

StayingAlive



Taking time out to think

MATTHEW EDLUND M.D.

Contributing Columnist
health@lbknews.com

These are times of national malaise. The stock market is down 20 percent, oil and gasoline prices have spiked, the nation is locked in two land wars in Asia, banks are failing, and real estate, the driver of the local economy, has tanked. At a time when so much needs be done, it was surprising two of the world's most prominent national leaders sat down to talk about how to obtain thoughtful rest.



The microphone picked up a private conversation. According to the BBC's Alan Connor, Conservative Party Chairman David Cameron told Barack Obama, "These guys just chalk your diary up. We call it the dentist's waiting room."

Obama replied, "The most important thing you need to do is to have big chunks of time during the day when all you're doing is thinking."

It's a positive sign when two of the most overscheduled Western political leaders are trying to find time to think. But what if you are a working mother with children, or trying to work two jobs and take care of the family, cutting back on entertainment, rest, even sleep. Where you can find time to think?

Creative places to think

In his BBC report, Connor quoted Tony Buzan, the inventor of MindMaps, about the places where people came up with their best ideas. The answers: Showering. In the bathtub. Shaving. Sitting on the can. Walking in nature. Lying in bed before sleep. Looking at water. Listening to classical music. Driving on the highway.

Such creative spots should be within the means of even the most time stressed. Many a songwriter will tell you they think of lyrics listening to water during a shower or driving to visit a friend. Sleep is a time of vast memory consolidation and learning. Walking in nature is used to treat depression in many countries. Sunlight improves alertness and mood, as does physical activity, and the presence of nature, especially trees and water, appears to promote mental rest.

How? Periods of reverie, daydreaming, imagining, and considerations past and future involve what researchers call the "default mode," a pattern of brain activity very different from intense attention. The default mode is probably "on" in various kinds of rest and involves mainly midline brain structures synchronizing together. Imagine a band going across the top of your head from ear to ear and you'll have an idea of where your brain's default mode works.

Creative times

Thinking may make us human, but just as some places are more conducive to rest and thought, so are certain times.

Human body clocks provide different genetically determined periods for greater alertness and rest. Generally, the highest level of attentiveness to analytic detail happens in the late morning and early evening. If you have lots of mental crunching to do, like memorizing foreign language verbs, those times may prove best for you. The early evening is also the time when the body tends to be most accurate and powerful.

Fortunately, creative thought can be accomplished at very different periods of the day. Many writers work early in the morning or at night. Academics often say their best ideas come to them when commuting in cars or on trains in the morning, as their brains move through

subjects consolidated during sleep.

When I ask people when they feel they have their best, most useful thoughts, they often point to routine morning activities like showering or commuting. Some claim family and work issues obtain their best solutions during family dinners or a "drink after work" with colleagues, while some office workers find out-of-doors lunchtime walks good for producing new ideas.

Different times can work for you. With luck, you'll probably be able to point to times of day when you've produced your best ideas.

Solving all the world's problems

Things look pretty bad right now. Lots of people are out of work or about to lose their jobs. People wonder how they're going to pay their mortgages, and lots of people can't imagine how they'll ever pay rising health care bills. Many Medicare recipients are working in their 70s and 80s just to pay for health care.

These times remind me of the early seventies. From 1969 to 1973 the stock market went down not 20 percent but 75 percent as the nation was led by a president whose lies shook American democracy. Thousands of Americans died in a land war in Asia that could not be won in battle. New York City went bankrupt, the federal government faced enormous debts brought by war and fiscal irresponsibility and the world economy suffered its first oil price shock.

Sound familiar? Many pundits left us for dead in those days. America came back.

Maybe now we should take the time to think of new ways we'll win the future back.

Dr. Matthew Edlund practices sleep medicine and psychiatry in Sarasota. His new book, "Designed To Last," is available online. He can be reached at 365-4308 and via his Web site at doctoredlund.com.

KeyTravel



Portugal: one foot in the past, one in the future

RICK STEVES

Contributing Columnist
steves@lbknews.com

With its membership in the European Union, many things are changing in Portugal. Day after day the roads here were messing up my itinerary — I'd arrive in town hours before I thought I would. I remember a time when there were absolutely no freeways in Portugal. Now, the country has plenty. They build them so fast, even my Michelin map is missing new ones.

There are other signs that Portugal is well into its EU upgrade. In the past, open fish stalls lined the streets; now they've been moved into "more hygienic" covered shops. Widows no longer wear black. Rather than crusty old locals doing the hard work, you see lots of immigrant laborers.

Yet, in spite of the EU, Portugal is still a humble and relatively isolated place. Driving into Nazare, you'll still see women squatting on the curb as you enter the town. Their hope: to waylay tourists from reserved hotel rooms with signs saying, "Quartos!" — meaning rooms for rent ... cheap. (By the way, simple hotels all over Portugal rent decent double rooms for \$60. And, even with the weak U.S. dollar, passable dives can be had for \$40 per double.)

Service is friendly in the hole-in-the-wall restaurants where menus come with two columns: half "dose" and full "dose" (4 and 6 euros respectively — full "dose"

designed to be split by two, which means traveling couples can dine for less than \$5 each).

I've noticed all over Europe that monks are famous for brewing beer and distilling liquors. But in Portugal, menus are rounded out by a fun selection of nun-inspired pastries called "convent sweets."

Portugal once had access to more sugar than any other European country. Even so, sugar was so expensive that only the aristocracy could afford to enjoy it routinely. Historically, daughters of aristocrats who were unable to marry into noble families ended up in high-class convents. Life there was comfortable, yet carefully controlled. Rather than romance, they could covet and treat themselves with sweets. Over time, the convents became famous as keepers of secret recipes for exquisite pastries generally made from sugar and egg yolks (which were leftovers from egg whites used to starch their habits). "Barrigas de Freiras" (Nuns' Tummies) and "Papos de Anjo" (Angel's Breasts) are two such fancies. For a good sampling, I've taken to asking for "mixta dulce" and waiters are happy to bring a nibble of several of their top "sobremesas" (desserts).

While they are enthusiastic about sweets from convents, young people don't go to church much in Portugal these days. But the country is remarkably Catholic for the sightseer. The main sights of most towns are the musty, old churches — those Gothic, stone shells crammed with dusty, gold-leaf Baroque altars. Even



RICK STEVES/Longboat Key News

One of Europe's top pilgrimage destinations is the shrine to Our Lady of Fatima near Nazare, Portugal.

my stop for the night, Nazare, was named for Nazareth.

Nearby, Fatima is one of Europe's top pilgrimage destinations. In 1917, three kids encountered the Virgin Mary near the village of Fatima and were asked to return on the 13th of each month for six months. The final apparition was

witnessed by thousands of locals. Ever since, Fatima is on the pilgrimage trail — mobbed on the 13th of each month through the spring and summer.

On my visit, the vast esplanade leading to the basilica and site of the mystical appearance was quiet. A few, solitary pil-

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