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Arlington Street Church  
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## Rest

Working in his father's pencil factory in the Estabrook Woods of Concord, Henry David Thoreau assumed his late-night coughing fits were the result of days spent inhaling the dust of pencil shavings. But it was tuberculosis, the leading cause of death in the United States in the 20th century. In May of 1862, Thoreau died at the age of 44.

He must have known something more than graphite dust was getting to him when his insomnia drove him from the pencil factory to serve as a tutor and his exhaustion persisted, increasing to the point that he found it difficult to read or write. "I am a diseased bundle of nerves," he wrote in his journal, "standing between time and eternity like a withered leaf." We almost certainly owe Walden, and the two-years-two-months-and-two-days sojourn that inspired it, to Thoreau's TB. In 1845, he went to the woods to try to rest.

In Walden, Thoreau exhorts us to rest. He calls out surprisingly contemporary-sounding causes for concern: "addiction to stimulating substances, sensational news stories and entertainments; the frantic pace of commerce and high-speed telegraphic communications; noise pollution; the pressure to organize work and travel on an exacting schedule...." A century and a half before the first smartphone, Thoreau ... [glimpsed] a future in which the hand reaches compulsively for an electronic device in the middle of the night: 'Hardly a man takes a half-hour's nap,' he wrote, '... but

when he wakes, he holds up his head and asks, “What’s the news?”<sup>1</sup>

In 1897, Spanish neuroscientist Santiago Ramón y Cajal argued that the idea that working longer hours would produce more and better work was a grievous mistake. It created the illusion of profundity and substance, he said, but would lead to asking only easy, shallow questions rather than hard, substantial ones.<sup>2</sup> Two years later, in 1899, American philosopher and psychologist William James wrote an essay entitled *Gospel of Relaxation*. If living with an “inner panting and expectancy,” he wrote, “and bringing breathlessness and tension to work ... would only enable us to do more,” then there “would be some compensation, some excuse, for going on so. But the exact reverse is the case.”

And in 1941, Quaker Thomas Kelley wrote, “Our lives grow too complex and overcrowded. Even the necessary obligations which we feel we must meet grow overnight, like Jack’s beanstalk, and before we know it we are bowed down with burdens, crushed under committees and commitments, strained, breathless, and hurried, panting through a never-ending program of appointments. We are too busy to be good partners to our partners, good companions of our children, good friends to our friends, and with no time at all to be friends to the friendless....<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Benjamin Reiss, “Happy Birthday to Henry David Thoreau, a great sleep scholar” in the *LA Times*, 7/12/17 (please see [latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-reiss-thoreau-sleep-20170712-story.html](http://latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-reiss-thoreau-sleep-20170712-story.html)), apparently borrowed extravagantly from a piece by “Erin” in an advertisement for Nectar mattresses, posted on 12/10/16, entitled Henry David Thoreau — the Sleep Expert. To compare them, please see [nectarsaleep.com/posts/henry-david-thoreau-sleep-expert/](http://nectarsaleep.com/posts/henry-david-thoreau-sleep-expert/)

<sup>2</sup> Santiago Ramón y Cajal, *Advice for a Young Investigator*, 1897

<sup>3</sup> The next paragraph says, “But if we withdraw from public engagements and interests, in order to spend quiet hours with the family, the guilty calls of citizenship whisper disquieting claims in our ears. Our children’s schools should receive our interest, the civic problems of our community need our attention, the wider issues of the nation and of the world are heavy upon us. Our professional status, our social obligations, our membership in this or that organization, put claims upon us and in frantic fidelity we try to respond.”

“... We’re weary... And we know and regret that our life is slipping away, with our having tasted so little of the peace and joy and serenity we are persuaded life should yield to a soul of wide caliber. The times for the silences of the heart seem so few. And in regret, we postpone till next week or next year that deeper life of unshaken composure in the holy Presence – the life ... we sincerely know our true home is. We postpone, for this week, this day, this hour is much too full.”

In his book *Rest*, Alex Soojung-Kim Pang brings this sentiment right into the present: “With a few notable exceptions,” he writes, “today’s leaders treat stress and overwork as a badge of honor, [and] brag about how little they sleep and how few vacation days they take.... [Our] working lives ... unfold in an environment saturated with unquestioned assumptions about the virtue and inescapable necessity of constant work. Whether [or not] we embrace the idea that overwork is essential for creativity and productivity, we are all defined by it.”<sup>4</sup>

It sounds pretty certain that, by degrees, this attitude has pervaded since time immemorial. But there were also always those who, in Thoreau’s words, marched to a “different drummer,” people who found time — made time — to rest, and went on to do extraordinary things. “Many [were] hard-charging workaholics in their youth, but while their ambitions never flagged, as they matured, they learned to lean back, develop sustainable routines, and make rest an essential part of their creative lives. They had to learn to rest.”<sup>5</sup>

“Rest is a skill,” Alex Pang continues. “...Everyone basically knows how to do it, but with a little ... understanding, [we] ... can

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<sup>4</sup> Alex Soojung-Kim Pang, *Rest*, p. 7

<sup>5</sup> Pang, *Rest*, p. 7

enjoy rest more profoundly and be more refreshed and restored.... Deliberate rest helps [us] recover from the stresses and exhaustion of the day, allows new experiences and lessons to settle in [our] memory, and gives [our] subconscious mind space to keep working. It's often in these periods of deliberate rest and apparent leisure — when [we're] not obviously working, or trying to work — that [we] can have some of [our] best ideas.”

Reading before sleep primes our brains for creative thinking and our capacity to memorize is at its best just before rest. And do you know the trick about asking yourself a question before you sleep? When you're lying down to rest, or getting ready to sleep, ask yourself a question with which you've been wrestling. You can ask it out loud, or just think it. And then immediately do something to help you forget about the question — maybe focus on your breathing, or read a little.<sup>6</sup> The research on this is really interesting. The answer will come! I'd love to hear if it works for you.

English novelist Anthony Trollope worked full-time as a post office surveyor while, over forty years, he published forty-seven novels, sixteen volumes of nonfiction, and uncounted articles for periodicals. This astonishing output — more than a book a year — has been directly attributed to the fact that he went out fox hunting twice a week, regularly entertained friends, “lived much in society in London,” and always spent at least six weeks a year out of England.<sup>7</sup>

And then there's Charles Darwin, who worked for just three 90-minute periods each day — that's four and a half hours — spending the rest of his time on leisurely walks, writing letters, and

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<sup>6</sup> Jane Porter, Do These 3 Things Before Bed To Hack Your Creativity While You Sleep, June 6, 2014, at [FastCompany.com](http://FastCompany.com). Please see [fastcompany.com/3031227/do-these-3-things-before-bed-to-hack-your-creativity-while-you-sleep](http://fastcompany.com/3031227/do-these-3-things-before-bed-to-hack-your-creativity-while-you-sleep)

<sup>7</sup> Pang, *Rest*, pp. 91-92

enjoying his family. Yes, this is the same Charles Darwin who wrote *On the Origin of Species*. Darwin's schedule was included in an analysis of the schedules of some of history's most prolific and accomplished scientists, mathematicians, and writers, which concluded that the optimum amount of time to work each day is, indeed, just four to five hours, or no more than 20 to 25 hours a week.<sup>8</sup> Gertrude Stein said, "It takes a lot of time to be a genius. You have to sit around so much, doing nothing, really doing nothing."

Obviously, rest is counter-cultural. It's "not something that the world gives us. It's never been a gift. It's never been something you do when you've finished everything else. If you want rest, you have to take it. You have to resist the lure of busyness, make time for rest, take it seriously, and protect it from a world that is intent on stealing it."<sup>9</sup>

As we lean into the long days of summer, I invite you to join me in reflecting on what it would take to craft for ourselves lives that feel more spacious, more sane. I want to be sure to define "rest" as not just napping or vacationing, lying in a hammock or on the beach. Although those are good, the most restorative rest is active: listening to music, reading for pleasure, gardening, spending time in nature and going for walks, exercising, making time for friends. Essentially, to rest is to make an investment in wellbeing. When we rest, the unconscious gets to work, and by its very nature, rest will restore our energy and our curiosity and bring us gifts of insight, inspiration, and innovation.

Alex Pang concludes, "Deliberate rest is not a negative space defined by the absence of work or something ... we hope to get sometime. ...Deliberate rest helps [us] recognize and avoid the trap

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<sup>8</sup> Alex Pang, "How to Rest Properly (and Be More Creative)," February, 2017, at MrPorter.com. Please see [mrporter.com/daily/how-to-rest-properly-and-be-more-creative/1888](http://mrporter.com/daily/how-to-rest-properly-and-be-more-creative/1888)

<sup>9</sup> Pang, *Rest*, p. 10. Also, please see [askpang.com/about-me](http://askpang.com/about-me)

of pointless busyness.... A life that takes rest seriously ... requires recognizing its importance, claiming our right to rest, and carving out and defending space for [it] in our daily lives.... When rest goes from being something that perches in the leftover hours between work and sleep ... to being something that [we] claim for [ourselves,] it becomes [invaluable].<sup>10</sup>

Beloved spiritual companions,

Let us question the unquestioned assumptions  
about the virtue and inescapable necessity  
of constant work

May we seek that deeper life  
of unshaken composure in the holy Presence –  
the life we know as our true home

Ask yourself a question, now ...

And rest

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<sup>10</sup> Pang, *Rest*, pp. 240-242