

## ARE YOU BUSY?

I meet an acquaintance.

“Hello, how are you?”

“Pretty well. And you?”

“Ok. Keeping busy. Are you busy?”

So far, so good. Now comes the crunch. The usual conversation should proceed.

“Yeah, very busy. Don’t know if I’m coming or going. Really need a holiday. And you?”

“Yeah, I’m busy, too. Just had a holiday, but I’ve forgotten about it already. I need another one already, ha ha.”

However, what if it does not proceed that way? Suppose I say, “No, I am not busy. I am just paddling along comfortably.”

I have said that a couple of times, but I desist saying it now. That is because my counterpart looks puzzled, frightened, hurt. It is as if I had made a terrible *faux pas*. Perhaps I threw a switch and all the weaving and bumping dodgem cars have come to an unwanted stop.

Busy people seem to be going round in circles in perpetual motion, externally and internally. They are constantly moving, agitating, contacting. They whirl up a continual postman through their emails. Their mobiles are never silent. There is a queue of waiting calls.

Some people should be busy. I would be disappointed if the prime minister was not, or if fire fighters in a bushfire were idle. However, some people, it seems to me, stir up a whirlwind around them.

Perhaps one reason is a sense of power. Two males, swaggering with mobiles in their belts, one-upping each other’s busyness, are like contestants matching their power. Mobiles then symbolise swords of old. Putting a person on hold while one answers another call, not to mention ignoring the person opposite looking mournfully into a steaming cup of coffee, is like waving one’s plumage above the heads of the rejected conversation partners.

If I do not play the busyness game, it is as if I have affronted the busy person. I have insulted the ridiculousness of the plumage, or the length of the sword.

The busy acquaintance then regains poise by remembering my folly, having by my own hand knocked myself off my perch. He or she now looks at me now with concern and pity, as if I was suffering from a serious illness. “Oh, of course. You have retired. So what do you do all day?” They try to comfort and reassure me, “People who retire are soon busier than when they worked. They don’t know how they fitted work into their time.”

Busyness indicates being needed. Dizzying levels of busyness flaunts one’s importance to others, one’s appeal and worth. A sad insight came from one acquaintance, who contemplated retirement and subsequent lack of busyness with trepidation. He said, “Well, it’s exhaustion or depression, isn’t it?”

I was taken aback. Why depression, if you are not exhausting yourself being busy? Sure, losing your job, especially later in life, losing your partner and being at a loss to know what to do can be crippling. But why are so many young, married, employed people obsessed with keeping busy? Why should they get depressed, if they are not exhausted? Are they also terrified of loneliness?

Perhaps for males busyness means that they are employed, fulfilling their male role, while not being busy may symbolise an impotent hunter. A woman, especially post-menopausal, who has nothing to do, no appointments to keep, no social meetings to juggle, may symbolise a lonely, not needed person.

Then again, being retired, you wonder, is it age? Not to be busy may mean that you are past it, on the scrap heap, past the struggle, on the way out. Perhaps while you are busy, even if burnt-out with frustration or pumped up with high blood pressure, you are still reassuringly alive. Yet, why should one be less alive in the quiet of an evening, than in the hustle of the day?

OK, it is now time for me to stop busily asking questions. But if I stop will I feel anxious? What if my mind is not a busy bee, ants scurrying for answers? The problem is, when one stops, questions emerge, “What is my life about? What is its purpose?”

If deep down one is convinced that one’s life has no meaning, busyness and exhaustion are a suitable price to pay to avoid the modern version of hell – boredom, purposelessness, alienation, or its medicalized term *depression*, as my acquaintance called it.

But with a positive centre, as another retired friend of mine demonstrated to me, leaving artificial busyness gives opportunity to deepen purpose– not a modern version of heaven, but time for family, love, wisdom and creativity.

The struggle is not between busyness and boredom, but between, umm, let me see...well, it makes you stop and think, doesn’t it?