

“Work and Rest (Part 1)”

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Learning Balance from a Calendar

(Holding up my cell phone)

This device is amazing. It does so many things, that it seems kind of short-sighted to simply call it phone. In fact, making actual phone calls is probably fourth or fifth on the list of ways I use this in my daily life.

The number one function, that I would absolutely be lost without, is the calendar, because I use it to schedule everything in my work and personal life.

You see, I came to the realization that, no matter how many things in life I try to juggle, I can only ever be in one place at any given time. And so, if I put something in my calendar, then that is the place I will be.

The other nice thing about the calendar, is that with a single glance I can see how busy I am. If I have lots of colorful blocks in my calendar, I know it's a busy week. Whenever this happens, I try to correct it by scheduling in “rest” or “free time.” This prevents me from filling those empty times with another meeting or appointment.

What my calendar is teaching me, is how to balance work and rest.

Now, in talking about work and rest, I'm not saying that one is good, and the other should be avoided; nor am I saying that one is inherently more important than the other. Ultimately, I think it's about balance; and that the wisdom in balancing work and rest lies in knowing when to do each.

Cultural Attitudes towards Work and Rest

One important thing to note: I believe that our culture does not value work and rest equally; and so, it is likely that most of us here hold views that reflect the cultural attitude that sees work as better and more valuable than rest.

This is deep in our roots. Our Puritans ancestors had a saying that “Idle hands are the devil’s workshop.” And while Puritans are not still around today, their legacy in this country lives on.

Even the very word “business” is a barely disguised version of busy-ness. And our system that prizes work and productivity would have us believe that our value as people comes from our ability to do, to make, and to produce.

The Case for Rest

Is our society right? Is work more important than rest?

I truly don’t believe so. I believe our first principle, that affirms and promotes the inherent worth and dignity of every person, leads me to conclude that our humanity is not measured by what we can do, or how much we are able to produce. I believe that affirming our first principle means affirming a balance of meaningful work and meaningful rest; a balance that helps us recognize the inherent worth that each of us already has.

And so, when it comes to work and rest (and not believing one to be worthier than the other, but recognizing that the value of rest is more likely to go underappreciated), let me make a case for why rest is a good thing.

The Parable of the Woodcutters

Consider this parable of the woodcutters¹:

Once upon a time (as parables often start) there were two woodcutters who both claimed to be the fastest woodcutter in the land. So they agreed to both work from sun-up to sun-down and see who could cut down more trees by the end of the day.

Woodcutter number one began swinging his ax as soon as the sun broke over the horizon. Listening, he could hear his opponent chopping away in the distance. But every hour or so, woodcutter number one noticed the sound of his rival’s chopping would stop. “Aha! He’s taking breaks!” thought woodcutter number one. “I’ll continue cutting wood while he rests to ensure I have the lead!”

¹ Paraphrased from a story found at: <http://www.clairenewton.co.za/my-articles/the-wood-cutter-stories.html>

He delighted in this, and swung harder and faster every time he heard his opponent stop, so as to take full advantage of his rival's pauses. Woodcutter number one even worked right through lunch.

When the sun finally dropped below the horizon, both woodcutters set down their axes, and the number of fallen trees were counted. Much to the surprise of Woodcutter number one, woodcutter number two was declared the winner!

"That's not possible!" exclaimed woodcutter number one. "I heard him take breaks, while I never rested the whole day! How could he possibly have cut down more trees?"

"Every time you heard a pause in my cutting, I was resting and renewing myself," said the second woodcutter, "and every time I paused to rest, I sharpened my ax."

I like this parable for its message of lifting up rest, and for raising the importance of caring for ourselves and the instruments of our meaningful work in the world.

However, I still find it problematic for a couple of reasons: first that it reinforces the cultural values of competition and productivity; and second, it misses the mark on *why* rest is important.

Rest for Rest's Sake

We don't rest purely so we can return to working. Like eating, or sleeping, or listening to music, we can take pleasure in it for its own sake.

Eating may serve a function by refueling our bodies, but when I went for ice cream last week, it certainly wasn't for nourishment. I did it because I like ice cream for its own sake.

Show of hands: how many of you hit the snooze button on your alarm this morning? [PAUSE]

Me too. And it wasn't because I had calculated that ten more minutes of sleep would be exactly the right amount needed to reach an optimal state of restedness. I did it because that extra ten minutes in my warm bed felt wonderful! I took pleasure in sleeping for its own sake.

And so it can be with our rest during waking hours too.

Work doesn't have to be the default setting of our existence. It can be one setting among many. We shouldn't rest just so we can work harder. We should rest because it is a valid part of our human experience. That, and we just might enjoy it.

Cultivating the Balance

So how do we counter this message of work being the default setting? How do we live a life that truly balances work and rest?

By engaging in spiritual practices; they have a way of cultivating mindfulness, and attitudes of appreciation, wonder, and gratitude;

By Sipping, Savoring, and Sauntering- take things in slowly; allow time to appreciate your experiences, and to be mindful of your sensations and surroundings;

By being patient; these practices take time to cultivate- time intentionally set aside from the busy-ness of our minds, and aside from our busy actions aimed at being productive;

Andrew C. Kennedy writes, "There once was a rabbi whose custom it was to pray for an hour each morning. The rabbi was asked, 'But what about when you're busy? Do you cut back to a half-hour or fifteen minutes?'

'Oh no,' the rabbi replied. 'When I'm really busy, then I pray for two hours.'"²

If we are to truly embrace a balance between work and rest, then, like the rabbi, we must be intentional about making rest a priority in our busy lives.

Why We Rest: Growth

"But why should I?" some of you may be thinking. Well, let's look at what happens when we rest.

In addition to being more balanced humans, experiencing a wider range of our humanity, we rest so we can grow.

² Alexander, Scott W., ed. *Everyday Spiritual Practice: Simple Pathways for Enriching Your Life*. Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations, 1999.

Physically, muscles grow when they are resting, not when they are working out; and so, I wonder if we similarly do the work of our lives, and then take time to rest and reflect, that this is how we grow our minds, our hearts, and our souls?

Why We Rest: Well-Being

What else happens when we rest? I know that my drive to work is a completely different experience when I leave early than it is when I am running late. When I'm in a state of busy-ness and rushing, I find it very stress-inducing; when I'm running late, everything looks like an obstacle, and it feels like the whole world is conspiring against me.

When I embrace a slower pace by setting aside time, I feel much better. I don't mind if people pass me, or if they go slower than I would like. By living into a life that values balance over busy-ness, I feel more human.

Communities of Work and Rest

Now, here's the thing about feeling more human: if I can better recognize my own humanity when I embrace the value of rest, imagine how it might also help me see the humanity of others.

Now imagine how a community that values a balance of work and rest might treat one another if we were all just a little more in touch with our own humanity, and the humanity of others?

Imagine a community that works together *and* rests together; that recognizes that relationship-building happens in times of both work *and* rest: that it happens while marching together for justice, as well as when we break bread together at potlucks, or sip coffee together during social hour.

This is what it means to belong to a beloved community. We work together, and then we rest together in the love we have created.

There is a love holding us.

There is a love holding all that we love.

There is a love holding all.

We rest in this love.

We rest in this love.