

If You Lived Here...

By Daron Larson

Learning to Stay

When I was growing up, our summer vacations were usually opportunities to visit family members who had moved away from Wichita. We knew we weren't in Kansas anymore when the landscape suddenly became three dimensional. When we visited an uncle in Colorado, my parents would wake my brother and me up as soon as they spotted mountain peaks in the distance. When we traveled to Missouri, the centrifugal force created by the winding roads would rock us awake. These contrasts seemed so exotic that we would get caught up in discovering details that seemed so much more interesting than things back home.



I remember seeing real estate advertisements that taunted us with the idea that if we actually lived there, we'd be living the good life without having to go anywhere but out our own front door. A life lived in a land of perpetual vacation sounds great to kids, but adults realize that the magic carpet would wear thin under the ceaseless traipsing of guests through their living room.

Still, we fantasize that vacations and weekends hold the promise of escape from the aspects of life that tend to drain our energy. Some of us are convinced that retirement will mean a permanent break from trouble. But I doubt that the future will really ever be better than what's going on right now. Why not? Because when it arrives, it will be instantly replaced by a newer promise of even better things to come.

One good definition of suffering is the wish for our current circumstances to be different than they are, which means that most of us suffer a great deal of the time. The degree to which we suffer fluctuates based on the gulf between how things are and our idea of a more perfect set of circumstances. The resistance to accepting what is happening right now takes energy. No wonder why so many of us frequently report feeling exhausted.

Mindfulness strategies provide some relief. Not just the kind of temporary relief we might feel from visiting a spa or taking an afternoon nap. With consistent effort, it resembles the kind of relief we feel after we've been consistently exercising and start to notice an increase in physical strength and energy. We get better at attending to what we decide to focus on while letting distractions remain in the background. We also get better at noticing subtle aspects of the things we are touching, feeling, seeing, hearing, tasting, and thinking. And we slowly come to resist the present less by relaxing into whatever is happening without needing it to be drastically different.

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Most of us have trained ourselves to notice discomfort and unpleasant feelings by default. It's a talent born out of the oldest components of the nervous system which has allowed humans to survive as a species. These problems give our minds puzzles to solve. They also reward us with entertaining stories to share from our day. *You'll never guess what happened to me today...*

Learning to find and create restful states can help us struggle less and enjoy life more. Physical relaxation is a restful state in the body. Breaks between scenes on the mental image screen and pauses between internal conversations are restful states in the mind. These restful states occur frequently throughout the day, but most of us don't know how to detect them or get the most benefit from them. Strategies for noticing rest can train us to look for and create rest in the midst of our regular lives: at home, at work, at the gym, and on the road.

When we notice rest, it makes us feel better. This in turn motivates us to focus on it more. We begin looking for opportunities to cultivate concentration in this way. Having some ability to notice, create, and savor rest in the body and mind allows us to experience greater fulfillment from the activities we enjoy when we can let them unfold, flow, and end naturally.

Where can you start looking for restfulness? Don't wait until your next vacation. Give some of these strategies a try today:

- When you are waiting at a red light, see if you can find any relaxation in your jaw or shoulders. If you can't, see what happens if you try to intentionally create relaxation in these places.
- If you find yourself in a boring lecture or meeting, try noticing any relaxation that occurs naturally on each exhale. Don't worry about missing important facts. If you are able to find or create relaxation in these situations, you are likely to discover that you actually retain more of the information but have more energy when it comes time to transition to your next activity. More relaxation means less resistance. Less resistance means more energy conserved.
- The next time someone's cell phone rings in the grocery store, try tuning into your reactions. Explore whether the startle has left any pleasant shivers in its wake. It is not uncommon for a quick burst of frustration, embarrassment, or anger to be followed by subtle waves of relaxation in the body. We're usually too busy thinking about ways to right the injustice to notice.
- If loud noises or conversations are preventing you from thinking or reading, see if you can notice what it feels like in the mind to not have enough attention left to think. We can only pay attention to a finite amount of stimulus at any time. When other people's rants are taking up space, see if you can briefly enjoy how they crowd out your own familiar internal commentaries. This is a challenging one, but even modest success can feel enormous.

If living inside a dream of some elusive future happiness is starting to feel claustrophobic, try a change of scenery. Get curious about looking for restful states where you can find them in the middle of your ordinary routine. And if you can get better at finding them right there where you live, you won't need to wait to get out of town to feel more at home.