

Get More of Your "Entertainment Calories" From Friendship

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[0 : 00] Welcome to the Providence podcast.

We're continuing our series on friendship. This week, it's all about friendship. My name is Chris Oswald, senior pastor at Providence Community Church. Today, I'm going to read to you an essay from Aldous Huxley, written in 1923, entitled Pleasures, Aldous Huxley, Pleasures.

And I want to hopefully show you how to increase the margin, how to increase the margin that you have available to invest in others by taking out some of what I would call our kind of empty calories in your day.

Those empty calories being the time you spend, whether it's a lot of time or a little time, the time you spend engaged in recreation that is not essentially social in nature.

So what I would want to suggest is that we all have a... But one of the ways to kind of get our life into as wholesome a shape as possible is very similar to how we would get our diet into as clean a shape as possible.

[1 : 27] We really are wanting to make sure we prioritize the calories we need in the macros that we need. So, you know, for instance, eating a gram per pound of body weight, a gram of protein per pound of body weight, that's a really good thing to try to do.

And so the problem with that is that if you wait too long in your day and you eat a bunch of calories that are low in protein, well, now you're in a situation where you're either not hungry, certainly not hungry for protein, or even if you were hungry, you'd be eating over the number of calories you need, so on and so forth.

So sometimes it's actually just this thing in life where when we want something to get better, we just have to modify things that are already there with a slightly different take.

And I read this article by Huxley written back in 1923 about pleasures, and I thought, well, there's something here I'd like to pass on to my friends.

So I've been holding on to this, waiting for Thursday afternoon so that I could get into my office after the homeschool co-op left and read this essay to you and make some comments.

[2 : 38] So let's get into it. Pleasures by Aldous Huxley. We have heard a great deal since 1914 about the things which are a menace to civilization.

First, it was Prussian militarism, then the Germans at large, then the prolongation of the war, and then the shortening of the same, then after a time, the Treaty of Versailles, then French militarism, then French militarism, with all the while a running accompaniment of such minor menaces as Prohibition, Lord Norcliffe, Mr. Bryan, Comstockery, etc.

Civilization, however, has resisted the combined attacks of these enemies wonderfully well, for still in 1923, it stands not so very far from where it stood in that giant age before the flood of nine years since.

Where in relation to Neanderthal on the one hand and Athens on the other, where precisely it stood then is a question which each may answer according to his taste.

The important fact is that these menaces to our civilization, such as it is, menaces including the largest war and the stupidest peace known to history, have confined themselves in most places, and up till now, to mere threats, barking more furiously than they bite.

[4 : 03] No, the dangers which confront our civilization are not so much the external dangers, wild men, wars, and the bankruptcy that wars bring after them. The most alarming dangers are those which menace it from within, that threaten the mind rather than the body, and a state of contemporary man.

Of all the various poisons which modern civilization, by a process of auto-intoxication, brews quietly up within its own bowels, few, it seems to me, are more deadly, while none appears more harmless than that curious and appalling thing that is technically known as pleasure.

Pleasure, I place the word in inverted commas to show that I mean not real pleasure, but the organized activities officially known by the same name. Pleasure, quote unquote, what nightmare visions the word evokes.

Like every man of good sense and good feeling, I abominate work, but I would rather put in eight hours a day at a government office than be condemned to lead a life of pleasure, quote unquote. I would even, I believe, prefer to write a million words of journalism a year. The horrors of modern pleasure arise from the fact that every kind of organized distraction tends to become progressively more and more imbecile.

[5 : 27] There was a time, this is where I need you to key in, I know that some of that seemed, you know, a little extraneous to the idea. Here's where I need you to hone in.

The horrors of modern pleasure arise from the fact that every kind of organized distraction tends to become progressively more and more imbecile. There was a time when people indulged themselves with distractions requiring the expense of a certain intellectual effort.

In the 17th century, for example, royal personages and their courtiers took a real delight in listening to erudite sermons, Dr. Dunn's, for example, and academical disputes on points of theology or metaphysics.

Part of the entertainment offered to the Prince Palatine on the occasion of his marriage with James I's daughter was a syllogistic augmentation on, I forget what philosophical theme, between the amiable Lord Keeper Williams and a troop of minor Cambridge logicians.

Imagine the feelings of a contemporary prince if a loyal university were to offer him a similar entertainment. So let's pause the essay, which is about halfway through, and discuss what he's getting at.

[6 : 42] He is sounding an alarm bell that suggests that there was a day in which our pleasures were far more nutritious for our whole person than they are today.

So this is where I'm getting the idea of empty calories. He is describing a period of time in which when folks wanted to entertain themselves, a certain amount of intellectual effort was required. And he gives some examples. For instance, they would bring a theologian in and he would, you know, give some sort of probably overly complex, fancy-schmancy oratory to the delight of the hearers.

As we see this in Acts 17. And, you know, where people are gathered constantly to talk about new things.

He gives an example of the marriage of King James's daughter. At that marriage, they arranged a syllogistic augmentation, a debate, if you will, between one man and a troop of minor Cambridge logicians.

[8 : 02] All right, so let's get back to the essay. Royal personages were not the only people who enjoyed intelligent pleasures. In Elizabethan times, every lady and gentleman of ordinary culture could be relied upon at demand to take his or her part in a madrigal or motet.

Had to look that one up. It's just a small polyphonic choir. Essentially a little, you know, little acapella action.

Continuing, those who know the enormous complexity and subtlety of 16th century music will realize what this means. To indulge in their favorite pastime, our ancestors had to exert their minds to an uncommon degree.

Even the uneducated, vulgar, delighted in pleasures requiring the exercise of a certain intelligence, individuality, and personal initiative. They listened, for example, to Othello, King Lear, and Hamlet. Apparently with enjoyment and comprehension, they sang and made music and far away in the remote country, the peasants, year by year, went through the traditional rites, the dances of spring and summer, the winter mummings, the ceremonies of the harvest home appropriate to each successive season.

[9 : 22] Their pleasures were intelligent and alive, and it was they who, by their own efforts, entertained themselves. We have changed all that. In place of the old pleasures demanding intelligence and personal initiative, we have vast organizations that provide us with ready-made distractions, distractions which demand from pleasure seekers no personal participation and no intellectual effort of any sort.

To the interminable democracies of the world, a million cinemas bring the same stale balderdash. There have always been fourth-rate writers and dramatists, but their works in the past quickly died without getting beyond the boundaries of the city or county in which they appeared.

Today, the inventions of the scenario writer go out from Los Angeles across the whole world. Countless audiences soak passively in the tepid bath of nonsense.

No mental effort is demanded of them, no participation. They need only sit and keep their eyes open. Do the democracies want music? In the old days, they would have had to make it themselves.

Now they merely turn on the gramophone or if they were a little more up-to-date, they adjust their wireless to the right wavelength and listen to the fruity contralto at the macaroni house singing the gleaner's slumber song.

[10:46] If they want literature, there is the press. Nominally, it is true the press exists to impart information, but its real function is to provide like the cinema a distraction which shall occupy the mind without demanding of it the slightest effort or the fatigue of a single thought.

This function, it must be admitted, it fulfills with extraordinary success. It is possible to go on for years and years reading two papers every working day and one on Sundays without ever once being called upon to think or to make any effort other than to move the eyes, not very attentively, down the printed column.

certain sections of the community still practice athletic sports in which they, in which they, in which individual participation is demanded.

Great numbers of the middle and upper classes play golf and tennis in person. Pickleball! If they are sufficiently rich, they shoot birds and pursue the fox and go skiing in the Alps.

But the vast mass of the community has now come to sport vicariously, preferring the watching of football to the fatigues and dangers of the actual game.

[11:56] All classes, it is true, still dance, but dance all the world over the same steps to the same tunes. The dance has been scrupulously sterilized of any local or personal individuality.

These effortless pleasures, these ready-made distractions that are the same for everyone over the face of the whole Western world are surely a worse menace to our civilization than ever the Germans were.

The working hours of the day are all ready for the majority of human beings occupied in the performance of purely mechanical tasks in which no mental effort, no individuality, no initiative are required.

And now, in the hours of leisure, we turn to distractions as mechanically stereotyped and demanding as little intelligence and initiative as does our work.

Add such leisure to such work and the sum is a perfect day which it is a blessed relief to come to an end of. Oh, wow.

[12:59] Huxley ended with a preposition. Last paragraph. Self-poisoned in this fashion, civilization looks as though it might easily decline in a kind of premature senility with a mind almost atrophied by lack of use, unable to entertain itself and grown so wearily uninterested in the ready-made distractions offered from without that nothing but the grossest stimulants of an ever-increasing violence and credidity can move it.

The democracy of the future will sicken of a chronic and mortal boredom. It will go perhaps the way the Romans went, the Romans who came at last to lose precisely as we are doing now the capacity to distract themselves.

The Romans who, like us, lived on ready-made entertainments in which they had no participation. Their deadly NUI demanded ever more gladiators, more tightrope walking elephants, more rare and far-fetched animals to be slaughtered.

Ours would demand no less, but owing to the existence of a few idealists, it doesn't get all it asks for. The most violent forms of entertainment can only be obtained illicitly.

Let us not despair, however, we still may live to see blood flowing across the stage of the Hippodrome. The force of a boredom clamoring to be alleviated may yet prove too much for the idealist.

[14:37] Well, there's your cranky Huxley for today, and he certainly is cranky, and he certainly is engaging in hyperbole, and his point is not necessarily to commend anything related to friendship, but perhaps you're hearing in the essay what I thought might be useful, and that's simply this.

It is helpful to understand through the lens of considering the history of distraction, the history of recreation, the history of pleasure, it's helpful to understand that for the majority of the human existence, those things came through the company of friends.

Nearly all of the pastimes he describes are things that are occurring, that he describes occurring in the past were things that actually not only could include friends, but really required them.

And so this is the idea. You have a certain amount of recreation time in a week. Some of you have more, some of you have less.

Let's call that potential macro nutrients. You can get a lot of good relationship time within those, context, or none.

[16:00] So, let's say that there are two essential kind of modes of friendship. Well, let me back up.

What I'm first suggesting is that a decent percentage of your leisure, fun, pleasure, recreation, however you describe it, really probably should include others.

okay? The idea of you sitting alone or you and your wife sitting alone and just watching a movie is certainly lawful and fine.

Is it ideal? Well, there may be other avenues of pleasure, recreation, and enjoyment that would be better for you and better for others. And there seems to be, through this glimpse of Huxley's review of the history of pleasure, there seems to be something that commends this idea that, you know, for a really long time people just got together and entertained themselves and entertained one another. Perhaps you've heard the phrase, you must sing for your supper. Well, this is an actual historical fact. This is how this is, it was, it was kind of joking, kind of not joking, like, hey, I will feed you, but you must entertain me.

[17:19] The truth is, is that I don't want you to get the wrong idea, that, that, you know, there should somehow be some expectation that friends would entertain you, but the truth is, is that when you get better at sort of, like, solving the boredom issue for yourself, one of the best places to do that is just with another human being.

As we saw with Lewis on Sunday, there are no ordinary people. people. A second tier to this idea would be that in addition to just prioritizing people more in your times of relaxation, you should really consider essentially, I would say, two categories of social time.

And, again, I found this essay helpful to remind me of these categories. And I think that there's a decent percentage of younger people in particular, but not just younger, because I can see me doing this too, in which consumption is the central activity.

So, we watch a movie together, we go out to eat, you know, there's often something that is being consumed at the centerpiece of the interaction.

Okay, but then there's a second category that I would commend is like, well, this sounds more human this sounds more historically relevant, and that would be, instead of always consuming, what about creating?

[18:49] Or what about adding some creativity within, you know, the friendships that you're already enjoying and the times you're already enjoying? Being this idea of, why don't you emphasize the humanity that you're sharing and be creative together?

It's like, well, what does that mean? Well, tell stories, you know, do something, do a project, you know, solve a problem together, fix something, so on and so forth.

I actually think that to the degree that someone might be saying, you know, I just don't feel very connected, I would just say, okay, well, how much time do you spend in sort of isolated consumption?

And then with the time that you do spend with people, how much of that time is kind of consumer centered, and how much of that time is creative centered?

Because what you would see really in the history of friendship is the history of recreation and the history of friendship are kind of the same thing to a large degree. And what you'd see is they would entertain each other with stories and so on and so forth.

[20:01] This is another idea here. You know, it certainly could go too far, but we should never be overly concerned about as Christians gathering together to feast on some theology.

There's sometimes pushback about that, that, you know, well, that's not really that important and so on and so forth. Well, you know, I agree with that, but the truth is that God is marvelously complex, and theology does have entertainment value.

It's not the ultimate value, but theology does have entertainment value. There's nothing wrong with getting together and talking about theological controversies or talking about some complex issue that you've thought of in the Bible or so on and so forth.

You know, Angela and I kind of stumbled into some of this when we were pretty young. We were doing kind of what all couples do, you know, we would watch movies together and so on and so forth.

But one day we stumbled upon a modern-day adaptation of Othello, and it was just so much more moving than the kind of typical TV that we would watch.

[21 : 13] And so from there we actually started going to, we started seeking out like little film festivals or little showings of kind of artistic films and so on and so forth that were sort of, you know, the quality maybe wasn't as great, but there was actually a message going on.

And then we started figuring out like, well, we can read books together and we can have conversations about ideas and so on and so forth. And so really I think the idea, what I wanted to bring to you with this essay was, man, I think if you just elevated your expectations for your pleasure as Huxley articulates, and as a part of that, made sure that a decent percentage of your time when you are recreating is spent with others, well, I think that's a really helpful insight that may not require a lot more time from you than you're already expending on relaxation, but could benefit you and others at multiple levels.

All right, well, that's all I've got. Huxley's pleasure essay, it's probably five or six paragraphs, and if you'd like to return to that and examine it, you are certainly encouraged to do so.

Let me leave you with a quote, I'll find it real quick here, from C.S. Lewis that we read a piece of it. Let me get this for you real quick.

Ordinary people. Let's see here. Just popped into my mind like, well, this kind of fits with that.

[22 : 55] All right. This is from the section that I read. I read some of this on Sunday, this same section from C.S. Lewis, Weight of Glory.

He says there are no ordinary people multiple times, and I think a piece of the essay that I read on Sunday precedes this section.

I think this is the summary section of his particular argument about ordinary people. He says there are no ordinary people. You've never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations, these are mortal and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat.

But it is immortals with whom we joke. And work and marry and snub and exploit. Immortal horrors or everlasting splendors. This does not mean that we are to be perpetually solemn.

I think this is the part I wanted you to hear. This does not mean that we are to be perpetually solemn. We must play. But our merriment must be of that kind.

[24 : 02] And it is, in fact, the merriest kind, which exists between people who have, from the outset, taken each other seriously. No flippancy, no superiority, no presumption.

So another way to think about this is, what if we all just took our thoughts seriously? And what if we just started learning how to engage in the kinds of friendships that Huxley described as having occurred routinely across all social and intellectual classes up until at least the 1920s?

All right, friends, be well. We've got one more friendship podcast to come tomorrow and I hope that, I hope the Lord blesses some of this in your life so that you can both be a good friend and receive the many benefits of great friendship.

Peace.