

I've been **thinking**...



## Mountains, Marijuana, and Multitasking August 2012

**I've been thinking** about mountains, marijuana, and multitasking.

When my son graduated from high school, I compiled twenty suggestions for him. The list wasn't terribly profound—hardly worth a book. Nevertheless, I think I offered a few pretty good ideas from “do your own laundry” to “start a business at least once in your lifetime.” I'm proud to report that Jeff has done his own laundry ever since (even after marrying Cristina) and has started a successful tech-support business. I borrowed my best suggestion for naming his list—“Climb Every Other Mountain”—to which I added, “You can't do everything in life. Choose well.”

Lord Chesterfield wrote advice to his son that was worth publishing. In a [letter](#) penned 201 years (to the day) before I was born, he warned against trying to do everything at once.

“There is time enough for everything in the course of the day, if you do but one thing at once; but there is not time enough in the year, if you will do two things at a time.”

The earl obviously didn't live in our brave new e-world. In the last few minutes, I've received a mountain range of texts, voice-mail notifications, high-priority e-mails, and several reminders, one of which is that I need to finish this article by noon.

Ever wondered who came up with the line about killing two birds with one stone? [Answers.com](#) says it was the Chinese. Who else? And, true to form, their sages were more efficient with words than we are. The original version supposedly reads, “One stone two birds.”

I've never tried, but I think it would be difficult to kill *one* bird with a stone, let alone two. Killing one bird with two stones seems a bit more realistic but still can't be all that easy.

Sometimes the proverb makes sense. The classic twofer resonated with my experience yesterday while digging up runaway bamboo in my garden. After a few hours whenever I bent over to pick something up, I looked around to see if there were any other *birds* I could snuff while I was down there.

However, Chesterfield's wisdom suggests that when we attempt to kill two birds with one stone, we typically kill neither. Or, like my friend Trinette says, we end up robbing Peter to pay Paul and Mary. Someone gets bamboozled.

Were Chesterfield living in our multitasking era, he probably would have sent his advice electronically over the Internet rather than on paper via the postal service. And odds are his son would have been barraged with potential interruptions while pondering his father's wisdom, including, perhaps, a text or two from his old man.

In 2005, [research](#) conducted for Hewlett Packard by the Institute of Psychiatry found that

excessive use of technology reduced workers' intelligence. The study showed that personnel “distracted by incoming email and phone calls saw a 10-point fall in their IQ—more than twice that found in studies of the impact of smoking marijuana.”

Lord Chesterfield’s advice is useful beyond the workplace.

A man is fit for neither business *nor pleasure*, who either cannot or does not command and direct his attention to the present object, and, in some degree, banish, for that time, all other subjects from his thoughts. If, at a ball, a supper, or a party of pleasure, a man were to be solving, in his own mind, a problem in Euclid, he would be a very bad companion, and make a poor figure in that company; or if, in studying a problem in his closet, he were to think of a minuet, I am apt to believe that he would make a very poor mathematician.

The HP study found that 62 percent of people surveyed checked work messages at home or on holiday. Was the other 38 percent in denial or dishonest? Robin Williams was today’s everyman in *RV*. Though his goal was to reconnect with his family on a road trip, he discovered his own inability to survive off the text/e-mail grid for the week. For all I know, you’re reading this on an iPad during your vacation at Mount Rushmore with your family.

In a day when “multitasking” has become a prequalifier on resumes, Chesterfield’s perspective is worth contemplating: “Steady and undissipated attention to one object, is a sure mark of a superior genius; as hurry, bustle, and agitation, are the never-failing symptoms of a weak and frivolous mind.”

Psychology pioneer, William James concurred. “The faculty of voluntarily bringing back a wandering attention, over and over again, is the very root of judgment, character, and will.”<sup>1</sup>

Speaking of marijuana, companies exercise mandatory drug testing with good reason. Perhaps voluntary assessment of wandering-attention disorders exacerbated by today’s technology would be a worthy exercise. I’ve met some people who could use an intervention and a 12-step program.

What do you think is next?



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P.S. Admittedly, sometimes birds are killed as unintended consequences of intense focus. Arizona Diamondback’s all-star pitcher, Randy Johnson, threw a 95-mph fastball that accidentally took out a pigeon on its way to the plate! Watch the *fowl* ball [here](#). Believe it or not, it’s happened at least two other times with cameras rolling [here](#) and [here](#). Confession: I’m watching the Olympics on TV as I’m adding this postscript. Caught me.

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<sup>1</sup> William James, *Psychology: Briefer Course*, p. 424.