

Sabbath and Rest Deprivation

by Ed Gungor

Learning to work well is great, but working well is not sufficient to create a balanced life; we must also learn how to stop working. That's called rest. The Hebrews called it taking a Sabbath, and it was on God's Top Ten List. Scripture says: "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy." Keeping something holy means being committed to doing it, period.

But we don't commit to Sabbath. In our helter-skelter, fast-paced world, rest has gotten a bad rap. When was the last time you got a pat on the back for taking it easy? We are an active people with a production mentality. Our culture takes an almost mythical view of work. Myths are powerful beliefs that go unquestioned in our minds. They're ideas and beliefs a society internalizes that become a part of who we are as individuals. Their power comes from our unquestioning attitude toward them.

The Myth of Moving and Shaking

The myth we hold is that only the excessive movers and shakers have value, not the snoozers and rest-takers. If you can work eighty to ninety hours a week, serve on a civic board or two, coach your kid's soccer team, and get by with five or six hours of sleep a night, you'll be held in highest esteem. The more you produce, the more value you will have in the minds of people around you.

In our overachieving world, not many give a rip about rest. We're busy beavers. On the whole, we disregard or have little more than disdain for rest. It's kind of like a bathroom break—we only do it when we have to. Yet rest was just as much God's idea as work. And just as God works, God rests. When we don't get enough rest, it hurts us. In fact, doctors tell us that many of the stress-related illnesses people have today are rooted in the fact that we're overtired and burned out.

Abraham Heschel wrote concerning the Sabbath: "When the Romans met the Jews and noticed their strict adherence to the law of abstaining from labor on the Sabbath, their only reaction was contempt. The Sabbath is a sign of Jewish indolence, was the opinion held by [the Romans]." But we need to rethink that position on rest. Rest is actually God's gift to us, a reward at the end of hard work. Back to Heschel, "In defense of the Sabbath, Philo, the spokesman of the Greek-speaking Jews of Alexandria, says: 'On this day we are commanded to abstain from all work, not because the law inculcates slackness . . . Its object is rather to give man relaxation from continuous and unending toil and by refreshing their bodies with a regularly calculated system of remissions to send them out renewed to their old activities.' "

Coffee Breaks Are Not Optional

If you refuse to rest, it will catch up to you, which means rest is not optional—you *will* rest. You will either learn to rest on your own, or you will be forced to rest through a heart attack or some kind of emotional breakdown. I think most of us would prefer choosing to rest.

When you don't have enough rest, you begin to lose perspective on just about everything. Psychological tests have repeatedly revealed that our perspective begins to distort when we're

deprived of rest—our reality may not be reality at all. That means we might be misreading our job, our relationships, and our whole world. Leonardo da Vinci said, "Every now and then go away, have a little relaxation. For when you come back to your work, your judgment will be surer, since to remain constantly at work, you lose power of judgment. Go some distance away because then the work appears smaller, and more of it can be taken in at a glance, and a lack of harmony or proportion is more readily seen."

But in a world full of appointments, to-do lists, relational responsibilities, deadlines, and power lunches, one sometimes has to get creative to get enough rest. Wayne Oates wrote: "Your world is, more likely than not, one of action. You look for the green pastures and still waters of silence to heal your noisy heart in the middle of a hectic existence. Quelling chaos is probably the name of the game of your life. . . . Begin landscaping your schedule to create some places and times of privacy for your regular cultivation of silence, communion with your inner being, and communion with the Eternal in your noisy heart." Rest seldom happens by accident.

Warning Signs That You May Need Rest

We need to catch the early signals of rest deprivation if we're going to learn how to establish a good work/rest rhythm. Watch out for:

- mental fatigue (having difficulty concentrating or trouble thinking flexibly)
- irritability (you're noticeably more defensive, argumentative, or angry)
- anxiety (feeling of restlessness, insecurity, or a general sense of worthlessness)
- apathy (the "blahs"—you just don't care anymore; nothing seems interesting or fun)
- just plain old exhaustion (you fall asleep sitting at your desk or standing in the subway)

If you believe you are rest deprived, do something about it. Otherwise your life will be dominated by fatigue, a loss of perspective, poor judgment, and confusion of heart.

Prayer:

Dear Jesus,

You invited us, we who are weary with heavy burdens, to come to you so you may give us rest. We ask forgiveness for too often rejecting this invitation and deciding to add one more activity to our schedules. Help us to landscape our schedules so we have time to be with you and accept your invitation.

We pray this in your name, Lord of the Sabbath. Amen.

Questions:

1. Who are some people in our culture who are idolized because they have found worldly success through non-stop work?

2. How many hours did you work last week? How many hours did you play and relax? When was the last time you took a vacation?

3. Do you find yourself exhibiting any signs that you need rest? What can you do to build more time for rest and renewal into your schedule?