

## The Twelve Principles of Personal Leadership

### *Principle #8 – Simple Diversions – Part 1*

*-One Leader's Perspective*

By Greg L. Thomas



By the time I graduated from high school in the early 1970's I had been prepared to enter the construction industry as an electrician. It had been determined by school authorities that I did not have college potential. In those days students were both labeled and categorized where the school officials determined they should be. For males who were not designated as "college material" you had limited options. Your career emphasis was directed toward auto repair shop, art classes or one of the construction trades. I did not disappoint the school administrators and the low expectations that they had about me, and I was in the half of my graduating class that made the *upper* half possible!

After working for an uncle for a number of months in the auto business, my first real job was as an apprentice electrician at age 18. In one of my early experiences I was sent to do electrical work at the private home of a noted business executive. "Mr. Fischer" was the president and driving innovator of a major international corporation that manufactured conveyor systems and monorails. He lived in an exclusive area of Northern Ohio known as Waite Hill. This was a small, wealthy and exclusive community in Lake County, Ohio that had a population of less than 500 people. Within this small town were a number of mansions and incredible properties located in a genteel and quiet environment. For a young man who grew up in the modest middle-class streets of Cleveland I was stunned by the magnificence of his home and property.

Aside from his actual residence, what I remember most about his homestead was the impressive *recreational* building located in the yard. It included a central clubhouse with full kitchen facilities and bath house. Walking out of one side of this dwelling you were led to a full-size tennis court that was surfaced immaculately and exactly as a professional court. If you walked out of the other side of this opulent clubhouse you would walk into a pristine swimming pool area. The pool was surrounded with beautiful cabana furniture and lounge chairs. Of course, the entire clubhouse area was impeccably landscaped just like the rest of the property.

Due to my electrical work on the property I struck up a few conversations with the maintenance man of the property. He was employed by Mr. Fischer to oversee the entire

complex and make sure the buildings and grounds were maintained well and according to his instructions. "Scotty" was a portly man who usually wore a dirty and drab olive green maintenance uniform. He was a jovial and friendly man who worked on the property about 12 hours a day and virtually 7 days a week! He was always "on-call" in case something went wrong on the property. He had faithfully worked for Mr. Fischer for many years and was well liked by everyone who knew him. One day in a conversation with Scotty I asked him how often Mr. Fischer used his clubhouse and tennis court or pool? His answer shocked me and I will never forget his reply. He said, "I have worked for Mr. Fischer for many years. Most mornings I am here at 6:00 AM to start my day and by the time I get here he has already left for the office. Usually, I leave at sunset and he has *not* returned from the office. I also work here on most weekends and I can tell you that I have *never* seen Mr. Fisher use the tennis court or swimming pool!"

That was my first experience with someone who was addicted to work... a proverbial workaholic. Here was a wealthy industrialist who on the outside appeared to have it all. Hans had a company of his own, majestic property, beautiful wife, European sports car, money, prestige and power. What he didn't have was a life. I wondered to myself what the purpose of this magnificent home and property was if he never enjoyed it. Then it dawned on me that this home and other possessions were only a *trophy* for him. It was an image to others that he had made it to the top of the business world. He didn't even take the time to enjoy it because he was addicted to work. Sadly, a few years later Mr. Fischer was indicted for a serious felony regarding fraud and tax evasion. He took his own life rather than face the consequences of his actions and crime. Thus ended the cheerless story of Mr. Fischer. I had not thought of him for many years until a commercial was run on TV a few years ago. As I remember it was sponsored by a financial company encouraging the viewers to prepare for their retirement. The commercial emphasized how we all get so wrapped up in work and our problems that we forget to *live*. It boldly proclaimed, "While you were out... life called... and you're late!"

The human mind is a remarkable organ and it was designed to accomplish complex and challenging tasks. What we often fail to realize is that it was also designed to be *refreshed* and enjoy recreation on a regular basis. You may have heard the old saying that, "All work and no play makes for a dull boy." In truth, it makes one worse than a dull boy. In time it will make one a self-absorbed miserable person with few friends and a lack of real fulfillment. The problem with being obsessed with work or accomplishing things is that the more work you do, or the more you accomplish, it is never enough! This emotional disease is very deceptive because the amount of work or accomplishment you can possibly achieve is always outstripped by what *still* lies ahead and is waiting to be done. One becomes so busy achieving, there is no room left for enjoying and savoring the life we have been given.

Recent cutting-edge research on stress and worry is very revealing. Stress causes our heart rates and blood pressure to rise. It contributes to a weakened immune system, more depression and surges of stress hormones that strain the heart tissue. Worrying or continually mulling over our problems produces the same results. Many health care providers refer to this as "overthinking" and it appears that humans are the only species prone to this problem. But people who force themselves to *step away* from this environment, and do diversionary tasks return to their original healthy levels more quickly than those who continue to be stressed or overthink about things. Dr. Nicholas Christenfeld of the University of California-San Diego has been involved in recent studies on worry and stress. As a psychologist he has observed in his studies that stressed out people who perform vigorous

exercise or listen to music speed up the physical recovery resulting from stress. He believes that *distraction* may prevent the harmful effects of mental stress or worry in the short term.

However, in our modern world it seems that diverting ourselves from the daily pressures of living is more difficult than ever. We have telephones, cell phones, email, voicemail, and dozens of new technologies to absorb our time. The traditional 40 hour work week has grown to 24/7 for many workers. Even when they are at home for the evening there is email to be checked and answered, papers to review, and even more work to be done. Combined with this is a myriad of *other* personal tasks that demand our time. There are financial responsibilities, health needs, family demands, and community obligations. It seems like the pressures grow day by day. When we become so wrapped up in work, or what we feel are our duties, we begin to miss out on the purpose of life. Your life is much more than work. We can build software and machines to do work. But we can't build software or machines that have a heart to enjoy the world around us and glean meaning from it. No matter how important we may think we are... when we are gone someone else will do our work. Many people are not *truly* living; they are "being lived" by society or a personal addiction. Within a generation or two, very few will remember or care about the work we allowed to consume our lives. Except for a few religious, political or social leaders, 99.9999999% of every one who has ever lived and *their* work is unrecorded, underappreciated and forgotten. Does this mean that life is in vain? No it isn't, but we will discuss this in a later principle.

Sadly, many people from all levels of our society have become one-dimensional beings. They have become emotionally unbalanced because they are obsessed with work, or music, or sports, or even religion! Of themselves, each of these activities are wonderful and can add a special dimension to life and make it more meaningful. However, when we become so deeply entrenched in *any* activity that we shut out joy, people, family, or other activities we become warped in our perspective of what life is all about. This makes us self-centered and it steals happiness and contentment from our souls. Lasting gratification is achieved when we share our lives with others and realize that only when we are *interdependent* with others, can we tap deep into the meaning of life. This is not possible when we isolate ourselves and emotionally live in our own little secluded world.

We all have a deep need to experience simple and refreshing diversions to our stress filled lives to keep a proper perspective and maximize each day. Examples of this might include taking time to enjoy your family, playing some sports, walking to take pleasure in the local scenery, meditation, savoring your favorite hobbies, reading a good book, calling a friend to chat, or volunteering to serve others. There are *many* other ways you can deliberately set aside an occasion to energize your thoughts depending on your lifestyle and environment. The wonderful thing about these simple yet powerful distractions is that *most* are free! They don't cost anything except a dedicated commitment of *your* time to relish them.



I made this statement in a seminar once and afterward a young man came up to me and told me about his personal example of experiencing this. He came from a deeply religious family. Every evening when his father came home from work he immediately had dinner with the family. But, soon after dinner his father would excuse himself and go to his office for the evening. There he would close the door, and as a recluse, he would study his Bible for the rest of the evening... day after day, year after year. This is an example of doing something good in itself, but turning it into an unbalanced obsession. I am sure his father was very sincere and thought his religious devotion was important, but he missed sharing in his children's lives and

the joy that comes from watching them grow up. The neglect and emotional separation caused by his father will take a lot of time to be healed. By the way, before you judge this man too harshly be assured that there are many more *millions* of business executives, managers and “sports nuts” who are guilty of the very same thing! The question we should ask ourselves is are we “living to work” or is *work* simply a part of our lives that makes living more fulfilling.

So what is the solution to this dilemma? The answer is you must purposely *schedule* a number of *meaningful* distractions into your life and these simple diversions must be considered as important as *any* other thing you do. These diversions should be daily, weekly and seasonally. Next time we will discuss what some of these diversions can be and why they are so beneficial.

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