

Overcoming Personal and Spiritual Inner Exhaustion: The value of rest and renewal

[Leadership Advance Online](#)- Issue VI Winter 2006

by Wayne A. Oppel

Working harder and faster, staying ahead of life, moving into the future at the speed of light. Does this describe your daily life? Are you forgetting to take time for you and your family? If so, you could be on the fast track to personal and spiritual inner exhaustion.

In his book, *Paradox of Success*, John O'Neil discusses how leaders have sacrificed personal values in order to further their careers. It is often manifested in workaholism, self-doubt, substance abuse and family difficulties. These problems are often transmitted throughout the organization, causing a loss of trust in the leaders' ability to lead effectively. O'Neil goes on to say that to become a "long distance winner" the leader must make a commitment to a process of self-examination, which will lead to renewal. To maintain this renewal, leaders must practice self-observation to use time effectively to rest and renew his or her physical and spiritual body.

Wayne Muller, in his book, *Sabbath: Finding Rest, Renewal, and Delight in Our Busy Lives*, describes how the Sabbath can either be a single day or a tool for cultivating those precious human qualities that grow only in time. He states, "when we consecrate time to listen to the still, small voices, we remember the root of inner wisdom that makes work fruitful. We remember from where we are most deeply nourished, and see more clearly the shape and texture of the people and things before us." He goes on to say, "a successful life has become a violent enterprise. We make war on our own bodies, pushing them beyond their limits; war on our children, because we cannot find enough time to be with them; war on our spirit, because we are too preoccupied to listen to the quiet voices that seek to nourish and refresh us."

When we fail to stop or slow down enough to "quietly sense God's breath upon us," we become consumed with doing, allowing our spirit to become exhausted and spiraling down without an opportunity for renewal. Flora Wuellner, in her book, *Feed My Shepherds*, describes Sabbath moments as gazing at a sunbeam on the floor, looking at a beloved painting, smelling a flower, touching a leaf, listening to a bird, stretching and breathing deeply, holding our hands under running water, ...or just quietly sensing God's breath upon and within us."

Thomas Merton, a Trappist monk, once wrote, "to allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many demands, to commit oneself to too many projects, to want to help everyone in everything, is to succumb to violence...it destroys the fruitfulness of our own work, because it kills the root of inner wisdom which makes work fruitful." The fear of failure and the need to get things done, create this downward spiral of the spirit. To break this "circle of violence" we must surrender not to the demands of life, but to the demands of self. Stepping back and reflecting, while at rest, will allow us the opportunity to see things anew, which will increase our "fruitfulness at work" and at home.

Are you caught in this circle of violence? If you are, then you may not be taking the time to care for the gifts of soul, mind and body that are given to you by God. This failure to care for these gifts creates an environment for personal and spiritual inner exhaustion. So, how do we care for these gifts and obtain some grounding and direction for our life-long journey?

1. **Meet God in the moment.** Rest and renewal is spiritual as well as physical. Taking time to meet with God in the moment will refresh you physically and spiritually. This time alone can be as simple as reflecting on the day while driving home from work, standing in line at the supermarket, or just sitting alone in your office. Use this time for meditation and reflection, spend a short time in prayer, then just relax and let your mind wander without restriction. If you're in your car, turn off your radio and cell phone and find a safe place to just sit and do nothing. During lunch, take a walk in a local park, sit under a tree, watch nature and revisit a peaceful place or moment in your life. For me, sitting outside with the warm sun on my face brings back a feeling of contentment and peace. Taking a few minutes to sit quietly and revisit this peaceful experience in your mind will allow you to experience a wonderful blessing of rest and will build your relationship with God.
2. **Understand fatigue and get enough sleep.** Fatigue can take its toll on you physically and spiritually. God has made us to need sleep. This time of sleep gives your mind, body and spirit a chance to process the day and prepare for tomorrow. During a recent family crisis, my wife had reached physical and spiritual exhaustion. I would place her in bed, tuck the blanket around her and tell her to give me all of her concerns and worries. I would then watch over her and allow her to sleep deeply while keeping her safe. This time of sleep allowed her to rest deeply, relax her mind and renew her spirit.
3. **Maintain relationships, seek new viewpoints and have a meaningful conversation each day.** During times of stress or suffering, it is important that you maintain productive relationships with family and friends; they can feed the soul like nothing else. For example, I spend an hour twice a week with a dear friend and minister discussing our faith, our families and our Christian worldview. It allows for an intellectual connection and keeps my mind focused on what is really important in my life. Also, each evening, my wife and I spend time sitting under our favorite tree, driving in the car or walking around the neighborhood just talking about life in general.

Before reading further, stop and take a Sabbath moment. Just relax your body, mind and spirit and think about the things that are important to you. Reflect on how it made you feel. Did you focus on work and getting things done or did you allow your spirit and mind to wander to those peaceful moments? During these Sabbath moments, it is important to allow yourself to just be in the moment and let God's grace flow over you while you lift your cares and burdens to Him.

In Ephesians, the writer describes how a community, with Christ as leader, can lift burdens, heal memories and relationships and release the chains that bind our hearts. The following passage can be applied to our physical and spiritual self to overcome personal and spiritual inner exhaustion: "speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together...as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love" (Eph. 4-15-16).

Taking time for self and family, "joined and knit together," helps maintain proper growth for the spiritual and physical body. The community of family and friends can be an important part of the body's ability to promote its healing through rest and renewal. As part of your daily rest and renewal, take the time to reflect on God's love for us and His healing touch. This time of reflection and rest allows us to find ourselves and provides us the capability to do our best work. Then we find the joy of returning to our work with a renewed vision of ourselves and our organizations.

To effectively move your organization into the 21st century, it is important to understand the value of rest and renewal. When we rest, we are able to be joyfully productive. When we learn to keep the Sabbath, the grace of God shines through us. It is then we understand that we are leaders by the grace of God, and by this grace, we are able to achieve and renew the potential that lies within our spirit.

Take the time to be in the moment, rest your body and renew your spirit. It will be the best vacation you've ever taken.

About the Author

Dr. Wayne A Oppel is a graduate of Regent University's School of Leadership Studies where he received his Doctor of Strategic Leadership degree. He currently serves as director of the Criminal Justice Partnership Program for Davidson County North Carolina. In addition, he is sole proprietor of OPPEL Consulting Group (oppelw50@yahoo.com) in Winston- Salem, NC.