

# DARE TO REST

By Kirk Byron Jones

**"In life we are called to play together and we are called to solo. One thing is certain, whether it be in concert with others or in a solo, all music, planned and improvised, requires pauses. Where there are no rests, there is no music."**



On a Tuesday evening in late August 2001, Pulitzer Prize winner trumpeter and composer Wynton Marsalis was playing at the Village Vanguard, one of the world's most famous jazz clubs. David Hajdu was there to see, hear, and relay this extraordinary moment:

He played a ballad, "I Don't Stand a Ghost of a Chance with You," unaccompanied. Written by Victor Young, a film-score composer, for a 1930s romance, the piece can bring out the sadness in any scene, and Marsalis appeared deeply attuned to its melancholy. He performed the song in murmurs and sighs, at points nearly talking the words in notes. It was a wrenching art of creative expression. When he reached the climax, Marsalis played the final phrase, the title statement, in declarative tones, allowing each successive note to linger in the air a bit longer. "I don't stand...a ghost...of... a...chance..." The room was silent until, at the most dramatic point, someone's cell phone went off, blaring a rapid singsong melody in electronic bleeps.

People started giggling and picking up their drinks. The moment—the whole performance—unraveled. Marsalis paused for a beat, motionless, and his eyebrows arched. I scrawled on a sheet of notepaper, MAGIC, RUINED. The cell-phone offender scooted into the hall as the chatter in the room grew louder. Still frozen at the microphone, Marsalis replayed the silly cell-phone melody note for note. Then he repeated it, and began improvising variations on the tune. The audience slowly came back to him. In a few minutes he resolved the improvisation, which had changed keys once or twice and throttled down to a ballad tempo, and ended up exactly where he had left off: "with... you..." The ovation was tremendous.

With all due respect to Marsalis' magnificent gift and skill, I think the key to his memorable recovery that evening is captured in two words situated in the middle of Hajdu's recollection: "Marsalis paused."

Each of us has a song to play in this life. Our song is distinct and unique to us. Our songs may be similar, but no two songs are exactly alike as no two persons are exactly alike. In life we are called to play together and we are called to solo. One thing is certain, whether it be in concert with others or in a solo, all music, planned and improvised, requires pauses.

Where there are no rests, there is no music.

It's not easy to rest in a world that sometimes seems to despise it. The roots of such disdain can be found among influential religious reflections. A well-known historic saint of the Christian Church once prayed for strength "to fight and not to heed the wounds, to toil and not to seek for rest." A highly respected leadership guru lists "rest" in a group of obstructions to genuine growth and development. He warns, "If the idea of having to change ourselves makes us uncomfortable, we can remain as we are. We can choose rest over labor, entertainment over education, delusion over truth, and doubt over confidence." A recent newspaper article celebrated the accomplishments of a local citizen by running a story with the headline: "Who needs sleep? Not this busy mom."

In his book *Crazy Busy: Overstretched, Overbooked, and About to Snap*, Dr. Edward Hallowell draws the following conclusion: "Being too busy is a persistent and pestering problem, one that is leading tens of millions of Americans to feel as if they were living in swarm of gnats constantly taking bites out of their lives. All the screaming and swatting in the world does not make them go away."

The great pastor and author, Howard Thurman, once said: "[Chronic] busyness is a substitute for the hard won core of direction and commitment." In the words of that great Motown spiritual, "What Becomes of the Broken-Hearted," it is possible to be "always moving and going nowhere."

When we go and go and perceive rest to be more of a threat than a treat, real menaces arise, none greater than the one identified in the following testimony:

One morning, hurtling from my desk toward the photocopier, I passed a roomful of colleagues just about to start a meeting. There was someone I needed to talk to. I saw immediately that he wasn't among them, but I put my head in the door before they could begin, and in a very loud, urgent voice, I said, "Has anyone seen David?"

There was a moment of stunned incomprehension, which to my amazement, quickly dissolved into table-thumping laughter. My comic timing must have been impeccable, because the whole room was soon helpless, repeating what I had said and generally behaving like the pig-ignorant fools other people seem to be when the joke is at our expense. I looked back at them blankly, the truth dawning as I looked. "Has anyone seen David?" might seem an innocuous question in most organizations, but I happened to be the only David who worked under that particular roof. I

realized the forlorn and public stupidity of my request and forced myself, after a wide-eyed moment, to laugh with them. Inside, I was dying. I was looking for David, all right, and I couldn't find him. In fact, I hadn't seen him for a long time. I was looking for a David who had disappeared under a swampy morass of stress and speed.

So confesses David Whyte in his book, *Crossing the Unknown Sea: Work as a Pilgrimage to Identity*.

Graduates, I join the many who dare you to dream big and do even bigger. But, even more, in the moment that is this moment, I dare you to rest.

I dare you to manufacture your own shut-down systems.

I dare you to create your own ways of pausing.

I dare you to, in the wise words of the poet, Mary Oliver, find ways "to enter the place of not-thinking, not-remembering, and not-wanting."

I dare you to give your body and brain the rests they deserve and need.

Here are "four Ps" for you to remember should you so dare:

**1. PERMISSION.** If you don't value your rest, no one else will. You have to become convinced of the meaning and value for rest in your own life. You have to become persuaded that you are a better person with rest than you are without rest. Convince yourself that rest leads to peace, peace leads to clarity, and clarity leads to creativity. Should you begin to feel guilty and selfish about making more time for nothing, dare to believe that the deeper selfishness is not giving yourself such time. As long as you remain "crazy busy" you insure that the world, including those nearest and dearest to you, will never behold you at your finest. That would be selfish. You have to rest to be your best.

**2. PLANNING.** Schedule daily and weekly times of rest and leisure, and be open to the unscheduled graces of free time to simply be. Planning them with the same intent that you plan your work signals to your consciousness, and just as importantly to your unconscious mind, that rest is as important to you as anything else in your life. You have to rest to be your best.

**3. PRACTICE.** Don't just plan your rest and leisure, but live it. Real change involves more than knowing you need to change, wanting to, and planning to. As valuable as they are, authentic change transcends awareness and desire. Real change is actually choosing to be different, to live different. And, sustaining true change involves trusting your transformation beyond all fear and suffering.

**4. PERSONHOOD.** Know that having regular periods of rest and relaxation helps you to remember that you are infinitely more than what you do. I hope you don't mind me saying to you from the window of my Christian faith tradition that you are God's "fabulous you" apart from any accomplishment or achievement. God cannot love you any more than God loves you right

now, not because of anything you have done or will do. Such divine affirmation can relax you in amazing ways. Among other things, it will help you to avoid the mad rush of living for acceptance and embrace the sweet peace of living from acceptance.

There is a story told of the musk deer of north India. In the springtime, the roe is haunted by the odor of musk. He runs wildly over hill and ravine with his nostrils dilating and his little body throbbing with desire, sure that around the next clump of trees or bush he will find musk, the object of his quest. Then at last he falls, exhausted, with his little head resting on his tiny hoofs, only to discover that the odor of musk is in his own hide.

*This Baccalaureate address was delivered at the University of Pennsylvania, May 2009.*