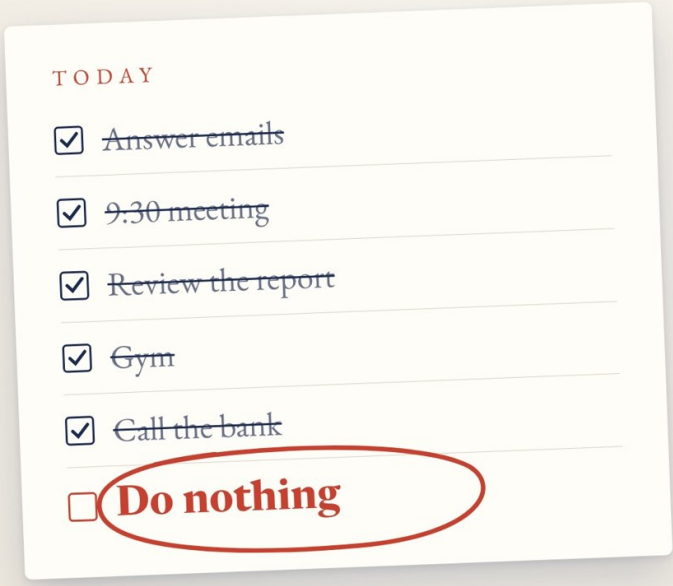
ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON

An Apology for *Idlers*

Eight Essays on Rest Guilt, Boredom and Free Time in the Age of AI



Annotated, with essays by

JULIAN DELPHIKI

Thinking School

An Apology for Idlers (Annotated)

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An Apology for Idlers (Annotated): Eight Essays on Rest Guilt, Boredom and Free Time in the Age of AI

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Prologue. A Hundred and Fifty Years of Bad Conscience

In July 1877 a twenty-six-year-old Scot, who had just qualified as a lawyer and had no intention of practising, published an essay in a London magazine in defence of idlers. He began by admitting that his clients had a poor reputation. Everyone, he wrote, is bound to enter some lucrative profession and to labour in it "with something not far short of enthusiasm", under pain of a decree in absence convicting them of a crime he invented for the occasion: *lèse*-respectability.

In July 2027 the essay turns a hundred and fifty. The crime is still on the books. Only the court has moved.

The person signing these pages makes a living in a trade that measures other people's time. I have spent twenty years in digital commerce. I started out writing press releases, moved into performance marketing, where every minute of attention has a price and ends up on a dashboard, and since then I have watched every wave the industry sold as the final one. I know how a "time on site" metric is built and what it celebrates. This book is not written by someone who left work to praise idleness from a hammock. It is written by someone still inside, who now and then distrusts what he measures.

Why this text

An Apology for Idlers is short. It can be read in half an hour, and it has one advantage over almost everything written on the subject since: it does not preach. Stevenson does not promise that rest will make you more productive, or that idleness is the secret of success, or that there is a method.

He writes, as he says himself, an apology, a brief for one side, and he warns in his second paragraph that he knows perfectly well how much can be said in favour of diligence. He only asks to be allowed to say the other thing.

The other thing is subtler than its reputation. His idler is not someone who does nothing. He is someone who does a great deal that is not "recognised in the dogmatic formularies of the ruling class": looking, walking, talking, learning outside the syllabus, sitting by a stream with no declared purpose. And Stevenson's target is not work. It is something narrower: people who no longer know how to be without an occupation, who fall into a kind of coma the moment they leave the office, and who make life miserable for everyone near them.

The British philosopher Julian Baggini has an example that sums up the misunderstanding better than many treatises. Every so often a study appears showing that anglers report higher wellbeing than average, and somebody concludes that one ought to take up fishing in order to feel better. But the angler is not well because he fishes in order to be well. He is well because he fishes, and the benefit reaches him precisely because he was not after it. Whoever takes a rod to the river to improve his metrics has turned the afternoon into another task.

This book tries not to fall into that trap, though it cites studies. When it does, it is to argue with those who believe rest must justify itself, not to agree with them using other numbers.

The essay is also funny. That is no small thing on a subject usually treated with a Sunday face.

A word with two faces

The title carries an old double meaning that is worth keeping in view. English has *leisure*, which is respectable: free time, recreation, a "leisure centre", something the economy sells. And it has *idleness*, which is not. Idle hands are the devil's workshop; the idler is someone who ought to be doing something. Samuel Johnson, whose words open Stevenson's essay, had written a series of essays for a London weekly in the 1750s under the title *The Idler*. Even then the word was a provocation.

Stevenson chose the character with the worse reputation. Had he wanted to praise free time, he would have chosen another title, and had far less fun.

The gap between the two words runs through this whole book. Our societies approve of leisure and distrust idleness. They accept free time as long as it is used for something: a trip, a course, a sport, a hobby with results. What they still find hard to accept is time used for nothing. That is the time Stevenson defends.

The confusion is old, and the Greeks had it better sorted than we do. For Aristotle, leisure, *scholé*, was not doing nothing but time free from necessity, in which one could think, learn and attend to the city. Its opposite was *ascholía*, the lack of leisure, which is literally the word for "occupation". "We are busy so that we may have leisure," he writes in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, as we make war so that we may have peace. *Scholé*, incidentally, gives us "school". Latin did the same: *negotium*, business, is *nec otium*, what is not leisure. Our most serious word for work is still defined by what it lacks.

Why now

Three things make this text sound less like a Victorian curiosity than like the news.

The first is guilt. We have gained free time over the last century, though not as much as was promised (as the volume on Keynes in this series discusses), but we have not gained the peace of mind to use it. In the United States, some 46 % of workers who get paid time off take less than they are offered.

In the United Kingdom, a government that came to power promising a legal "right to switch off" dropped the plan within a year. The decree for *lèse*-respectability is no longer handed down by the neighbours. It is handed down by the phone that buzzes on the beach towel.

The second is accounting. British workers gave their employers £28.5 billion of unpaid overtime in 2025, according to the Trades Union Congress; those who did it put in nearly seven extra hours a week. It is hard to defend idleness in an economy that does not pay for the hours it already takes.

The third is the machine. Every technology that has entered the office in the last fifty years has come with the same promise: do the same in less time and give us back the rest. Remember when email was going to put an end to meetings?

Artificial intelligence repeats the promise with more conviction than any before it. And the first serious field studies of what it does inside a real company say something Stevenson would have understood at once: people do not use the time it saves to rest. They use it to fit more work into the gaps, lunch included.

I have a habit, from my trade, of looking at hours as an opportunity cost. A free afternoon is not a free afternoon: it is what I could have produced in it. Reading, walking or doing nothing all have a

price, and the price is measured in work not done. It is the accounting of my job applied to my life. This book is, in part, an attempt to audit it.

I work with these tools and explain them in class, so I cannot claim much distance. My rule is the least dramatic one I know: treat AI as what it is, a piece of software. Software can save time. What it does not decide is what happens to the time saved. That is decided by whoever runs the calendar, and it is rarely the person resting.

How the book is built

The book has three parts and one rule.

The first part is the text: Stevenson's original, as he collected it in 1881, It has notes on the allusions a reader of 1877 caught without help and a reader of today may not: coins, characters from novels, proverbs, an imaginary ministry from Dickens. Before the text there is a short context on who its author was when he wrote it and what he did next, which turns out to be the best joke in the essay.

The second part is eight essays of mine. Each takes an idea from Stevenson and sets it against a problem of today: the guilt of resting, the boredom we no longer allow ourselves, holidays that wear us out, the walk the phone has taken over, a childhood with every hour scheduled, hobbies obliged to pay their way, retirement turned into one more productive stage. The eighth is a counterpoint: the most serious objection to the whole book, that idleness is a privilege, argued as honestly as I can.

All eight share one question, which is also the book's argument: who collects on the time we do not produce. Stevenson called it a sentence. Here it will be called the collector, because it rarely judges and nearly always invoices. In each essay it wears a different face, and at the end of the book they are gathered together.

The third part collects further objections (that work gives meaning, that the unemployed are not happier, that Stevenson did not practise what he preached) and ends with an epilogue of options, not advice.

The rule is the rule of the whole series: every fact has its source, at the end of each chapter. If a figure could not be checked, it is not here.

What this book is not

It is not a productivity manual dressed up as a praise of rest. Those books exist, sell well and share an assumption Stevenson rejects: that rest is worth what it yields afterwards. Idleness is not defended here as an investment.

Nor is it an invitation to quit your job, skip school or retire early. Stevenson writes with a humour that can pass for frivolity, and he sets the limit himself in a line that is often forgotten: his revolutionary precept, he says, is not easily abused, "thanks to hunger and the workhouse". He knew what he was saying, and he knew where he was saying it from. The eighth essay deals with that.

What it is: a conversation with a text from a hundred and fifty years ago that is still right about what matters most, and wrong, or silent, about what we now see more clearly.

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Context. A Lawyer Who Never Practised

To understand *An Apology for Idlers* you need to know one thing before anything else: its author had just said no to two respectable careers, and he had finished the second one before saying it.

The lighthouse family

Robert Louis Stevenson was born in Edinburgh on 13 November 1850, the only child of Thomas Stevenson, an engineer, and Margaret Balfour, a minister's daughter. The Stevensons were a dynasty of engineers. His grandfather Robert, and then his father and uncles, built many of the lighthouses on the Scottish coast, some of them on rocks the sea covers at every tide. It was a serious, Presbyterian, prosperous family, living in a solid house in Edinburgh's New Town.

The boy was sickly. He spent long spells in bed with the chest troubles that would follow him all his life, and his schooling was patchy: several schools, private tutors, health trips with his mother. He read a great deal, in no particular order.

In 1867, aged seventeen, he entered Edinburgh University to study engineering. It was what was expected of him. He attended little. By the university's own account he spent much of his time avoiding lectures, which is an elegant way of saying he played truant. In the

essay he says so with pride: he remembers little of the lectures and a good deal of what he picked up "in the open street".

Law, as a compromise

In 1871 he told his father he did not want to be an engineer but a writer. His father, disappointed, accepted a compromise: he would read law, so as to have a respectable profession to fall back on if literature failed.

Stevenson kept the bargain halfway, which is how such bargains are kept. He studied law with what one biographer called "serious although fitful" attention, and in those years things grew worse at home: in 1873 his father discovered that his son no longer believed in God, and the quarrel left long scars. On 14 July 1875 he passed his final examination and two days later was admitted to the Faculty of Advocates. He was twenty-four. He put a brass plate with his name on the door at home, and never practised.

The magazine

What he actually did was write. From 1874 he was publishing essays in London magazines, above all in the *Cornhill*, then edited by Leslie Stephen: critic, mountaineer and future father of Virginia Woolf. Stephen was one of the first to take him seriously and introduced him to people who opened doors in London.

The essays of those years are personal and light on the surface: on walking tours, on falling in love, on marriage, on youth and age. Stevenson thought of collecting them in a book to be called *Life at Twenty-Five*. In the list of chapters he left, there are titles such as "Way of life. Why to be chosen", "Money" and, fourth, "An Apology for Idlers". Stephen advised him in March 1877 not to prepare a book

of essays yet. The idlers' essay appeared in the July issue of the *Cornhill*.

It should be read, then, for what it is: the brief of a twenty-six-year-old who has just refused to be an engineer and a lawyer, who lives on his father's money. And who needs to explain, to his family and to himself, why what he does is not wasting time.

The summer at Grez

The year before the essay mattered for another reason. In 1876 Stevenson canoed the canals of Belgium and northern France with a friend (the trip became his first book, *An Inland Voyage*, 1878) and in September reached Grez-sur-Loing, a painters' village near Fontainebleau where his cousin Bob was staying. There he met Fanny Van de Grift Osbourne, a married American ten years older than himself, living in France with her children.

He fell in love. The essay belongs to that season of painters working outdoors, long conversations and no timetable at all. When Stevenson describes his idler walking out through the gardened suburbs into the country to smoke pipes by a burn, he is not inventing a literary type. He is describing his summers.

What came next

The joke of the essay, the one its author could not know, is what came next.

In 1879 Stevenson crossed the Atlantic and the American continent, ill and nearly penniless, to join Fanny in California. They married in 1880, after her divorce. From then on, the advocate of idlers became one of the hardest-working writers of his century. *Treasure Island* came out as a book in 1883. *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr*

Hyde and *Kidnapped* in 1886. Novels followed, and stories, poems for children, travel books, essays, a biography, thousands of letters. He wrote in bed, through haemorrhages and fevers, sometimes with his right hand out of action.

In 1890 he settled in Samoa, on an estate called Vailima on the island of Upolu. The Samoans called him *Tusitala*, "the teller of tales". There he went on writing, took the Samoans' side in local politics against the colonial powers, and kept a large household of family and staff that had to be paid for. On 3 December 1894, while preparing dinner with his wife, he collapsed with a brain haemorrhage. He died that evening. He was forty-four.

The collected editions of his works run to more than twenty volumes.

Before you read it

Three warnings for today's reader.

First, the essay is written from a particular social position. Stevenson's "we" are comfortable young men choosing among the liberal professions. Women appear seldom and, when they do, looking or being looked at. There is not a single labourer in the text, unless we count the barefoot boy with the marble. Stevenson does not hide it, and at one point says so plainly: his precept is revolutionary, but hunger and the workhouse keep it from being abused. The eighth essay in this book argues about what follows from that.

Second, the essay quotes a great deal, and from memory: Bunyan, Shakespeare, Thackeray, Hazlitt, Dickens, Tennyson, Boswell. For a *Cornhill* reader in 1877 they were household names. The notes explain each one, briefly.

Third, the humour. Stevenson exaggerates on purpose, laughs at himself and contradicts himself when it suits him. Read it as a treatise

and you miss half of it. Read it only as a joke and you miss the other half.

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Part One

The Text

An Apology for Idlers

Robert Louis Stevenson (1877)
Annotated by Julian Delphiki

> *BOSWELL: We grow weary when idle.*
> *JOHNSON: That is, sir, because others being busy, we want company; but if we were idle, there would be no growing weary; we should all entertain one another.*

Just now, when every one is bound, under pain of a decree in absence convicting them of *lèse*-respectability[1], to enter on some lucrative profession, and labour therein with something not far short of enthusiasm, a cry from the opposite party who are content when they have enough, and like to look on and enjoy in the meanwhile, savours a little of bravado and gasconade. And yet this should not be. Idleness so called, which does not consist in doing nothing, but in doing a great deal not recognised in the dogmatic formularies of the ruling class, has as good a right to state its position as industry itself. It is admitted that the presence of people who refuse to enter in the great handicap race for sixpenny pieces[2], is at once an insult and a disenchantment for those who do. A fine fellow (as we see so many) takes his determination, votes for the sixpences, and in the emphatic Americanism, it "goes for" them[3]. And while such an one is ploughing distressfully up the road, it is not hard to understand his resentment, when he perceives cool persons in the meadows by the wayside,