

Chapter 3

What Is an Oasis in Time?

So we aren't talking about a traditional Sabbath—unless it fits your own vision—what is an oasis in time? Is it downtime? Beach time? Gardening time? Reflect-and-catch-up-on-life time? Is it sacred time? Is it a leisurely meal at a big table surrounded by family and friends? It can be all of these things and more. As you take steps to create more oasis time in your life, you will discover what it is for you.

The idea is that for one day, or maybe half a day, a week, you set aside your doing-for-the-sake-of-doing mind, your it's-never-enough mind, and your crazy nonstop trying-to-control-things mind. You enter a period of contentment and equanimity—an alternative reality of timelessness, of soul time, right in the middle of the frenzy and the perceived time desert. When you take off your “getting things done” glasses, you soften your vision. And when you soften your vision, you can see that the world right in front of you is magnificent. You give your anxious nervous system a break. Start with an hour or two. Or start with fifteen minutes. And don't do it just once. Practice setting aside time *each week* to discover that there is another world right in front of you.

Every oasis in time provides renewal. Each one is restorative in some way. And with practice, you can experience a sense of timelessness, you can let go of that nagging feeling that there is something else to be done. You become fully absorbed in the present moment. You fully engage with the people right in front of you. You notice the clouds drifting by and the wind blowing through the trees.

When was the last time you didn't check social media for an

entire day? When was the last time you ignored your screens for twenty-four hours? When was the last time you put away your to-do list and lived in the present moment for a solid stretch of time? Most people are so tied to the grid that they can't imagine getting off. But it can be done. You can do it, and you will only benefit as a result.

When trying something new, it's handy to have a model. And one time-tested, incredibly effective model for pulling away from the overwork/overconsumption trap is the Sabbath. I offer here five gateways to weekly rest and renewal. These are not rules but principles that come out of my own and others' experiments with Sabbath time. These principles are designed to help you try out oasis practices and find the ones that are most fulfilling and achievable for you. As you start your journey to oasis time, revisit these gateways regularly to remind yourself how to stay on track. Over time, you will find it easier and easier to create a time of relaxed connected joy and share it with others.

FIVE GATEWAYS

From years of practice and study, as well as talking to and learning from hundreds of people, I have found five gateways that will help structure your journey and shape your oasis time. Taken together, these strategies and reminders will open the way, starting us down the path that shifts us from the world of action and into the world of rest.

1. **Protect and prepare.** Protect your time off and guard it fiercely. Prepare and plan for it. Consider what social time, activities, food, and spiritual connection your oasis time will include. Planning makes all the difference in creating an oasis that is truly restoring.
2. **Begin and end.** Name your starting and ending times, and stick to both as best as you can. Oasis time can come to shape your week, and it works best when it is

clear and time limited. The rhythm of a regular oasis time gives you essential boundaries that help you focus at work and let go when not at work.

3. **Disconnect to connect.** Put down your digital devices. Experience life without checking for text messages, social media updates, or e-mail. Instead, connect with yourself, with others, and with your sense of what has greater meaning and is life sustaining. Though disconnecting from digital technology can be scary at first, people report how genuinely fulfilling it is to get past the pull of technology and reach the satisfying connections of love and friendship.
4. **Slow down to savor.** Slowing your movements helps to slow your mind, and vice versa. This is key to savoring the delectable aspects of now, which is all about pleasure, enjoyment, and entering the present moment. Even a painful now can be savored for the innately fulfilling texture of a truly lived life.
5. **Let go of achieving to rest, reflect, and play.** Release the tension of going after any goal, large or small. When you do this, you let go of worries and expectations. Then you can finally rest well, reflect deeply (alone or with others), and play more freely.

Protect and Prepare

Years ago, before I discovered oasis time, I was a hard worker round the clock, or so it seemed to me. But I was incredibly inefficient. I thought I was giving work my all, all the time, but actually I was slowly running out of steam. Every week, I promised myself that the following Saturday or Sunday, I would take a real break. *Next weekend, I told myself, I will get organized, straighten out my priorities, go for a long run, maybe out in nature, and just get back on top of things.* But that next weekend never came. I knew darn well that I needed refreshing time off, I just didn't have a clue how to get it.

When I was on the road all week, trying to help people work together better, I would slide in from a business trip late on Friday, crawl into bed exhausted, and not move until I got out of bed or off the couch late Saturday afternoon. Although I knew that there were people who protected their weekends or evenings with strict, purposeful “no work” and “no shop” policies, I needed to figure out how to do it.

From many conversations and a lot of observation, I could see that the people who protected their time decided in advance what was in and what was out. They weren’t trying to figure it out on the fly. They protected their downtime, and they planned it. I realized that the only time I didn’t work was when I was too tired to function. I never made a real commitment to creating oasis time; I always left the door open for a work opportunity to come in and pull me away from renewal: What if there was something else I really wanted to do? What if I *had* to work that weekend? What if I *wanted* to work that weekend? I never guarded time off for real restoration.

If you want to be as passionately committed to your time off as you are to working and taking action, you need to find a way to safeguard that time off, no matter what forces try to invade it. Then you prepare for it. But how do you do that?

- **Find your “big why.”** Start by enumerating the reasons you need, want, and *must have* regular time off. Do this now. Set a timer for two minutes, and list every reason you can think of for committing to oasis time. Don’t fret about why you can’t get oasis time, simply focus on why you need it. Write down the price you pay for how you live now—frayed relationships? health issues? feeling out of sorts? Then list what you could gain—time with friends? a good night’s sleep? equilibrium? I say a lot more about your Big Why in Chapter 4.
- **Say no.** In the beginning, I guarded my time by saying no to any off-purpose request. A lot. I said no to myself as well as to others. What helped was that the benefits were immediate—oasis time gave me more energy, focus, and deeper contact with the sacred aspects of life, which in turn

supported my determination to say no. Constantly referring to your big why helps you juggle your big and little nos. Try this partner exercise. Give your partner a list of everything you think you have to do. Then, she says, “you should....” and you say “no.” Go down the list. Then switch. This gives you the chance to practice saying no. Even if it seems farfetched at the beginning.

- **Start small.** Don’t immediately take a whole day off if that commitment sounds overwhelming. I started with half an evening a week. I went to a Shabbat dinner, then came home and worked. Soon I dropped the work part, and very slowly, over years, I grew my commitment to a day a week. You could start with a specific hour once a week when you turn off your phone and take a walk with a friend, listen to a favorite piece of music, or do something else that sustains you. Then expand to an afternoon or evening. You might stop there, and that might be respite enough for you. But you might find that the oasis benefits are so powerful you want more. That desire will be your best motivator to cor-
don off and protect more time.
- **Make a plan.** It may be hard to know what to do with your newly free time; I struggled with this myself. I was so used to working that I had to learn to trust this nonwork time. I had to stop myself many times from doing “just a little work” to stay on top of things. Avoid that situation by planning some activities in advance to give a little structure to your hour or day.

Be intentional so that you don’t fritter away your precious oasis. Perhaps your plan is for a morning of rest or opening a book that you have been meaning to read or in a quiet mindful way finally making the big pot of soup that you have wanted for a while. You might schedule afternoon childcare so you can enjoy a long-desired nap or luscious slower sex. You might arrange to join with friends for a meal. Remember: There are always reasons not to rest and renew, but over time, the reasons for renewal will increase and seem greater.

- **Seek validation and reinforcement.** There is a whole world of people who are sick and tired of being on the run all the time. Talk to people about what you are trying to do. Read books, follow blogs, and listen to podcasts by folks who are talking about their oasis time and other kinds of time off (see [Appendix](#) of Oasis Time Resources). The more oasis time is on your mind, the more real it will become, and the more you'll be able to find others to join you as you seek your oasis. It's so helpful to find a buddy to explore with.

Every week, reasons not to step into your rest and renewal time will crop up. Think hard about whether those situations suit your purpose. Prepare yourself to handle them. Plan to stick to your purpose. People exhaust themselves by doing so many things that they think will please others or even please themselves but don't actually fill their own tanks even during their leisure time. Initially, you might find that saying no to certain activities doesn't fit your idea of who you are, but if you are growing, those initial things will change. You might discover that certain television shows belong on your day of renewal, or you might discover that you lose your sense of peace and delight when you watch TV. With careful self-observation and discernment, you will find that creating your personal version of the Sabbath is worth the effort. If you are logistically and emotionally prepared for your oasis, you will have an easier time getting to it.

"Protect and prepare" is the meta-gateway, the gateway of gateways to oasis time. When I protect and prepare my oasis time, what I am really doing is protecting the time and planning and preparing for the other four gateways. This is the pivot point of happy, satisfying oasis time. Because of that, I devote a whole chapter to it in Part II.

Begin and End

When you have named a starting point to your oasis time, you won't have to squeeze your work lulls and soul time into random bits of your day, because you know your deep, expansive

downtime is coming. This enables you to summon the burst of energy to finish a task and to get ready to enter your replenishing oasis. For me, those tasks might be writing up an interview report, creating a workshop design, or cleaning the kitchen. But whatever I am working on, I can more easily muster the energy to finish what I need to do when I know that there is a stopping point. I can go all in, because soon enough with a sense of relief, I will be all out.

There's always something more to do. Be aware that as your respite starting time approaches, you may not feel finished or ready to step away. Just last Friday, I was working until the very last minute. But when I finally stopped, closed my computer, and reminded myself that I would start up again in a day, I felt such liberation.

Eventually, you will get used to separating from the frenzy of the rest of your week, and you will come to anticipate this moment with eagerness. But for now, name your starting time and stick with it. It may not feel like the right minute to go off-line, to stop answering the phone, to walk away from your desk or your pile of laundry. And that is the point. It won't ever feel like the right time. But you are in charge. If you're working, make notes about where you stopped on a project and where to pick up again, then walk away. Create a work shutdown ritual and make it stick.

As you end your workweek, start your oasis time with a special action, ritual, or blessing. Rituals help us make the transition between the end of work and the start of renewal. The ritual act itself can be anything: Go for a long run, take a shower, make music, sing or play a song, put on fresh clothes, burn incense, pour yourself a great beer, or mix yourself a drink. What's important is that you see the ritual as the end of rushing and the beginning of sanctuary.

In my family, we bring out a small prayer bowl, and our son sounds a tone. The tone is clear and pure and reminds us that we are in the present moment. The week is over. We light candles and say a simple blessing as we summon joy. With hugs all around, maybe a little dance, and often a lot of celebration, we greet the return of this special time that liberates us from our many obligations.

Designating an end to your oasis in time is just as important. The end provides structure. You can give your all to your renewal because you know your oasis, your breather, has a limited time frame. Within this specified amount of time, you are free to explore your connections, your inner world, and your deep sense of being.

Tiffany Shlain, filmmaker and founder of the Webby Awards, is a big proponent of oasis time ending. She is known for her advocacy of what she calls a “tech Shabbat.” Her family’s digital Sabbath has a starting time and an ending time. When it’s over, everyone jumps right back on their screens “with so much more appreciation,” Tiffany says. They appreciate their time off, and then they reconnect with technology with great gusto and energy.

Blogger Sonja Haller writes about her experiments with a year of secular Sabbath experience in her blog *52 Sabbaths*. As she sums up the wisdom she gained from this experiment, she says that *an end to downtime is just as important as a beginning*: “Us worry-a-holics need an idea of when we can ease the vehicle out of idle and slam the foot down on GO! Having an end to this weekly respite time in the beginning is the only way many of us can start.”

As my family ends our oasis time, we look ahead to the next six days. We name our hopes, and our goals, for the week. We light a braided candle that creates a large, torchlike flame and remind ourselves to be open to whatever comes our way. Thus renewed and reconnected, we feel greater courage and energy for the joys and challenges to come. Since we end our oasis time on Saturday evenings, we often extend the sense of ease with a family movie.

Disconnect to Connect

There is a lot of talk about disconnecting from our digital devices regularly, whether it is once a week or for a designated period every day. It’s more than a great idea: Executing it provides immediate benefits. When people disconnect from their screens,

they can be with the people around them face-to-face, in a more respectful way. They stop telling the people they are with to wait while they text or chat with someone who isn't there.

Disconnecting is very rewarding but it does take practice. As we first begin unplugging, life can feel flat and boring. Jonathan told me the other day that the "graphics" of our back yard didn't measure up to the graphics of his Xbox games. Just kidding of course, but we are used to that online dopamine rush and so accustomed to functioning in tandem with our devices that unplugging may send us into a tailspin. *Who am I without the rest of the world?* we wonder. *How do I connect if not online?* Rather than thinking of unplugging as disconnecting from the world, think of it as reconnecting with what's most important in your life. Oasis time helps us devote ourselves fully to the people, activities, and pursuits that are right in front of us. Digital technology has so many benefits, and a weekly stoppage can enhance the experience.

CONNECT WITH OTHERS

As much connecting as there is, digital media also lets people avoid themselves and others. According to researchers at Michigan State University, high levels of digital media use are tied to depression and anxiety. People are fruitlessly trying to get the comfort of human connection through a screen. Also, some researchers attribute these high levels of anxiety to the "compare and despair" phenomenon. We compare ourselves with other people based on their online portrayals, and it looks like everyone else is having more fun. They're posting their holiday snapshots and picture-perfect family celebrations, not their growls at their spouses, their frustrations with work, their shouts at the kids to get them out of the house in the morning. They omit the boring dates, the exhaustion on the couch and the uninspired sex. No wonder other people's lives look better than ours.¹

But when we spend time with real people in real life, we can connect rather than compare. Our oasis in time is the perfect opportunity to spend time with others in a slow, gentle way that enables all to be present with one another. What about a day trip to

the beach or mountains, or even the local park, with friends? What about going to the neighborhood playground with a group and enjoying everyone's kids? Or meeting your neighbors at the dog park? We can develop all kinds of sociable activities for our oasis time that in turn help us build the deep, connecting networks that nurture us.

Psychiatrist and author Edward Hallowell, emphasizes the particular importance of this sense of connection for children. He points out that even kids who have material advantages may lack the most important advantage of all: emotional connection to people, places, and activities they love. They learn to comfort themselves with screen time rather than playing in the yard, the street, or the woods. An emotionally connected child feels a deep sense of being part of a world that has meaning and has many people to go to for comfort and self-development. An emotionally disconnected child can act out and become depressed. Depression is now diagnosed as early as fourteen. When you help a child disconnect from screens, you help him or her build much needed human connections.

Under the direction of George Vaillant, MD, and Robert Waldinger, M.D. the Harvard Grant Study's seventy-five years of research on the life satisfaction and success of Harvard men definitively illustrates the importance of connecting to others. One of the longest-running longitudinal studies on success and well-being in scientific history, the Grant Study shows that "the only thing that really matters in life are your relationships to other people." For all of the massive successes that Harvard alumni experienced, the key to their happiness was and is love and connection.

Dr. Vaillant sums up the study's results: "Happiness is love. Full stop." Far more than we realize, we need to connect with ourselves, others, and some kind of greater spiritual force or sense of meaning to experience happiness in our lives. Dr. Waldinger amplifies this by saying socially disconnected people are "less happy, their health declines earlier in midlife, their brain functioning declines sooner, and they live shorter lives than people who are not lonely...Good relationships keep us happier and healthier. Period.

Connect with Something Greater—Higher Power and Deeper Meaning (header)

Oasis time can connect us with our sense of the overarching higher power or force that dwells within and outside of us. During oasis time, you can bring the values and goals that give your life meaning into your heart and mind. Oasis time is also a good time to cultivate awe. Researcher Melanie Rudd of Stanford University and several colleagues discovered that experiencing awe decreases our sense of time scarcity and increases our generosity to others. Awe increases our empathy and well-being and lowers our stress levels. Rudd and colleagues suspect that awe is a powerful way to bring us into the present moment and shake up our view of the world, making us more open to other people and new ways of looking at things. Filmmaker Jason Silva is a big proponent of the mind-expanding benefits of awe. His film series “Shots of Awe” immerses the viewer in amazing images. “Not being in a state of awe is a way to save energy, it’s easier to run on autopilot,” Silva says. “It takes energy to blow your mind, but being overwhelmed [by awe] is worth it. It’s what gives life its luster²

Gratitude exercises are another place to start connecting with something greater. Bring to mind a few things you are thankful for. As neuroscientist Rick Hanson, PhD, says, “Our minds are Velcro for the negative and Teflon for the good.” It can take effort to not only notice the good in our lives but also allow it to touch our hearts. He recommends a practice called “taking in the good,” where we notice the good in our lives and pause to deliberately feel the blessings we receive in every moment. Anyone of us can feel jaded. Another way to jolt ourselves out of jadedness is used by the stoics and the Jews. Negative visualization entails imaging that we don’t have something we really value. Rabbi Zelig Pliskin recommends a moment of imagining that we don’t have the use of our hands. This can lead to immediate gratitude for your dexterity, if you have it. Try that right now. Your oasis is the perfect time to practice taking in the good and negative visualization.

Another way to connect with something greater than ourselves is through prayer. Prayer is the human way of acknowledging that some force beyond us shapes our lives. We shape our

lives as well, but there is an ineffable mystery that is hard to fathom. Prayer comes in all forms, everything from fleeting utterances of thanks to heartfelt wishes for help. Anne Lamott aims there are only three prayers: *Help, Thanks, Wow*, which is the title of her book on prayer. There are many ways to pray, that is, to connect with a force in life that is greater than ourselves.

Slow Down to Savor

In days of yore, travelers could move only as fast as the pace of a strong horse or the wind blowing in their sails. In other words, people were constrained by the limits of nature. With the introduction of the train and steamship, we were freed from certain natural limits and got a taste for speed. Speed has a certain pleasure. It's a feeling of power, of overcoming the laws of nature. It's a feeling of joy. We are covering ground! Yet, of course, there are risks with speed. As the pace of horseless carriages went up, for instance, so did the number of deaths on carriage roads.

The risks of physical speed are obvious to us, but we are less aware of the risks of mental speed. Once our minds start racing, it is equally hard to keep up. A racing mind can generate amazing ideas but also lots of problems—such as losing touch with our sensations, important sources of pleasure, and self-knowledge. Meditation and mindfulness practices have become popular because they help people slow down and become more aware of what is happening in the present moment. Slowing down means moving our bodies more slowly and thinking more slowly.

In her bestseller *Overwhelmed*, Brigid Schulte thinks deeply about the struggle for open, unscheduled space and time. Here she shares what she was learning about slowing down:

In that free and open space, when we can lose track of time and are fully present and absorbed in the moment, we become most human. We get into a state that some call “flow” or peak human experience. That can be devoting yourself to a passion, a hobby, getting lost in a

book, gardening, taking a walk, sharing time with family and friends, or just feeling fully alive in the moment and doing . . . nothing.

Slowing down and experiencing open time and space refresh us, giving us renewed energy and a clearer head. We enjoy ourselves more because we aren't so frantic. We can reflect on our experience and correct our course as needed.

Speed reduces empathy. Slowing down enhances charitable action. In the classic Princeton Theological Seminary "Good Samaritan" experiment, time pressure led even theological students to hurry past someone in need. In this study a group of 67 theological students were told to give a talk on the Good Samaritan. In one key aspect of the study, many of them were told that they were late to give their talk. Running late, most of them ignored the needs of a man slumped in a hallway in evident distress as they passed him by. Some actually stepped over him even though they were on their way to give a talk about the Good Samaritan. Speed can constrict our heart. When we move too fast, we can violate our deeply held values. Slowing down gives us a chance to think about others more broadly.

My long term friend social justice consultant and coach Adam found an unusual way to slow himself down. Though he had achieved substantial professional respect in his field, he felt he was living a life out of balance and too disconnected from important parts of himself. He had given away too much, was going too fast, and didn't know how to rein in his pace.

About five years ago, Adam returned to photography, using real film and a classic 4x5 large-format field camera. Every Saturday, he couldn't wait to get outside. He traveled to local lakes, hills, fields, and mountains. He loved that the equipment was cumbersome, not at all automatic and that he had to slow down just to set up the tripod and camera. "The economics were daunting, too" he recalled. "The film was really hard to get, and it could cost thirty-five

dollars every time I snapped the shutter. Each shot required that I go really slowly.” It took time to get the contrast, focus, framing, depth of field, and content right.

Although part of him worried about the cost, Adam was convinced that this was the currency of his inner work. Photography helped him unearth his more authentic self by focusing his attention on beauty, not just the problems of the world. What I find most remarkable is that after a few years, Mark sold his film camera and continued his photography with digital equipment. He no longer needed the slower equipment to force himself to work slowly; he had internalized the more deliberate pace and learned how to look slowly and let the landscape enter him. Now nothing can take that way of being away from him.

I believe we each have our own ways of moderating our pace. For me, I need to deliberately turn my attention to physical sensations to slow myself down. The first hours of oasis are often difficult, and at night I sometimes can't stop my mind from racing back to things I forgot to do or forward to things I want to remember. So I walk very slowly when I get up in the morning. I focus on making good, simple food. Using and chopping fresh herbs and vegetables demands my attention, and as I work, I lose myself in the colors, shapes, and textures of the vegetables.

Almost every week, this miracle occurs: When I physically stop rushing, my mind slows too. I appreciate the color of the sky and the lush foliage outside our house, which otherwise I rarely stop to enjoy. I sit in nature. I let the sun shine on me. I feel the gentle breeze on my skin and the pressure of my feet resting on the ground. I allow myself to drift. After many years of practice, I now can slow down for an entire day. During my oasis, I regain the feeling of my essential self moving at an easy, contemplative pace.

Enjoy. Savor. Relish. That should be easy, and often it is, particularly when we are savoring our favorite ice cream! But you may notice that after the first several bites, the deliciousness begins to fade and the mind goes on to other things. The vivid immediacy of the moment does not need to become dull, though. Mindfulness practice teaches us to bring our focus back to the

present to discover that the ice cream is still delicious. Teachers in the Jewish tradition point out that enjoyment can be cultivated over time. They teach that happiness is an obligation in the sense that returning to happiness is a basic spiritual practice that reminds us that we are created for joy.

Aisha, a new mother, told me that during her oasis in time, she is able to move from highly anxious to moderately anxious. She worries a little bit less than in her day-to-day life, but even that tiny bit less stress makes a difference. During the week, her fears dominate. She worries that her daughter, Lily, didn't get enough supervised tummy time or didn't drink enough or cried too much or too little. But during oasis time, Aisha slows down. She stops trying to do it right and lets her instincts reign. Focusing on the moment, she feels a little more trust in the process of mothering. She's calmer because she is not multitasking, and she can sense her own instincts more clearly. She is able to put her worries aside for a limited time. *For the next twenty-four hours, I can be a little more peaceful*, she tells herself, and she is. "In those moments I really enjoy Lily," she reports. "I'm calmer, and so is she. I'm so happy to be with her."

As you slow down, practice turning your attention to pleasure. The more you savor, the more you can enjoy each moment.

Let Go of Achieving to Rest, Reflect, and Play

For one day a week, you can stop achieving. You can let go of your big life vision, your master plan, even your bucket list. Don't worry, you will pick them right back up when your rest period is over. The key here is to take a regular break, to find a rhythm that allows you to move back and forth between your daily drive to succeed and the oasis time that restores you. Achievement is so valued in our culture that we can be at loose ends when we aren't accomplishing something, filling in little bits of the day with *anything*. But this is your time for being, for resting, for playing. For just one day a week, you know that you matter simply because you exist on this planet.

To take an oasis means stopping. It means committing to setting down your to-do lists, both your actual to-do lists and the ones that pulse in your veins. My neighbor Sherry calls the one in her veins her “haunt list.” This is the list of what she means to do but never quite gets to, the things she forgets to write down: the thank-yous for her wedding presents (from twelve years ago), the book she wants to write, the photos she wants to sort and place in an album. When she sits down to relax or read a novel, the haunt list appears, reminding her of all the things she hasn’t done and nudging her to get moving. But for one day a week, she gives herself permission to set her lists aside.

It’s hard to stop when stopping seems like a waste of time, but there is so much to gain from temporarily letting go of our achievement orientation. How do you put down your to-do lists? You practice. You accept that if something has been hanging over your head for weeks, it can wait another twelve hours. You talk yourself out of the sense of pressure and into the present moment. You actively and sometimes forcefully turn your attention to what and who is right in front of you. You notice that you don’t actually need to do something in this minute. For the time being, there is no emergency.

Elizabeth Gilbert author of *Eat, Pray, Love*, is passionate about dialing down the achievement orientation.

We are the strivingest people who have ever lived. We are ambitious, time-starved, competitive, distracted. We move at full velocity, yet constantly fear we are not doing enough. Even though we live longer than any humans before us, our lives feel shorter, restless, breathless. . . .

Dear ones, EASE UP. Pump the brakes. Take a step back. Seriously. Take two steps back. Turn off all your electronics and surrender over all your aspirations and do absolutely nothing for a spell. I know, I know—we all need to save the world. But trust me: the world will still need saving tomorrow. In the meantime, you’re going to have a stroke soon (or cause a stroke in somebody else) if you don’t calm the hell down.³

Letting go of achieving means telling yourself you don't have to get anything done in this moment, or the next one. You learn to ignore your inner drive for accomplishment. You remind yourself that pausing, slowing, and letting go of the act of creating value all have value. Yes, it's a paradox, and it is a type of spiritual discipline. We don't have to get things done all the time; we don't have to turn to task accomplishment to make ourselves feel better. In fact, if we want to bring more of ourselves to what we do, we have to be more of who we are in the first place.

One theory about workaholism is that at our core we feel we don't have value if we are not accomplishing and contributing. We experience the opposite of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel's oft-quoted phrase, "Just to live is holy, just to be is a blessing." It's wonderful to contribute to the world and to make a difference, but if our urgency to do so comes out of a deep sense of lack of value, then it is hard to stop trying to get more done.

What do we do if we are not trying to get something done and make our contribution, or tidy up, or be a better person? What do we do with open space and unscheduled time? We can, slowly and quietly, turn toward the joys of our existence, appreciate our friends and family, feel the unbearable lightness of our being, or gaze at the play of light and shadows on the wall. We can allow the anxiety of relaxation, and then let it go. We give the busyness a rest.

REST

My cousin Pam, a lawyer with a lot on her plate, told me that her best vacation time is when she's able to do nothing: "People always ask me for a list of favorite activities or things to do on Martha's Vineyard because we know the island so well. But I don't have that list. They ask me, 'Well, then, what do you do when you are there?' and I always say, 'Nothing.' We do nothing. But it isn't nothing, exactly. I read a lot of books, and so does my daughter, but not to accomplish anything. We just love to read. Then we might walk on the beach. Then chat with a neighbor or two. Then

perhaps we walk to the store to buy dinner. Often there is a spontaneous get-together. We know a lot of people in Menemsha, so perhaps we will grill some fish together and then watch the sun set. We have no obligations. We don't have a list of places to see or even people to visit. What happens, happens. I always feel so refreshed when we come home."

We need rest as much as we need sleep. According to Matthew Edlund, MD, author of *The Power of Rest*, we need both passive rest and active rest. Passiveest includes sleep, watching TV, and perhaps lounging on a couch or hammock. Active rest has four components: mental rest, social rest, spiritual rest, and physical rest. We pay lots of attention to food and exercise, but not nearly enough to rest. If we learn to direct our rest, rather than evade it, we can significantly enhance our health.

Sometimes when I sit or lie down to rest in the middle of the day, I am tempted to jump back up to take care of one last thing. I remember something else I need to do, or I feel haven't worked hard enough. But then I fight myself back into a relaxed position. I take a few deep breaths. I remind myself that I can attend to my action steps later. Luckily, my body kicks in, and I become hungry for rest the way I crave a good meal after a long day. Relaxing may make me uncomfortable at first, but my body knows what to do.

REFLECT

We tend to view reflection as a solitary activity. Draw to mind Rodin's famous statue, *The Thinker*, of a seated man, palm supporting head, pondering. But here I am going to look more closely at the concept of *shared* reflection. The ancient Greeks treasured shared reflection time. *Schole*—which we translate as "leisure" describes a process of contemplation and dialogue about living a good life. The Greeks found great pleasure in conversations about what really mattered in life. Think about it: Some of the times we feel closest to others are when, together, we ponder what matters most to us and explore the quandaries we face.

The Hebrew world also saw deep discussion as the highest form of learning. Engaging in disputation over biblical passages or Talmudic texts was meant to refine the mind, heart, and soul and

lead the student to greater awareness of justice, one of the key values in ancient Israel.

There is an art to thinking together, a type of deliberate dialogue where we take turns discussing challenging topics so that we can learn more, not just get our point across. We can explore all kinds of topics that help us live better; dive into the meaty, juicy questions of our lives; and get to know one another in new ways.

One of my best evenings recently was talking over dinner with other parents. Joe told us that he was burned out on his high-paying, high-performing job, and he just wanted more time with his kids. We asked what was happening at work and why he wanted change now. And instead of giving him advice about finding a new job and handing over networking contacts, we each talked about our value of good work.

We talked about the challenge of getting dedicated time with our kids when we weren't stressed out. We also each wanted to work more towards the greater good and find the time and energy to combat racism and environmental injustice in our community of Oakland. We didn't get answers that night, but we parents all understood each other more deeply and left refreshed and heartened. The act of simply stating and exploring your priorities out loud can be an extremely beneficial way of reinforcing them.

PLAY

According to Stuart Brown, MD, of the National Institute for Play, play is highly beneficial to our happiness. Play is essential for innovation, creativity, and joy. Here's the neat thing about play: It happens best when it's separate from the drive to perform and achieve. Google, one of the most successful tech companies, is famous for offering playtime to its employees. Management knows that people do some of their best work while fooling around. When we play, we relax. We enjoy each other. We have no purpose but to have fun, yet in that moment of fun, something deeply human and delightful bursts forth in us, and we catch a glimpse of the uncensored self, the nonproductive self, the self

that is just in the moment being human. This is the play from which brilliant creativity comes, but it occurs only when we, paradoxically, let go of outcomes. Don't *try* to access the flaring vitality that perks up when we are just playing, don't *force* the insights and joy that come with play, just let them happen. Dr. Brown has spent his life studying play. He says that:

of all the animal species, humans are the biggest players of all. We are built to play and built through play. When we play, we are engaged in the purest expression of our humanity, the truest expression of our individuality. Is it any wonder that often the times we feel most alive, those that make up our best memories, are moments of play.⁴

Achieving a flow state, is a special type of play. First discovered by Mihaly Csikszentmihaly flow emerges from a type of deep focus that enables us to temporarily suspend our sense of identity. This inner state is described colloquially as “being in the zone”. It happens when we experience deep focus, when we are doing what we really like to do, and there is a good balance between challenge and skill. A sense of clarity appears, often there is immediate feedback, the sense of time disappears, we are doing something difficult but doable. This type of play is so rewarding that it makes life worth living.

What do we do if we are not trying “to get something done” and make our contribution, or tidy up or be a better person? What do we do with open space and unscheduled time? We can rest, reflect, and play. In doing so, we slowly and quietly turn toward the joys of our existence. When our active mind starts roving around for the next tiny action item, we let it go, reminding ourselves that “just to live is holy. Just to be is a blessing.” For one day we let in the vast, infinite, tiny, immeasurable, ineffable quality of life.

IT'S NOT JUST THE REST, IT'S THE RHYTHM

That final gateway to oasis time—letting go of the focus on achievement—might just be the most important. It helps us understand that the *rhythm* of oasis time is what brings us the most value. It's not that we go to work, doing "important" stuff, and then we rest so that we can work again. It is that we live in a rhythm. The rhythm is part of our lives. We understand that we don't just breathe in; we breathe out as well. One is not better than the other; both are essential.

Jim Loehr, EdD, a top high-performance sports coach, says that "it's not that we work too hard, it's that we don't recover enough." According to Dr. Loehr, to have the strength, flexibility, and resilience to be a top performer, you *have* to rest and recover; otherwise you will burn out and become jaded. Get it? Rest as recovery is *key* to high performance. Or to put it another way, rest and recovery are keys to a good life.

If Dr. Loehr makes the case for a measured balance between activity and rest, we also need a rhythm that balances between two prevailing mind-sets. One mind-set is "I am going to improve the world, things can get better, I can be happier. I need more of something." The other mind-set is "Things are fine the way they are. I'm content, I'm absorbing the absolute magnificence of the world right now." You can allow these mind-sets to alternate. In fact, this is the ultimate in oasis time: a regular pulse between our active, busy time and our slow, restorative periods of rest, reflection, and play. After the deep rest and replenishment of just being, we go back to doing, learning, expanding, and, if we want, achieving—but an achieving that is mindful, focused, and sustainable. As we reach this rhythm and deepen each perspective, we begin to know for sure that our lives are meaningful just as they are.

These five gateways will help you access your time oasis. Try them out, see how they work for you. Look for places in your life where these gateways already exist. What has worked well for you when

you tried to take a break? What has been hard? Do you find it easy to slow down but difficult to disconnect? Do you struggle to plan ahead? Do you let go of your need to accomplish something each week but find that speed still pulses in your body? In discovering what works for you, you figure out how to bring your oasis time into reality. Each step toward your oasis guides you closer to health, happiness, and deeper well-being. Let's take those steps together.

¹ Marche, Stephen. "Is Facebook Making Us Lonely." *Atlantic* May 2012: n. pag. Print.

² Bosler, Cayte. "Make Time for Awe." *Atlantic* 18 Dec. 2013: n. pag. Web.

³ Gilbert, Elizabeth quoted in Seth Godin, *What Matters Now*. Lulu.com, 2009

⁴ Brown, Stuart L., and Christopher C. Vaughan. *Play: How It Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul*. New York: Avery, 2009. 5. Print.

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