



“Idle hands are the devil’s tools!”

Amy Mercer

**B**orn into a family of New Englanders with links to the Mayflower, my grandfather’s motto was, “Everything in moderation!” Raised during the Depression, Gramps liked to utter this phrase at the dinner table. Moderation meant moderate behavior, moderate down time, and moderate pleasure. Gramps was tall and thin with long legs and ice blue eyes. By the time I was born, he had plenty of money, but as his granddaughter, I received a moderate amount of affection. The Puritan work ethic made us a family who knew there was always something to be done, and, looking over the other person’s shoulder, a better way to do it. A life lived with “should’s”, relaxing was not in our genes.

When my parents bought a hundred-year-old house in Vermont, they stayed busy hauling wood, shoveling the driveway and clearing the roof from snow in winter, raking the leaves and cutting the grass in summer and fall. If I lingered too long indoors, my father would say, “I’ll find something to do if you’re bored!” Turned out from my bedroom and books, I discovered places to relax outdoors, and out of sight. There was a spot on the ground near the back of our barn that was covered in a soft, squishy, bright green moss where my Barbies liked to go “camping” with Ken. There was the swing hanging from the birch tree on the big hill and when I pumped my legs, my feet touched the sky. There were walks up our dirt road after school, when telling stories in my head passed the time. At the end of the walk, I’d linger outside and hang my legs over the edge of the wooden deck, peeling back leaves on the ferns until dark.

Trading the woods of Vermont for the beaches of South Carolina led to different forms of relaxation. The beach was just a 20-minute drive, and my straw bag holding sun screen, books and a towel had a permanent home next to my sandy flip-flops at the front door. I learned to move slowly under the white glare of the southern summer sky and became a determined relaxer. There was no one to tell me not to anymore, and I would relax whenever I could. There were girlfriends to call who’d come over just to watch tv, or go to a movie, or walk around downtown and shop. There was sailing in the harbor Wednesday nights after work, and reading in my bed, couch and hammock.

When I met my husband, relaxation took shape in undiscovered places. There was the sun on our faces as we traveled by ferry to Martha’s Vineyard. There was navigating curving island roads in a rented jeep with a picnic of beer and lobster. There was the thrill of discovering each new shared pleasure.

Relaxing came naturally. There were weekends spent in bed, with coffee and a paper, walks through the park, jazz bands playing under the stars. Greedily, we took our fill of simple pleasures. Time seemed to stand still.

As a mother, the person in charge, the person who makes sure everything gets cooked and eaten, bathed and dressed, the person who takes care of boo-boos, and settles fights, I’ve found it hard to relax. Giving up my income to stay home with our first child altered my landscape, shifted the sands under my feet. Stretching our dollars every month made me anxious to prove my worth, to stay busy, and show the value of our sacrifice. My beach chair sat rusted in the shed. The voices of my ancestors and their Puritan work ethic crept back into my head. “Idle hands are the devil’s tools!” There was always something to be done, and there was no clocking out. Relaxation felt like a memory.

“What should we do today?” I asked my son Will after breakfast one day. Summer had begun and the days sat before me, like an insatiable beast, waiting to be fed.

“Just stay home,” he said. And by six pm, my skin felt stretched too tight. Sitting on the edge of the toilet seat as the boys took a bath, I imagined my face in a grimace as I waited to be summoned with a towel. As they laughed, splashed and squirted each other with bath water, I thought about the dinner dishes, the unpaid bills on my desk, and the meowing of our cats, demanding to be fed. How could I complain about not being able to relax when I was doing exactly what I wanted and staying at home to raise my boys? I knew there were harder jobs out there and that I was fortunate.

I searched out other mothers to uncover their relaxation techniques. I eavesdropped at Barnes and Noble during the children’s story hour, and listened to talk of “Bunko” and “Girl’s Night Out.” I read emails from my church’s “mama’s group” about dinners and movies. “Schedule a date night with your husband,” the parenting magazines recommended. “Shut the door to the bathroom and take five minutes to yourself. Rub some calming lotion on your arms and legs and take deep breaths.” I tried to take a shower alone, and my two-year-old yanked the shower curtain open to throw his toy frog in to bathe with me.

I like to think that my grandfather married my grandmother because she didn’t know the definition of moderation. A big, curvy blonde from Wisconsin, she liked to laugh, drink, play games and have fun. They were a good team. I want my boys to know all sides of our family history. I want them to know moderate behavior can be a good thing, as long as it includes moderate amounts of indulgence. I want them to know the value of staying in their pjs till noon, eating waffles for dinner, throwing rocks in the river at high tide, climbing trees, and having a mother who knows how to throw down the towel and relax. I want them to know a life lived with “coulds” instead of “shoulds”.

*Amy Mercer is a freelance writer who is busy learning to relax.*