

The Benefits of Being Unemployed and Doing Nothing

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

A few years ago, I was on an airplane and was seated next to a woman who appeared to be in her mid-40s. It turned out she had started a well-known business and was married to a well-known business tycoon. For most of the five-hour flight we went back and forth discussing business in some depth. In fact, I do not think we stopped talking more than a minute or two the entire flight. We didn't even watch the movies.

At the time, the United States was in a severe recession and the economy was not doing well. I will never forget something this woman said to me (referring to the broader economy):

"My husband and a lot of his friends decided that now is the time to be 'bored' and are just sitting this one out until things improve a bit. Things are too unpredictable and it is never smart to fight when you do not know the rules."

Due to this, the woman stated that she and her husband were going to spend several months overseas just "being bored."

When the flight landed and we were walking off the plane, this woman turned back to me and said: "You have a lot more potential than you realize. You need to stop thinking about work and take a few months, or years, just to be bored."

I remember not really understanding what she was saying at the time. I thought about it for some time, off and on, trying to find the meaning behind it. Then, about a year later, I saw Steve Wynn on a morning news program and he was saying that he had no interest in expanding his business in the United States because "things were too unpredictable and the rules kept changing." Instead, he was expanding his business in China because he felt it was more stable and he knew the rules. It was starting to make sense to me.

In essence, this woman was saying that I needed to get more perspective, to think, and to charge my batteries so that I would be ready for something even more significant.

Taoists believe in something called *wei wu*, which means "without action." Wei wu teaches us that you can often accomplish more by doing nothing than by constantly trying to accomplish something. Most people are constantly striving to achieve something, are engaged psychologically with work and trying to move forward. They are fighting against the current.

According to *wei wu*, the constant struggle to be someone or achieve something actually puts you in your own way and creates problems. Wei wu means going with the current and being part of the natural order of things—it is not separateness, but oneness.

To practice *wei wu*, one needs to act without purpose. The idea of acting without purpose is very frightening for most people. Most of us have identities that are tied up with our professions and being one thing or another—we are separate from the rest of the world. Instead of our traditional beliefs about the world based on action and separateness, *wei wu* encourages us to trust our thoughts, emotions, and bodies and believe that the world and its natural flow will support us.

More significantly, the idea of *wei wu* is to get out of your own way. We want to be detached and not worried about profit, how things make us look, and where we are going. We want our actions to be spontaneous and effortless. We want to experience life as it is. If playing a sport, for example, we do not want to be concerned with ourselves, winning, how we are doing—we want to just play and enjoy the sport and go with the flow. By taking ourselves out of the equation we greatly improve our chances for success.

The idea of being bored, of not fighting or doing anything—of retreat—is something that few people ever seriously consider. Not working, not fighting, being in retreat—all of these things are often looked on negatively in American culture, as a sign of weakness or laziness.

In the legal profession, for example, it is considered bad to ever not be practicing law for more than a few weeks at a time. In fact, other attorneys look at each other very suspiciously if they learn that someone has not worked more than a few weeks.

Generally speaking, we look suspiciously at any able-bodied person who is not working, not pressing forward, not doing the most he or she can. In fact, if someone stops work and does not have another job lined up, we are likely to presume they were fired.

I believe, though, that not working, retreating, and so forth is actually a time where we can gain strength. In times where we are doing nothing, we have the ability to gain perspective and strengthen who we are—and we come back much stronger as a result. By being disengaged and doing nothing, you can look inward and think about who you are and who you want to be. From there you can open yourself up to new opportunities.

When we are working in a job and in a routine, we rarely have the ability to see who we are and the differences between us and others. If you are always involved in pressing forward, earning a living, fighting and consoling others at work—you never are able to gain perspective. Your actions and life will be routine and predictable. You will be acting out and living your career and life based on things that happened in the past. You will be imitating things you did in the past because they are comfortable.

Historically, many great religious figures have retreated into solitude when they needed perspective. For example, Muhammed retreated from Mecca into the desert, wrote the Koran, and founded Islam. Moses and the Jews fled Egypt into the desert. Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness.

Getting away gives us perspective and allows us to be separate from whatever circumstances are threatening us. In addition, when we are away from something that requires our energy, threatens us, or makes us angry, we are free from the negative emotions associated with that. Making a retreat can give us strength and make us that much better.

When we retreat, we are not engaging in any way. We have made the decision that we are not going to fight and, instead, will

make use of our time to gain perspective. By not engaging, we allow others to stay involved in the day-to-day while we step back and decide what we want to do.

Most people are engaged at all times. They are engaged psychologically with friends, enemies, work, and everything around them. They feel it is impossible not to stay active and connected to everything going on around them. By disengaging and resisting the temptation to stay involved you are, instead, exercising great power. You are remaining calm and are using time to your advantage.

There comes a point, of course, when you need to engage again and move forward with whatever you are doing—and toward a goal of some sort. You need to go back to work, you need to fight, you need to press on. The most important thing you can do, though, is to get perspective so you understand your actions and what you are doing—and who you can become.

The street I moved to when I was 4 years old and where my mother lived until I was 35 was inhabited by people who never seemed to change. In thinking back about this street, the families of just about every kid I knew are still living there. The parents moved to this street when they were in their late 20s and early 30s. More than 35 years later they are still living there.

Each morning for the past 30 years or more, the men and women inside of these small homes have gotten up and gone to similar—or the same—jobs each day. Their income has not fluctuated too much and they have grown old while never changing all that much. They have raised children who have gone off to college and started their own lives.

This is how most of us live. We fall into a routine and this routine is all we know. We never get perspective and never see the way things could be, who we could become, what would happen if we got outside of our box and looked at the world a different way. We go to work each day and our life never changes.

There is nothing wrong with not changing. But what if we could be much happier, more successful, and more fulfilled?

What if our fantasies about who we want to be could be realized?

Who we become in our lives is all the result of our perspective. When you lose a job and have a lot of time off, this is an opportunity to gain energy and get perspective. You can step out of the life you are living and discover what else is possible. Perhaps you are interested in becoming a different type of person—doing something completely different with your life. This can happen when you get that sort of perspective because it allows you to see life more clearly.

I have heard of people taking time off and realizing they wanted to be priests instead of doctors. I have heard of people taking time off and getting the idea of starting businesses. I have heard of people taking time off and deciding they wanted to go back to school.

If you feel that your career is not where it should be—if you feel that your life is not where it could be—often the best thing you can do is to do nothing. Doing nothing can give you strength and prepare you for the next opportunity that arises.

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