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PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

Winston Churchill on Hobbies

By Mary Pat Campbell

Wartime leader, long-lived parliamentarian, roving correspondent, prolific author, careful crafter of barbed remarks, visionary person with broad ideas on technology and society: Winston Churchill is known for many things, being particularly held up as a role model for those wishing to be charismatic leaders.

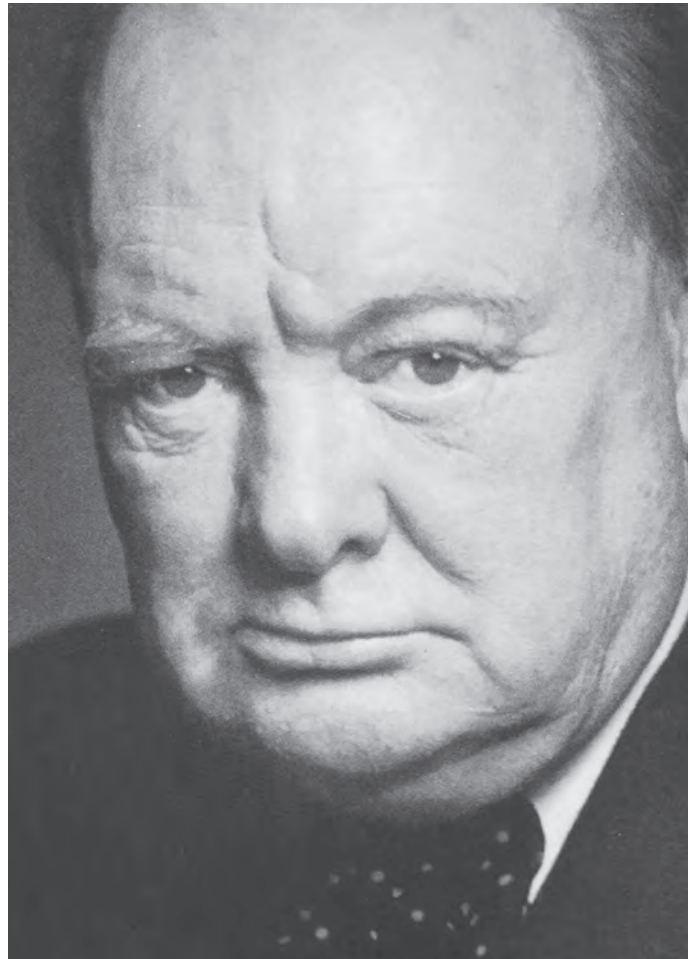
But would you associate Churchill with advice on how to relax?

Born of the English aristocratic class (albeit with an American mum), Churchill had grown up with associated upper-class pastimes: polo and hunting in particular. While of the aristocratic class and those tastes, his own family did not have the independent income to support it. Thus, Churchill started hustling from an early age, writing dispatches while serving in the British Army as a young man, becoming an independent war correspondent, and continuing his prodigious writing output after entering Parliament in 1900.

Churchill was notorious for the hours he kept, working on speeches and articles into the small hours of the morning, only to rise again before 8 a.m. His day was punctuated by a short nap in midday, a habit gained when he covered the Cuban War of Independence in 1895. His first book, *The Story of the Malakand Field Force*, was published in 1898, when he was still in his early 20s. His last published original work was in the late 1950s, the four-volume collection called *A History of the English-Speaking Peoples*. He wrote multivolume works on the first Duke of Marlborough (his aristocratic ancestor), World Wars I and II, his own father, and published collections of his speeches, essays and other works.

He was an active parliamentarian, being a member of Parliament from 1900 to 1964, with a few breaks in service (and not much activity after his second stint as Prime Minister ended in 1955). Attending sessions and known for his parliamentary speeches, his parliamentary career only added to his writing volume. Even his bon mots were often crafted in advance.

When did he have time to relax?



BRINGING LIGHT TO A DARK PERIOD

In the spring of 1915, Churchill hit the lowest point in his political career. Churchill was the First Lord of the Admiralty, and he had promoted a strategy to take the Gallipoli peninsula in Turkey (then the Ottoman Empire) by ground troops, with British naval support. This campaign failed, and as the most visible supporter of this strategy, Churchill lost his office as First Lord. When Prime Minister Asquith formed a coalition government in May 1915, Churchill was not included.

At this low point, in his middle age, when playing polo and other active pastimes were becoming more difficult, he tried his hand at painting.

Painting proved to be a creative outlet for Churchill entirely detached from his money-making creativity in writing and influential creativity in Parliament. Churchill did not paint to persuade or to make money. But he approached this pastime with the same diligence and passion he brought to the activities for which he was better known.

In 1921, Churchill wrote what became one of his most popular essays, “Painting as a Pastime.” Churchill republished it multiple times throughout his life, ultimately publishing it as a standalone book in 1948, with examples of his paintings. The version I read was an e-book from Rosetta Books, published in 2014. In this version, there are 10 of Churchill’s hundreds of paintings as exemplars.

If you read this essay for yourself, I recommend getting a version with at least some of his paintings as illustrations; you will be able to see what care he brought to that work, so different from his writing ... and yet, so similar. In addition, there are other books dedicated to talking about his paintings, with attendant color examples, that can be seen in the list of sources at the end of this article.

In Churchill’s essay, it is clear that painting brought respite to him, first in his darkest days at the nadir of his political career, and later as age crept up on him. In the next section, I will pick what I consider top excerpts, along with some comments. The essay has a broad construction of first arguing why one should develop serious hobbies (and what he means by that), why reading cannot fulfill this role (but what and how you should read), and then specifically advocating for oil painting as the hobby of choice.

WHY ONE SHOULD HAVE HOBBIES

... [O]ne cannot mend the frayed elbows of a coat by rubbing the sleeves or shoulders; but the tired parts of the mind can be rested and strengthened, not merely by rest, but by using other parts.¹

... It is only when new cells are called into activity, when new stars become the lords of the ascendant, that relief, repose, refreshment are afforded.²

The core of Churchill’s argument is that a hobby needs to be something completely different from one’s main activities. He mentions that one should not expect manual laborers to enjoy even more physical exertion on top of their already strenuous activities.

As well, simply doing nothing does not really re-energize a person exhausted by whatever work one does. It’s merely a pause before the work starts again. Mind you, Churchill loved his work, so he’s not merely talking about being spent by hateful drudgery of any kind. He means that you can exhaust yourself even if your main work is something you love.

To be really happy and really safe, one ought to have at least two or three hobbies, and they must all be real.³

More than anything else, Churchill is known for his abundance. His hobby that other people could enjoy, painting, was far from

his only one. Another notorious hobby of his was bricklaying. He loved building walls on his estate of Chartwell.

But more than the amount, let us look at what Churchill means by “real.” He means that they must have some serious value, and also that one seriously commits to them. In the same passage, Churchill says that merely to “work or worry about trifling things at the weekend” would not provide respite for someone with serious work during the week.

As well, Churchill may have had to toil hard for his money, but he associated with many people who did not. As he notes, for those with an abundance of resources, it’s too easy to flit around to anything new and never commit to a real interest. When trouble and pain come, those ephemeral interests will provide no relief, because one never imbued them with any meaning.

WHY READING DOESN’T FULFILL THE ROLE HOBBIES DO

[R]eading and book-love in all their forms suffer from one serious defect: they are too nearly akin to the ordinary daily round of the brain-worker to give that element of change and contrast essential to real relief.⁴

Churchill’s work was words. Whether written to be read on the page, to be spoken to a mass radio audience, to be performed for a packed Parliament, or to roll out in a long postprandial dissertation, he worked on his words as a craftsman. As a result, we have so many famous lines from Churchillian speeches: “I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat”; “Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few”; “We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender.”

The problem is when Churchill’s words failed, how would he get relief from reading?

Throughout the 1930s, after Hitler and the Nazis came to power, he used forceful words to warn of the danger. But few wanted to listen to those words after the horror of what was the Great War—the war that many hoped was the last such war. The more forcefully he argued, the more he was marginalized. In 1936, he was particularly marginalized by his support of King Edward VIII during the abdication crisis, throwing his reputation even further into the shade as he supported a man who did not deserve it.

In these trying times, words did not help Churchill find relief. He originally wrote the essay before he hit this funk of the 1930s, but he returned again and again to the canvas in times of distress.



Indeed, it may well be that those whose work is their pleasure are those who most need the means of banishing it at intervals from their minds.⁵

As noted previously, Churchill really enjoyed his work and world of words. The problem with such enjoyment of one's main work is that it can take over one's life. I think of my many friends who entered into tech during the dot-com boom, getting sucked into all-tech-all-the-time. I remember in 1996 and 1997, so many proclaiming to me "I can't believe they're paying me for this!" They worked long hours, not because they'd get more money or acclaim, but because they enjoyed solving the problems so much.

When the bust came in 2000/2001, it wasn't pretty. People lost their income **and** the problems and interests that motivated them.

We are middle-aged now, and most are still in tech (even though many went through that boom-and-bust more than once). I have noticed that more and more have picked up non-tech hobbies,

It was Lady Lavery who encouraged Churchill to attack the canvas with vigor, and not to worry about a screw-up. Just do it!

which seems to help them keep a work-life balance even more than any corporate policy would do.

WHY PAINTING, IN PARTICULAR, IS A GOOD HOBBY

My friend said that it is not a bad thing to know nothing at all about pictures, but to have a matured mind trained in other things and a new strong interest for painting.⁶

One aspect that Churchill mentions in his pursuit of painting as a hobby is that he took no formal training. He had an observant eye, and as remarked earlier, an interest. Churchill had the benefit of associating with multiple painters, including Sir and Lady Lavery, who helped direct him in his early efforts. It was Lady Lavery who encouraged Churchill to attack the canvas with vigor, and not to worry about a screw-up. Just do it!

Churchill favored oil painting, as that was the easiest to "fix" if one wanted to. Watercolor is unforgiving, and acrylic is not much better for fixing faults. But in oil painting a palette knife, some paint thinner, or even daubing new paint over the old can work wonders.

Churchill makes the point time and again: There is nothing to fear in oil painting. If you screw up, so what? You can fix it or move on to another painting. The requirements are simply paints, brush and a canvas. (Well, and an easel, palette, paint thinner and so on, but still—you don't have to buy a horse.)

While Churchill had the luxury of painting brilliant sunlit scenes such as on the French Riviera and in Egypt, some of his paintings were interior views. One need not travel to make a good painting.

Painting is complete as a distraction. I know of nothing which, without exhausting the body, more entirely absorbs the mind.⁷

Here is a key—painting was able to engage Churchill fully. By focusing on the task at hand, without a mind wandering to the next speech to give, Churchill could re-invigorate his mind already spent on words.

The whole point is to get away from that which possesses your mind most of the time.

Not only do we develop our powers of observation, but also those of carrying the record—of carrying it through an extraneous medium and of reproducing it, hours, days, or even months after the scene has vanished or the sunlight died.⁸

One aspect Churchill draws upon with respect to painting is that he could carry his painterly eye into his other activities, even when he wasn't in front of a canvas. He traveled extensively through his life, and was noted as the most-traveled wartime leader in WWII. On some of these epic trips, Churchill would take in the landscape.

Often he had his paint box with him, but as he'd write, sometimes just walking along, he would notice the color and light and try to think of how to reproduce that effect in oils. Churchill was used to paying attention to great international powers and ideologies as part of his work, as well as the structure of an argument and the well-honed use of rhetoric. Painting trained him to observe on a different dimension, in the nonverbal and in light.

CHURCHILL'S PAINTERLY LEGACY

During his life, Churchill displayed some of his paintings using the pseudonym Charles Morin. In the 1920s, he was able to sell four of his paintings for £30 each (using an inflation calculator, that would be about £1,200 now.) In 2016, two long-lost paintings by Churchill were found, valued at more than \$700,000. Of course, the interest now is more due to the historical rather than artistic value. During his lifetime he presented some of his paintings to his wartime colleagues such as Field Marshal Jan Smuts, notables like actress Vivien Leigh, and to world leaders such as President Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

Others have found inspiration from Churchill's example in painting, including Dwight D. Eisenhower, who wrote, "I have had a lot of fun since I took it up, in some miserable way, your hobby of painting." President George W. Bush credited Churchill as inspiration to take up the hobby after leaving office, though he has concentrated on portraits, unlike Churchill's landscapes. After suffering a stroke in 2013, BBC presenter Andrew Marr

found inspiration in Churchill to make a documentary about Churchill's painting pastime as well as detailing how painting and sketching helped him (Marr) recover from his stroke.

So give it a try yourself—grab some brushes, paint and canvas, and set to work! Audacity! ■



Mary Pat Campbell, FSA, MAAA, PRM, is vice president, Insurance Research, at Conning in Hartford, Connecticut. She can be reached at marypat.campbell@gmail.com.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Churchill, Winston. 2014. *Painting as a Pastime*. New York: Rosetta Books.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Ibid.

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