

Soul Training

Margin

Dr. Richard Swenson has written a wonderful book called *Margin*. Margin refers to the space on the edge of a page where there is no text. The page you're reading has margins on the top, bottom and sides. If words stretched from top to bottom and to both edges there would be no margin. Swenson believes our lives are like that. We add so much to our schedules that we have no "margin," no space for leisure and rest and family and God and health.

Swenson describes margin and being marginless this way:

[The conditions of modern-day living](#) devour margin. . . . Marginless is being thirty minutes late to the doctor's office because you were twenty minutes late out of the hairdresser's because you were ten minutes late dropping the children off at school because the car ran out of gas two blocks from the gas station—and you forgot your purse.

Margin, on the other hand, is having breath left at the top of the staircase, money left at the end of the month, and sanity left at the end of adolescence.

Marginless is the baby crying and the phone ringing at the same time; margin is Grandma taking the baby for the afternoon.

Marginless is being asked to carry a load five pounds heavier than you can lift; margin is a friend to carry half the burden.

Marginless is not having time to finish the book you're reading on stress; margin is having the time to read it twice.

I think just about everyone I know can relate to this. We live in a culture that rewards busyness and overextension as signs of importance.

Swenson discovered marginlessness in the lives of his patients before he recognized it in himself. He is a medical doctor who began noticing all sorts of health hazards that were caused by stress. Stress, he discovered, came from overextension. So he started telling his patients to slow down and eliminate unnecessary things from their lives.

Then he examined his own life and discovered he was in the same condition. He realized that by working eighty-hour weeks he was compromising his health, his family time and his relationship with God. Then it hit him: those are three of his most precious resources! So he decided to cut his practice in half—which meant cutting his income in half. It wasn't easy, but according to Swenson, it was the best decision he ever made.

I've worked hard to create margin in my life, and I discovered the secret. It is simple but very difficult to do: *Just say no.*

Say no to what? Anything that is not absolutely necessary to the well-being of your soul or the welfare of others. The list of all of the activities that you feel you need to do each day or each week is probably filled with a lot of good things. This is not about good versus evil but good versus good.

Let me give an example. A young woman who was going through the material in this book was taken by the idea of margin—because she had none—so she set out to create some in her life. She had schoolwork and a job, so a set portion of her time was already spoken for. She also believed that her family time is valuable, as is prayer, Bible reading and journaling. Finally, she

had a boyfriend, and she wanted to invest in their relationship. However, she realized that her boyfriend took up three to four hours of each day. She prayed about it and realized that their relationship was an area where she could create margin. She told her boyfriend that she wanted to develop their relationship, but she needed at least three nights away from him each week. This would create nine to ten hours of margin.

She later told me how meaningful this decision was. She was able to do better in school, deepen her relationship with God and her family, and go about her day with a rhythm and a pace that made her feel happy and at peace. She and her boyfriend were still able to develop their relationship as well. Remember, *God never called anyone to marginlessness*.

When we lack margin, it is our own doing and is a sure sign we have stepped outside the kingdom. So be honest and be ruthless with your schedule. Your spiritual, relational and physical health depend on it.

Margin and Holiness

Holiness is essentially wholeness—a life that works. Sin is dysfunction or sickness. The number one spiritual sickness of our day is “hurry sickness.” We are constantly in a hurry because we have overloaded our schedule. When we lack margin in our lives we become tired and lonely and joyless, which seems to invite temptation. We need margin. Margin restores balance and restores our soul, thus increasing our capacity for joy. Joy is a bulwark against temptation. Margin and holiness are related to one another in very deep ways.

Here are some ideas for finding margin:

- Get up ten minutes earlier and create a space for silence before you begin your day.
- Cut out unnecessary entertainment activities.
- Explore scaling back some of your commitments by asking, “Is it essential?” For example, must you serve on *three* church committees?
- If you do something often (for example, spending time with a friend), consider reducing the frequency without cutting that person out of your life.

For Reflection

Whether you are going through this material alone or with others, the following questions might be helpful as you reflect on your experience. Either way, it might be a good idea to answer these questions in your journal. If you are meeting with a group, bring your journal with you to help you remember your insights as you share.

1. Were you able to practice any of the suggestions for creating margin this week? If so, describe what you did and how you felt about it.
2. What, if anything, did you learn about God or yourself through the exercise?
3. As you tried to develop margin in your life, what was most difficult? What was most rewarding?