

A Minute of Margin: Restoring Balance to Overloaded Lives

Richard A. Swenson

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"I was finishing an evening meeting across town and beginning a migraine at the same time," writes the author. "Meanwhile back home, my wife, Linda, went for a late evening walk. Along the dark street, her crying could be in private." This quiet breakdown was the outcome of the Swensons' living without an indispensable quality that Swenson calls "margin."

What is margin? Swenson, a doctor and former teacher at the University of Wisconsin medical school, defines it as "having breath left at the top of the staircase; money left at the end of the month; and sanity left at the end of adolescence." It is the opposite of overload, stress, and burnout. Margin is simply having breathing room in any given area of one's life.

In this book of 180 daily devotionals, Swenson examines the elements of modern life that tend to destroy margin, including materialism, pride, the intemperate use of certain technologies, inappropriate guilt, and a lack of faith. These things cause people to overwork themselves, destroying their emotional and spiritual well-being and sabotaging their relationships. Swenson's aim is to equip his readers to discipline themselves to rest in God and resist overloading their lives—instead allowing themselves the titular, sanity-preserving "minute of margin."

Each daily reading is centered on a particular theme, such as stress or the sovereignty of God. Swenson begins each devotional with a quotation, then provides his own insight into the day's topic, often using illustrations from his own life or from scientific research. For example, in a section about time management, Swenson compares time-consuming obligations to fruit trees: "Every year the fruit trees in our front yard sprout new branches without even being asked. It seems logical to think that these branches would increase the yield of the trees. ...Counter-intuitively, it is only when I actively prune away unnecessary growth that the trees flourish." He then provides the reader a "prescription"—a practical way of enacting the virtue just extolled, and bringing the proper amount of margin to life. He closes each reading with a proverb.

Swenson's facility for teaching is evident in his easy, engaging manner. Although his writing could be tightened up in places, and additional evidence could be given to bolster certain arguments, Swenson makes his points ably and interestingly. The occasional partially-developed thought, which would in another book be a distracting flaw, here is actually an effective tool for further reflection. Likewise, the author expounds similar messages in separate chapters, but the redundancies are helpful in a devotional context, aiding the reader's memory.

A Minute of Margin provides much-needed direction for Christians who want to simplify, and simultaneously enrich, their overloaded, overstressed, and overworked lives.

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