



Holy Rest

More Than a Massage

A patron at the Hotel Hershey Spa in Hershey, Pennsylvania, lies on a chamois-covered table, her body covered by silky sheets, her tight shoulder muscles kneaded by a massage therapist. Soft music plays in the background, and the scent of chocolate wafts up through the room.

The patron is part of a growing number of harried workers who seek a break from stressful lives in the regenerative accouterments of a hotel or resort spa. According to the International Spa Association, the number of hotels or resort spas more than tripled over the last five years.

“In a 24/7 wired world of cellphones, e-mail, BlackBerrys and laptops—one in which we are constantly under scrutiny and pressure, and our value is determined by how seemingly indispensable we are—it’s not enough to go on a simple vacation anymore,” writes Kate Zernike of *The New York Times*. “Now, people seem to need to elevate their vacation experience into something more meaningful, where they will come back a changed, detoxed, perhaps even more spiritual person.”

Jim Root, director of the spa at Miravel Life in Balance in Catalina, Arizona, agreed. “Spa is all the ‘re’ words: renewal, rest, rejuvenate, revitalize.”

Zernike’s commentary suggests that many spa-goers are actually looking for more than a 40-minute massage and an exotic body wrap. They are seeking healing of the whole person from the effects of stress and overwork. There seems to be a spiritual hunger here, a need to restore balance to a life that is badly out of kilter.

Burned-Out Believers

Churchgoers are as likely as anyone to be burned out and exhausted. Discipleship is difficult, and many persons add the demands of church membership to already overfilled lives. It takes a lot of volunteer labor to keep a church going. Uncertain about the church’s future and hoping to appeal to fickle church-shoppers, leaders feel the need to offer a plethora of programs.

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The Session at a Glance

Overworked and over-committed at home, office, and church, many Christians seek relief from the stress of their daily lives. By observing sabbath and following the example of Jesus, who urged his disciples to come away with him for a while, we can find rest for weary bodies, minds, and souls.

Meet Our Writers

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“The church has been invaded by a consumer mentality that reflects society’s view that bigger is often better,” said Rev. Marjorie Thompson, director of the Pathways Center for Christian Spirituality in Nashville, Tennessee. “I wonder when church growth will be understood in terms of depth, not just numbers.”

Pastors worry as much as corporate CEOs about keeping the attendance, membership, and giving numbers up as a measure of their success in ministry. “Ministers are particularly liable to do this because much of our work is of an unseen, intangible, invisible kind and we cannot point to specific results,” said psychiatrist Wayne Oates in his book *Confessions of a Workaholic*. “Some of the most important things we do are things about which we cannot tell anyone. . . . Consequently, we are likely to spend considerable time discussing how busy we are [and] how much we have to do.”

Sunday, the traditional day of rest in the Christian community, is often the busiest day of the week for pastors and church leaders. In turn they spend their weekdays responding to the myriad demands of administration, worship planning, and pastoral care. Working through fatigue, propped up by sugar and caffeine, good Christians rush from prayer breakfast to Bible study to committee meeting to hospital to soup kitchen and back to church for another meeting, returning home at night to fall in bed exhausted.

Preacher and professor Barbara Brown Taylor noticed the same dynamics at work in the lives of her students at Piedmont College. “Like other Americans, 95 percent of these students say they believe in God, but this belief offers them no relief from their exhaustion,” she wrote in *The Christian Century*. “Most will tell you that God expects the same things from them that everyone else does: high marks, full attention, top performance, and complete devotion. . . . Some days, when I see their eyes like burned-out coals in their puffy faces, I want to cancel class and make them all go back to bed.”

Does God really want us to work ourselves to exhaustion? Does our worth really come from what we do? How can our faith help us as we seek relief from our stressful lives?

Come Away for a While

The church has two great traditions to relieve our stress and restore our balance: the example of Jesus and the observance of the sabbath. All four Gospels report that throughout his ministry, whenever the crowds pressed upon Jesus, he drew apart for prayer and solitude. Early

Core Bible Passages

“Self-care begins with a sense of focus: [for example] knowing who we are . . . whose we are . . . and having a clear sense of direction.” This counsel from a church health resource by the Evangelical Free Church of America suggests the best way to take care of ourselves is to remember what God has called us, specifically, to do.

Jesus demonstrated this focus in his first sermon at Capernaum in Luke. Quoting the prophet Isaiah, Jesus declared he was sent to the poor, imprisoned, blind, and oppressed (**Luke 4:16-21**). Later in his ministry, he clarified his role again and again, asserting that he came to preach the Kingdom widely and to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance (**Luke 4:43; 5:32**). Even as a young person, Jesus had a strong sense of who he was and what he was called to do. Left behind in Jerusalem, he told his worried parents, “Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” (**Luke 2:49**).

In the Gospel of John, Jesus defined himself with a series of “I am” statements such as “I am the good shepherd” or “I am the light of the world” (**John 6:35; 8:12; 10:11; 11:25; 14:6; 15:1**). Being clear about our focus allows us to say no to pressures and expectations that are not part of God’s mission for us.

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in the Gospel of Mark, after a tremendous bout of activity calling his disciples, preaching, teaching, exorcising, and healing, Jesus got up in the morning “while it was still very dark” and went to a deserted place to pray (**Mark 1:35**). After the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus “dismissed the crowds [and] went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone” (**Matthew 14:23**). The writer of the Gospel of Luke records that the more word about Jesus spread and the larger the multitudes gathered to hear him were, the more he would “withdraw to deserted places and pray” (**Luke 5:15-16**). The Gospel of John tells of Jesus’ final week of life where, after entering Jerusalem in triumph and telling his disciples about his death, Jesus “departed and hid from them” (**John 12:36**).

“Jesus did not wait until everyone had been properly cared for, until all who sought him were healed,” writes Wayne Muller in his book *Sabbath: Finding Rest, Renewal, and Delight in Our Busy Lives*. “He did not ask permission to go, nor did he leave anyone behind ‘on call,’ or even let his disciples know where he was going. . . . He would simply stop, retire to a quiet place, and pray.”

Jesus called his disciples to emulate his rhythm of work and rest, activity and prayer. “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest for a while,” Jesus told them (**Mark 6:31**).

Stopping to rest and pray allows us to restore our reserves, to maintain what author Richard Swenson calls “margin” in our lives. Swenson, who has written several books on Christian overload, urges church leaders to pay attention to their need for a buffer emotionally, physically, financially, and in use of time. “Margin,” Swenson says, “is the amount allowed beyond that which is needed . . . the gap between rest and exhaustion.” Many people do not stop their frenetic activity until an illness forces them to. It is much better for us to rest before we become ill.

When asked what the greatest responsibility of the believer is, Jesus replied with what we know as the Great Commandment: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. . . . [and] your neighbor as yourself” (**Mark 12:30-31**). His summary of the Torah speaks of three loves: God, neighbor, and self. For Jesus, well-being would issue from this three-fold relationship that integrated all parts of the person—body, mind, and spirit.

Remember the Sabbath

In modeling for his disciples a rhythm of work and rest, Jesus was taking seriously the Jewish tradition of the sabbath. “Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy,” the fourth commandment said. In the Hebrew Scriptures, the sabbath was linked to Creation and to Exodus. Because God rested, we should rest. Because we know what it was like to be slaves in Egypt, we should not oppress ourselves or others with relentless work (**Exodus 20:8-11; Deuteronomy 5:12-15**).

Jesus’ observance of the sabbath was not legalistic, however. Despite the objections of his critics, he healed a woman on the sabbath and instructed his hungry disciples to pluck grain, proclaiming, “The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath” (**Mark 2:27**).

Stress Analysis

How stressed are you? According to a Roman Catholic youth resource, analyzing how stress affects us is a first step to reducing it. Scan your body. Does your neck hurt? Are your shoulders tight? Is your back stiff? Is your stomach in knots?

Recurring tension in the same place can be an indicator of stress. Other warning signs of stress include sleep disturbance, changes in appetite, poor concentration, chronic fatigue, irritability, or frequent illness.

You can review recent events and ongoing circumstances to gauge your level of stress. Have you recently experienced an illness or injury? job change? death of a loved one? major project at work? conflict with a family member or co-worker? Stress can come from positive as well as negative circumstances. Have you fallen in love? received accolades or a promotion? given birth to or adopted a child?

Both internal and external forces may generate stress. Do you carry high expectations of yourself? Have you internalized stressful messages from parents or other family members? Do you frequently belittle yourself? Keeping a daily stress journal for a week will help you note what happens in your life and how you respond to it. Detailed notes can also show you the connection between stress and eating.

For Christians, the Sunday sabbath became a celebration of the Resurrection, of freedom from fear of death. Therapist Wayne Oates observed that many workaholics compulsively use work to “ward off the anxiety of death.” Confessing his own discomfort with unstructured time, Oates said, “I have never met a work addict that I did not think was preoccupied subconsciously with the imminence of his own death.” Keeping sabbath reminds us that Christ is victorious over sin and death. We can rest easy because we have eternal life in Christ.

Pampering Our Souls

Claiming moments and days of sabbath may require going to another place, turning off the cell phone, doing “nothing” for God. Any one of these acts can be tremendously freeing, expressing the confidence in God taking care of the world while we are away. “By saying no to making some things happen, deep permission arises for other things to happen,” Muller says. “Walking with a friend, reciting a prayer, caring for children, sharing bread and wine with family and neighbors—those are intimate graces that need precious time and attention.” Muller shares the counsel of Jewish rabbi Reb Zalman who suggested we begin the sabbath simply by saying, “Today I am going to pamper my soul.”

The UMC on Stress and Sabbath

Compared to other issues, neither *The Book of Discipline* nor *The Book of Resolutions* have much to say about managing stress or observing sabbath. The Social Principles have one sentence on leisure: “We recognize the opportunity leisure provides for creative contributions to society and encourage methods that allow workers additional blocks of discretionary time” (§163). The only resolutions on sabbath have to do with promoting health-care justice, organ donation, and the needs of children.

This lack of material speaks volumes. Taking after their tireless, workaholic founder, United Methodists as a whole are probably more comfortable with work than rest. John Wesley urged members of Methodist societies to avoid “softness and needless self-indulgence” and instructed his preachers to “never be unemployed” or “triflingly employed,” not spending “any more time at any one place than is strictly necessary.”

Nonetheless, Wesley also urged Methodists to avoid “profaning the day of the Lord, either by doing ordinary work therein or by buying or selling.” In his notes on **Genesis 2:2-3**, Wesley described the sabbath as made for human beings “to further [their] holiness and comfort.” He called on Methodists to honor the sabbath “for the sake of its antiquity, its great author, and the sanctification of the first sabbath by the holy God himself.”

Managing Stress

Besides traditional Christian disciplines of prayer, meditation, spiritual reading, and sabbath rest, many other techniques can help us manage unavoidable stress. How? Some ways to relax include deep breathing, focusing on pleasant images, taking a fantasy vacation, stopping negative thoughts, progressively relaxing one’s muscles, listening to music, exercising, or practicing a hobby. Incorporating one or more of these practices into a weekly routine can make a big difference in how we handle stress. Getting organized, cleaning out a messy place, or sharing a good joke are also great stress-busters. A Web site for parents of high-need children also recommends avoiding too much caffeine or alcohol when you are stressed as well as not watching the news before going to bed.

Meditative exercise disciplines such as yoga or Tai Chi Chih can be very beneficial in reducing stress. Yoga, a philosophical system originating with Hindus in India 5,000 years ago, seeks to unify body, mind, and spirit. It combines gentle exercise with deep stretching and meditation. Eleven million persons in the United States practice yoga at least once a week. Such forms of bodily prayer can help heal the mind-body split that has plagued Christianity despite Paul’s assertion that our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit (**1 Corinthians 6:19**).

After taking a Tai Chi Chih class led by a parish nurse at First United Methodist Church in Phoenix, Arizona, one participant said, “This helps reduce my stress level. It makes me feel very calm, relaxed, peaceful.”

Holy Rest

How do Christians find relief for stressful lives?

CREATE Your Teaching Plan

Keeping in mind your group members and your group time, choose from among the OPEN, CONTINUE, and CLOSE activities or from “Teaching Alternatives” to plan this session.

OPEN With Worship

A. Begin in Prayer (3 minutes)

Read Isaiah 30:15 as a call to worship. Ask for prayer concerns and invite intercessions for persons experiencing stress in their lives. Close with the affirmation from Augustine of Hippo (*The United Methodist Hymnal*, 423).

B. Sing a Hymn (3 minutes)

Sing “Take Time to Be Holy” (*Hymnal*, 395), “I Need Thee Every Hour” (397), or “Be Still, My Soul” (534).

CONTINUE by Exploring

C. Been to a Spa? (7 minutes)

Read and solicit reactions to “More Than a Massage,” page 1.

Discuss opinions regarding the Hershey spa’s “chocolate hydrotherapy bath” or its signature Chocolate Fondue Wrap. If any group members have ever been to a spa at a hotel or resort, invite them to share what it was like, what they did, and how they felt about the experience. What was their reaction to the level of luxury there?

D. Burned-Out Believers (12 minutes)

Review the portion of the essay, “Burned-Out Believers,” pages 1–2, and “The UMC on Stress and Sabbath,” page 4. The author suggests most United Methodists, like John Wesley, “are more comfortable with work than rest.” How does this compare or contrast with your own lifestyle? Ask group members to assess the level of activity in your congregation. Would you characterize it as “too much,” “too little,” or “just enough”? It is possible a few people may be working “too much,” while others are contributing “too little.”

Discuss: How can persons support each other in carrying out the work of the church and enabling time for rest?

Take a look at your own lifestyles. Have you ever wanted to skip church just to sleep in, or maybe you have felt the need to go into the office instead of attending church? Have you told someone else this past week how busy you are? Have you complained about how much you have to do? Encourage group members to find a partner in the group so that the two can together support each one’s need to balance work and rest.

E. Study the Scriptures (10 minutes)

Invite each member of the group to choose one of the Scripture passages cited in the main essay under the headings of “Come Away for a While,” pages 2–3, and “Remember the Sabbath,” pages 3–4; or choose one from “Core Bible Passages,” page 2. Ask participants to study the passage and its context with these questions in mind: What pitfalls or temptations does this passage address? What does God want to give us in this passage? What does this passage suggest to me about stopping to rest and taking care of myself? Invite volunteers to share one or two insights from

their study. (If the group is large, form smaller groups of two or three.)

F. Assess Your Stress (12 minutes)

Ask a volunteer to read aloud “Stress Analysis,” page 3. Ask individuals to reflect silently and write individual responses to the questions, doing a mental scan of their bodies and reviewing recent events and the ongoing circumstances of their lives.

Next, invite group members to review the column, “Managing Stress,” page 4.

Survey the group, asking these questions: What are your

favorite methods of managing stress in your life? Invite persons to form groups of two and tell each other what they most enjoy about the activity they have named.

G. Consider Sabbath (8 minutes)

Review “Remember the Sabbath” and “Pampering Our Souls,” pages 3–4, inviting participants to comment on the portions of the essay that most impressed them.

Ask the group to reflect on their own observance of sabbath. Do you take a day off every week from work and household chores?

Do you make time for family and friends? Do you have regular times not to “do” but to “be”? What gets in the way of your keeping the sabbath? Consider what lifestyle changes you can make—physical, emotional, spiritual, use of time—to put more “margin” in your life?

CLOSE With Song and Prayer

H. Closing Worship (6 minutes)

Sing together “Turn Your Eyes upon Jesus” (*Hymnal*, 349). Read Isaiah 58:13-14 as closing thoughts. Forming a circle, join hands and together pray the Lord’s Prayer.

As part of an alternative closing, sing “Spirit of the Living God” (*Hymnal*, 393) using simple hand motions, such as raising arms and making the motion of rain for the first and second lines, reaching hands in front of the body for the third line, and repeating the first motions for the final line.

Teaching Alternatives

◆ Direct the group in five minutes of meditation as a brief exercise in sabbath stillness. Alert them that for those unaccustomed to meditation, this may seem like a long time. Give them a focus, such as paying attention to the breath going in and out of their nostrils or silently repeating a phrase of Scripture such as, “God is love” or “Be still and know that I am God.” Instruct them that as each inner or outer distraction arises, they should simply note the distraction, then quietly return to the focus. Encourage them not to judge how they are doing, simply to notice what comes up.

After the exercise, discuss what persons experienced during the meditation. Ask: How difficult was it to remain focused? What thoughts or frustrations arose? What resistance did you encounter? What new insights or clarity emerged?

◆ Share with the group the reactions that the students of Barbara Brown Taylor expressed when they tried to meditate. One student was hostile, saying he would rather watch television and drink a beer. “Who am I when I’m not doing anything?” he asked. “It’s a stupid question, but my answer would have to be no one. I am no one at all.”

Another student got chills and began to cry, realizing how little she appreciated small, wonderful things like the wind blowing across the hairs on her skin.

A third student, a hunter, experienced a moment of oneness with the deer, the forest, the sky, the sun. “Man, was that weird,” he said. How do the reactions of your group compare with those of Taylor’s students? What does such an exercise suggest about our ability to be still?

Next Week in FAITHLINK

An Eye for an Eye

In recent years tough sentencing guidelines and a greater use of the death penalty have marked criminal justice in the United States. Is there room for a different approach that emphasizes restoration and reconciliation?