

The gentle art of pottering – or body-mind unfocused

Ros Pirani points out the usefulness in what might otherwise be considered idling your time away

Pottering in the garden is what most springs to mind for me from the word *potter*, but I suppose you could just as well be fiddling with maggots while waiting for the fish that never comes and enjoying being in the fresh air. I am surprised by the Wordsworth Concise English 1994 edition: 'to busy oneself in a *desultory* way' (my italics); 'to dawdle' (that is better), and had no idea about their n. pottering; 'diffuse talk', although after the first shock it does seem mysteriously encouraging. Chambers 1994, obviously the year in which dictionaries were upgraded in our house, adds 'in a desultory way with trifling tasks' and 'to progress in an unhurried manner'. *Desultory*, according to them, is 'jumping from one thing to another; without rational or logical connection; rambling; hasty; *loose*' (my italics). I have jumped to the wrong conclusions about the word *desultory* and must have been using a merely depressing rather than the obviously psychotic meaning intended. I can see why they invented a TV programme where you can produce evidence to change the current usage of a word.

Sometimes when at your most focused, a bout of unfocused activity may come over you as a kind of safety valve. Over focused, you could be out of touch with what is going on around you, or what is going on

inside you in terms of stress and discomfort. Pottering is one of the best forms of self-help, done preferably alone and spontaneously, but members of a group could go off on their own and meet up when they are required to be less desultory. Just going off on your own may not lead to pottering but it is worth a try. Even if you encourage it, pottering feels as if it comes out of the blue. There must be unconscious forces at work for it to happen.

Anything creative appears to come from nothing, yet if we look closely we see that it is made up of ingredients stored in the memory at some level, which are triggered by unconscious associations. Pottering is creative, although the end product is usually refreshment, distraction and a building up of depleted resources. When we potter, something in us, aided by the safety of life allowing us to be free of pressing tasks for a while, accidentally pushes the 'pause' button. We then pause from being operational and purposive while experiencing through a kind of unstructured, spontaneous play, a richer sense of who we are.

We need that built-in safety of circumstance in order to potter. I felt strangely privileged when for some years I had to take a lengthy train journey twice a week to work. It gave me time to talk randomly to

fellow commuters, read my neighbour's book instead of mine, wander round stations and platforms and generally let myself go without involvement or purpose. Pottering became a crucial part of my life, responding to warning signs from the embodied mind that it was not always good to write notes on the train (although sometimes I had to) nor to read academic articles. I read more when the novelty wore off and the trains got later so that the situation felt less safe and more of an irritation. Yet the need to potter before and after a hard day's work would still come over me to make me pause and stop what I was doing, stretch and let thoughts wander with the motion of the train, eyes unfocused on the speeding countryside.

Individuation and diversification

Pottering occurs developmentally in young children playing by themselves in a safe environment where an adult is keeping an eye. Typically, the child is talking to itself and one form of play leads by association into another in a sequence understandable only to them. Although others may be imagined, the rules, if there are any, are such that they cannot be shared. Unselfconsciousness and talking to oneself is lost by the age when solitary rehearsal and imaginative acting out is no longer necessary, but comes back in another form when we are alone yet safe as adults. A child potters in



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“Pottering occupies the borderline between being alone and being with others. In adults it restores us to a state of individuation from being a part of the fabric of society”

anticipation of activities to come whereas adult pottering is a harking back to that time when life was unexplored.

Pottering occupies the borderline between being alone and being with others. It is not possible if a state of aloneness becomes overpowering. For the child, it enables them to move away from a parent who is keeping them in mind. In adults it restores us to a state of individuation from being a part of the fabric of society.

Novel ideas arise and are rehearsed in little activities that mimic the possibility of larger projects. Pottering round a garden gives rise to the thought of next year's planning, what to have for tea, memories of other times, and of one's own bodily condition. As a break from a stressful focused activity where the mind is concentrated on one thing, it allows us to become unfocused and broaden our gaze, movements, and feelings, to refresh before returning to something where we become instrumental rather than alive.

Pottering is creative in the sense of

being consciously able to dream. It often seems impossible to make our dreams come true, so pottering is a kind of subversive activity. The bridge between the dream and its fruition needs a gigantic leap of faith. It may be that what is needed is not more action but more pottering in which to cradle the state of mind where dreams are nourished before they can bear the light of day.

Cultivation in moderation

Too frequent or large amounts of pottering are not a good idea. Pottering loses its meaning if not contrasted with all our other activities. Everyday life requires us for the most part to remain focused on what we are doing. The exception can be repetitive tasks, which are good for the soul in that they allow the mind to wander. Pottering is synonymous with contentment, where less and more conscious elements run in tandem. By the end of the state of pottering a decisive focus to do something else may have been reached unconsciously. Pottering isn't something we can really decide to do, but instead find ourselves doing, so has its own

built-in safety valve. It only occurs when other needs have been met and there is a fortuitous space that fits into a slot between one activity and another. So it will regulate itself for the most part. But if we haven't been doing it for a while, we may ask why not, and set the scene to allow it to reappear. It could be that we have been living too hectic a lifestyle.

We cultivate the art of pottering by giving in to the urge to potter. By seeing it as both a healthy and a pleasurable part of our lives, noting its absence during times of stress and overwork, and by naturally ending a spate of pottering rather than trying to prolong it. If it becomes procrastination it would revert to its dictionary definition of being not an art but an aberration. Think of birds playing on the wing in proportion to hunting, migrating, defending from attack, or propagating the species.

Connection with self and environment

Pottering is a means of touching base. When we are involved in a focused task we don't have time to think

about where we are or who we are. Pottering gives us space to reconnect. Senses and perceptions become sharpened. Feelings are allowed. We emerge after having been receptive to details of our environment that we do not usually have time to appreciate. The spontaneous switching off of purposeful action removes constraints: timeless and unpressurised, and is perhaps the best unconscious memory of childhood we can experience.

Communion and clarification

Pottering is communicating, not with other people, but with oneself, and to some extent, with the environment. Not about anything in particular, a wordless state on the whole, it can nevertheless engender a feeling of clarity. The space in which we find ourselves pottering is full of awareness of objects outside ourselves at the same time as awareness of what is going on inside, on all levels, physical, mental and spiritual.

Pottering alone in the room reminds us of the absence of loved ones. If they are dead, their presence may seem to fill the room and as we wander they seem to come with us, asking how we are, what we might need from them, appreciating possessions we have acquired since their demise. I am aware that this is a highly personal example, but what other kinds are there? The personal may also be the universal.

True pottering is free from anxiety, a relatively rare state in the human existence. Without anxiety we see more clearly. A sense of being safe, as if there were someone else there, could be a memory of first learning to potter, when an adult was around to watch for our safety while we played to an imaginary audience, talking out loud, spontaneously changing from one activity to the next until the call, 'Dinner's ready!'

Unfocused on specifics, the specifics we toy with do not matter, only the general quality of the experience, which is more being in the here-and-now. The child playing her solitary

game in the shadow of the parent who guards against the intrusion of the world is in preparation and rehearsal for becoming the adult and taking her place in that world. Perhaps adult pottering is a retreat from that world and a return to childhood whence we came.

Applications and comparisons

Pottering in context is not the same as pure pottering but has certain comparisons. Freud's asking the patient to free-associate may lead to a state of pottering even though constrained to lying on a couch, trying to reconstruct the child at play watched over by the thoughtful adult. In psychotherapy both client and therapist may be engaged in a free form of mutual endeavour where the greatest fruits come from a kind of pottering which, again, cannot be wilfully induced, but if the therapeutic climate is right, may naturally occur.

Creative people may try to induce a state of pottering to enhance the creative muse, via perhaps listening to music as a way of calming and distracting the mind from more mundane activities. Doodling or desk-top games may induce a state of wakeful dreaming where the mind is more open to novel or breakthrough ideas. It has been said that mathematicians dream the solutions to problems they then are able to see clearly on waking. Pottering is a must for the over-coper. Less focusing is, in the end, more productive than too much. ■

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