

Subversive **Rest**

by Will Van Der Hart



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SUBVERSION IS THE ART OF CONTRADICTING THE PRINCIPLES OF A SYSTEM, LIKE FOR EXAMPLE HAVING A RELAXING SLEEP IN THE MIDDLE OF A FURIOUS STORM.

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I believe that the majority of leaders in my generation grew up with a distorted vision of rest. It is little surprise then, that burnout, poor mental health, relationship problems and disillusionment are rife among us. The remedy (at least in part) to these issues is an appealing and highly available commodity; yet it remains a ‘dirty word’ in the corridors of the busy (if not the productive). ‘Rest’: there, I said it.

I cannot remember exactly where I first heard the phrase, 'There is no rest for the wicked.' Most likely it was while my bedroom curtains were being thrown open and the dog unleashed to lick my sleepy teenage face. I cannot blame my loving parents. If it was them, it was probably said with a smile. Even so, it is a phrase that we are quick to absorb; we 'the wicked' should live lives of grateful labour in which rest is an awkward necessity, if not an out-and-out luxury.

It seems the greatest irony that such a damaging idiom should have its roots in Isaiah 57:20-21. Like many idioms, its meaning is a brazen distortion of the original text: "But those who still reject me are like the restless sea, which is never still but continually churns up mud and dirt. There is no peace for the wicked," says my God.' (New Living Translation).

DISTORTED PRODUCTIVITY?

It follows that those who have accepted God should have the inverse experience, finding peace and rest as a direct consequence of faith. Yet this is not the case as evidenced across the church, particularly within its leadership. No doubt Augustine's

preoccupation with our woeful and enduring depravity left rest on the wrong side of the line: evidence of our mortal fragility and unguarded lusts.

Augustine's most famous phrase is arguably, 'Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in Thee.' It is a beautiful and worthy truth, and yet for many of us, it also infers that 'rest' is a spiritual reward more than a productive and worthy discipline.

Speaking of discipline, the second major distortion of the principle of rest is its diminishment for the sake of productivity. Our time is finite. We have just 168 hours in one single week in which we need to eat, work, nurture, worship, commute, relate... the list goes on. An addiction to productivity, potential realisation and getting ahead is leaving rest and recreation off the list. 'I haven't got the time to rest,' could be the mantra of the 21st century.

The privilege of leadership coaching is, for me, an opportunity to spend time with some incredibly inspiring people. Yet, my sense of responsibility has shifted from trying to maximise their impact, into trying to moderate their extension and build in some self-care. Many people just don't see the guilt that is common to successful

people. They don't notice the 'payback mentality' that so many of them carry.

Humans have always worked to create order, reduce risk, and systematise reward. We have learnt to accept the belief that success is the reward of hard work, and that hard work requires sacrifice. The thing that we tend to accept most readily for sacrifice is rest, since we believe it has the least virtue of all our responsibilities. Even this sacrifice has become systematised. Robin Sharma's book *The 5am Club* extolls the benefits of getting up at, yes, 5am to, 'Own your morning, elevate your life.'¹ Hal Elrod in his book *The Miracle Morning* offers to 'help you achieve your most significant goals, faster than ever before.'²

In truth, if society continues to promote outstanding personal impact as the ultimate measurement of success, humans will sacrifice more and more rest to realise that dream. What we struggle to accept is that most millionaires (if money is any measure) didn't get up at 5am, they didn't all sacrifice their rest, and they don't want you to know how lucky they were. Russ Alan Prince writing for *Forbes Magazine* comments, 'The critical role played by luck is something you must first unquestionably (even if it's



be grudgingly) admit if you want to have a solid shot at becoming seriously wealthy.' This is nothing new: David laments the same reality in Psalm 73:12, 'Behold, these are the wicked; always at ease, they increase in riches' (Revised Standard Version).

Of course, there is virtue in labour and sacrifice in hard work. That was never in question. What I do want to challenge is the 'inevitability of success' principle: that my success in life or ministry will be proportionate to the number of hours that I give over to my work at the expense of my rest.

Having grown up to believe we are, as sung by Delirious, 'History Makers', it is hard to accept that world-changing success is outside of our control, but that single fact could be the gateway to a life better lived. Extinguishing the 'fear of being average' threatens a loss of motivation. But we cannot continue to let fear be the energy of our achievements; faith and a countenance of peace should play that part.

WRESTLING WITH SHAME?

It is not uncommon amongst clergy to have a code word for rest. These are used in conversation with other 'knowing' individuals or to book

diary slots: 'personal reflection', 'evangelism', 'family business meeting', 'environmental prayer', 'communion of friends'... It once seemed humorous to me, but now I just find it heart-breaking. These code words have been generated from the judgement that we have experienced relating to rest and recreation.

As a minister, I can remember innumerate conversations that broadly enquired about what I did for the 'other six days of the week?' Then there were the comments about apparently 'always being on holiday', the 'privilege of home working' and countless other small slights. The net outcome of these experiences doesn't improve our relationship with rest and recreation.

The simplest equation that we can apply to paid work is hours worked = equivalent remuneration. This says nothing of the complexity or quality of the work or its ungainly hours of engagement, or the responsibility or management it involves. When implied or assumed criticism is levelled, our natural response can be to collapse into this formula. We reduce our rest or relabel it as something more worthy, such as 'gym evangelism'.

Many people experience a 'Martha-like' oppositional energy in the face of

judgement. Overworking or reducing rest becomes a form of self-sacrifice. Not for the sake of altruism but as an attempt to show others how far we are willing to go to show that we are 'committed' or 'hard-working'. It is the phenomenon that leads to people positively comparing how little rest they have had... 'I haven't had a day off in six weeks.' 'I haven't finished work before 11pm in a year.' 'I am always available, even on holiday.'

Dr Brené Brown describes shame as the 'most powerful master emotion.' It is the one that we are desperate to escape. Because judgement begets shame, avoiding the judgement of others regarding our capacity of work can become all-consuming. When Dr Rob Waller and I wrote *The Power of Belonging*, we were constantly amazed at the lengths that people would go to, in order to escape or avoid shame. Sacrificing rest was a small price to pay for the sake of social approval, even when it caused illness and breakdown.

We can summarise the three rest-reducing beliefs of this article as: 'Rest is unvirtuous', 'Rest is the enemy of success' and 'Rest invokes judgement and shame.' Ask yourself which of these three is true? Still struggling?



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TO REST AND RECREATE IN TODAY'S HIGH-SPEED WORLD IS AN ACT OF REBELLION. IT TAKES A LEVEL OF SOCIAL FORTITUDE NOT TO CAPITULATE TO THE COMPETITIVE MARTYRDOM OF REST DEPRIVATION.

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REST IS A SUBVERSIVE ACTION

Without doubt, my favourite miracle of Jesus is the calming of the storm in Matthew chapter 8. Of course, the Bible is littered with passages extolling the true virtue of rest, not least God's own Genesis Sabbath. More literate articles than mine will explore those with you in this issue. What I want to focus my attention on here is subversive rest. Subversion is the art of contradicting the principles of a system, like for example having a relaxing sleep in the middle of a furious storm. It isn't what we would expect and so Matthew writes, in verse 24, 'But Jesus was sleeping.'

If we were going to test these rest-reducing beliefs against this passage, we might ask ourselves if we have a higher standard of virtue than the Son of God. If not, then we might take his lead and accept that rest is good and godly and necessary. If we are wondering whether success is predicated on our busyness, we might contrast the disciples' failed strategies with Jesus' mastery over nature itself. If we were concerned with the judgement associated with rest, we might concern ourselves instead with being people of faith. Jesus may have looked unconcerned by his disciples' plight, but he was not. As Martin Luther stated, 'Though he sleeps, Christ is in the boat.'

If we are seeking to live with a greater affinity to rest and recreation, we cannot lean timidly against the prevailing wind. Not only are the material pressures of life greater than ever, rest and recreation are escaping us. Materially, studies show little change in the amount of sleep hours over the last 30 years, but what has changed is the quality of the rest we are experiencing and how we feel about it.

Several years ago, I decided that I would post a photo of myself fishing on social media, every time I went. This included times that other people might consider normal working hours. I found it remarkably uncomfortable, for all the reasons I have outlined above. Would people think I was lazy? Would they be offended that I was having time off in the day? Did I need to counterbalance it with pictures of me working at 11pm? All these concerns demonstrated to me how wedded I was to a system that vilified rest and deified work.

If we are going to live with a Sabbath principle (which can take varied shapes and styles), it requires us to carry the confidence to subvert the cultural zeitgeist. This looks like a much more confident and unapologetic celebration of the times that we recharge, rest and recreate. It is the recognition that we are paid to rest as well as work, and that all productive and responsible work requires us to take our self-care seriously. Ultimately, it is an act of

obedience and witness to Jesus, who says in Matthew 11:28-30, 'Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me – watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace.' (The Message version).

To rest and recreate in today's high-speed world is an act of rebellion. It takes a level of social fortitude not to capitulate to the competitive martyrdom of rest deprivation. Yet this rebellion is a freedom filled with upsides. It is the commitment to self-knowledge, creativity, prayer, joy and contentment. That we might give our best is dependent upon the rest that we have ourselves received. In rest, we are formed for work.

1. Robin Sharma, *The 5AM Club. Own your morning. Elevate your life*, (Harper Thorson, 2018)
2. Hal Elrod, *The Miracle Morning: The 6 Habits that will transform your life before 8AM*, (John Murray Learning: 2017)

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