

Lawn Chair Living

Reflect upon your present blessings, of which every man has plenty, not on your past misfortunes, of which all men have some.

~Charles Dickens

Burn out. It happens to everyone -- even writers. Thirteen years ago, I was a freelance executive speechwriter and advertising copywriter and my busy season ran from January to April. In that four-month period, I would write twelve to fourteen hours a day, six days a week to hit my deadlines for ads, brochures, speeches, newsletters, magazine articles, and annual reports. By the first week of May, I was comatose. My energy level was zero, my creativity was shot and my brain was mush.

That's when Gregg Levoy delivered just what the doctor ordered, a cup of *Chicken Soup for the Writer's Soul*, in his story entitled, "Power Lounging." In it, Levoy describes his extended sabbatical designed to revive his spirit, and he leaves us with a vital message not just for writers, but for any profession: rest brings restoration.

Levoy reminded me that I need to rest more and he inspired me by the ways in which he found rest and renewal in ordinary things and in simple pleasures. In his words: "I succumbed to the lazy lure of a spring afternoon spent in my own backyard, watching the shadows of clouds bend in the folds of the hills, the hawks and vultures sweep into view on long, slow arcs, the tomcats stalk birds in the low branches of the fig. And for a brief spell I was released from being pinned to the ground by the gravity of my endeavors.

"Over the next three months, as the days flicked by like white lines on the freeway, I took great long walks by the sea and in the forests, lost myself in epic novels, wrote poetry again, traveled, and stopped postponing jury duty. I went surfing, joined a men's group, got to know my friends better..."

His article not only motivated me, it changed me. I not only learned how to optimize rest and relaxation, I took it a step further. I inserted pauses into my routine to better appreciate the most meaningful moments of life. Some pauses were only a few minutes long, others hours, some days. I call it "Lawn Chair Living." Here is how it works for me.

Several years ago, I inserted a long pause into my day by grabbing a lawn chair and heading to the beach. I planted myself under a shade tree overlooking a bay. I was there for one reason. From the comfort of the lawn chair and the beauty of the idyllic setting, I was mentally preparing myself for another major transition in my life.

In the next few weeks, my father, a widower of forty years, would be moved into an assisted living center because Alzheimer's was robbing him of his memory. Soon, I would lose daily contact with one of the most significant people in my life.

What troubled me though was that the chaotic pace of my life could easily cause me to overlook the implications of this life change. Thus, from a lawn chair, I would pause, refocus, and quietly reflect on my changing role as a son.

As the gulls circled overhead and sailboats glided across the bay, I asked myself if I was the son I could have been. Should I have been more helpful forty years ago as he struggled to raise six children alone following my mother's premature death from cancer? What could I, as an eleven-year-old, have done to support him more? Did he know how much I emulated him as a child? Did I say the things I should have said before

Alzheimer's systematically fragmented his memory? Did I ever tell him what he taught me about commitment in marriage?

As I sat in that lawn chair and surveyed my father's life, I realized when my mother died, a piece of my father died too. Perhaps that's why he never gave himself permission to marry again.

I remember preparing for my wedding fifteen years after my mother's death. I noticed my father never lectured me on the importance of commitment. He never pointed to himself as an example to follow, although I've never seen a better one. He just quietly lived a life committed to his children and their mother's memory, and his life spoke volumes.

Shortly after I was married I stopped by to visit him. As we chatted about my job, I slid my wedding ring off my finger.

"What did you just do?" he asked abruptly.

Surprised, I said, "Nothing. I just slid my wedding ring off my finger."

"Why did you do that?" he pressed.

"What do you mean, Dad?"

"Do you take your wedding ring off often?"

"No. Why?"

Then I realized my father was about to take me to a sacred place -- his heart.

"I told your mother at our wedding that when she placed the ring on my finger, it would never pass the end of my finger again as long as she lived," he said quietly, looking down at his hands.

I knew the rest of the story. Seven years after my mother died, a jeweler had to cut his wedding ring off his finger because it was so tight it affected his circulation. For twenty-five years his wedding ring had never passed the end of his finger.

As I looked out at the horizon, I realized today was like many days I've spent in a lawn chair over the years. The locations have changed but the mission has remained the same. Pause and reflect. By inserting pauses into my life and taking time to reflect, the events of my life have paraded before my eyes again, providing a second chance to appreciate them fully.

By pausing in a lawn chair, I wrestled through the decisions to have my then four-year-old son undergo three surgeries. From a lawn chair, I made the decision to leave corporate America and become a freelance writer so I could be home more and watch my children grow up. From a lawn chair, I helped my sons sort through their college choices. And from a lawn chair, I planned the best way to move my father out of his home of forty years and into an assisted living center.

Today, I believe that a simple lawn chair, placed in a beautiful setting, has become a sacred place for me. A place to recall my past. A place to pause. And a place to reflect on the things that matter most in life.

And to think, it all began with some friendly advice from Gregg Levoy and a hot cup of *Chicken Soup for the Soul*.

~James C. Magruder