

Practicing Rest



ATENA O. DANNER

Author, *Incantations for Rest*

Did you know that there are 7 kinds of rest?

Physical, mental, spiritual, emotional, social, sensory, and creative. There's been a lot of talk about rest in our society lately. Some people have called rest 'revolutionary.' Some say it is wealth, or can be a kind of reparations. Whatever you believe about it, every one of us needs it, and many of us don't get enough.

Last winter, I made a commitment to deep rest. I aligned my vacation days, my children's winter break calendar, and my employer's office shut down to allow myself for two solid weeks of not reporting to work, keeping my commitments limited to self, family, writing and slowing down to a stop as often as I possibly could. During what I call my Hibernation Time, I didn't know about the 7 kinds of rest list, but I offered myself all the hours of sleep my body desired, all the laying in bed reading and coloring I wanted, all the books I wanted to read, all the warm tea, soft comforters, and breakfasts made slowly and lovingly with no tasks, no meetings, no need to run toward any event with a piece of toast in my mouth and a cold cup of coffee in hand. For the better part of two weeks, I took time to figure out how I wanted to be treated, and I treated myself that way. In hindsight, it looks a lot like

seven kinds of rest. Deliberately slowing down and protecting my rest was uncharted territory for me. Black women are not encouraged toward leisure. We are expected to take care of everyone and clean up messes and save elections and be inspiring and dignified and refuse to back down and never appear angry about any of it. Anything else runs the risk of being called lazy or unmotivated, which are historically punishable offenses for people who look like me and live in this country. So Hibernation Time was actually difficult to get started with. But once I got into the groove of it, it became transformative. That time changed me, and I have not been the same since.

Fast forward to June 2022, when I had the joyful experience of seeing my first book published — a collection of poetry and meditations, titled *Incantations for Rest*. This was a big deal for me and I committed to celebrating my accomplishment instead of playing it down. This, like resting, was also quite challenging. Self-appreciation is also not encouraged in people who look like me.

I planned two book release events, starting in April, and while I had been wonderfully fortified by the time I took to practice resting, life is what it is, and eventually, my rest reserve waned.

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“Rest is a beautiful interruption in a world that has no pause button.”

TRICIA HERSEY,
THE NAP MINISTRY

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IN DARKNESS, ALL THINGS ARE POSSIBLE
Atena O. Danner

EVEN GOD RESTED / CLF WORSHIP
*Atena O. Danner
& JeKaren Olaoya*

REST

What does true rest look like for you?

CARLEOUS

CLF Member, incarcerated in CO

For me, rest is a state of calm. It is a winding down, a meditation of stillness.

When I speak of rest, I don't refer to sleep – I refer to our Creator. Rest shifts my attention to the one responsible for it all. It's a release and giving into a higher power.

Rest is a break and a breakthrough that allows us to regain the energy to continue on. ■



PHOTO BY HENDRIK MORKEL ON UNSPLASH

In Darkness, All Things Are Possible

ATENA O. DANNER

Author, Incantations for Rest

Published by Skinner House Books, 2022

Realize that we were taught
to fear the dark.

Consider the seed that splits and unfurls
unseen within the Earth . . .

Consider the inside of the egg;
consider the place where
the Big Bang exploded . . .

Unknown and generative,
darkness is unpredictable:
limitless possibility.
We are in the habit
of learning to fear our potential,
but imagine embracing rest and dreams . . .

We learned early to believe in
the whiteness of certain magic and light
And blackness of certain arts and hearts;
confronted with the sky and its stars, I must reject
this entire premise.

Remind me, siblings
to unlearn these bad habits
and accept the gifts I've been given.
Darkness is free and abundant;

There is joy in unfurling
from the shadows we were made in.
We need only close our eyes to go home.

Practicing Rest, continued from page 1

I felt it most acutely when my first book release event was just about to begin. As we finalized the set up, I realized that I was doing the thing where I think to myself (tell me if you've heard this one before): "They're not gonna do that the way that I want it done, so I'll just do it myself." Or, this great time-saver: "Explaining how to do it will take a lot longer than just doing it myself, so I'll just do it myself." It felt like there was so much to do, I was keenly aware of a feeling in my body of the clock bearing down on me.

Ultimately, thanks to my family and amazing community, the event was a success. Still, I had a little nagging feeling afterward, feel guilty about getting stressed out, and then I felt guilty about feeling guilty about it. I was thinking, "What happened, Atena? You did such a good job learning how to chill—three months ago, you were the mistress of chill! Now your Auntie Anxiety! How did this happen?!" This is a pretty human thing that we do: we put great effort toward learning a lesson, practicing the learning, and working towards getting it right. We feel proud of ourselves. And then after some time, pretty inevitably, we find ourselves at the bottom of the hill, looking up at that looming lesson yet again. And feeling terrible that we did not "learn our lesson," saying, "What's wrong with me? How could I forget it all and have to start all over again?"

I was listening to Brene Brown's



PHOTO BY SIXTEEN MILES OUT ON UNSPLASH

'Unlocking Us' podcast recently, and she said something that resonates strongly with the point that I'm trying to make: it's not about having a knowledge base; it's about practice!

It doesn't matter how many books you've read (or written) about rest; What makes it possible for us is practicing it. It doesn't matter how many retreats you've gone to in the past; are you practicing yoga now? It doesn't matter if you have a masters degree in it; are you engaging in best practices currently?

So I don't have a revelation, just a reminder: keep practicing.

Whether it's a matter of enough sleep, enough time to play, occasional

vacations, or a season of hibernation, rest is a human need. To think of it as a privilege or revolutionary tells us how far we have strayed from practicing rest in the ways we need and deserve. Rest is not revolutionary, but being able to practice rest in a racist, capitalist, ableist hetero-patriarchal society is rare and transformative. The revolution may lie in creating conditions where Black and Brown and Indigenous folks have equitable access to those seven kinds of rest as anyone else. The revolution will need us to claim and practice rest for ourselves and each other. ■

For more selections of Atena's poetry, see our abbreviated worship service, [Even God Rested](#), on pages 4-7 of this issue.

even god rested

A CLF WORSHIP SERVICE

Most Sunday evenings, members of the Church of the Larger Fellowship with internet access gather for an online worship service. We are exploring ways to bring the spirit of those services to our many members who do not have regular internet access. The following is an abbreviated outline of a CLF worship service that can be read through or shared out loud in a gathering. Please feel free to make it your own, adding whatever music, ritual elements, and readings are most meaningful to you.

OPENING WORDS & CHALICE LIGHTING

We light our flaming chalice and enter into our worship service together with these words from Atena O. Danner, from her book, *Incantations for Rest*.

Storyteller's Invocation

*Honor our Ancestors
Stories tucked into our hearts*

*Bless the stories reaching back
To when the Word began*

*Blessings to my siblings
As we break the Word apart*

*Touch the soul inside of it
And build the Word again.*

SHARING OF JOYS & SORROWS

Every time we gather, we share what is most present in our lives. Whether you are arriving to this service full of excitement or with a heavy heart, take a moment to name that which you are carrying. You may write your joy or sorrow down, or share out loud with those in your gathering. We know that every joy shared is multiplied, and every sorrow shared is halved.

We hold these joys and sorrows with you, and say in response:

May we all be held in the heart of love

SERMON

JEKAREN OLAOYA

Learning Fellow, Church of the Larger Fellowship

We have likely all heard some version of the Biblical creation story, which says it took God seven days to create the heavens and earth. On the first day, God separated the light from the dark, creating day and night. On the second day, God created an expanse to separate the water above and below, to separate the sky from the oceans. On the third day, God separated the land from the water and created vegetation. On the fourth day, God created the Sun, Moon, and Stars. The fifth day was the day of living creatures, birds, sea creatures, and fish. And that work of creating creatures continued on the sixth day with creatures that creep. Personally, I think we could do without some of the creepy crawlies, but I wasn't there to consult.

And so, it seems that the heavens and earth were created in six days. Why do we count the seventh? We often assume that rest is the absence of doing. Rest is nothingness. Rest is inaction. Take a moment and think about something you did for pleasure recently. Something that was absolutely fun and engaging. Got it? Was it related to work? A hobby? How did you feel before, during, and after? Did you feel like it was a waste of time? Did you regret it?

It's hard to imagine anyone would regret things that make them feel good and even harder to imagine it could be labeled as an absence or nothing. So I imagine God, on this seventh day, looking at the fish swimming in the ocean, watching the flowers bloom and the tall grass growing. Looking at the waves as they lap against the edge of the land. I imagine God hanging over the edge, laying down on their belly, feet crossed in the air, so pleased with themselves. God's probably a bit tired after expending so much of their own energy to create, and I imagine them drifting off to sleep as they watch life unfold.

And unfold it does. We are in this constant state of creation and destruction, life and death. There is only one starting line, with no end. Physics as we understand it now is a process of constant movement and transformation, energy can neither be created nor destroyed. And so, this story of how the world began fits into this model. Creating and pausing. Creating and resting. Over and over again.

This process probably sounds super familiar to anyone who has ever had a job. We exist in a culture that is 'living for the weekend'. I can't tell you how much small talk I've personally engaged in about hating Mondays, Celebrating Fridays, and Sunday nights dreading the next day.

I imagine my ancestors waking up before the sun rose to make a fire,

to cobble together a meal. Going out to milk the cows, collect eggs from the chickens if they had them, and working until the heat of the day at noon was above them, oppressive and staggering. The water they carry with them is warm, ice doesn't last long in the Georgia heat if there is any. Picking cotton. Harvesting peanuts and tobacco. Every single day of their lives, this cycle of the day continues. And they teach their children, and also, pray that it will be better for them. Over and over again, generation after generation until we get to a generation where gardening is a hobby. My grandmother grows plants for their beauty, to exercise her skills. Succulents grow in the dirt patches that scatter the floor of her porch. I grow plants for my mental health. And also because they are pretty. I kill them in equal measure, but that is a different sermon.

Are there other stories from our own personal history that prioritize rest? What did rest look like for your grandparents? Great grandparents? I come from a long line of people who worked the land. Enslaved. Sharecroppers. Farmers. Pleasure Gardeners. Each generation takes back its freedom and choice. Slowly. What did rest look like for my ancestors in Nigeria? In Denmark? In Benin and Togo? What about when they made their way to Virginia? What did rest look like?

[Even God Rested, continued on page 6](#)

 Even God Rested, cont. from page 5

Rest. What used to be a skill needed for survival is now a hobby for pleasure. I'm in constant awe. Our relationship with the earth changes, but our need for rest doesn't.

Rest is more than just naps. Naps matter, but they are one element of rest. I believe that rest is all the things that are counter to our cultural narrative of work and labor and capitalism. It is the space where we are free of expectations and demands of our bodies and minds, where we can be in our natural state. Where we can breathe freely, and really connect deeply to each other, to the community of beings around us.

There is so much work to be done. We sit here, as individuals, wondering too often what we can do, what action we can take to make the world a better place. We wear ourselves out running from this group to that committee to that job to meetings. And what we really need at this moment is a little bit of what we had in those early days of the pandemic. As terrible as it is and was, there were bits of hope for our global climate crisis in those weeks in solitude. Pollution decreased, plants started to grow more vibrantly, and animals started to stretch their legs in places that became quiet after so much of the noise pollution died down.

We were forced to rest. To slow down. To just be. As with any other major disaster, there is a recovery period, one we have yet to start as we still live through this. It would be so easy for us to go back to all the old ways of the before times, working nonstop, chasing the promise of more, and never resting. I don't want that for any of us. The systems we have created over time want that for us. They want us to be tired. To be overworked. To not speak up and make demands of the people who have sworn to both protect us and represent us.

We don't have to live this way. We can choose a different path. We can prioritize rest for ourselves in so many small ways that allow us to feel renewed every single day of the week. Not just on Saturday afternoon.

Even God rested. Back to the time of creation according to Biblical traditions, at the end of each day, God paused to take stock of what was created. After approval, God moves on to the next part. There is rest in pausing. In taking a moment to appreciate where you are before moving on to the next thing.

I have to say, this particular message is more for me than anyone. I am so guilty of moving from one thing to the next, hardly mourning or celebrating, just moving towards the next achievement. One is not enough, I had to always be thinking about the next few steps before I could finish my current one. I will graduate from Starr King School for the Ministry in May 2023, a semester earlier than I

expected, and I am already planning my Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) options, thinking about ordination and where my work might take me. I have a whole year to think about this process, and I have been consumed by the work of it in the last few weeks. I realized while reading and starting a book club for *Braiding Sweetgrass* by Robin Wall Kimmerer that I am spiraling into the behavior of the before times. I am not taking time to really think about the current moment. I'm not mourning the things that need to be mourned. I'm not rejoicing over the things I should be excited about. I'm looking ahead and anticipating things that I can't change, that I can't yet enjoy.

And so, this message is for me. A reminder in the words of Tricia Hersey of The Nap Ministry, that rest is resistance. She reminds us over and over again that rest is our birthright, and that we don't have to earn rest. Octavia Raheem, author of *Pause, Rest, Be*, says, "My ancestors don't only rejoice at the external show of success, ladders climbed, or work I've done. They rejoice when I rest. Because that means I'm safe enough. Whole enough. Warm enough. Nourished enough. Free enough. Present enough. Loved enough. Aware enough. Healed enough to release the trauma of endlessly laboring and being defined by what I've produced."

There is no end goal that matters more than this moment right now than knowing that the rest your body needs to thrive, to heal, is yours. If God could rest, so can you. ■

CLOSING WORDS & CHALICE EXTINGUISHING

We extinguish our flaming chalice and close our worship service with these words from Atena O. Danner, from her book, *Incantations for Rest*.

Generational Wealth

*My grandmother was so tired
that my mother was born tired.
My Mama's so tired
that I'm tired right now. And I see
my children getting tired,
so it's time to put this to bed.
I will gift time to my children;
they will inherit a legacy of resting:
Leisure time and vacation days taken,
sick time used to nap and renew.
I'll steal time and show them how to eat it raw,
I'll say "Yes!" to my babies, on the clock,
show them how to tuck joy and stillness
into the pockets of reclaimed life.
When I accrue time: I let them see how I use it.*

*When I take time: I give it to them and let them play.
I save time in their names, for them to practice how to
protect it
and spend it on rest.
It has been said that the best things in life are free;
untrue!
The high cost of the best things in life is time!
My progeny will know that time seeds restoration:
how creativity is nurtured by time to play,
how love is deepened by time together,
how revolution needs time to imagine,
how healing and growing are possible and what it takes
to rebuild broken skin and bone.
That wellness is rest is time is wealth.*

FOR YOUR REFLECTION

In this section, we offer questions for reflection based on ideas explored in this issue. You may wish to explore it individually or as part of a group discussion. To submit your reflection for possible inclusion in a future issue of Quest, tear off your answer and mail it back to us using the envelope included in the middle of this issue, or mail a longer reflection separately.

What is your relationship with rest? Does rest feel like resistance to you?

If you would like us to be able to publish or share your writing in the future, remember to include "You have permission to edit and publish my words" somewhere on your submission.



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