

WHAT FUN

BY MICHAEL MILBURN

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“Fun”--it always seemed to leave you at a loss...
- Elizabeth Bishop, “North Haven”

On the first day of school last September, I asked my ninth-grade students to write their first names on index cards and prop them on their desks, adding any doodles or favorite quotes. One girl’s scribbled “Why so serious?” made my heart sink. I’m used to being told I never smile, but she had only known me for five minutes and had already pegged me as a drag. I wanted to reassure her that I’d loosen up over time. A few weeks later I was watching the new Batman movie, *The Dark Knight*, in which Heath Ledger’s Joker taunts his victims, saying, “Why so serious?” I realized that the girl had merely followed my instructions by writing down a favorite quote. I had applied it to my paranoia about not being or having fun.

(90) My sensitivity to the student’s question puzzles me because I mistrust the idea of fun, both as something to be “had” and as a feeling produced by certain situations or behavior. When I watch people playing softball or celebrating at a crowded restaurant table, I understand why onlookers might envy them and see my quiet detachment as pitiable. Fun is generally considered healthy, positive, and life-affirming, whereas the self-containment that I project might look aberrant. We tend to think of fun the way we think of health—if you’re having it, you’re o.k.; if not, poor you. But I don’t always want to be doing what the fun folks are doing, and if I were, I wouldn’t necessarily be feeling the way that I like to feel.

Between the ages of eight and twelve I spent several weeks every summer visiting school friends at their vacation homes. These stays were encouraged by my parents and also looked forward to by my friends as a kind of open-ended sleepover—all the stimulation of constant companionship with none of the boredom of solitude. But I found the nights of bunk bed giggles followed by days of swims and cookouts exhausting. I’m not completely antisocial, but I do need time to myself. My boarding school advisor was onto something when he remarked to my parents about my dour expression. Contrary to his assumption, I wasn’t depressed, but the omnipresence of people in dormitories, classes, and the cafeteria made me long for escape.

I’m not sure why cheerfulness comes so hard to me, especially given how easily I am amused. I can be having a good deal of fun without looking like I’m having any. One reason for my grim demeanor

is that I tend to be nervous around people I don't know well—nervous that I will say the wrong thing or misunderstand what is said to me. When I speak in public, my stage fright can make me look “stern” (a word I overheard a student apply to me during the first week of classes) and “deadpan” (how an audience member described me reading my poetry in public). As I move through my days, I'm constantly reminding myself to smile, and wishing I could warn people not to judge me by my expression.

That school advisor wasn't the only elder troubled by my glumness in company. The therapist I saw throughout college equated mental health with an active social life. He once urged me to accept an invitation to attend the Quebec Winter Carnival with my roommate and two friends. An overnight drive north in a Volkswagen bug, a shared motel room, nights of drinking and days of revelry amid ice sculptures and parades—what college kid wouldn't love a trip like that? he asked. One who's uncomfortable with spontaneity, phobic about sharing his space, and allergic to sleep deprivation, I replied. The prospect of frenetic round-the-clock fun put me in mind of those scenes in movie Westerns where the villain fires bullets around the rube's feet and says, “Dance, and smile while you're at it.”

Not surprisingly, my relationships have occasionally foundered on this issue. One girlfriend attracted by my affinity for reading and writing reconsidered after discovering that these activities were my primary means of enjoying myself. I didn't blame her for equating companionship with shared amusement any more than I fault people who rush to fill their free time with recreation. With the approach of my school's summer vacation, my colleagues pose two recurring questions as they encounter one another on campus: “Are you getting away?” and “Do you have anything fun planned?” My answer to both is a shrug and a silent “yes” as I anticipate heading to my study instead of a classroom for the next three months.

Writing time aside, I hate summer. As the days grow longer and Daylight Saving Time begins, I feel besieged. People are out and about until late, biking, rollerblading, chasing Frisbees, chatting on porches. I open my windows and resign myself to the sounds that clamor inside. I dread this season for the same reason that most people can't wait for it, for its promise of spontaneity and unpredictability. I prefer structure, routine, and finite amounts of time for socializing. Winter's frigid weather and early darkness mean that I don't have to feel guilty about not going outdoors; its blizzards excuse me from driving anywhere. Housebound, I am one with my housebound fellow man. In summer, my fellow man is laughing and tinkling glasses in the yard next door. When he's having fun, I feel disgusted with myself that I am not, do not, cannot.

The inability to have conventional group fun is central to my personality. One problem is that I like solitude, a state that many people find incompatible with a good time. Quick—what comes to mind when you hear the word fun? Friends at a ballgame? Waterskiing off Aruba? Dancing in a nightclub?

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Dancing anywhere? Group activities all. Solitary fun sounds pathetic. Yet I'm uncomfortable in festive situations, reluctant to travel or try new experiences ("What I see tires me and what I don't see worries me," the 17th century French writer Madame de Sevigny said about sightseeing). My multiple phobias—of heights, crowds, and enclosed spaces—keep me from relaxing anywhere except at home. The only time fun sneaks up on me is if I'm participating in an activity where it's being had and I get distracted from my self-consciousness. This often happens when I'm teaching; my shyness subsides and I start to enjoy myself.

In fact, the classroom is the only place where I've ever had communal fun, and then only after months of getting to know my students. Otherwise, I gravitate toward solitary pursuits or the company of a friend or family member. For example, from the time my son was a child until his present age of twenty-five, I have loved bodysurfing with him near my parents' summer house in Rhode Island and wouldn't be as happy doing it alone. I don't require solitude in order to enjoy myself, just the absence of social anxiety, which limits my pool of prospective companions to him, my siblings, my girlfriend, and a few close friends. Anxiety-free more often means people-free for me, which may be why I have cultivated such a passion for writing and reading. "By paring and paring and paring away," says the writer protagonist of Philip Roth's novel *Exit Ghost*, "I found in my solitude a species of freedom that was to my liking much of the time."

(92) Given my low tolerance for socializing, it surprises me that I get along so well with my students, many of whom seem to have been born with an aptitude and appetite for comradely fun. My own high school years felt like one fraught social interaction punctuated by self-consciousness about my solitude. At the school where I teach, inclusion is mandatory. Every senior, no matter how diffident, participates in the senior play, goes on a whale-watching weekend in the fall, travels to China over spring break, and repairs to the thronged senior lounge between classes. At night, they oversee the ebb and flow of their social lives in Facebook pokes and Instant Messenger pings.

Observing these kids in class, I think they'd be amazed by how little of their kind of fun I had at their age (or have now, for that matter). For me, the biggest hurdle in overcoming the demands of conviviality was getting through school. Most of all, I dreaded the social cauldron of the cafeteria—the self-conscious entrance, the search for someone to sit with shadowed by the potential ignominy of sitting by oneself, the spirited conversation lasting long past dessert. I agree with my classmates who, in their wistful alumni notes, credit those bull sessions with providing their "true education." They did for me, too, by teaching me that I like to eat alone.

At a friend's New Year's Eve party, one of the guests proposed a game that involved acting out stories. When my turn came, the host said to me, playfully, "This isn't going to happen, is it? Too many years of upper class repression." He was right; the idea of me joining in the fun was no more conceivable than

when the instructor of my private school's African-drumming course exhorts teachers and parents to keep time with the students' performance at graduation. The majority of the audience claps along gamely, but I sit frozen, hands in my lap, praying for the ordeal to end. The adults' expressions remind me of the rock star Ric Ocasek's definition of fun as "a false sense of ecstasy," just as my discomfort bears out his comment that "I have trouble with the word 'fun.' And I never liked the word 'enjoy.'"

For me, fun depends less on outer circumstances than on how an activity makes me feel. As for my contribution to others' fun, it doesn't involve any "life of the party" qualities, but more subtle virtues of companionship. I won't enliven your weekend house party in the Hamptons, but could make an agreeable passenger on a cross-country drive. When my shyness burned off after a few hours, I would listen and talk without indulging in too much of either, and add some humor and inquiring observations on the passing landscape. My fellow traveler who thought me unpromisingly distant at the trip's outset might even produce a surprised "Hey, that was fun" at its end.

That was the reaction to my most successful attempt at showing someone a good time. When my son was younger he would fly alone from his mother's home to mine for school vacations. Arriving at the airport after one of these visits, we discovered that his flight was delayed for four hours—an eternity to spend amusing an impatient ten-year-old boy. As a non-custodial father, I already felt self-conscious about my parenting ability, so I resolved not to let this delay make him think of his visits to me as a chore. I dreamt up a game involving spies masquerading as airport merchants, travelers as shapeshifting aliens, and a need to reconnoiter the terminal. Four hours into it, my son was checking the departures board, hoping for a further delay. His happiness as he finally boarded taught me that fun is what you make of it in your own life and in another's. Or as Aldous Huxley wrote, "Experience is not what happens to a man; it is what a man does with what happens to him."

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Writer Jonathan Franzen purports to illustrate, in an anecdote, the depressed state of his friend David Foster Wallace. Franzen, an avid birdwatcher, recalls visiting Wallace shortly before the latter's suicide.

I couldn't keep my eyes off the hummingbirds around his house and was saddened that he could, and while he was taking his heavily medicated afternoon nap, I was studying the birds of Ecuador for an upcoming trip, and I understood the difference between his unmanageable misery and my manageable discontents to be that I could escape myself in the joy of birds and he could not.

Franzen may be right about Wallace's depression, but he's wrong to base his diagnosis on his friend's

lack of interest in birds. Nothing is more tedious to me than birdwatching and its voluble enthusiasts, and my indifference has nothing to do with my state of mind or my ability to enjoy myself. Just because I can look at a birdwatcher hoisting his binoculars at 6 a.m. on a park trail and conclude, “That guy is having fun,” doesn’t mean that he can look at me yawning and say with equal accuracy, “That guy is depressed.” Whatever the extent of Wallace’s despair, it’s unlikely that he would have marked its end at the moment when he could take pleasure in sighting a rare warbler.

Later in the article, Franzen admits that what really worries him is Wallace’s inability to escape himself in joy anywhere, especially in his writing.

He’d loved writing fiction ... and he’d been very explicit, in our many discussions of the purpose of novels, about his belief that fiction is a solution, the best solution, to the problem of existential solitude. Fiction was his way off the island, and as long as it was working for him—as long as he’d been able to pour his love and passion into preparing his lonely dispatches, and as long as these dispatches were coming as urgent and fresh and honest news to the mainland—he’d achieved a measure of happiness and hope for himself. When his hope for fiction died, after years of struggle with the new novel, there was no other way out but death.

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The kind of escapism-in-writing that Franzen describes here strikes me as great fun, though it’s a long way from the images of spring break revels or picnicking families that I usually associate with that word. I’m all for expanding the definition of fun to include experiences that reserved or solitary people can enjoy. The notion that conspicuous, collective gaiety equals happiness reminds me of evangelical Christians insisting that faith equals salvation. More pertinent is one’s ability to achieve inner peace, or, in the case of fun, pleasure.

Interviewer: Have you been on a water slide?

Ric Ocasek: I’ve never been on a water slide in my life.

Interviewer: They’re fun.

Ocasek: I guess they could be fun, and I guess skydiving could be fun, too. But I would never do it. It would be more fun to sit in a room with William Burroughs and listen to him grumble.

Still, I can’t shake the feeling that happiness requires ebullience or gregariousness or both. The first time I read Jon Krakauer’s book *Into the Wild*, about Christopher McCandless’s solo travels across America,

I envied McCandless's ability to be alone for long periods without feeling guilty about being antisocial. His letters and journal entries celebrate his self-sufficiency as he attempts to live off the land and limit his contact with people. Cut off from family and friends, he writes to a man he has met on the road, "You are wrong if you think Joy emanates only or principally from human relationships." Yet when McCandless decides to end his two-year odyssey and return home, he admits in his journal: "happiness [is] only real when shared."

Martin Seligman, founder of the positive psychology movement, offers five crucial components of well-being, each pursued for its own sake: positive emotion, relationships, engagement (the feeling of being lost in a task), meaning, and accomplishment. Seligman recommends identifying which of these matters most to us, and then setting goals and monitoring progress. I have often invested the first two, which I associate with having fun, with a disproportionate power to determine my happiness, even though my life is rich in activities that engage me and provide meaning and accomplishment. According to Seligman, I should be able to achieve well-being by focusing on the last three alone.

"Why does he not come out of himself, have some fun?" J.M. Coetzee is asked in his fictionalized memoir *Summertime*. "Some of us are not built for fun," he replies. It's human nature to crave what can't be easily attained, however, and it's my nature to dwell on my shortcomings rather than my blessings, a habit that often takes the form of envying others at play. Like Franzen's birdwatching, this pastime keeps me engaged, and therefore, Seligman might say, happy. "Misery is his element," Coetzee writes of his alter ego. "He is at home in misery like a fish in water. If misery were to be abolished, he would not know what to do with himself."

Coetzee's book shows that a degree of reserve can be conducive not just to contentment but to literature. As a reader I prefer Emerson's measured essays to Hunter Thompson's flamboyant ones, and would choose the former writer over the latter as a walking companion, too. Elizabeth Bishop appeals to me more than Dylan Thomas in both her person and her poetry. My favorite writer, Philip Larkin, happens to be my favorite misanthrope. These lines from Larkin's poem "Vers de Société" give voice to thoughts that I once would have not dared utter:

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Just think of all the spare time that has flown
Straight into nothingness by being filled
With forks and faces, rather than repaid
Under a lamp, hearing the noise of wind,
And looking out to see the moon thinned
To an air-sharpened blade.

Larkin's girlfriend, Monica Jones, told his biographer, "He cared a tenth as much about what happened around him as what was happening inside him." In recent years I have begun to make peace with my own introversion, or perhaps age has helped me to inhabit it less guiltily. At fifty-four, it's acceptable to act as if one's footloose days are past and one has settled into a sedate existence. The difference between me and a sexagenarian homebody like Keith Richards is that I never sowed many wild oats, but grew up with a middle-aged suburban schoolteacher's notion of a good time—dinner, book, and bed. Sounds like fun.

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