

From the Kitchen

31 March 2010



It's easy to feel at a loose end, the sense of an absence of anything to do. It's a strange notion and conjures up even stranger images. What is it a loose end of? Am I following a piece of string and then come to the end of it, dangling loosely in my hand? What does this string represent? Security? Guidance? Imperatives?

We rely heavily on routine and tasks imposed on us by others or by circumstances (or by ourselves). The weekly calendar can dictate a five-days-on, two-days-off routine. Then a public holiday changes all that or we take a week or two break; or a month. How do we structure our lives without an external structure to guide us?

Some people make themselves lists of things to do, sometimes with dates and times for intended completion. Some make a simple 'to do' list and work through it.

Being structureless at home can be harder than when away. At home there are always things calling to us, beckoning us, cajoling, begging, even threatening. Doing 'nothing' requires us to ignore these things we would be doing if it weren't for doing nothing. Away on holiday, in an 'other' place, there may still be available activities to ignore or avoid in order to do nothing.

Doing nothing is an ages-old pastime indulged in by mystics, swamis, ascetes and spiritual masters. We talk about it as meditation or contemplation, but even that often involves techniques that are far from an absence of doing. Anything is one of the hardest things not to do. In the presence of inactivity, the mind can go crazy and demand a resumption of life. It creates itches, back pain, muscle ticks, anything to keep us out of the void. The challenge is to not respond, either by succumbing to the urge to scratch or by actively ignoring the distraction; ignoring can be as much an activity as scratching.

In the 1980s I used to spend time in a floatation tank, an hour or two at a time. This was like a huge bath with warm water saturated with Epsom salts (to aid floating), with a lid over it to exclude light and sound. It was designed for sensory deprivation to make it easier to do nothing. I was amazed, when there was no sensory input, at the extent to which the mind will invent things in order to keep active. Perhaps the mind is afraid of the void, where it becomes irrelevant.

I remember coming out of those sessions, and others involving mindlessness, with the world appearing fresh and unthreatening. This would last from a few hours to a few days. I've read of people who can be in such a state continuously and yet affectively function in the world.

I sit here on my day off from external have-tos and wonder what to do. I could go for a walk, or sit and write, or watch TV, or read, or listen to music, or do some housework or ... I decide to do nothing and find my mind going through a list of things I have decided not to do by not doing anything. In exasperation I walk down to my special quiet spot by the creek, to do nothing there. My mind notes the various birds and tries to identify them and then notices the plants and orders them into their genus and then notices things floating in the

creek and wonders at their origins. I close my eyes and hear the distant traffic and distinguish trucks from cars from motorbikes. There are dogs barking, birds twittering, screeching and singing, kids laughing (why aren't they at school?). It goes on and on. There's a twig digging into my gluteus. Ah, that's the thing to do – relax my muscles one by one. I'll start with the frontalis, then the temporalis, then ... oh, what's it called? I picture my anatomy posters and try to imagine the labels enlarged so I can read them. It doesn't work.

I get frustrated and go home. I feel too agitated to relax now. I grab a broom and start at one end of the house and methodically clear the dirt to the other end. As I create a neat, round pile, I suddenly realise that I'm very relaxed and I can't remember anything since I started sweeping. The last twenty minutes are a complete blank.