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## Margin: Px for Overloaded Lives

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## Margin: Rx for Overloaded Lives

BY SUSAN E. MURRAY

**Y**ears ago, I had the opportunity to learn about creating margin in my life. Physician Richard Swenson identified margin as the space between our load and our limit. It has to do with our reserves. He said if our load is 80 percent filled up (with work, duty, busyness, activities, commitments and obligations — all good things), we still have some margin, some buffer. But if we are 100 percent filled up, we are overloaded.

I immediately identified with the concept of margin. I visualized a sheet of three-ring notebook paper with the fine-lined margins around the outside. Aha! My “life” should be planned to fit within the margins, and the space outside the margins offered buffer. For me, buffer meant leaving five to ten minutes earlier than absolutely necessary, not scheduling appointments right on top of each other, and remembering that things often take longer than we anticipate! Today, I still hold that visual in my mind, and it helps me to allow for and stay committed to keeping margin in my life. Countless times God has used that margin in significant ways!

This is not to imply there aren’t challenges! In a culture that sends the message we should maximize everything and that stress and overload are “normal,” where are we supposed to fit in things like rest, love, caring, giving, empathy, service, compassion, friendship and neighborliness? I believe it depends on our actual, real-life priorities and making choices not to over-schedule our lives.

A few of the other insights I received from Richard are:

- Everything we own owns us, and everything we own will demand a certain amount of our attention, energy, time and finances.
- Saying “yes” to something always means saying “no” to something else.

- We must be ready to allow ourselves to be interrupted by God.

Paul advised us, *Be very careful, then, how you live — not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord’s will is* (Ephesians 5:15–17 NIV). Paul is encouraging us to walk intelligently and not in ignorance, looking around carefully so we don’t stumble. He’s saying we need to be purposeful in our life every day because we live in a sinful world. All around us there are things that interrupt us from our desires to live in balance and to serve wisely and responsibly.

This isn’t to say there aren’t times for doing and daring, for attempting and achieving, for taking risks. We should beware of moments and hours

of ease when we can fall most easily. Paul’s counsel illustrates the importance of Christians having practical wisdom, and Richard illustrated for me the practical wisdom of margin as it relates to time, finances, emotional energy, physical energy and spiritual energy. What a blessing!



Susan E. Murray is a professor emerita of behavioral sciences at Andrews University, certified family life educator, and licensed marriage and family therapist.

\*A 2004 revised version of the book *MARGIN: Prescription for the Pain of Overloaded Lives*, by Richard A. Swenson, is available at <http://www.richardswenson.org>.