

Is prayer time used properly?

By JIM RYAN

21st Sunday
in Ordinary Time
John 6:60-69
Aug. 25, 1991



Religion
and
Reality
by
Jim Ryan

Witold Rybczynski is everywhere these days. At least that's my impression. I spent part of my summer reading two of his books, *Home* and *The Most Beautiful House in the World*. And now there's a third book just published to keep me up late at night. It's called *Waiting for the Weekend*. The August edition of *The Atlantic* has an article adapted from his new book.

His thesis in *Waiting for the Weekend* is that our free time isn't really free. In fact, according to Rybczynski, we're probably more compulsive and driven during our leisure time than we are during our work time. We have a word for the latter, *workaholic*, but no word yet for the former.

Listen to Rybczynski: I'm always charmed by old photographs of skiers which show

groups of people in what appear to be street clothes, with uncomplicated pieces of bent wood strapped to sturdy walking boots.

These men and women have a playful and unaffected air. Today every novice is caparisoned in skin-tight spandex like an Olympic racer, and even cross-country skiing, a simple enough pastime, has been infected by a preoccupation with correct dress, authentic terminology, and up-to-date equipment. This reflects an attitude toward play which is dif-

ferent from what it was in the past. Most outdoor sports, once simply muddled through, are now undertaken with a high degree of seriousness. "Professional" used to be a word that distinguished someone who was paid for an activity from the sportsman; today the word has come to denote anyone with a high degree of proficiency; "professional-quality" equipment is available to - and desired by all.

Conversely, "amateur", a wonderful word literally meaning "lover," has been degraded to mean a rank beginner or anyone without a certain level of skill. "Just an amateur," we say; it is not, as it once was, a compliment.

THREE KINDS OF LEISURE

1. Being allowed to do something.
 2. Being allowed to do anything.
 3. Being allowed to do nothing.
- According to G.K. Chesterton, the first kind is most common; the second is practiced by artists and other creative people; and the third kind is the least common. The third kind was Chesterton's favourite.

It's also Rybczynski's favourite. He writes: Leisure was the opportunity for personal, even idiosyncratic, pursuits, not for ordered recreation; it was for private reverie rather than for public spectacles. If a sport was undertaken, it was for the love of playing - not winning, nor even playing well. Above all, free time was to remain that: free of the encumbrance of convention, free of the need for business, free for the "noble habit of doing nothing at all."

This sounds to me like a pretty good description of prayer, or at least one kind of prayer.

FOUR KINDS OF PRAYER

1. Petition.
2. Contrition.
3. Thanksgiving.
4. Adoration.

Petition is the most often practiced. (You can pray for those new ski boots). Contrition is number two in the scale. (You can apologize for what you did when you didn't get what you prayed for.) Thanksgiving is the third most practiced. (Thanks God, for the ski boots).

Adoration is the least practiced. It is when you do nothing. You just sit there. (Call it contemplation). It's playful in the sense that nothing is anticipated. You're not trying to twist God's arm, or blackmail him, or make a deal with him. Nor are you trying to impress someone who is standing by looking on. It's free of conventional encumbrances, free of the need for business, and free for acquiring what Flannery O'Connor called the Habit of Being.

United Church numbers declining

"Numbers are down, but the decline is typical of what's happening to all membership figures in mainline Christian denominations," says Doug Flanders, Director of the United Church of Canada's Department of Education and Information.

"While the trend is worrisome in terms of the health of the church as an institution, this year's numbers are consistent with patterns over the past decade," he adds.

The 1990 statistics show a decline of 21,000 United Church members. The denomination's confirmed membership is now 808,441. The United Church is still the largest Protestant denomination in Canada.

Mr. Flanders explains the major portion of the decline in membership in 1990 can be clearly attributed to the dropping of inactive or non-resident names from church membership lists.

He says there are a variety of reasons for more careful reporting of statistical figures by local congregations.

"Computers have helped, but it's really tightening budgets that have motivated local congregations to take the time to really count heads and not just guess at their membership figures," says Flanders.

He explains that accuracy is encouraged because each United Church congregation's financial support of the wider church is determined by an assessment of

the number of resident members in that congregation.

Says Flanders, "When a local congregation's funds are limited, as many are in these recessionary times, it essentially comes down to dollars and cents. Either you report accurately your membership figures or you quite literally pay a price for each of the people you haven't seen or heard from in years."

Mr. Flanders adds, "The decline in membership this year is only very marginally due to the debate over gay ordination." A hand check of all statistical returns from congregations indicated approximately 2,000 persons left the United Church in 1990 because of that issue.

Says Flanders, "That brings the maximum total to about 15,000 members that we assume have left the United Church because of the church's 1988 statement *Membership, Ministry and Human Sexuality*."

Other figures of interest in the 1990 statistics are the closure of 31 congregations, leaving a total of 1,081 United Church congregations in Canada. Most of the closures were of small rural churches, largely in Western Canada, whose often very small numbers no longer made the congregation viable.

"Only three congregations closed in 1990 when the majority of members left because they disagreed with the United Church's policy statements," says Mr. Flanders.

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