



“How Am I? Still Busy?”

The French are helping me stop turning friendly greetings into a competition.

KEVIN MCGOFF

“Long time no see. How are you?”

“Busy, how about you?”

“Oh, boy, I’m swamped.”

The greeter seeks to learn their old friend is well and happy or perhaps experiencing a rough patch. Instead the pleasantries open the door to a competition. There aren’t enough hours in the day for these two. Thus begins the contest: Who’s more busy? It’s a bizarre custom.

When I was a hard-working litigator 15 years ago, I tackled the subject of routinely trying to out-busy our lawyer friends. I wrote a piece suggesting we lawyers come up with a better answer to “How are you” than “I’m busy.”

It had no impact.

The challenge to demonstrate we’re busy at the outset of a conversation remains the custom and practice. Perhaps it’s a cultural thing. Why are we Americans so busy? Why must we boast about it?

I moved along, leaving day-to-day lawyering to do something different. The “I’m busy” custom followed. I thought once my briefcase was retired and all but one of my court costumes were on display in a second-hand shop, “I’m busy” would be a thing of the past.

There are no briefs due on inopportune dates, no client meetings in the afternoon, and no partner breakfasts before sunrise. The alarm clock goes off only if we have an early flight. Why tell people I’m busy?

The urge to let friends know we’re not idlers isn’t the exclusive province of the young. The motivation to impress differs as we lawyers slow down a bit or simply retire. No longer needing to establish we have more work than ever, slowing down or retiring from the law opens doors to a new kind of busy—one worth bragging about.

WHO’S NOT BUSY?

I again began looking for an alternative to declaring busyness, hoping to discover something I might personally embrace and share—once again—with others. In the process, I set out to identify a culture where people revel in *not* being busy. In my quest to discover the opposite of busy, the pace of life in France came quickly to mind. Life often moves at the pace of a two-hour lunch in the land of brie and baguettes.

I knew I was on the right track when I learned the French even have a word for not being busy—*farniente*—which literally means idleness or doing nothing.

Barbara and Ira Spector, authors of *A Month of Sundays: Villa Life in the South of France*, described *farniente* as a state of “peace, tranquility, and bliss.” The French are fortunate to have this term as a part of their vocabulary.

French people know how to *not* be busy. In general, they simply enjoy life. Some have a 35-hour work week. Most have five weeks of vacation, which they even take. Beyond the generous vacation schedule the French celebrate—with a day off—every holiday known to the western world.

When did you last sleep in on Whit Monday, which you may know as Pentecost Monday or the Monday of the Holy Spirit? If a holiday falls on a Tuesday or Thursday, the French sometime take *le pont* (the bridge). The holiday grows into a four-day weekend with Monday or Friday providing the bridge—also a day off—to the holiday.

CAFÉ IS TAKEN IN A CAFÉ

Here’s another example of an unbusy life. The French enjoy their café in a café. French lawyers don’t juggle a \$6 latte in a Styrofoam cup while walking down Rue République. Not that coffee breaks can’t be a quick affair in France. I’ve witnessed many an espresso quaffed in two minutes or less. A busy French person can be in as big a rush as a harried American.

But coffee in France is consumed while seated at a table. Often a croissant is dunked in the steaming drink with one hand. In the other a cigarette dangles, expertly held such that the smoke blows across another table.

An acceptable alternative is a hurried espresso while standing at the café’s zinc counter while chatting with the servers or checking the winning lotto numbers scrolling across the screen. There’s no risk of a Parisienne barrister staining an outfit by spilling their java while driving to a meeting.

GREETINGS IN A NON-BUSY COUNTRY

This more-relaxed culture is reflected in how one responds to “How are you?” “Ça va?” I’ve never heard a French person respond with, “I’m busy.”

The three top choices seem to be “*Ca va bien*” (it’s going well), “*Impeccable*” or “*Impec*” (impeccable, perfect, flawless), and *en forme* (great shape). I don’t recall hearing any of these responses in the States.

If someone is in the doldrums, you may hear a “*Comme ci-comme-ça*” (so-so). I’ve heard the “so so” response in the United States, probably from a not-busy person.

NOT EVERYONE GOT THE MEMO

It’s not all *farniente* on the continent. America introduced Europe to Starbucks. The golden arches of McDo, pronounced Mac Dough in France, *s’il vous plait*, can be found throughout the country. And for better or worse, the American culture of busyness has infiltrated life across the pond as well.

I witnessed unfortunate busyness first-hand during a summer vacation with our kids. One year, a family trip to France coincided with *le quatorze*—July 14—France’s national holiday. We joined the festivities at a restaurant with tables set under tents on a Mediterranean beach. After the meal, there was dancing, then fireworks were launched over the water.

For the finale, the diners stood for the national anthem and loudly sang along to *La Marseillaise*. When the music stopped, the patrons all jumped up and began mingling about the restaurant. They grabbed one neighboring diner after the other, exchanging *la bise*, the customary French kiss on both cheeks. We joined in and dished out timid *bises*, each coupled with a hearty “*Vive la France!*” A lively end to a great affair.

As the festivities wound down, I looked down the beach. Every other restaurant was dark. I asked our young waitress why all the other establishments were missing the opportunity to serve a full house and rake in the euros on this festive night.

With a long face and a Gallic shrug, she explained that the owners of the other restaurants worked to live. Her boss lived to work. The manager dragged her and the rest of the staff along with him to clock in on the national holiday. Unlike their counterparts down the beach enjoying the *fête*, this staff was busy—and not particularly thrilled. America has introduced more than McDonald’s and Starbucks to the continent.

THE SUBTLE BUSYNESS INDICATOR

Some years ago, when our children were teenagers, I discovered that they really *did* listen—not to my lectures or pontifications but to my routine phrases. I was informed that shortly before every family trip, old dad would reach a point where I would profess, “I don’t know how I’m ever going to be ready. I’m not sure I can go.”

I assure you I wasn’t stressed about cutting the grass. Work was pressing. I was busy.

Before one trip, our kids, who no doubt staged the moment, called me out on my use of this pet phrase. They asked my wife, Patty, while I was within earshot, “Has he said it yet, Mom?”

How about ditching the routine answer to a welcoming “How are you?” with more flourish and grist for an interesting discussion? “I’m doing great! We moved to a bigger home, traded the Benz for a Jag, Susie’s making straight As, and Johnny was paroled in the fall.”

I never realized I had this habit; another way of conveying my busyness. Upon hearing their memory of how the family vacations started, I swore off this phrase. It wasn’t easy, and I slipped a few times. I’m periodically reminded of my old habit and subjected to good-natured ridicule whenever hauling the suitcases up from the basement.

I recently learned that the “I don’t know how I’m ever going to be ready” whine remains in the family lexicon. It was reported that our 37-year-old son, also a lawyer, incorporated this phrase into his vacation-packing repertoire. One day his kids will call him out.

This habit of describing ourselves as busy to any available ear isn’t unique to lawyers. When discussing this topic with a nun from a local Catholic college, she told me of a quote hanging over her desk. It’s a reminder to her of the downside of being too busy.

Sister shared the words from her wall, penned by Thomas Merton: “The frenzy of the activist [that’s us]...destroys the fruitfulness of one’s own work because it kills the root of inner wisdom which makes work fruitful.”

Even a nun needed a reminder, provided by a monk, not to get caught up in busyness.

CONVERSATION STARTERS

Since it’s unlikely we’ll ever become as relaxed as the French, there may be another alternative to the “I’m busy” reply to a greeting. How about, “I’m broke” or “I’m waiting for the phone to ring because my practice is floundering”? Probably not likely to happen, but they’re attention getters.

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I’m still waiting for the right opportunity to test this Christmas-letter-trending-in-the-wrong-direction style response.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

My father’s routine response to, “How are you doing today, dad?” was a jaunty, “I’m doing the best I can, Kev.” That was after he’d retired, of course.

I’ve managed to eliminate the “I’m busy” answer when someone asks how I’m doing. But I still have the urge to let it be known that I’m no idler or slacker. As conversations move beyond the pleasantries, sometimes I’m asked how I’m spending my days. I toss out, “I’m as busy as I want to be.”

This is unkind. I know the next question will be, “What are you busy doing with no cases or clients?”

I’m prepared with an answer. Working lawyer friends want detail. “How do you spend your day,” they ask? Before, I’d rattle on about the trial I was preparing for or seek their opinion on a riveting issue with which I was wrestling.

Now it sounds like, “So today, I took 20-mile bike ride, did the Wordle in three, then ran a few errands. I was back in time for a late lunch, after which I read a little and wrote a little before I took a nap. I got in a swim before it was time for *hors d’oeuvres* with a nicely chilled rosé.”

Busy comes in many forms. Napping is now a part of being busy, just as was preparing for a trial back in the day. Should I feel guilty deriving pleasure sharing the details of my busy day? After all, they asked.

IT’S A CONTINUING QUEST

I’ve come to appreciate that it’s a tall order to think this habit of professing busyness to all who will listen can be broken. Perhaps I will turn to Merton for guidance on the topic. This is something Sister recommended to me 15 years ago.

I’ll get to it. I’ve just been so busy. **E**

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