More praise for Al Gini’s *The Importance of Being Lazy*

“Al Gini is to philosophy what Edison was to engineering—he subjects Great Ideas to the service of the common good. His reading of the human condition leads him to the conclusion that we need to take things a little more easy. Now I have powerful ammunition the next time someone wants me to get out of the hammock.”

—Peter Sagal, Host of NPR’s *Wait Wait…Don’t Tell Me!*

“By degrees both scholarly and whimsical, and written by one of the hardest working people in leisure studies today…Al Gini delivers a brilliant narrative on the history of leisure as well as its ongoing necessity for workaholics today…This is an essential book.”


“For all of us hyper-programmed, over-committed, Type-A workaholics, Al Gini has the prescription for what ails us: Put down the Palm Pilot and cancel the meeting. It’s time to unplug, unwind, and rediscover the joy of play. God bless him.”


“This exquisitely researched offering provides sharp insight and a new perspective into why Americans must take vacations, why many feel they must escape if only for two weeks a year the ever-growing demands of what has become a pulverizing and dehumanizing daily grind”

—John Eckberg, career and workplace reporter for the *Cincinnati Enquirer*

“Gini is so persuasive I kept putting the book down to go out and play!”

—Eric Zorn, columnist for the *Chicago Tribune*

“With wit and grace Gini examines the meaning of leisure and challenges readers to reflect on how they spend their time.”

—Joanne B.Ciulla, Ph.D., Professor, Coston Family Chair in Leadership and Ethics, Jepson School of Leadership Studies

“It’s a measure of how twisted our work-based minds have gotten, that we need a book like this one to persuade us that enjoying ourselves is okay. But need it we do, and Al Gini makes a compelling case that
a life without play or leisure is a life missing in action, without discovery, growth, and an ingredient we seem to have forgotten: fun”

—Joe Robinson, author of Work to Live

“Having previously explored our cultural obsession with work in My Job, My Self, Al Gini now takes us on a fascinating journey through leisure. He brings to this topic a philosopher’s mind and a humorist’s wit...Illustrating his discussions with examples from his own life, Gini never lets us forget that he is as immersed in these realities as the people he studies. The Importance of Being Lazy solidifies Al Gini’s reputation as a leading philosopher of contemporary American culture.”

—Ronald M. Green, Director, Ethics Institute, Dartmouth College

“Al Gini reminds us that work is not all there is to life. The Importance of Being Lazy offers a timely reminder that ‘all work and no play’ makes Jack (and Jill) pretty dull adults.”

—Gregory R Augustine Pierce, author of Spirituality @ Work: Ten Ways to Balance Your Life On-the-Job, President and Co-publisher of ACTA Publications, Chicago, IL

“Wonderfully entertaining, informative and thought-provoking—a delight to read.”

—Allan Cox, author of Confession of a Corporate Headhunter
The Importance of Being Lazy

In Praise of Play, Leisure, and Vacations
The Importance of Being Lazy

In Praise of Play, Leisure, and Vacations

AL GINI

Routledge
New York and London
To Mary Koenig, whose work put this book together.

To Damon Zucca, whose encouragement made this book possible.

To Sherry Gini, who makes life a pleasure and every vacation an adventure!
If all the year were playing holidays, To sport would be as tedious as to work; But when they seldom come, they wished for come.

-William Shakespeare’s Prince Hal, *King Henry IV, Part 1*
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The Project and the Problem

More men are killed by overwork than the importance of the world justifies.

—Rudyard Kipling

The history of labor and work is long and convoluted. The history of not working is short. Paid downtime, vacations, leisure are, for the vast majority of working folks, perks of the postindustrial age. Clearly, Melville’s whalers, Dickens’s sweatshop workers, and Sinclair’s meatpackers knew nothing of holidays, sick time, and personal days off.

What many of us now take to be a standard part of the annual rights of summer—time off, travel, organized play—was, until recently, the exclusive preserve of the aristocracy, the landed gentry, and the nouveau rich. It is only since World War II that the general American workforce has taken to the roads with a vengeance, spent quality time with the kids in a cabin in Connecticut, or traveled to Europe and beyond. And it is only since the success of Disneyland that the travel industry has committed itself to the goal of offering every man, woman, and child in America the opportunity to spend two weeks on the “Love Boat Cruise” of their choice.
My thesis is a simple one. Even if we love our jobs and find creativity, success, and pleasure in our work, we also crave, desire, and need not to work. No matter what we do to earn a living, we all seek the benefits of leisure, lassitude, and inertia. We all need to play more in our lives.

As a nation, by living out the virtues of our Puritan past and pioneering forefathers, we have achieved unparalleled success. In being “dutiful soldiers” and “diligent in our toil,” we have created a land of riches and opportunity. Of course, there are some real downsides connected to our collective efforts and achievements.

Like it or not, too many of us, out of desire or necessity, choice or chance, put too much time in on the job. We have made a fetish out of work. It’s now part of our character and culture. We have become addicted to the promise of work. Work promises we will get ahead. Work promises power, money, and influence. Work promises we will be accepted, respected, successful. And so, we work. We work because we want to, because we need to. We work out of habit and desire. We work to occupy time. We work to establish our place in the pecking order, to guarantee status and prestige. And, too often, we work because we simply don’t know what else to do with ourselves, because we think we must and should.

But even if we don’t overwork, even if we are not certifiable workaholics, work still preoccupies our lives. Most of us will spend the majority of our adult conscious life on the job. It has simply become standard to respond to the conventional salutation of “Hello, how are you?” with some version of the refrain “I am so busy!” Unfortunately, we say this to one another with no small degree of pride, as if our exhaustion were a trophy and our ability to keep going a mark of real character. As theologian Wayne Muller has pointed out: “The busier we are, the more important we seem to ourselves and, we imagine, to others.” Sadly, to be busy, to be unavailable, has become the model of the successful life.
Although we use being busy as our mantra and our model, there is some research suggesting that even though we claim to adhere to the strict interpretation of the Protestant work ethic, most of us in fact really don’t “walk the talk” or put in as much time on the job as conventional wisdom would lead us to believe. In a 1997 study titled *Time for Life: The Surprising Ways Americans Use Their Time*, the time use experts John Robinson and Geoffrey Godbey of Penn State University argue that despite all the intrusions and demands upon people’s lives these days, Americans in the 1990s have more leisure than ever before. Not everyone of course. A working single mother of two children doesn’t have as much time as a sixty-five-year-old empty nester. And, of course, a married father of four isn’t as carefree as a twenty-year-old single male. But in general, say the authors, Americans are working less than they did thirty years ago—about fifty hours per week, which includes paid work time, household chores, and commuting. And Americans, say the authors, now enjoy close to forty hours of leisure per week, five more hours than we had in 1965. “People think they are working longer hours,” says Godbey, “but in reality, they mistake the pace of work for length of time spent working. On average, the number of hours people spend working has diminished.”

Needless to say, this is a controversial thesis and one that has received a lot of criticism because it seems to directly counter the pace and feel of our lives. The authors, however, aren’t surprised by this reaction. The problem, they claim, is that the society we live in values and measures time—“being busy has become a status symbol.” We constantly brag about being busy, say the authors of the report, because being busy means we are important. Hence, when people are asked how many hours they work, eat, tend to children, do chores, and so on, they exaggerate. So instead of just asking them, Robinson and Godbey required their ten thousand survey participants to keep a minute-by-minute, 24–hour diary of how they spent their days. The results were surprising. When asked, women claimed that...
they put in 40.4 hours per week on the job, and men claimed they put in 46.2 hours. When calculated from diary entries, women actually put in 32 hours per week and men worked 40.4 hours per week.³

Robinson and Godbey’s research wants to change the agreed-upon number of hours we claim to be on the job. I think their numbers are wrong. I think they are way too conservative. But no matter the exact numbers, it doesn’t change how this society sees itself and deals with the issues of work, time, and self-importance. Although it may well be true that people mistake working faster and being more rushed with working longer, Robinson and Godbey’s data also indicate and reinforce the overall thesis that busyness, constant rushing, and stress are huge problems in our society. Numbers aside, the point is that the feeling of being pushed, overworked, or too busy is primarily about attitude, concentration, and orientation, and not just about the actual hours we put in on the job. There may be lots of debate about how much time Americans spend working, but there’s no disputing that it “feels” like we’re working more. When it comes to feeling busy—no matter what they told you in logic class—perception is reality!

Of course, just because we put in so many hours on the job doesn’t mean we like it. But love it or hate it, work sets the pace and establishes the rhythm for everything else we do in life. Alexis de Tocqueville may have been the first to recognize and report on the energy and busyness of Americans, both in their work and in their private lives, but he was by no means the last. James Gleick, in Faster: The Acceleration of Just About Everything, reflects on why Americans (and, increasingly, the world) work and play as hard and intensely as they do. Gleick suggests that we have always been time and task obsessed, but now due to the “rapid heartbeat of technology” we can squeeze more and more of everything into the allotted time span. We are now manic about speed, says Gleick. The world now seems to operate on five-minute intervals. We are rush freaks. We are time obsessed.
“Lose not a minute” is the motto of the age. We are always making haste. Multitasking isn’t an option, it’s a way of life. Hyperactivity is the norm. As Gleick sees it:

We humans have chosen speed and we thrive on it—more than we generally admit. Our ability to work fast and play fast gives us power. It thrills us. If we have learned the name of just one hormone, it is adrenaline. No wonder we call sudden exhilaration a rush. “Your life is lived with the kind of excitement that your forbears knew only in battle,” observes the writer Mark Helprin. And: “They unlike you, were the prisoner of mundane tasks. They wrote with pens, they did addition, they waited endlessly for things that come to you instantaneously, they had far less than you do, and they bowed to necessity, as you do not. You love the pace, the giddy, continual acceleration.” Admit it—you do!4

Here’s the problem. When life becomes an Olympic endurance event (“the Everydayathon”), when the stopwatch is always ticking, when are we supposed to have fun? When will there be a time to be human?5 As Benjamin Kline Hunnicutt, professor of leisure studies, so aptly put it, “Having to go so fast to keep up, we miss stuff—our existence is truncated. Some things simply cannot be done going full speed: love, sex, conversation, food, family, friends, nature. In the whirl, we are less capable of appreciation, enjoyment, sustained concentration, sorrow, memory.”6

I think, if we can be honest with ourselves, we all do too much or try to do too much. My mother used to accuse me of having “eyes bigger than your stomach.” She told me that I both literally and figuratively put too many things on my plate. “Alfredó,” she’d say, “You do too much. Slow down, take smaller bites, or you’re not going to enjoy anything. “Piano, piano arriva sano!” (Slowly, slowly, and you’ll get there surely, safety!)

Even when we ‘re not at work, when we’re not on the clock,
we consume time by constantly doing things and staying busy. Weekends are whirlwinds of activity. Vacations often resemble a blitzkrieg of organized movement with every moment of the trip preplanned and orchestrated for maximum efficiency and, of course, pleasure! For example—“Twenty-one countries in 14 days: Airfare, ground transportation, guides, lodging, meals, wine but not cocktails, and all tips included!”—perfect, don’t you think? At the risk of sounding like a Jean-Paul Sartre wannabe: “We just don’t do no-thing well!”

Here’s a series of statistics I think more accurately reflects how long we work and how we spend our time. According to the Harvard Health Letter, leisure time has dramatically eroded in recent decades, down to approximately 16.5 hours, per person, per week. The Bureau of Labor Statistics claims that dual-income married couples are now the most common type of household unit in America, numbering 31 million, or 39 percent of all working households. On average, these married couples work 26 percent longer each year than similar married couples did 30 years ago. In the 1950s, commentators worried about how we would all use the extra unstructured leisure time that was being generated by the “automation revolution.” Ha! Instead of free time, we ended up with a national epidemic of overwork, stress, and too little time for work or rest. A recent surgeon general’s report declared that the lack of “leisure-time physical activity” has become a serious health threat. About one in four American adults reports not having time to participate in any form of physical activity. Finally, besides more of us working more hours per week than ever before, more of us are working more weeks a year than ever before. According to a report issued by the United Nations, U.S. workers average 49.5 weeks of work each year.

Joe Robinson, former editor of the travel magazine Escape, used to make a living by going on vacation. Robinson claims that “we’re the most vacation-starved country in the industrial
world!” In this society, says Robinson, we perversely allow “downtime for machinery for maintenance and repair, but we don’t allow it for the employees.” America’s most hazardous work-related illness, says Robinson, is “vacation deficit disorder” or “vacation starvation.” Robinson believes that every American should, by federal law, be guaranteed a minimum three-week vacation per year with pay, increasing to four weeks after three years. For Robinson, life is too short—so, “work to live” don’t “live to work.” “Workers and travelers of America, unite! We have nothing to lose but our stress!”

Robinson and the surgeon general are not alone in their warnings regarding the lack of leisure and vacation time and potential health issues. A fourteen-year study of 12,866 men published in The Journal of Psychosomatic Medicine found that annual vacations sharply reduced the risk of death in middle-aged men. Similarly, a twenty-year study of 749 middle-aged women by the Centers for Disease Control found a direct link between a lack of vacations and a higher risk of heart attack and death. At the University of Essex, England, researchers found a link in women between working more than forty-eight hours a week for more than three years and high blood pressure, as well as ailments of the arms, legs, and hands. Finally, the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health claims that demanding jobs that give employees little control over their work increase the risk of heart disease. Conclusion: “Vacations may be good for your health.”

Unfortunately, too many Americans, primarily men, but increasing numbers of women too, only alter their patterns, habits, and lifestyles when they absolutely have to. On more than one occasion, I’ve bumped into a male friend I haven’t seen in years who has lost weight, is sporting a fresh tan, and is looking great. Almost invariably his response to my question “What’s new?” is some version of “I had a heart attack, a stroke, cancer surgery, or_______[fill in the blank]. It made me think. It made me see the handwriting on the wall. It made me
On many more occasions, however, I’ll bump into a widow of an old friend who will relate a similar scenario, but with a much less happy outcome. Sadly, sometimes we give ourselves permission to change only when we’re confronted by a crisis that we can use as an excuse.

In a cover story in the Utne Reader, Mark Harris argues that most children don’t live their lives by a day planner, Palm Pilot, or a Rolodex. Kids live life in the moment. They use their imagination to seek out adventure, silliness, and laughter at every opportunity. A child’s world, says Harris, despite parental rules and regulations, is simmering with fun. Children, says Harris, are masters of play. They need to play. It’s what they do. It’s the way they ingest the world. It’s the way they learn. By acting out or playing out a situation they acquire cognitive and motor skills. In play, they create a map of reality and come to know and define the other players in the game. Play, says the psychiatrist Lenore Terr, is not frivolous. It is one of the ways we become human. Play, like laughter, says Terr, is crucial at every stage of life. Play, for both children and adults alike, helps us unlock the door to the world and ourselves. Sadly, Terr concludes, the rush of modern life means less spontaneity, more scheduling, and the slow erosion of the time and opportunity to play.

All of us need to play more. All of us need to “vacate” ourselves from our jobs and the wear and tear of the “everydayness” of our lives. All of us need to get absorbed in, focused on, something of interest outside of ourselves. All of us need escape, if only for a while, to retain our perspective on who we are and who we don’t want to be. All of us need to gain some feeling for, some knowledge of, the differences between distraction and insight, merriment and meaning, entertainment and recreation, laziness and leisure, rest and inertia.

The ability to play, to go on vacation, to take long walks, to have a quiet weekend, to have time to think, should not be perceived as a perk or privilege. We need not always be doing. In fact, we must all try to studiously do less, in order to be more.

If we are what we do, then to a great extent, as adults, we are defined by our work and our play. Both of these basic patterns of behavior influence not only how we define ourselves but how we understand and interpret reality and how we make ethical choices about our lives and our interactions with others. Therefore, depending upon who we want to be, and how we want to be known, we must be very careful in our choices of what we do for a living and how we choose to play. Remember, to borrow a couple of rather classic phrases, “leisure can be the basis of culture,” the “enzyme of a quality life,” or it can simply be “the catalyst for camp and kitsch.”

This book is a brief breakdown of what we do when we are not on the job. It’s a look at how we rest, recreate, and play. It’s a window into why we venerate vacation time, how we spend our time and money when not on the job, and why we all work so very hard at trying to have fun. This slim text does not attempt to cover every conceivable vacation option from Alaska to Zimbabwe. As the Chicago radio mogul Pat Fitzpatrick said to me, “Whatever you do keep it short! Who’s got time to read a lot of stuff about leisure?” Nor does it attempt to address all the possible definitions, differences and nuances regarding the terms recreation, and re-creation, leisure, play, jobs, and work. (According to Wayne Booth, scholar and bibliophile, such an endeavor would require a lifetime. The University of Chicago library alone contains 32 books on recreation and re-creation, 119 books on leisure, 150 books on play, and literally thousands of books on the various aspects of work, jobs, and careers in our lives.13)

This book is a highly eclectic, idiosyncratic, and hopefully philosophical survey of how we play and why we need leisure in our lives. I believe that Thomas Carlyle was wrong, or at the very least exaggerating, when he said: “Work is the grand cure of all of the maladies and miseries that ever beset mankind” (italics mine). I believe that the purpose of life is probably closer to

pleasure and play than it is to simple drudgery and toil. Unfortunately, I also believe, too many of us confuse leisure and play with mindless distractions, excessive consumerism, and do-nothing laziness.

Having said all of this, let me warn those readers who are looking for a single theory or formula by which to achieve leisure in their lives that they will be disappointed in what follows. Yes, there is some theory involved in the pursuit of leisure. Yes, there is some study and preparation required to achieve leisure. But, in the end, we learn leisure by living it. It’s about giving ourselves over to it. It’s an art form that we have to directly experience. Perhaps the late great violinist Isaac Stern ironically and indirectly makes the point about how we achieve leisure in his comment about how we don’t come to appreciate music: “Learning music by (simply) reading about it is like making love by mail.”

In the immediate aftermath of 9–11–01 both the national psyche and the economy went into shock if not complete paralysis. Within three weeks two national airlines declared bankruptcy and literally closed their hanger doors. Within a month, a reputed 110,000 airline workers were laid off or furloughed indefinitely and 20 percent of all flight schedules were canceled. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the economy lost 480,000 jobs in October 2001 and another 331,000 jobs in November, thereby bringing the national unemployment rate to 5.7 percent, its highest level since August 1995. Moreover, retail sales dropped 2.4 percent in September, rallied in October by 6.4 percent, plunged again in November by 3.7 percent, and stayed steady but were not sensational during the December Christmas rush.

Besides its immediate impact on the airlines, 9–11–01, not so surprisingly, had a devastating impact on the vacation, restaurant, and hospitality industries. For example, Disney World and Disneyland stayed open and soldiered on, but in the
immediate aftermath of 9-11-01, cancellation rates exceeded 60 percent. In the months that followed, although attendance did pick up, both of the Magic Kingdoms could be best typified as “ghost towns.” Hardest hit was Disney World in Orlando, Florida, which sharply reduced the schedules for all of its 40,000 hourly workers, and asked its 7,400 salaried employees to voluntarily cut their paychecks and workweeks to thirty-two hours. Regionally, economists claimed that in excess of 60,000 waiters, waitresses, fast-food workers, restaurant cooks, hotel housekeepers, and the like either lost their jobs or had their hours reduced due to the decline in tourism after 9–11–01.16

At “ground zero,” Mayor Rudolph Guiliani—the unexpected Churchill to arise out of the ashes of the Twin Towers and Time magazine’s Man of the Year—was in front of the media, seemingly every hour on the hour, for weeks giving status reports, keeping the nation informed, offering prayers, offering advice, flying the flag, rallying the troops, and acting as a “cheerleader” and “Big-Apple Booster.” He implored us: “Don’t let them win!” “Show them our spirit!” “Show them what Americans are made of!” “Let’s live our lives!” “Come to New York!” “See a play!” “Go shopping!” “Go out to dinner!” “Let’s get back to normal again!”

We will, of course, recover. But I wonder if we’ll ever be normal again, or if we ever want to be normal again? As Sue Shellenbarger of the Wall Street Journal so eloquently put it, “Across the nation, at nearly every level of the workforce, a subtle, but far-reaching shift in priorities is underway Values that were pre-eminent for many people—career, status, money, personal fulfillment—now are taking a back seat to more fundamental human needs: family, friends, community, connectedness with others.”17

I think that life-changing events can spark serious changes in our priorities. It doesn’t mean, however, that we’re going to reprioritize everything instantly. But, at the very least, I think it forces us to pause and reflect on things we take for granted: the
role of work in our lives; being preoccupied by the pursuit of status, stuff, and success; how, when, and where we spend time with our families; and the quality of our friendships and relationships with others.

In a very basic sense, I think 9–11–01 is going to force us to reexamine our priorities on and off the job in regard to how we work and how we play. It is my hope that we will learn or relearn two complementary and fundamental truths regarding the human situation. (1) Adults need work in the same way that children need play in order to fulfill themselves as persons. (2) Adults need play in the same way that children need play in order to fulfill themselves as persons.

[A]n overworked man is an unimaginative one, at best dully completing a routine, at worst making serious mistakes. Far from benefiting his company, he is very likely creating problems rather than solving them—and so making work for other overworked men to boast about. We get new ideas when our mind is allowed to roam in a free and relaxed way around a problem—and for that we need a reasonable amount of leisure and thus a decent annual vacation.

Maybe the European practice of five weeks paid vacation goes too far—but not by much! (John Sullivan, columnist, Chicago Sun-Times, January 1, 2002)