The Laziness Trap

by ANDY FARMER

When I was growing up, I had a fixation with the Frankenstein monster. It started by watching old Boris Karloff films on Saturday afternoon TV. But I would feed the fixation by saving up my money to buy monster magazines at the local five-and-ten-cent store. I remember sitting at my desk for hours, carefully copying the pictures in the magazine, trying to draw Frankenstein in exact and frightening detail.

I loved to lay awake at night and plot escape plans out of my house if Frankenstein ever made it to my neighborhood. I imagined hearing him bursting through the front door while I was alone in my house. I had just enough time to run downstairs to the basement, taking advantage of the fact that Frankenstein didn’t know the layout of my house like I did. Then, I’d run out the basement door, jump the fence into my neighbor’s yard, and run down to the creek at the bottom of the hill. From there I would crawl through the drainage culvert under the street and emerge on the other side, safe under the cover of the woods. The key to my whole plan was to never

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let myself get trapped where I didn’t have a way of escape.

I think back on those idyllic days when all I had to worry about was being trapped by fake monsters. But as we grow, we realize that there are plenty of real things around us that can feel like traps. Pressures and responsibilities in life. Health concerns. Family trials. Financial burdens. To feel trapped means we see no means of escape or release, and little hope for anything to change. As I do pastoral counseling, I often meet people who feel trapped in their problems, relationships or bad habits. And, true confession: I myself have been trapped. This article is about one trap I know inside and out—the laziness trap.

The laziness trap may seem pretty benign compared to other traps, such as addiction to alcohol or pornography. But it is no fake monster. In its own way, laziness ensnares and controls people in habits that span decades. It lays waste to people’s potential in life. As one writer described it, “Laziness grows on people; it begins in cobwebs and ends in iron chains.”1 People caught in the laziness trap know its dark side. They know the gnawing despair of regret—a life of unfulfilled dreams, failed plans, and disappointed loved ones. They feel stuck and weighed down, like prisoners of their own lives.

That’s how I felt. I knew I was lazy and I knew it was a problem, but it just felt like it would be too hard to change. I felt hopeless. But I finally got to a point when I decided that wasting my life isn’t living. It’s just getting used to being stuck.

But how do you get out of the laziness trap? How do you even begin to change when you feel so stuck? I will outline the path to freedom that I walked and have helped others walk along as well. To do that, I will show how the Bible reframed my understanding of laziness and suggest a way forward based on key passages in Hebrews and Romans.

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Laziness Can Hide in Plain Sight

It’s not always obvious to see who struggles with laziness. If you observed my life over time, you might not have said, “That’s a lazy guy.” I was a busy pastor working six days a week, caring for the needs of hundreds of people along with the daily administrative tasks of running a church, with nary a golf-outing in sight. I was a husband and father of four, riding herd on the competing agendas of church activities, school, sports, and the management of home and family life. On the surface I might have seemed busy, even productive. But for years I wasted gifts and opportunities in the pursuit of comfort and ease. Though my days were filled with activity, my heart was committed to idleness. I wanted to keep up with my responsibilities, but I also wanted to kick back and do nothing. This tug-of-war permeated my daily life.

If you were to get a close-up view of it you would see the disarray of a heart committed to procrastination. Lazy people are skilled at avoiding things that feel like pressure or duty. I survived college because the only class details that mattered were due dates and the day before due dates. Tardiness, a telltale sign of laziness, is a frontier I’ve spent a lifetime exploring. And I am very familiar with what the monks in the early Christian era called “the noontime demon,” the tendency to seek relaxation when you should be working. I have two favorite recliners in my house—and one is right next to my bed.

Lazy people aren’t very time-conscious. I can amuse and distract myself through a traffic jam or flight delay without any sense of lost time. I don’t even need a smart phone to do it. I am my own endless distraction. It’s not hard for me to identify with Mark Twain’s description of himself: “I have seen slower people than I am—and more deliberate . . . and even quieter, and more listless, and lazier people than I am. But they were dead.”

The first time I was aware of my laziness, I was reading about the tree sloth (itself a revealing window into my endless distractibility). I discovered that what the tree sloth does best is sleep. I love to sleep; in fact, it may be what I do best. I can sleep almost anywhere, any time. I once experimented to see

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2 Mark Twain, as quoted by James Edward Caron in *Unsanctified Newspaper Reporter* (Columbia: The Curators of the University of Missouri, 2008), 287.