

ROOM
TO

BREATHE

A little white space around the edges of life leaves room for unexpected joy and opportunity.

I'm constantly fighting the urge to pack my day full. To squeeze in just one more conversation, e-mail, decision, or project. One thing that helps me resist this: visualizing "margin" in my life. Purposefully leaving the mental elbowroom to relax, enjoy an unexpected opportunity, or tackle the little daily dilemmas of life gracefully. Here, I'd like to introduce you to some folks who have their own strategies for creating various forms of margin. I hope you find ideas that will help you push back the edges and create some white space in your life, too. —Joanna

IT WAS ONE OF THOSE

crazy, stressful evenings. I wasn't firing on all cylinders at work that day, so at home I was distracted and irritable, thinking about my job. I tried a new recipe for dinner. It was supposed to be a simple and elegant meal, but I ended up with a curdled disaster instead. Because it took so long to cook, we ended up missing both my daughter's dance class and her church group. Worst of all, I blew up when my eighth-grader interrupted as I was on the phone scheduling an appointment. I was stressed out and in a terrible mood.

I apologized to my daughter for yelling and was about to crawl into bed, defeated and weary, when my 5-year-old cheerfully said, "Let's go for a walk!" Going outside was the last thing I felt like doing. I wanted to hide under my comforter with a stash of chocolate and wait for tomorrow. But I knew she wanted to spend time with me. So I found my shoes under a pile of laundry and followed her out the door.

As we walked, we said hello to the cows who were grazing in a nearby pasture. We counted grasshoppers and searched for fish in the creek. We raced each other to the nearest light pole and played a dozen rounds of red-light-green-light. It was far and away the best part of my day. Being open to taking that walk when my inclination was to climb into bed turned that day around and gave me a few rejuvenating minutes in the gently fading daylight.

—Monica Reha



AT THE END OF THE DAY,

I take 10 minutes to write in a gratitude journal. This ritual reminds me every 24 hours of all the blessings in my life—a wonderful focus to take with me into a restful sleep.

—Debra Landwehr Engle

“At the end of the day, no matter how much remains on my to-do list, when the clock strikes 10:30 p.m.,

I make my way to the tub. The simple act of running water and lighting candles relaxes me. When I sink in, it's 20 minutes where I focus only on me. The water calms and rejuvenates me. It literally washes away the grime of the day and figuratively washes away the hassle, tension, and anxiety.

**I'M READY
FOR
WHATEVER
THE NEXT
DAY WILL
BRING.**

—Stacy B. Feldman



I GREW UP IN A HOME

with nine kids and parents that barely scraped by. So when I graduated from college and began making “real” money, I figured if my checking account had something left in it at the end of the month, I was winning the game.

A few years later, when my husband and I bought our first home, the banks were still approving ridiculously high amounts for mortgages. Although the bank approved us for a mortgage well over our combined income, my husband refused to buy a house with a monthly payment more than 25 percent of his income alone. At that point, I didn't intend to stay at home with our future children. But this decision to “underbuy” our house allowed us the freedom to choose if I worked or not—without the pressure of maintaining a house we could only afford with two incomes.

This plan also allowed us to roll my income into savings. It wasn't easy, but we were committed to living simply and without the pressure of needing every paycheck the day it arrived. Now that I do stay at home with my three little boys, that saved money continues to work for us. It accrues interest that allows us to invest and occasionally buy something we just want to enjoy.

—Melanie Dykstra

“I pretend I always have a car payment. Every month, I put the equivalent amount in savings. Then, when it comes time to purchase a car, I have the option to pay cash or take advantage of good finance terms. There’s a psychological benefit to not having a loan hanging over my head.”

—Todd O’Brien

“ WHEN I HAVE A LIST OF ERRANDS TO DO IN AN AFTERNOON,

I add up how long I think each one will take. Then I add 50 percent. So when things run long (as they do) I have built in a buffer and don’t get stressed.”

—Beth Montpas

PRIOR TO MY WIFE’S

death, it wouldn’t have occurred to me that simple household tools such as a chef’s knife, a steam iron, a wash bucket, or a snow shovel could become household icons, creating quiet spaces in my daily routine where rejuvenation happens.

Some people are surprised to hear that I steer clear of shortcuts like prepackaged meals, a snowblower, and no-iron shirts. Those innovations seem like lifelines for a single dad, right? But for me, the physical action of simple labor done well, with basic tools, in solitude, creates an oasis that nurtures moments of clarity. It counters the impulse of distraction and the tendency to sleepwalk through the frenetic buzz and motion of my everyday life.

Cutting whole foods with my knife to make dinner connects me with sustenance and the love that I share through my ability to feed others. Ironing my own clothes is a task done in a certain order, without hurry, and the finished work becomes a thing of beauty and comfort. The rhythm and motion of washing the floor by hand or shoveling snow in the cold and quiet invites me to take a pause and look beyond the surface of this one present moment. In that mindfulness, I’m not dwelling on the past or fretting about the future. I’m just considering the possibility of the gift of this moment, this breath, this heartbeat.

—Brian Smith

“ WHEN I GET HOME FROM WORK, I LEAVE MY CELL PHONE IN THE CAR.

It reminds me to separate work mode from mom mode, clearing space for me to be fully present with my family.”

—Joanna