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A Sickly Sabbatarian

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About the Contributor

Heidie Raine studies English literature with concentrations in creative and journalistic writing. She loves asparagus, hates nail polish, and tolerates the color yellow.

A SICKLY SABBATARIAN

Heidie Raine

I get stress sick. More eloquently diagnosed, at the end of every major season of my life, the culminating blows of final exams and state meets reduce me to spiked fevers, puke buckets, and a Benadryl-induced slumber. It's a tradition I've grown accustomed to, knowing not to schedule anything for the first weeks of Christmas breaks or summer vacations. I will inevitably be cocooned into bed, tissues crumpled about, melted popsicles staining my wrinkled sleep shirt underneath sweat-strung sheets.

It's my body's reset button—a systematic recharge. Self-imposed exhaustion splintering into ailments. Endurance: purged. Equilibrium: restored.

The weekend following my junior speech season, I blocked out a Saturday to go prom dress shopping. I awoke that Friday to nausea beating in my gut, temples throbbing at the rattle of the fan. Even so, it was the only free time I had. 24 hours after my face went flush and my intestines began to curdle, I found myself in the passenger seat of my mother's black suburban, swallowing teaspoons of applesauce on our way to the shop. I left with a gown too small for my normal figure but sized perfectly for my particularly trim, still-puking-skinny frame. The dress barely zipped on prom day.

I often contrast myself against my healthier peers, wondering how they can welcome

spontaneous Waffle House runs and embrace the penalties of late assignments, shrugging off forgotten meetings with apathy, leaving each season rich in memories and adequate in performance. I scrutinize them, hard, viewing their slothfulness as the gravest sin. So I flee it. When people ask how my day has been, I respond by regurgitating the checklist of all I've accomplished, determining my mood by what tasks remain. And then months later, I toil as Robitussin streams through my system, agonizing to capitalize on the free time by finally reading *Jane Eyre* as my vision blurs sideways.

I do not nap. It's a waste of time.

* * *

At a missions conference I attended in 2018, John Piper spoke on the balance of work and rest. He shared the words of nineteenth-century preacher Robert Murray McCheyne who worked himself to a preemptive deathbed at 29 by destructively, unrelentingly, ministering and studying. McCheyne uttered his famous 'horse quote' days before his death, which reads:

"God gave me a message to deliver and a horse to ride. Alas, I have killed the horse, and now I cannot deliver the message."

His words elicited the crowd's reflective "hmm," likely prompting families to defend their Sundays a bit more strictly and, in cases of stark conviction, withdraw from the weekend youth basketball league. Yet when it rang in my ears, a sadistic admiration warmed in my heart: a shameful desire to applaud this man who sucked every opportunity from his 29 years.

I find comfort in someone like McCheyne: a co-laborer, who, like me, has ascetic threads woven thick in his bones. I'm sure he coughed through sermon-preps and feverishly led Bible studies, avoiding naps that could have extended his years. I would've shed tears of pride at his funeral, championing his ability to produce.

But did McCheyne collapse because he out-worked sustainability, or because the average lifespan in the early 1800s was 44? I know the Baptists want to canonize Piper's every syllable—and I indulge, too, when it's theologically opportune—yet I detect a false parallel. The born-again American, listening to a playback of a Piper sermon whilst soaking in their jacuzzi with a flute of Prosecco, next to a 19th-century countryman with roots in the generation that couldn't outwit cholera. I entreat the irony of Piper, 75 and aging, able to share McCheyne's message with me because of his access to MRIs.

Regardless, I'm not a worthily-wearied clergyman like Robert McCheyne, or David Brainerd, or Peter Marshall, fervently spreading a soul-saving message from dawn to dusk. I'm an undergraduate student writing literary criticisms and mastering

APA. And yet I continue, emulating these men in the bulk of my days.

I've tried unearthing my motivations, staring in the mirror at my naked soul to breach my subconscious. I figure if I can find my "why," I'll develop a sort of agency over my practices, like the self-realized stress-eater or daddy-issues bad-boy-dater. If I could blame it on the woes of childhood trauma (typical but valid) or escapism (sadly not my style), there'd be a visible road to change. But soul-searching was fruitless.

Treating my work-til-you-drop cycle as a predisposition rather than a discipline feels unsatisfactory. I'm chewing on the possibility of both. My affinity for exertion leads me to fill every moment, and then my inclinations and customs conjoin. Whether by heredity or habit, wearying work is embedded deep within me as the vice I revere and love. At the peak of suicidality, my sister was earning straight A's and volunteering at the local nursing home's Saturday bingo. Should that strike concern? Probably, in moderation. But the resolve to carry on is programmed into me, etched in the matrix of my essence. Why not call out B6 while waiting to see if Lexapro kicks in? To demand a waiting period would be sickly idle.

I don't mean to disregard the detriments: *working to the point of yakking after every major season of life is destructive*. Ruining vacations and breaks with my snotty drudge is far from glamorous; it's taxing. I know an afternoon hammocking would serve me well, but I can't justify it. I'd rather keep

moving. I will conjure up projects to fill a free hour, learning guitar and cleaning out my closet during empty afternoons. And where I may teeter to lament my tired body, exhaustion will eventually beat me, like everyone. The horse is going to die. It'll get battered by missions and dehydrated by sunbeams and wrinkled by age. I'll be damned if I await its collapse cloaked in the luxury of afternoon teas and evening leisure.

My mother often tells me, "*You're happiest when you're busy.*" I'd replace "busy" with "striving." The juggle of emails and story-writing and overtime hours gives me a rush. They propel me to the next thing. But as I run forward, I glance back over my shoulder to see the premature demise of my expired idols. Their pursuits age well, and yet they made haste to the end with vigor. I remind myself: these tendencies that churn in our guts to do aren't acquired—they're inherent. If restlessness will always serenade our days, we ought to capitalize on it.

Someday, I'll have to give an account to the Lord of all I've done with my life. My prayer is that I have the humility to fall at His feet rather than spit out accomplishments. I don't labor to seek God's favor (that's a Piper point I will canonize, straight from Paul himself), but I do find comfort in knowing that He affirms the ant's work ethic in Proverbs. What makes it through the fire? I can't carry any of my products with me, en-tote, to the new earth. But there, I'll be released from my fragile frame and given one anew, able to dance in the expanse of opportunities, never again subjected to the crashing haze of a feeble end. Endurance: inexhaustible.

I'd like to speak with David Brainerd in heaven. I want to ask if, through his westward horse rides and evangelistic zeal, he ever thought that auditoriums of 21st-century believers would one day dissect his ardor, describe his fervor as a mere valuable derivative, pleading with bowed heads not to thin their lives as he had.

There's piety in work. There's wisdom in rest. Brainerd privileged the former.

Yet Jesus took naps, knowing that it wasn't exhaustion, but humanity's stained hands, that would inflict His fatal blow. He slept through the storms regardless.

Piper's auditorium, echoing, "May we more faithfully steward our time on this earth, Father. Let us retain Brainerd's passion without squandering decades of ministry. Guide us in sustainability."

My sore throat, supplicating: May I distinguish between the glories of a dense mission and the horrors of a young corpse. Grant me Brainerd's pace with Piper's age. I want both, Father.

Brainerd's twenty-nine years, spent with a bloodied handkerchief tucked neatly into a pocket, coughing through benedictions, carrying consumption to converts, closed in a coffin and covered with dirt.

A martyr to the Lord, yet perhaps also, in part, to self.