

Frolic Rev. Gabi

The first time I ever came across the word “frolic “ was about 50 years ago, in Germany. Frolic was the very first brand of dried dog food in my home country. It came in small, donut shaped red kibbles. The picture on the front of the box was a collie. Lassie in other words, same box, different breed. I soon found that all dogs loved it. But I never wondered about the name - I assumed it would be a variation of the German word “froehlich” which means happy, blissful, gay. And that’s what you want in a dog, right?

A few years later, I was probably about 15 years old, I had English at school, and I learned that the word “frolic” as a verb means exactly that: being gay, happy; and as a verb: moving around in a happy way.

And now, a few weeks ago, I was reading a book called Why Amish Cows Learn Dutch. It had been a farewell present from my UU congregation in State College. In the second chapter, the extension Specialist who wrote this book, and who worked with Amish people for decades, mentions that the Amish he was visiting that day were planning to have a “frolic”.

So here was this word again, in a completely new context! An insert author explains that what it means here is a combination of work and fun. You all know at least one example of an Amish frolic: the raising of a barn by the whole community. But having a “frolic” could also be getting together for thrashing, or other agricultural chores. What distinguishes a frolic from any other teamwork is that “having fun” is an integral part of it! There is chattering and laughing; and breaking bread together afterwards, enjoying a few precious moments of restful silence together. Often, at the end of the day, people don’t go home right away, no, they have - what we call - a party! What a splendid idea: Doing tedious or boring work - and having fun doing it! And when you look at their barns, or quilts pieced together in hundreds of hours by Amish women, you see that it is work well done. The Amish are living proof that this quote of Aristotle is indeed true: *“pleasure in the job puts perfection in the work”*.

When you look at our SmartPhone-infested society, you do not see that approach very often, do you? We are on the extreme other side: each of us in our own little world, with our own laptop or tablet; in cubicles or small offices. On the fields, huge combines take care of most of the work. They are driven by one lonely dude, probably wearing headphones and listening to his music.... “Frolic” seems to have been replaced with “depressed.....”

But it’s not only the latest technology to blame. We “Yankees” as many Amish call us, have a rather strict separation of fun and work. A theology I cannot understand, and that is not based on anything in the Bible, forbids fun and considers it sinful in many branches of the Christian religion. This attitude came to America with the settlers.

Eventually, even Benjamin Franklin opined: *A life of leisure and a life of laziness are two things. There will be sleeping enough in the grave.* And this opinion is still going strong! Remember Garrison Keillor's description of the Lake Wobegon Lutherans?

With the arrival of industrialization, there was less and less opportunity for working together in groups of people. In the decades of the 20th century people became more and more isolated from each other; with the arrival of the personal computer, cubicle became the norm. Societies like the Amish always defied this trend, and in a way I envy them for it. Maybe I feel such a strong affinity for the Amish culture because I grew up in the Bavarian farmland, surrounded by farms; tickled when I was allowed to help out with milking, making hay, or riding on the hay wagon. When working in the fields, it always was a group of people, and there was yakking and often singing while we did this work.

I am not unrealistic - Life, work, can be pretty drab, it can be hard, beyond endurance even. And yet, very often folks have found ways to make it more bearable. One really successful way to do that is to sing. I invite you to listen to 3 short clips of music: the first one is a troupe of young marine corps soldiers, the second one is a very old recording of a chain gang song Bryan Stevens told me about. Finally, there is a minute from a live-recording of a prison song from Pachman Farm in 1947. Since we will be talking about labor songs in 2 weeks, I want to make a clear distinction that the kind of music I'm talking about here is not for "rebel rousing" but for "leisure making", for making hard or boring work more bearable by singing.

You see, the definition of leisure is not "free time", or "being free". No, leisure is a state of mind, independent of time and place. Whenever you do something that feeds or fulfills you, that makes you happy, that satisfies you one way or another, you are in a state of leisure. The easy way to prove this is if you look at those of your friends you might call "workaholics" - if they don't stop working after 40 hours, they might eventually be exhausted. But they rarely "burn out" or have stress related illnesses! Unfortunately, many dictionaries have not caught up with this newer definition. I learned it when I got my Associates Degree in Recreation and Leisure Studies. And this new definition is more than "semantics", because our brain has the tendency to believe the words we use..... And here we are back at the beginning: the word "frolic". Just try it out yourself: say "I'm going to frolic" and then say "I'm going to work".

A different example and approach to make boring work more fun: Lancaster Theological Seminary holds a "Titivation Day" twice a year. "Titivation" originally meant to add or improve something a little, or to make it look better. "Titivation Day" means that all students and faculty go outside and clean up and weed, straighten out the grounds, in order to make the seminary look more beautiful. Again, teamwork - easy for the individual helpers, but a big deal for the seminary campus when you look at it afterwards! And you can probably guess everybody is singing together of course, in this

case they are hymns. The joy of beautification is a powerful spiritual stimulant - in case you hadn't noticed it.

By the way, this concept is easily transferred to our churches: with the understanding that everybody only has to do a little bit, and that our beloved building and the grounds will be more beautiful afterwards, and that - fun will be had by all! - it is not difficult at all. Semantics once again make a difference: call the event a "work day" and it will be hard to get enough folks to come; make it a "work party" and many will come and bring their kids. Of course you'll have to provide music, donuts and coffee.

Here are the voices of a few people from different walks of life who experience that difference. The athlete Ezekiel Elliott says: "*When we go out there, we have fun, but we get to work; and I think we're at our best when we're having fun. Having fun is the key.*" The actor Joe Lando: "*When you work with somebody you have chemistry with, it's easy and it's fun. You hardly call it work.*" Former Versace model, and now actor and singer James Marsden believes that "*If you have fun and keep a good attitude, people want to work with you.*" I treat everyone as equals. I can't work if I'm not having fun, and I can't have fun if not everyone is happy. Swedish actor Stellan Skarsgard

There is one more way that can help you deal with work that you do not like, and that is mindfulness. In other words, you have the option of focusing your awareness on what you're doing. You can become conscious of everything you are doing: with your hands or with your body at that time. For example, when I fold the dry T-shirts I take out of the dryer I usually start by just enjoying the warmth of the item, and then its good smell. But then I might become mindful of the person this T-shirt belongs to. And be mindful of how grateful I am that this person is in my life. Being mindful of what you are doing as you are doing it is very easy. Give it a try. All you have to do is start: it takes off on its own from there.

Let me share an interesting example of this with you. I have a question for you: Do you know how long it takes to build a Rolls-Royce? Let me tell you-it takes a minimum of six months to build one Rolls-Royce car. The reason is that every Rolls-Royce is hand assembled. Every screw, every bolt, every piece of metal or glass - it's put together by the hands of a human being. The men and women working on those cars are always focused on what they are doing at that moment; and everybody working at Rolls Royce takes great pride in their work. It is actually very hard to get a job at Rolls Royce, because people like it so much that they do not leave unless they have to retire. Isn't it another example for Aristotle's quote: "*pleasure in the job puts perfection in the work*"?

I have tried to give you a few possible ways of making work, even really boring work, more pleasurable: sharing work with a group of folks; and singing while you work; being mindful of what you are doing, and recognizing the importance of valuing your efforts with pride. Not a new sentiment by any means: in Genesis, where the writer describes

how God created the world, at the end of every day there are the words “*and God saw that it was good*”.

Now it's your turn: what are your experiences with work and leisure? Do you use any of the techniques I mentioned, or maybe have one of your own?