

Sacred Saturdays, Deep Work & Other Ideas to Foster Creativity and Relaxation

Laurie Cook | Feb 13th, 2022

Learning to live in a healthy way that embraces different levels of energy, moods and various emotions has been a lifelong journey for me. I am a mother, daughter, sister, wife, activist, community developer and educator, person who lives with a mental illness, and a Ph.D. student in Educational Studies. As part of a course called *Contemporary Educational Theory*, Dr. Ashwani Kumar asked us to find an activity to help us relax, practice using it on a regular basis, and journal about what we experienced while doing this. At the same time, I happened upon a book called *Deep Work* by Cal Newport. This book also encouraged me to re-think my usual ways of working, and my thinking around the value of self-care. I knew if I was going to do a Ph.D., work and have some sort of life, I needed to 'work smarter, not harder.' What I learned during this time helped me find a new 'rhythm' to my life that has made a significant difference in my approach to life, work and schoolwork.

The book, *Deep Work*, suggests a variety of ways to think differently about work. Two methods I found particularly helpful were creating a work schedule that included chunking 'shallow' administrative tasks together that don't need as much deep thinking, and then allowing for larger 'chunks' of time for work that enables the brain to go really deep on a particular idea. Newport also advocates for developing a routine that gives the brain time to 'recover' and change from one type of work to another to address the challenge of 'attention residue.' Newport says this happens when we change focus from one topic to another. He says our brains need time to adjust to new topics; especially when working on a variety of tasks that include 'shallow work' such as emails, social media, organizational tasks, and 'deeper work' involving reading and writing. Newport says we can be more creative, innovative, and effective with deep work if we allow for longer periods of time to focus on that work.

My schedule for school during this time meant I had classes twice a week in the afternoons, so my goal was to stop regular work early, go for a walk to get rid of any 'attention residue' before doing attending classes or doing schoolwork. I was also going to group various 'shallow' administrative tasks related to work together more during the week. I thought this would help me feel more on top of things, but it didn't work. I felt like the chunks of time for deep work weren't long enough, and during the week there was just too much 'stuff' going on in my head to be able to focus properly for schoolwork. So, I decided to change things to enable me to focus on regular work during the week, have a full day break on Saturdays and then be able to focus fully on school on Sundays.

So, Saturdays became 'sacred' time for me to spend with family and friends and being in nature. This enabled me to clear out any 'residue' from the week past, and rest and reenergize for each new week to come. It was amazing how much fresher I felt on Sundays to focus specifically on schoolwork. These were long days, but it worked. I was doing the best work I had ever done in school, and I felt less stressed out during the week doing regular work. Spending time with family became a key part of 'sacred' Saturdays, and a great opportunity to get away from the house and my home office where I worked once the Covid-19 pandemic hit and did all my schoolwork too.

One memorable day trip on a Saturday early in the Fall, my husband and I went down to the Annapolis Valley in Nova Scotia, Canada to spend time at a winery. We tried out wine. We walked in the vineyard. It was

beautiful, and it was times like these that I really tried to just let my mind be in the moment. I found making time for me, when I just moved in my body and focused on absorbing the feelings I had being in nature and being with whoever I was with, critical. I also had much less anxiety about doing my Ph.D. so late in life and



wondering how I was going to juggle everything. Early in the program, I felt very anxious about any time I spent not working, reading, or writing. Again, I noticed after making time for relaxation, I was fresher, more energized, and able to focus better on whatever I needed to do each week.

Other things I did included walks with my sister on the rail trail in our area. One of the fun aspects of this was to see various rocks that people in our neighbourhood had painted and distributed along the trail. Every day there were different ones with cute images or little sayings like 'mind over matter.' In the time of Covid, these little connections with people in community were also very valuable.



Other times I would enjoy the beach with my mother and daughter, or my daughter and her new husband. Sometimes the weather was grey. Sometimes it created the most beautiful golden light. This time with family and in nature combined to really help me break patterns of anxiety, worry, and obsession with

various pieces of work or schoolwork. The more I made time specifically for relaxation, the more I felt my spirits lift and myself free to just be in the moment.



I was also very grateful for time with my children during this period and tried to spend as much time as possible with them. Both have recently finished their post-secondary education and started their work lives. Because of Covid-19, they decided to live with us to save money. Again, we are lucky we have enough space for them to be with us but have their own space as well. My daughter and husband in a basement apartment, and my son in a tiny house that I was fixing up to be an Air B&B space. So, we all have our own spaces, but we also see each other often just passing through the house and for meals. It is a lovely opportunity for us to see them and hear about what's going on in their lives in a way that otherwise likely would not have been the case if not for the pandemic.



I'm also very grateful we live in a rural area with such easy access to nature. Directly behind our house, our son, daughter, and her husband have built lovely trails in the woods. Even on weekdays, during the Fall I would try to take breaks at the end of a workday as well to get outside for a quick walk. Even if I only have half an hour I can get out and be fully immersed in nature very quickly. As the light fades earlier and earlier in Autumn, again and again this has been a huge boon to enable me to be a world away from work and school within minutes.



This access to nature, my family and a better sense of how I can structure my time more effectively so that it includes time for deep work has been very special. I feel much more at peace and more productive when I make time for just doing nothing. In these moments I often take pictures to help me remember the sights, smells, and feel of the air. As I move through these moments, I find my mind quiets more quickly now. I don't try to control my thoughts, I just let them go where they like. I focus instead on just 'being present' in the world.

I have learned that making time for being in nature, prioritizing self, family, and friends, and

developing a 'rhythm' to my days that allows for periods of no work, and times for deeper work, has really made a difference in my ability to have new ideas, make connections, be creative and be healthy. In the past, I have not been as deliberate in making time to enjoy the easy access I have to nature and enable it to help 'heal' me when I need that. I have learned the time I spend not working is just as crucial, even more so, than the time I spend doing anything else. Without this time, in nature and with my family, I could not do the many other things I do. I can honestly say this is one of the happiest, most fulfilled, and productive times of my life, despite the circumstances of the pandemic. And yet, I do not try to 'be happy' every day either. Instead, if I feel melancholy or sad, that's fine. I let myself go with that. I listen more to my body now, and if I feel a particular emotion or mood overwhelming me, I just go with it. I don't fight such things like I used to. It's as if I now have 'permission' to not have to be busy all the time. With this learning, I find myself enjoying the little moments of life more. Each day is a treasure, and I try to 'be present' more. I have a strong awareness of being in the later years of my life, but I am not bothered by this. I feel less pressure to 'accomplish' things. I feel more at peace with whatever each day brings. That does not mean I don't feel stress at times or have some tough days still, but I am better at recognizing them and understanding the need for proactive self-care to deal with them.