

AN INDUSTRIOUS WOMAN



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Most nights, in those last moments before sleep overtakes me, I tally up the day's accomplishments. What, exactly, did I do that day that would qualify as industrious?

Had I been born a cave woman, I suspect my days would be filled with berry- and nut-gathering, collecting soft materials to improve my family's sleeping situation, and assiduously avoiding being eaten by a carnivore larger than I. Evenings might find me working by firelight, perhaps weaving a basket, shaping a clay bowl, or trying to improve my hole-y clothing through sewing with a sharp thorn and hand-spun thread.

Or, had my birthdate fallen in the 1800s, every moment of my day would be spent in some productive state: sweeping out the cabin, making candles, sewing a new quilt, canning fruit for the long winter months. Doing the wash would take me much of the day, my fingers growing red and tired from the washboard and from hanging the wet laundry on the line.

As it is, I grew up in the 1970s and 1980s, by which time the life of a young woman had become markedly easier. Never was I called upon to haul water from a well, to mend a sock, or even to practice my needlework by perfecting a sampler.

Is it possible I've always simply had too much time on my hands? Do we all?

My nighttime inventory of accomplishments might include: walking the dog, a load of (easy) laundry, taking out the recycling, going to the grocery store, a quick trip to the office for a few hours' work, cheering on my daughter at soccer, cleaning out the bird cage, making dinner, ironing my son's dress pants.

This is, of course, punctuated by approximately 63 visits to the world of cyberspace to check email, texts, Facebook, and Twitter, reinforcing my sense that everyone else is achieving more than I.

The need to feel industrious, to feel useful and productive, is overwhelming. Don't we all want to feel that we matter to someone, somehow?

I am toying with the idea of trading in 30 or 40 of those cyberspace visits for a more productive activity. Were I to sculpt that pot, make that candle, or try my hand at homemade strawberry jam, I'd have a tangible product by day's end, something to look at and think, "I did that, I made that."

Busyness does not equal industry. Successfully navigating the carpool, rush hour, or the self-checkout does not create a satisfying sense of accomplishment.

Somehow, I doubt the cavewomen struggled with this. Their sense of self worth came from keeping their family alive and healthy, not from a prestigious job or six-figure book deal. When, exactly, did we evolve beyond this? And was that a good idea?

I'm not ready to throw out my washing machine or my microwave. But my notions of accomplishment? Those may need some serious adjusting.

