soon become an urgent necessity.

This twentieth-century tedium is a curious one. It is rather unlike previous tediums. The medieval monk, his soul sunk in *acedia*, was in part suffering from monotony, from a lack of stimulus, from an insufficiency of active control of his environment. Our trouble is the precise contrary. We are suffering from an excess of control, or apparent control, of our environment, and from an excess of stimuli, available everywhere and at all times. The lackluster fare of the subway rider reading his newspaper, the vacant look of the moviegoer emerging from his dark cave, the unexpectant countenances of the citizens swarming along Broadway: these are all pictures of a special boredom. Not unhappiness, not fatigue, and certainly not aristocratic ennui; but that odd modern *stunned* look that comes of a surfeit of toys and a deficiency of thoughts.

One of the most interesting ways in which our illness reveals itself is in our passion for motion. Chrysler, for example, has designed a car that will travel 130 miles per hour. This

will be bought by those who are weary of cars that travel only eighty miles per hour. The appeal is, though lunatic, profound. It strikes deep. Machinery *applies* power; therefore, we reason, it should give *us* power. It does not. We refuse to admit it. We will force it to make us feel powerful. And so poor Françoise Sagan smashes her ribs in an imbecile accident because in her sickness she is willing to mistake motion for emotion. The case of James Dean is similar; and it is more than a coincidence that he should be the cult-object of the most profoundly bored generation of youngsters in all history. The current excesses of these miserable children stem in part from the frustration of having the simulacrum of power without the reality. For the unconscious knows that no one is enhanced when he presses a switch, turns a dial, or jams down an accelerator. But the conscious refuses to admit it; one's pride would be hurt.

Motion mania may assume queer forms. The Anglican Bishop of North Queensland recently suggested church-run "antiboredom clinics" to counteract the gambling craze of Australians. Because they are bored they gamble; and gambling is but a way of communicating swift motion to money instead of to one's own body.

The United Nations has discovered another problem on its hands, that of relieving the growing boredom of the world's first international police force. It is meeting it with boxing gloves, radio quartets, and so on—all the paraphernalia of the spiritual vacuum from which the boredom emerges.

The Crusades were stimulated in part by the love of God, in part by the love of loot, in part by the tedium of daily life. So in the future in highly industrialized countries boredom may expand to such proportions that it can release itself only through mass aggression. Wars may be fought less between nations than between rival systems of ennui. The hyperbomb of that day will have lost meaning as a weapon and gained meaning as a complex substitute for Françoise Sagan's "sports" car, as this death device is so playfully named. That being the ultimate logic of the situation, we may contrive to kill boredom and ourselves at one and the same time.

And so we have these two vast and powerful forces, matching each other in the speed of their growth, rushing toward each other to what would appear an unavoidable, head-on collision. Of this potential disaster there exists a general uneasy sense. As yet

it has hardly reached the conscious level. Already we feel, and correctly, that the use of the coming leisure, as well as the neutralization of the coming tedium, are somehow connected with a fresh understanding of the idea of play. Being, however, animals first and rational animals second, it is natural enough that at the outset we should associate play with Mr. Adler's conception of the word—that is, with diversion, mass excitement, violent activity, accelerated motion, and the pleasures the large muscles and the epidermis are eager to supply. And so, with a magnificent efficiency translated from our commercial and productive skills, we are mass-producing laughter, entertainment, speed, sport, colored images, loud noises, excitement. For all this there is something to be said: I am not arguing for gray solemnity. But it does not touch the heart of our dilemma. The solution does not lie in the multiplication of external stimuli in the area of pure diversion.

**H**ENCE in a blind, almost instinctive way we seek it in other areas. One of these areas is that of business, in which as a nation we are supremely competent and in which as individuals most of us are supremely interested.

Psychologists use the term *elation* in its generally accepted sense—an emotional state of intense, joyful excitement. But they also frequently give it a special coloration whereby it becomes a distant cousin of mania and is linked to a partial loss of the sense of reality. We have all been struck, I am sure, with the way in which elation, as thus conceived, has entered

advertising, that accurate barometer of our unconscious social pressures. The cigarette jingle implores us: "Don't miss the fun of smoking." "It's fun," we are told, "to save at the Federal Savings Bank." "Just luxury and fun while you fly," says one of the larger airlines reassuringly, brightly. And a tooth-paste maker, using pictures of laughing, playing children as illustrations, seeks to persuade us that brushing is fun.

I have no quarrel with the object of these advertisers. They are trying to sell perfectly honest goods and services. I am concerned only to point out the new note of elation that shrills through such advertisements and a thousand like them. For clearly there is something excessive in associating "fun" with sober, habitual actions like brushing one's teeth and filling out deposit slips, something akin to hysteria about the hordes of wildly grinning figures who gesture and scream their manic messages concerning prunes and refrigerators. The disquieting effect on the non-enthusiastic observer proceeds, I think, from a sense that we have here a case of emotional displacement. Seller and buyer are cooperating, to a degree in all innocence, to insert into the world of detergents (Be *Happy* with Didey-Wite!) and chewing gum (Try This *Exciting New Gum with That Fascinating Artificial Flavor!*) the emotions linked to true play. They are trying to climb over the tedium-leisure roadblock by using the ladder of consumption, by forcing the mere tools of daily

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—Hans Namuth.

**TONES OF TALK:** For more than three decades Clifton Fadiman has been writing an average of 100,000 words a year, yet "Any Number Can Play," from which the accompanying article is drawn, is only his second book. It will be released by World on September 5. A sequel to "Party of One," published in 1955, the forthcoming volume continues the critic-columnist's effort to restore to the familiar essay the sense of personality it had when Lamb and Hazlitt were at work. "That," he has conceded, "is not very fashionable. People don't like them because they aren't analytic—giving the final lowdown on everything." Nevertheless, Mr. Fadiman is all for a return to nineteenth-century discursiveness and the intellectual climate of Montaigne, whose motto was "What do I know?" "Self-distrust," he once observed, "can be a very educational thing." Although he has translated books from German and French, been teacher, editor, anthologizer, and *The New Yorker's* literary critic, Mr. Fadiman gained widest recognition as master of ceremonies on "Information Please" and assorted television shows. Currently host for the NBC radio series "Conversation," he makes a concerted effort to convey to the printed page "the tone of talk." Regardless of whether one "considers them nonsense," he wants the reader to feel behind his sentences a genuine voice. "I think," he said, "there are, in a way, only two kinds of writers: the great ones, who can give you truths, and the lesser ones, who can only give you themselves." Acknowledging his lot with the latter, Mr. Fadiman remarked of his new book, "It represents an imperfect attempt to see what my own mind could come up with, if allowed free play; I am not a professional thinker."

—ROCHELLE GIRON.





## The American Language: Proper and Improper

**"A Dictionary of Contemporary American Usage," by Bergen Evans and Cornelia Evans (Random House. 567 pp. \$5.95) and "A Dictionary of American-English Usage," by Margaret Nicholson (Oxford University Press. 671 pp. \$5) are reviewed by Professor Mario Pei of Columbia University, author of "The Story of English" and "The Story of Language."**

By Mario Pei

A EUROPEAN scholar recently remarked to me that there is a striking parallel between a nation's view of law and the same nation's view of language. The Roman tradition, he claimed, passed on to the nations descended from Rome a legal code which may on occasion be too lax or too severe, but which is fixed and precise. The Anglo-Saxon lands have inherited instead a tradition of "common law," working largely by precedent. "You are not right or wrong, guilty or not guilty in the eyes of the law by reason of fixed standards," he said, "but only by virtue of a series of decisions, often in conflict, made in similar cases across the centuries by judges who themselves relied upon earlier decisions. In like manner, when it comes to language, the Frenchman, Spaniard, or Italian can rely upon a ruling of his language academy and safely pronounce a certain form, spelling, pronunciation, or grammatical construction to be right or wrong. All you people of English speech can do is to refer to a vague, uncertain something known as usage, something that bears to language about the same relation that precedent bears to law."

In language, it was not always thus.

The older generation among us still recalls the prescriptive, normative grammars of our youth, by whose dictum something you said or wrote was "right" or "wrong," and this despite the complete absence of an English-language academy throughout our entire history. As a matter of fact, both Margaret Nicholson's "American-English Usage" and Fowler's "Modern English Usage," from which it stems, blissfully combine the term "usage" with the unequivocal adjectives "right" and "wrong." It is perhaps only in the most modern American works, of which Bergen and Cornelia Evans's "A Dictionary of Contemporary American Usage" is a fair sample, that "usage" triumphs and "right" and "wrong" are all but eliminated. But even the Evanses occasionally speak of "acceptable" and "unacceptable" uses.

By its very nature, "usage" lends itself to a variety of interpretations.

In vain do our modern American grammarians seek to circumscribe and limit it by defining it as "the language of the educated people" (who is and who is not educated, in these days when practically every one knows how to read and write, and most young people have gone to high school?), or the "standard language," to which an undefined "substandard" is opposed. How are we to determine "usage"? On one occasion, I was asked to look through a booklet designed to impart some American English to French populations that might come in contact with our armed forces. I found "I laid on the bed" and marked it for revision, but was voted down on the ground that "90 per cent of the G.I.'s say it that way." I shall refrain from using the words "right" and "correct," which the modern school of American grammarians abhors, but does this make *laid* "standard" in the use quoted above?

All this is not being said in a spirit of criticism, but merely to indicate the thorns that strew the path of one who would compose a dictionary of modern Anglo-American or American usage. "Language changes!" says Dr. Evans. True; the trouble is that it changes unevenly. An innovation may be accepted by some of the speakers, not by others. Then the question comes up: "What is standard?" Shall we tolerate every innovation, however irrational or freakish? Shall we accept it only when it has penetrated the upper crust? Shall we regard those who say "I laid on the bed" and "I ain't got none" as ignoramuses? Or, conversely, shall we condemn as hopeless old fogies those who say "Whom did you see?" and "It is I"? Usage is such an elastic yardstick!

Fowler and, by reflection, Miss



—George Cserna.

**OF SIBLINGS AND SYNTAX:** "Collaboration is nothing new to us," Bergen Evans said last week. Cornelia Evans nodded. It began, in fact, more than forty years ago when the brother and sister, children of the American consul at Sheffield, England, teamed up to write plays and verse for their family's approval. Their most recent collaboration is the "Dictionary of American Usage" which Random House has just published.

The idea for this weighty project (134 pounds in manuscript) occurred to Bergen some years ago while he was teaching English (as he still does) at Northwestern University. ("It's an idea," he observed, "that occurs to everyone who has had to plod through English I papers.") He got in touch with Cornelia, who by this time was in Washington working as writing consultant to the Children's Bureau. Over seven years and a thousand miles the brother and sister collaborated, Bergen marshalling the clichés and synonyms, Cornelia attacking the grammar and syntax. Checking conflicts in usage, they asked "booby-trap" questions, and often got surprising results. In "Winstons taste good like a cigarette should," it was the "good" that upset many, while "like" as a conjunction sounded just fine.