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Tish Harrison Warren

Can Everyone Take a Sabbatical?

We all need a rest.

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Olatunde Sobomehin, the chief executive and co-founder of StreetCode Academy, a Silicon Valley-based nonprofit that offers free tech classes to people from communities of color, thought that taking a sabbatical would be impossible. But his thinking began to change as he read and learned more about the practice.

Sobomehin came to view sabbaticals as a way to resist the destructive “work, work, work” culture that he grew up in and that he says characterizes Silicon Valley. Instead, they offer a path “to rest and restore our connection to our God and our calling on earth, and to birth new iterations of our purpose and find new layers of our calling,” he told me. He now thinks this change of pace is necessary for quality work to be sustainable, a way to “step back to level up.”

He collaborated with his board and staff to set up a sabbatical policy for his organization. It felt like a radically countercultural move and a risk.

Every year around this time, when my kids are on summer break, I begin to fantasize about what I might do if I could slow down for several months. I have never taken a sabbatical, but I'm surrounded by people who have because I'm friends with a lot of professors and clergy people. In both professions, sabbaticals are common — so much so that I know of ministry organizations that pair employees with a specialized “sabbatical coach.”

Over the last few years, I heard from friends about how critical their sabbaticals were, how they gave them renewed stamina and passion, how they wouldn't have made it without them. And I wondered if this practice could be more widespread and replicated in other fields.

The idea seems to be catching on. “In recent years, the number of employers offering sabbaticals has grown exponentially,” Kira Schabram, Matt Bloom and DJ DiDonna wrote in *Harvard Business Review* in February. “In addition, many more workers, especially employees in managerial and professional roles, are taking their own unpaid sabbaticals when their organizations fail to offer them.” They conducted a study on professionals who took sabbaticals and found that “people largely experienced significant, positive changes in their work and life.”

But for some, this practice isn’t only a smart professional move, it is also a theological commitment. I spoke with a group of business people and other leaders of faith who have come to see sabbaticals as a crucial spiritual practice. Consequently, they have structured their work so that they and their employees can have regular times of rest.

It’s important to clarify what a sabbatical actually is. In general, sabbaticals are extended periods of time, spanning anywhere from two months to a year, during which one can change her duties and pace of work. Rest is often a key part of sabbaticals, but they are not long vacations, so nix any fantasy about sipping piña coladas on a beach for months.

What a sabbatical looks like depends on the field. They are traditionally taken every seven years (but this can vary greatly) and allow for a less hectic schedule and more freedom to choose how to focus attention and spend time. For clergy, sabbaticals provide a break from the intense relational and spiritual pressure of running a church or a nonprofit. They are a time for preparation for the future, study, deep reading, prayer, goal setting, vocational discernment and renewal. For most people in academic fields, a sabbatical offers an opportunity to take a break from teaching in order to focus on research and other projects. Sabbaticals also provide, as one professor told me, a “check against total burnout.”

Annie F. Downs, who runs the That Sounds Fun Network and Downs Books, Inc., said that taking time off and giving her employees ample time off is a key priority in her organizations. Each year her staff gets the first two weeks of July off, which, she said, “does not count against their vacation days and is not optional.” She is also planning for a full-year break in 2027. She described this goal as “currently just pipe dreams and a savings account. But it is my hope to give my staff and myself a longer paid break than a few weeks.”

The business owners and nonprofit leaders I spoke with often view their commitment to sabbaticals as an extension of the practice of keeping the Sabbath, a weekly day of rest, and a way to honor human limitations and needed seasons of fallowness. They frequently cited Leviticus 25, in which God speaks to the Jewish people, saying: “For six years sow your fields, and for six years prune your vineyards and gather their crops. But in the seventh year the land is to have a year of Sabbath rest.”

Obviously, this year of agricultural rest didn’t mean that ancient Israelites sat around bingeing Netflix all day, but the seven-year rhythm afforded extra time for physical and emotional renewal, as well as a regular cycle of religious festivals, pilgrimages and community life.

Eddy Badrina, the chief executive of Eden Green Technology, a vertical farming company, said: “The concept of Sabbath is absolutely foundational to Judeo-Christian values and beliefs. We don’t have those in modern times and secular society, so I think we have to carve out the time ourselves, and establish our own rhythms.”

Part of the beauty of this vision in Leviticus is that all people — even those who are socially and economically vulnerable — had the same cosmic “leave policy” commanded by God. But I wondered if sabbaticals were now only possible for elites or those lucky enough to work for the small group of people I interviewed. So I asked a handful of economists and business experts if American work life could be structured so that everyone, including low-wage workers, could take a regular sabbatical every seven years.

They all essentially told me the same thing: Don't hold your breath. America falls far behind most advanced nations on policies like providing paid parental leave and sick leave for employees, so widespread sabbaticals are even less likely, and perhaps less urgent, than other needed reforms.

These experts did suggest, however, that incremental changes could make sabbaticals possible for more people. Employees could strive for a system of job protection, like we have for family and medical leave, that would allow those who can save a small percentage of their income to self-fund a sabbatical every seven years or so. (Even this, some said, would be a stretch.) Some suggested that a regular redistribution of workloads could allow lower-wage workers to take up training or continuing education to gain new skills and expertise.

Steve McMullen, a professor of economics at Hope College and the executive editor of the journal *Faith & Economics*, said that this rhythm of work life might “give people a chance, a few times over their career, to take stock of their skills and their work, and possibly push for some skills that would set them up for a promotion or other advancement.” Sandeep Mazumder, the dean of Baylor University's Hankamer School of Business, told me that before we could possibly see an uptick in sabbaticals in this country there would need to be a profound shift in how Americans think about rest and work more broadly.

“I was born and raised in London,” he said, “and the European attitude to work is very different. Holidays and vacations are celebrated in Europe, and there is no social stigma from taking time off, which often is the case in the United States. Unused P.T.O. days are highly uncommon in Europe, but are often treated as a badge of honor in this country.”

Business owners and nonprofit leaders I spoke with feel a responsibility to help forge a path to a more healthy American work culture. “The ones who are building the companies are deciding whether the workers get to rest,” Downs reminded me. “So as I'm building my companies, we have rest built in as a core value.”

One person I spoke with who runs a company that provides work for marginalized communities in Afghanistan (who withheld her name, owing to the dangerous nature of her work) told me that when she decided to take a sabbatical, she found that “half of the battle is believing that you are worthy of a season of rest and deconstructing guilt and fear of judgment.”

Sobomehin, the StreetCode Academy chief executive, admitted that “establishing a sabbatical policy was challenging.” But now, after taking his own sabbatical, and two of his employees beginning their own, he thinks it was worth the effort. “As I believe God promised, it served our mission even better,” he said. “We have become more efficient because the time away enabled other people to step up and understand each other's roles and responsibilities. We've become more interdependent on each other, increasing trust. We have preserved people's excitement about the work. And we've served people's entire lives, respecting their full humanity and not just their value as an employee committed to one mission.”

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