

WHAT IS A WEEKEND? HAPPINESS DEFINED.



On this Friday, as in all others, millions of people will wish each other a good weekend, inviting the question of what a good weekend might be. The standard here, like the ideal of happiness, is deeply connected to the caprices of personal choice, as well as the whims of experiment. Weekends are the working laboratories of happiness where, if we're lucky, time allows a few furtive hours to embrace what makes us smile.

Careers can bring their own forms of happiness, but while school and work require us to be what others expect, the weekend is where we go to become, quite simply, ourselves. A weekend, like a wardrobe, indulges individuality, although a few universal principles seem to apply.

One common truth is that a weekend's sharpest pleasure comes in anticipation. Rebecca Lee captures this beautifully when she writes of "Friday afternoon, when the air is fertile, about to split and reveal its warm fruit – that gold nucleus of time, the weekend."

On Friday nights, a household comes alive like a city liberated from occupation. Perhaps a pizza arrives at the front door, summoned from the deliveryman to inaugurate the evening

sloth, which might include binge-watching Netflix. The weekend seems endless.

On Saturday morning, the alarm clock stays silent, or at least holds its tongue for longer than the weekday reveille. "Actually, Saturdays as part of the weekend have seriously eroded," Barbara Holland once lamented. She complained that "what was once a day for picnics, sandlot baseball, and pruning roses has degenerated into a day of errands and housework." Holland has a point, although even Saturday's obligations have their charms. The trip to the grocery evokes our hunter-gatherer past, and mowing the lawn echoes, ever so faintly, the traditions of the yeoman farmer. The newly stocked fridge carries the pleasure of plenitude. Life is good.

Maybe the best Saturday afternoon is a rainy one, just wet enough to postpone the parental marathon of soccer, football, and baseball games that's become American childhood. As drizzle dampens the window, a book beckons by the reading lamp, and maybe a cup of coffee.

Saturday night is sensual, an evening given over to restaurant dinners, cocktails, trips to the theater, maybe romance. Even an unassuming night at home seems lighter, more frivolous, the running hounds of obligation still at bay.

Weekends include the solemn traditions of Sabbath, with fellowship at synagogues and churches, a pause to reflect on the Big Picture. A secular counterpart is the Sunday newspaper with its expansive think pieces and cultural reporting, the world held comfortably at arm's length, and fleetingly clarified.

At some point, perhaps as the mental fog lifts from an overly ambitious Sunday lunch, comes what R.K. Narayan called "the Sunday-evening feeling already tainted by thoughts of Monday."

The retired and the privileged, of course, can escape Monday's growing shadow. One of the most memorable lines in public television's *Downton Abbey* comes when Violet Crawley, the dowager played by Maggie Smith, asks, "What is a weekend?" Conditioned by perpetual leisure, she can't grasp why Saturday or Sunday should stand out as beacons of respite.

For such affluent souls, Charles Dickens felt a twinge of pity. "The pampered aristocrat," he observed, cannot possibly "form an adequate notion of what Sunday really is . . ."

Dickens knew that weekends, like most forms of happiness, derive their true magic from being earned.

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