

Margin for Living

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In the 1960s, sociology experts predicted that you and I would suffer a horribly frustrating problem by the end of the century: boredom, massive and pervasive boredom. The scholars foresaw that we would be bored to the point of becoming suicidal. The thought was that we – all of us – would be working less than 20 hours a week, because technology would provide devices that could do most of our work, and prosperity would abound for all. The biggest difficulty would be to find meaningful activities to fill our empty hours and to occupy our minds. It was thought in the '60s that churches and service agencies would have volunteers in great abundance, anxious to help them fulfill their various missions, because people would have so much free time.

The truth in 2003, of course, is that most of us do have a huge problem, but it stems from stress and overload and the frantic effort to keep up with all we have to do. The reality of the new millennium is that we face exhaustion on a regular basis. Few of us, if any, can be called bored. And churches and other organizations are told repeatedly, "I am too tired or too busy to do what you need; please ask someone else." They struggle to find volunteers.

Two new concepts have appeared in our vocabularies in the past few years. One is "multitasking." Doesn't that word just fry your grits, as Donna Carter might say? The other, equally abhorrent, contemporary concept is "24 – 7." That phrase just rolls off the tongue so smoothly, but those terms paint a vivid picture of the dilemma in which we find ourselves: trying to do several things at the same time, and being expected to do them without ceasing.

What has happened? Now that that prediction 40 years ago turn out so wrong, and – more importantly – what can we do about the effects on our lives?

Dr. Richard Swenson has written extensively of the problem. He observes that progress, which he describes as inevitable, is the culprit. He also claims that this is not a new problem; Plautius, a Greek who wrote in the 3rd Century before the time of Christ, cursed the man who had invented the sundial because of the pressure it put on him.....and we now measure time in nanoseconds.

According to Swenson, it is the nature of Progress to work both by differentiation and by proliferation. Progress leads to increased stress, fatigue and burnout. In doing so, it robs us of the best aspects of our humanity, because it reduces productivity, creativity, morale, passion and joy. Progress leads inexorably to a number of things; I'll mention five of them.

First, Progress leads to Change, which is by definition and common understanding stressful. As creatures of habit, we do NOT want to change, especially on any terms other than our own. Alvin Toffler and other futurists have documented the deleterious effect of change, increasingly rapid change, on our psyches. Of course, some change can be good. Consider the woman who ran an ad in the classifieds, "Husband wanted." Within a week, she had 128 replies, all saying the same thing: "You can have mine."

Secondly, Progress flows toward Complexity and away from simplicity. The jokes about people my age having to ask an elementary student to program the VCR are founded in reality. Remember that any engineer can improve something by making it more complicated, but it takes a concentrated effort by a genius to make it simpler while also making it better.

Third, Progress always leads to more Speed. We now are described as being engaged in “hyper-living” and “hyper-working.” The old Finnish proverb points out a truth: “God did not create hurry.”

A fourth result of Progress is increased Intensity. Many people today have gotten so tightly wound by the intensity that permeates their lives that they never experience restorative rest.

Finally, Progress leads axiomatically to Overload. We need to remember: short-term overload is a universal occurrence and is not necessarily a bad thing, but long-term overload makes our lives miserable. The problem is not with “load;” it is with “over.” Dr. Swenson finds that overload brings physical symptoms –headaches, heart palpitations, hyperacidity, weariness, irritability, dread of work, abnormal sleeping patterns, withdrawal, hostility and many more.

Swenson defines Overload as “a state of chronic overage that leads to dysfunction in at least one important area where God requires of us a decent minimum.” We are finite creatures, but there are certain basic things that we as human beings can and should do. Overload can disrupt our ability to perform those tasks.

One of the great banes of modern existence is the Overload of accessibility. 50 years ago, we had healing, peaceful time to ourselves, but cordless phones and i-pads and cell phones and voice mail and pagers and email have made interruptions so accessible that we rarely have a quiet moment to ourselves.

Okay, then, Progress leads to a number of things. I may have made it sound as if they are uniformly bad, but that’s not correct. Progress is an amoral thing. It can lead to good or it can lead to bad. One of the effects of the progress we have experienced in the past half century has is a deeply stressed American society. What can we do about it? Let’s look at some individual solutions, and leave the big picture to the experts.

Swenson suggests that we should each work to restore Margin in our lives. Margin is the space between our load and our limits. Margin is our reserves. Ability minus load = margin. Margin is the difference between what we CAN do and what we AGREE to do. If we agree to do all that we can do, we have no margin. Too often, we are asked, or we expect ourselves, to do more and more with less and less help. We have given up, or lost, the Margin in our lives.

Swenson would suggest that a strong way to restore margin in your life is to be intentional about relaxing and about finding the things that you can use to renew your energy and outlook. For some it is yoga or tai chi. For some, it is gardening or music; others read or play golf. Some crochet or enjoy crossword puzzles. But all persons benefit from a deliberate setting-aside of time to maintain their margin.

Faith traditions of all types counsel us to take time for ourselves. For some, that means meditation, perhaps at a retreat center like the Well of Mercy near Hickory. Others find help in advice to live mindfully and in harmony with one's surroundings. Hear this paraphrase of Thich Nhat Hanh's comments about looking at Vulture Peak in India with several friends. Being Buddhist, he did not use the term, "God."

"When there is mist on the mountains, it is beautiful, and when there is no mist, it is beautiful. All four seasons are beautiful. You are beautiful, and your friends are beautiful. There is nothing to stop you from being in touch with life in the present moment. The question is, Do you have eyes that see the sunset, feet that can touch the earth? If God were to transmit his eyes to you, would you know how to use them? Don't think that happiness will be possible only when conditions around you become perfect. Happiness lies in your own heart....The heart of God is in each of us. When we are mindful, God is there....We need to touch God within us. We need to enter our own heart, which means to enter the heart of God." Thich Nhat Hanh has probably never heard of Margin for Living, but I am convinced that he would support the concept.

Judaism and Christianity similarly advise believers to seek emotional shelter in their deity. Many of us find comfort in simply reading a Psalm quietly, or in contemplating the image of God tenderly holding us in His care. This and similar images are therapeutic, and they have even more value when they are carefully personalized. When we adopt the image of God that is held by an authority figure like a minister or a parent, it is somehow less complete than when we develop, through study and prayer and discussion and thought, our own image of a comforting and caring God.

People from different faith traditions approach the concept of a nurturing God differently, of course, but most traditions interpret their understanding of God as caring, loving, protecting. "Be still....and know that I am God."

I believe that our gathering for worship in this space on a regular basis is evidence that we are conscious of our need, among other things, to invest in our own margin for living. May each of us find peace on the paths we have chosen to take, and may we be vessels of peace for others. Cultivate and protect your margin; your humanity and your Christianity alike will be enhanced.

After our closing hymn, I invite you to read with me the 23rd Psalm, in the familiar King James Version, as our benediction. This is one way that people in the Judeo-Christian faith tradition have found margin for living in times of grief, and fear, and stress, and danger. I submit that it can also help in times of overload.