

Practices

Doing Nothing

James Currie

**Doing
Nothing**



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Practices

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In loving memory:

Lester McLennan (2004–2024)

Not for nothing

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PREFACE

Faced with the increasingly unlivable conditions of our times, where “too much” has become the presiding modality—where we work too much, expect too much of ourselves, are bombarded with too much information, overwhelmed by too much stimulation, and endlessly confronted with political and ecological catastrophes that are close to being too much for us to be able to do anything about, and sometimes too much even to conceptualize—many have started taking counsel from the idea that less is best, and that the injunction always to be “doing something” is as much a symptom of the disease from which we are suffering as it is a rallying cry for the making of a better world. As a result, slow movements proliferate in every sphere; wellness as opposed to success at any cost has become a discursive norm; a whole array of practices are now being sought out so that we might at last escape from the iron cage of the Protestant work ethic and live better; and an army of publications, blogs, and

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podcasts has marched onto our bookshelves and smartphone scrolls to school, inspire, and elucidate us regarding how this quiet revolution is to be achieved.

It would seem, then, to be a propitious historical moment in which to be writing about doing nothing. And indeed, in recent years, doing nothing has become increasingly viewed as admirable, useful, good, healthy, responsible, wholesome, ethical, civic-minded, effective, and evidence that you are not wasting your life. Doing nothing “is about being free to live the lives we want to lead, free from bosses, wages, commuting, consuming and debt.” It is a “revolution brewing”—indeed, “the most enjoyable revolution the world has ever seen.”¹ It can help working women and mothers achieve more by doing less.² When it appears as aimlessness, it has value and utility: It is “purposeful,” the “directed randomness of nomadic life,” an encyclopedic impulse where “paths are endless” and “possibility reigns”; it is a “fluid, fluctuating, unstable collection of expectations,” an “aspiration,” a “place where one takes time out in order to regroup and resurface in a new mode,” an “intentional unintentionality,” and “exactly what it takes to get some of us in motion, get us to bump into what we need to bump into.”³ To practice it is to join the path that leads to happiness.⁴ As the blurb on the back of one book states, it is both “easily achievable” and “absolutely essential to leading an enjoyable and creative life.”⁵ And so it is the perfect antidote to a world where stress and burnout are on the rise.⁶

But doing nothing, as a result, has evidently now become the new means of doing something instead. It’s depressing. Some of its present practitioners even call themselves out happily in this regard. One well-known author states that her book on

the topic is a “field guide” that functions as “an act of political resistance” and “also a plan of action”; in the process of writing her book, she claims, she “inadvertently radicalized [herself] by learning the importance of *doing something*.⁷ So what about doing nothing does this new ideology of doing nothing seek to avoid? Those aspects of our lives about which nothing can be done. This is what doing nothing has been for me: It is what I did when there was nothing that could be done.

My practice thus recuperates something of the proclivities of an unreconstructed doing nothing—of its unacceptability, brutal humor, fury, despair, poor behavior, and grand refusal of the inanity of team-player life. Unsavory at times, it is a challenge to the digestive system and might make you sick. Like the chthonic sovereign of some archaic realm, it is accompanied by a ghoulish retinue including procrastination, lassitude, torpor, apathy, immaturity, indifference, fatalism, resignation, bathos, exhaustion, indecisiveness, nihilism, inactivity, intransigence, failure, melancholia, introversion, and sleep. It is a hard sell. But if I assume it’s too expensive, I will never make it out of the present deadlock. I’ll remain stuck between forms of doing nothing that suffer from either lack of aspiration or hubris, irrelevance or impertinence.

And stuck talking about capitalism, because the polarities of the present ideology of doing nothing are riveted to it. On the one hand, lifestyle suggestions for doing less, forms of capitalism tweaked with wellness to make them more humane; on the other, political manifestos seeking the abolition of capitalism altogether. Present forms of doing nothing can neither imagine life existing beyond it nor conceive humans facing any problem apart from it—as if only capitalism keeps us from luxuriating

innocently in life on Earth. But once I acknowledged that I was doing nothing, I also had to acknowledge that superseding capitalism would still leave me existentially screwed. I do not argue against working for capitalism's dismantlement. I am not indulging in an entitled invitation to despair, decadent quietism, a conservative rejection of change, or morbid belief that the only valid response to life is to lie down and die. I merely assert that the effectivity of such endeavors will distort as long as they deny their nonnegotiable framing realities. And it is for this reason that I dwell so extensively on such issues in this book. Worthy or incontestable as anti-capitalist endeavors may be, as long as they are fueled by existential denials, it will be difficult to discern whether they are being performed to achieve their purported goal, or the purported goal is an unconscious ruse to engage in activities that, being all too easily self-validating, easily distract from the intransigent, unavoidable malfunctions that indelibly stain any human life. We will be doing something merely to avoid acknowledging where nothing can be done.

So why should you bother practicing doing nothing? Quite simply, because you have no choice. Meaning that doing nothing is a rather strange kind of practice. I was hesitant to take up the invitation to write about it. And reading back over what I've written has not always been easy. There is something embarrassing about having authored a book that takes next to no pleasure in the fact that most people's practices are attractive precisely because people have chosen to do them. But doing nothing entered my life from other sources than the heroics of choice. It came into being from the confrontation with limits, boundaries, and defining perimeters. It has been the shadow side of my attempts to use decisions to mold the shape my life

has taken. It is what I have had to do when my path through life was blocked by structures and conditions that could not be changed. It is how I carried on once I crashed my car into the brick wall of the nonnegotiable, how I dealt with the injuries accrued. It has qualities, therefore, of the experience of palliative care, disability, and queerness. Mournful feelings of entrapment and shame exist cheek by jowl here with the unexpected opportunities such situations afford.

It is my belief that the realization that what you have been doing all along is in part doing nothing is a realization awaiting us all. It is a constant feature of the existential backdrop of our condition that the immediate distractions of our lives keep us from confronting. As a result, very few know its ways from the start (although teenagers are bestowed with certain privileged revelations, which the slide into adulthood, as I will discuss, does much to encourage them to forget). Since there are myriad ways in which a person can land up in this place, doing nothing is therefore quite diverse, allusive, and more difficult to pinpoint than most other practices. It is as much a mood or mode in which you can find yourself doing things as it is what you find yourself doing *per se*. It teeters on the edge of being a pose; that is its risk. One must practice hard to keep one's balance and not fall off into being insufferable. Style is often necessary if you are to succeed; at times it is one of doing nothing's highest goals. Doing nothing flourishes when priorities shift from the pragmatic to the aesthetic.

There are a variety of different means by which we come to the realization of what we should do when there is nothing that can be done. In my own case, it was through a confrontation with mental illness. While I do not consider that this

constitutes the sole route, or that grim beginnings necessitate dispiriting conclusions (this book ends with a smile), it is nevertheless relevant for understanding the character of my practice. Moreover, I hope it might offer solidarity to those out there who have suffered likewise. Because the fact that mental illness is not at all uncommon does little to compensate for its distress. And the fact that we are more prepared to acknowledge this than in the past hasn't necessarily resulted in us being any more open to listening to the truths bestowed on those in pain. People busy themselves with making one better to comfort themselves that something got done; in trying to help, they deny the reality of the very problem they are hoping to resolve. Experience has therefore taught me to distrust those who speak the language of wellness and good health. There's something they don't want to hear.

My own confrontation with doing nothing came on the heels of a particularly debilitating mental breakdown that had brought me limping and whimpering back to the therapist's office. Decades before, I watched my mother in her sixties be kicked to the ground by a series of disturbing psychotic episodes from which she never properly got back on her feet. Over the course of the following years, she barely left the house. Something small but significant in her eyes completely disappeared. It was replaced by a quiet but tangible terror that she learned to keep frozen in place with the most rigid of habits and daily rituals. Her gaze became flat, petrified, a kind of awful void, and to distract attention from this disfigurement, she started overcompensating with her facial gestures. It was as if she'd tried to relearn the basic conventions of expression by studying an illustrated how-to guide to human portraiture. Everything

was right, but none of it rang true. It was uncanny. This was my mother, and I am a sissy mommy's boy. She was the center of my idea of home. But since she no longer seemed to be my mother, what was she doing in the house I grew up in? Keeping up the performance that nothing had changed became her practice; trying to be an appreciative audience to it became mine (though one at which I have rarely been successful). By the time I was pushing fifty, it had become clear to me that I would have to confront the possibility that I was going to share her fate. I needed to establish whether the ongoing disarray I experienced at an almost constant level behind the closed doors of my adult life was just a result of poor self-management—and so something that a bit of light counseling might rectify—or something more invasively broken. It was the latter. When I told the results of six months of professional psychological testing to a riotous health-care-professional friend of mind, her response was blunt: “Most people with these readings are dead or in jail.”

In the years following, I have had to ease myself into understanding that while there are things that can be done to alleviate symptoms, the problem itself is never going away. It is structurally hardwired. I can rant and rave as much as I want about an appalling family inheritance, the injustice of all that it has made impossible, the basic “normal” things I have wanted to do but probably now won’t, and all the rest of it. Nevertheless, I am subject to a situation that neither is of my own making nor could have been otherwise. I might learn new ways to breathe and make these cramped conditions temporarily more bearable, maybe interesting. (They have certainly informed the parade of different artistic practices I have participated in during my

adult life as I searched for compensation for the home I lost, when I lost my mother, when she lost herself.) But I am never getting out. About that, there is nothing that can be done.

We work hard to avoid such revelations. And this work involves us in other ongoing and mostly unacknowledged practices, including keeping yourself busy, getting on with it, carrying on, making the most of it, putting yourself out there, trying to be the best you can, keeping your chin up, and other such modalities. I reject none of them. They sometimes offer people techniques for getting by. But they are not for everyone, and for many they are simply unavailable. This is not only because of socioeconomic concerns, or debilitating forms of mental illness, or refusal to think positively, or other typical assumptions. It is also because some people, irrespective of where they come from or find themselves in life, are marked by an ineradicable philosophical proclivity of being. This has little to do with being intelligent, smart, bookish, academic, brainy, or good at school. It has to do with being the kind of human that is incapable of not doing what a human, more so than any other animal we know, can do: thinking extensively beyond the mere pragmatic fulfillment of needs; thinking for the sake of thinking, even if it leads to destabilizing the territory on which you are trying to build your sense of home. It is a practice of truth, although easily written off as dysfunction. And so I have not always agreed to get well. It hasn't always been possible. And the can-do optimism that demands that it should is often brought at the expense of insight and, as a result, is in sore need of being provincialized. Part of me wants to see it stripped of its smug and mostly censorious assumption of universal validity and made to face the possibility that it is

simply the meager worldview of a local belief system seeking to condone the hubris of its colonial ventures. I want revenge.

But the ultimate problem with the can-do worldview is that it trains us in ignoring the nonnegotiable limits of our own lives. And this has devastating effects on our ability to inhabit the nonnegotiable limits of human life as it must be lived on Earth. It makes us feel obligated to opt for too much instead of too little. When I am in one of my rare moments of trying to escape doing nothing, I find myself adopting the hubris of magnitude. I start piling up stuff (things, possessions, experiences, commitments, relationships, endeavors, worthy causes, and maybe practices, too) to blot out of sight the limits of my ability to choose what I want my life to be. It is a hoarding practice with metaphysical aspirations, its clandestine aim to erase evidence of impotence from my life. I assume if I can manage it, I will then live better. But in this life, I have found that when I keep on running, I keep on being pursued. And so doing nothing ensued when I finally stopped allowing myself to be chased. It is what happened when I no longer got away. When I admitted that life was a condition of being caught. When I couldn't make things better. When there was nothing that could be done.

The practice of doing nothing thus eclipses politics as the ultimate horizon of human endeavor. It reveals a dark surrounding penumbra that radiates out into something else. Politics, as a result, barely registers in what follows. Political action constitutes one of human life's most far-reaching practices for making change and putting faith in the hope that there is always something that can be done. Since it is almost impossible to have humans without there being politics, it is also

defining of the species. But if politics is simply a fact of human life, to vaunt it above other things is to make a virtue out of a necessity. It is to confuse the ontological for the moral—as if the ineradicable fact of something in human life were proof it must be good; as if life on Earth were structured only for human flourishing rather than for no reason at all.

I have wondered if this confusion constitutes a disavowal of the fear and shame that come from realizing that politics is simply our fate. After all, if it is possible to make a virtue out of the political and view it as proof that we are rich, it is just as easy to flip the table and see the nonnegotiable political orientation of human operations as evidence of poverty. Because if politics is a participatory art of social transformation and change, then human life (a) has never yet been good enough, (b) has always therefore lacked, and (c) will continue to remain so until there are no more humans to necessitate the activity known as politics. This does not invalidate expending political effort. But it does put the self-righteousness accompanying its exercise in a questionable light; it seems like self-infantilization—a means of avoiding that we are doomed to having to change things using politics. The political in human life is thus a genuine antagonism; it is the stage on which some of the most striking performances of human agency occur, while simultaneously the slab on which such agency is repeatedly slaughtered. It is doing something while sliding around on a platform about which nothing can be done.

Politics is simply what we’re stuck with. It isn’t everything. It’s a constituent factor of a certain middle ground of human social life and discourse production that human anxieties periodically hope will beat the surrounding competition. It’s not

the foundation on which everything else rests; not the base for all other superstructures. It's as much lost in space as anything else. And so, when I found that what I was doing was doing nothing, I found I no longer resided naturally in politics' domestic center. I found myself instead in polarized feral peripheries, often simultaneously, as in a holograph. I could experience being slowly crushed to death by perplexing quotidian mundanities indifferent to the political at the same time as being exposed to existential, cosmological, and even apocalyptic issues that dwarf it. It was as if the comforting opacity of the political had become transparent; I could look straight through from one side to the other. As a result, this book is bluntly divided in two to reflect the shuttling back and forth between, and harsh superimpositions of, the phenomenological realities that have constituted my life. Its first half is consumed by an unapologetic confessional mode. But in its second half this is abandoned in a sudden turn to a long close reading of Lars von Trier's 2011 *Melancholia*—a film that replicates the polarized simultaneities of doing nothing by brutally dramatizing the profound existential indifference of the cosmos through the immediate realities of human subjective life. When you find yourself doing nothing, there is no longer any padding to soften the blow between the self and the cosmos; they either grate against each other, creating a wince, or cancel each other out in disorienting lurches without transition.

Without acknowledgment of the crushing force of this polarized frame, the political withers into merely ineffective denial of human impotence and vulnerability. Those most capable of acknowledging this are therefore those caught in patterns of mental illness from which escape has become impossible;

the insight is the gift bestowed when your fate is to work out what to do when there is nothing that can be done. To understand this existential framework, you must be caught in the very subjective self-involvements that would seem to be antithetical to the political itself; depression and mental illness in those doing nothing are both method and practice for attaining truth. I therefore do not write *about* them. As I argue in part 2, to write about such things—to partake in the uncritical endeavor of conceptually clarifying merely how they should be understood—is tantamount to disbelief in their very existence; just another attempt at turning doing nothing into doing something instead. By contrast, the practice of doing nothing is a testament to how thinking happens and how the world looks *from* the perspective of such conditions. It inverts the usual assumptions that the “I” is reliant on the “we”; here it is the “we” that is reliant on the “I.” Mere adaptation in the name of good health to the middle ground where the “we” resides must therefore be avoided and voided, because doing nothing is an act of solidarity and a profession of faith in the idea that if you want to know the truth, then don’t get well.

Fairy tales sometimes show us that it is precisely those who remain incapable of denying their limitations who ultimately get the prize. In Hans Christian Andersen’s famous story, it is because the princess continues to be bothered by the pea, even though it is buried beneath a mountain of mattresses, that she gets to marry the prince. Her unquestioning acceptance of her condition of being chronically thin-skinned is precisely the precondition of her salvation; if she could somehow have transcended her disability, the quality of her life prospects would have been less. The princess has something to teach us, then,

precisely because she's sick. And in saying this, I do not deny the real miseries attendant on illness; I have too much personal experience of what they're like. But it helps to draw attention to the fact that a space exists between, on the one hand, such miseries and, on the other, the stupidity, blindness, indifference, and shortcomings of empathy that are easily produced by good health, vibrancy of the body, and a general sense of well-being. As someone who does nothing, I have had to loiter in that space. In part, for sure, because I am not well. But also out of a desire to see things that would otherwise remain concealed. Barred from the good luck that allows some to identify confidently with the choices they have made and the resulting things they have done, doing nothing lights up the potential poverty of such privilege.

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Writing this book has embroiled me in ironies. Because writing a book, even one as modest in proportion as *Doing Nothing*, is a lot of work. It is hardly doing nothing. Never in thirty years of publishing has such apparently small a thing cost me so much. Intense labors, seemingly endless, have been required to house-train the intensity of emotions that continue to swarm for me around the issues I address. But if it took a long time, *Doing Nothing* did at last get done. And for that I remain solely grateful to my editors at Duke University Press. To the sage and patient Elizabeth Ault and the committed and uncompromising Margret Grebowicz. More than any editors I have worked with, they gave me the time and opportunity to stagger around until I found my way. And maybe found myself, too.

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All images and all artwork in the images are the author's own.

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NOTES

Preface

- 1 Hodgkinson, *How to Be Idle*, xi.
- 2 Northrup, *Do Less*.
- 3 Lutz, *Aimlessness*, 30–31, 39, 52, 67, 107, 143, 149.
- 4 Jonat, *Do Less*.
- 5 Muradov, *On Doing Nothing*, cover.
- 6 Mecking, *Niksen*.
- 7 Odell, *How to Do Nothing*, xi, xxii (emphasis original).

Part 1. About Me

- 1 William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, act 1, scene 1.
- 2 Melville, “Bartleby,” 112, 113, 116, 117, 118, 122, 126, 140.

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