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Why Are Vacations So Exhausting?

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Why Are Vacations So Exhausting?

Abstract

"What do we mean by 'vacation'? Is vacation about relaxation or adventure? What do we even mean by those terms? Does vacation really give you a break?"

Posting about retreating from every day activities from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/why-are-vacations-so-exhausting/>

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Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service](#) at Dordt College.

Why Are Vacations So Exhausting?

 [all in allthings.org/why-are-vacations-so-exhausting/](http://allthings.org/why-are-vacations-so-exhausting/)

Howard Schaap

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It's 5:00 a.m., but the boys pop out of bed eagerly, as if they've been faking all night and waiting for this moment. They grab their pillows and light blankets which have been readied for exactly this moment; their slippers are ready, as are some favorite stuffed animals. They load all of this into the van and tilt and re-tilt the van seats for maximum comfort. This is a road trip, a vacation, and they are so excited for it that they won't sleep again for another hour, but that doesn't matter. It's the feeling of leaving, of vacating, that is so energizing, and whenever they drift off into sleep—or don't—it will be comfortable and somehow freeing.

I know this feeling because I remember it: the strangeness of the early morning departure, of feeling so free and yet safe within the community of a family vehicle. As an adult, this feeling gets a little harder to reproduce. On the one hand I feel responsible for recreating the wonder of family vacays for my kids; on the other, the ideal of that so free vacation seems to retreat farther and farther into the distance.

So what do we mean by “vacation”? Is vacation about relaxation or adventure? What do we even mean by those terms? Does vacation really give you a break?

It seems to me that there are at least a couple of poles to this topic. On the one extreme, we connect “vacation” and “relaxation.” We think that “vacation” means “vacant,” empty. The ideal of this type of vacation is the all-inclusive ease where as much as possible is done for us and we put our feet up and do nothing. This type of vacation is often impersonal, about anonymity and escape from most everything we know except for a few hand-picked companions. It's dependent on paying resort owners to take care of us, and it's why the resort industry exists. It might be a symptom of us being overstimulated in most of our lives that all we want to do is to give people money that we might do nothing in some sort of ideal environment. Because we find the rest of our lives so fraught, we don't want to see relatives or work at a vacation; we just want escape. The hope is that finding neutral will still us just enough to fill us for return to the workaday world.

The other pole is the vacation you work at: the one you plan for, the one you carefully schedule, accounting for each meal, filling each day with enough activities to maximize the experience. Magic Kingdom one day, Epcot the next, Hollywood Studios the next. Or white water rafting, hiking, horseback riding. Or the busyness of the plain old work of camping: packing, meal prep, clean up. Each of these can be exhausting in its own way. However, the hope is that either the change of pace and scenery or the shared intensity of experiences will be filling, perhaps especially in the shared memories, good or bad—who doesn't remember disastrous vacations?—we make with our families or friends.

Both poles, I think, could potentially point to the problems of overstimulation. In the first case, we're so overstimulated we seek a vegetative state. In the second, we seek out overstimulation because what else is there?

Historically, “vacations” functioned a bit differently, I think, in that they were often dictated by finances and families. You went to visit relatives in another place and perhaps made day trips to the surrounding attractions, or just spent time with them in their space, making memories and getting in each other's hair until coming home felt like freedom.

This is another aspect of “vacation.” We “vacate” ultimately to return. In literature, the goal of any hero's journey is to go out, have experiences that change us, and then return with our changed selves to better the place from which we came. The same can be said for vacation. Even if we return with tales of eating smoked gator, vacation and travel widens our experiences, connects us with others, cross-pollinates ideas. In this sense, there can be good vacation or travel and bad vacation or travel.

Scott Russell Sanders, in a talk he gave about travel titled “[The Geography of Somewhere](#),” warns us first about “the geography of nowhere.” When we center vacations around malls, for example, we’re in danger of going somewhere that looks exactly like the places we’re used to—the same stores, the same fashions, the same food court and architecture, all within a very narrow range of variation. In travel like this, we’re not cross-pollinating ideas; we’re just going to more of the same.

Instead, Sanders admonishes us to go to “a real place” marked by architecture that emerges from the geography, a strong local economy and art scene and food culture, and history both preserved and alive in “festivals and folkways and habits of speech.” When we travel to such places, we are more likely to return changed, and “to nurture similar qualities back home.”

Central to Sanders’ vision for travel and central also to what I believe we all seek in “vacation” is simply a way to be filled.

In place of “vacation,” my European in-laws use the word “holiday.” It’s a helpful word, I think, in that it doesn’t place the emphasis on *place*, on leaving or relocating, but on *time*. A holiday is a day or week or month for freedom or celebration or relaxation, whether we’re staying home or traveling across the world.

For me, “holiday” is a word that seems more in line with a concept of Sabbath. As we come into the holiday of God’s grace, it transforms how we see the world and emphasizes the goodness and wonder of it. It invites me to look on experiences with new eyes, even when returning to my “normal” life.

During your next vacation, how might you best experience it as the holiday of God’s grace?