

BALANCING FAITH, FAMILY & PRACTICESM

Sacred Rhythms: God's Pace for a Hectic World

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My 41st birthday was an occasion I wish I could forget. I spent it in the hospital, not caring for patients but flat on my back in bed. I remember lying perfectly still, my chalk white hand feebly clasping the blankets. My breath came in short agonizing gasps, and pain constricted my chest. I felt my system shutting down as I gently faded out of the world. For two days, a cardiac monitor recorded every beat as colleagues puzzled over my condition. Had I suffered a heart attack?

“Can you think of what the problem might be?” they asked. After all, as a physician I should be able to diagnose my own condition, shouldn't I? Even my brain had shut down, and I couldn't string two logical thoughts together — let alone think about what was going on in my own body.

During my protracted convalescence, I spent a lot of time reflecting on what had brought me to this place. Could I have avoided it? The underlying cause was a viral illness, but I suspect my body was also rebelling at the abuse dealt by my fast-pace, high-stress lifestyle.

Unfortunately, I am not alone. Anxiety, depression and suicide are on the rise, and growing evidence suggests stress and the pressures

of our overlooked schedules are major contributors.

Doctors are often the worst at establishing a healthy pace of life. We have always been pressured to be on call 24 hours a day, and the advent of cell phones and e-mail only increases demands on our time and resources. These “time-saving” innovations crank up the pace of life to unimaginable levels, convincing us that every day is supposed to race at a frantic beat with no time to slow down or take a break. Even on days off or during vacation we feel guilty if we don't read our e-mail or call the hospital to check on our patients.

Our crammed schedules crowd out the very elements that should be our priorities, such as the condition of our spiritual lives. When I feel overwhelmed, I jettison church activities and prayer time first. Tragically, although we have more tools than ever to steer our spiritual journeys, we feel less in control. We have hundreds of versions of the Bible to read, endless Christian Web sites to explore and countless Christian musicians to listen to, yet time spent in prayer and Bible study has dropped precipitously in the last 10 years. Our daily routines are not only disconnected from God's plans but also in competition with them.

Getting in rhythm

So how do we get in tune with God and find the healthy spiritual routines we need to cope with the pressures and stresses of busy lives? How do we bring eternal values from the periphery of our chaotic world to the center of all we are and do?

After my illness, I asked myself, *How did Jesus spend His time on earth, and how did He pace His life?* Jesus carried the weight of the world on His shoulders. He should have been overwhelmed by the constant demands of the crowds; He could have spent 24 hours a day healing and preaching. Instead, He rarely seemed overloaded. As I sat in my hospital bed contemplating my overstressed life, I realized that if Jesus truly offered abundant life, then the patterns of His life provide the best model for what mine should look like.

I discovered that Jesus modeled four essential routines; I call them sacred life rhythms. To some, the idea of a “life rhythm” conjures images of New Age therapies and biorhythmic rituals. But the rhythm of life that Jesus led flowed out of a genuine, intimate relationship with the Father and provided the focus for all He did.

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Prioritizing prayer

Jesus was never too busy to pray, and His prayer life wasn't just a devotional lubricant to make life flow a little more easily. He spent a lot of time listening to the Father rather than talking to Him. Jesus paused regularly in His daily work to check in with His Father. He directed His life according to the Father's instructions and never made major decisions without praying for direction.

How much less stress would we suffer if we gave this kind of priority to prayer? Pausing for prayer throughout the day to reconnect to God and renew our spiritual energy, listening to Him as part of our decision-making process, and taking the occasional day off to pray can enrich our lives and bring us closer to God and His purposes.

Several years ago, my husband and I started taking a couple of days every few months to get away and re-evaluate and refocus our priorities. These have become our most valuable prayer times. We start by reflecting on how well we have used our resources and where our accomplishments fall in the light of God's purposes for us. We spend time listening to God and setting goals that reflect our sense of biblical call — not just for our vocation but for every area of life. In the months between our getaways, we take time on Sunday

mornings to journal and check on our progress. Our lives are not only more spiritually focused but also far less stressed and more celebratory as a result.

Embracing community

Jesus' second priority was community. He rarely worked alone. Typically He was with His disciples or in a crowd instructing and reaching out with the compassion of God. Jesus' relationships weren't just focused on work, either. He and His disciples frequently enjoyed good food, fellowship and celebration. From my perspective, Jesus should have been on a worldwide evangelism tour after the Resurrection. Instead, He met the disciples on the Galilee shore and made breakfast for them.

Taking time for friends and family, encouraging co-workers and fellow believers, having fun and celebrating our faith should all be part of our life rhythm. One family I know takes two evenings a week to focus on their neighborhood. The kids voluntarily give up television and video games so they can pray for their community's needs. Once a week they invite neighbors over for dinner. Not only has their family been transformed, but they are also beginning to see God accomplish amazing things in their community.

Reordering work

The third rhythm that paced Jesus' life was work, but not for His daily bread. (He encouraged His followers to trust God for that.) His work focused on service to His Father and the radical principle that, as God's representatives, our work also should focus on this priority. We are designed to bring hope, healing and salvation, helping those around us look forward to a world in which there will be no more crying or hunger or pain. Of course, as doctors we often rationalize our long work hours by saying that this is the reason for our dedication. But without the balance of God's other priorities, our lives are still out of sync with His intentions.

Ron, a cardiologist in Los Angeles, realized this when his young daughter asked, "Why don't we ever get involved in mission work?" Her question made Ron aware that his kids needed to see him modeling God's love and compassion. Ron cut his practice to four days a week so he could volunteer with his kids at a free clinic downtown.

Finding rest

What a relief when I realized that Jesus not only believed in work, but He also encouraged His followers to rest. One of the repercussions of my illness is that I still need to nap in the afternoons.

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Recent medical research applauds my decision. An afternoon siesta increases productivity so much that we actually accomplish more than when we keep busy all day. A good night's sleep also boosts our immune system.

Along with proper sleep, consider the biblical concept of the Sabbath. What difference would it make if we viewed the Sabbath as a day for the joy of fellowship with God, for enriching relationships with others and for enjoying the glories of God's creation? One friend of mine recently instituted a "technology Sabbath." One day a week he disconnects from the phone, e-mail and computer to decrease his stress.

Model behavior

If Jesus doesn't give us heavy burdens to carry, where do our overcrowded lifestyles come from?

John, a young pastor in Denver, was recently asked, "Why are you always so busy?" John, thinking his parishioner wanted an account of his time, started to relate all the activities that kept him on the run: church, committee meetings, hospital visits, family and friends. "That's not what I meant," the parishioner explained. "Why are you so busy? Don't you think God wants you to model a different way of life?" The question stopped John short, and soon he rethought his priorities and life patterns.

Perhaps you, too, would like to reflect on this question. Get away with a friend, your spouse or your family for a prayer retreat and examine how you prioritize your time.

Jesus' life rhythm is a model. People still look for evidence that Christians invest their time and energy in priorities different from

the society around them. They are looking for a faith with a different rhythm — a rhythm that fulfills rather than exhausts.

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