

Henry David Thoreau wrote of having a rock for a paperweight at his cabin by Walden pond. He threw it out when he discovered he had to dust it. This is the very essence of a do-nothing attitude.

“Organize a strike in your school or workplace on the grounds that it does not satisfy your need for indolence & spiritual beauty.” - TAZ: The Temporary Autonomous Zone by Hakim Bey

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The Art of Nothing



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Westerners who first met the Shoshonean bands of Indians in the Great Basin Desert typically described them as being "wretched and lazy". Many observers remarked that they lived in a total wasteland and yet seemed to do nothing to improve their situation. They built no houses or villages; they had few tools or possessions, almost no art, and they stored little food. It seemed that all they did was sit around and do nothing.

The Shoshone were true hunter-gatherers. They spent their lives walking from one food source to another. The reason they did not build houses was because houses were useless to them in their nomadic lifestyle. Everything they owned they carried on their backs from place to place. They did not manufacture a lot of tools or possessions or art, because it would have been a burden to carry.

We often expect that such primitive cultures as the Shoshone must have worked all the time just to stay alive, but in actuality these were generally very leisured peoples. Anthropological studies in different parts of the world have indicated that nomadic hunter-gatherer type societies typically worked only two or three hours per day for their subsistence. Like the deer and other creatures of the wild, hunter-gatherer peoples have nothing more to do than to wander and eat.

The Shoshone had a lot of time on their hands only because

nothing at all. Then you will have the time on your hands so that you can choose to do nothing, or even to go do something.

(Thomas J. Elpel is the director of Hollowtop Outdoor Primitive School in Pony Montana)

suggested further reading:

walking by david thoreau

evasion by mack evasion

the one straw revolution by Masanobu Fukuoka

tang pingist manifesto

Manual for a worldwide manuke revolt by Matsumoto Hajime

corrosive conciousness by bellamy fitzpatrick

the abolition of work by bob black

gone to croatan

the unique and its property by max stirner

Possum Living by Dolly Freed

The Jukes in 1915

The Truth About Primitive Life by Theodore John Kaczynski

various primitive skills: i.e.: how long does it take to construct a particular shelter? How much of a particular food resource can I harvest per hour? Can I increase the harvest using different gathering techniques? One thing I have noted is that it is only marginally economical to manufacture common primitive deadfall traps. It is time intensive; it adds weight to carry, and the traps often have short life-spans. The do-nothing alternative is to use whatever is at hand, to pick up sticks and assemble them into a trap, without even using a knife. Preliminary tests of this "no-method" have produced results equal to conventional, carved and manufactured traps, but with a much smaller investment of time.

Primitive hunter-gatherer type cultures were very good at doing nothing. Exactly how well they did this is difficult to determine, however, because doing nothing leaves nothing behind for the archaeological record. Every time we find an artifact we have documentation of something they did; yet the most important part of their skills may have been what they did not, and there is no way to discover what that was by studying what they did.

Nevertheless, what you will discover for yourself, as you learn the art of doing nothing is that you are much more at home in the wilderness. No longer will you be so dependent on a lot of tools and gadgets; no longer will you need to shape the elements of nature to fit our western definitions. You will find you need less and less, until one day you find you need

they produced almost no material culture. They were not being lazy; they were just being economical. Sitting around doing nothing for hours on end helped them to conserve precious calories of energy, so they would not have to harvest so many calories each day to feed themselves.

Today many of us westerners find ourselves fascinated with these simple cultures, and a few of us really dive into it to reproduce or recreate the primitive lifestyle. In our typical western zeal we get right into it and produce, produce, produce. We work ambitiously to learn each primitive craft, and we produce all kinds of primitive clothing, tools, containers, and art, and just plain stuff. True hunter-gatherer cultures carried all their possessions on their backs, but us modern primitives soon find that we need a pickup truck just to move camp! In our effort to recreate the primitive lifestyle we find that we have ironically missed our mark completely-- that we have made many primitive things, but that we have not begun to grasp the true nature of a primitive culture. To truly grasp that essence requires that we let go, and begin to understand the art of doing nothing.

Understanding the art of nothing is a somewhat challenging concept for us westerners. When we go on a "primitive" camping trip, we take our western preconceptions with us. We find a level spot in a meadow to build our shelters, and if a site is not level then we make it so. Then we gather materials and start from scratch, building the walls and roof of a shelter. We

do what we are accustomed to; we build a frame house on a surveyed plot in the meadow. Then we gather materials and shingle our shelter, regardless of whether or not there is a cloud in the sky, or whether or not it has rained at all in a month.

Part of the reason we act this way stems from our cultural upbringing. Another part of it is simply because it is easier for those of us who are instructors to teach something rather than to teach nothing. It is much easier to teach how to make something than to teach how not to need to make anything. The do-something approach to primitive skills is to make everything you need, while the do-nothing method is to find everything.

For example, the do-nothing method of shelter is to find shelter, rather than to build it. Two hours spent searching for a partial shelter that can be improved upon can easily save you two hours of hard-working construction time, and you will usually get a better shelter this way. More so, the do-nothing method of shelter is to look first at the incoming weather, and to build only what is needed. If it is not going to rain then you may be able to do-nothing to rain-proof your shelter. Then perhaps you will only need to put your efforts into a shelter that will keep you warm, instead of both warm and dry.

There are many things, both small and large, that a person can do, or not do, to better the art of doing nothing. This can

be as simple as cupping one's hands to drink from the stream, instead of making and carrying a cup, to breaking sticks to find a sharpened point, rather than using a knife to methodically carve out a digging stick. Hand carved wooden spoons and forks are do-something utensils that you have to manufacture, carry, and worst, that you have to clean. But chopsticks (twigs) are do-nothing utensils that do not need to be manufactured or carried, and you can toss them in the fire when you are done.

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The do-nothing approach to primitive skills is something that you do. Doing nothing is a way of saving time and energy, so that you can finish your daily work more effectively. One thing that I have found through the years of experimental research into primitive skills, is that there is rarely enough hours in a day to complete all of a day's tasks. It is difficult to go out and build a shelter, make a working bowdrill set, set traps, dig roots, make bowls and spoons, and cook dinner. Hunter-gatherer societies succeeded in working only two to three hours per day, yet in our efforts to reproduce their lifestyle we end up working all day.

Doing nothing is an approach to research; it is a way of thinking and doing. For instance, I do a lot of timed studies of