

Take your Life Back by Peter Bregman

□The waiter was halfway through taking my family's order when his manager called him away.

□"Where did the waiter go?" Sophia, our seven-year-old, asked.

□Daniel, our five-year old, looked at me and then answered, "I think he had to take a conference call."

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□Even before hearing Daniel's analysis of the waiter's momentary inattention, I knew I had a problem: I work all the time.

□I moved from an outside office to a home office because I wanted to spend more time with my family. But now I'm always in my home office. I briefly emerge for moments like dinner and telling bedtime stories, but quickly return "just to finish up a couple of things." I love my work, but it's out of hand.

□I desperately need to relax, read fiction, and hang out with people I enjoy. But the undertow draws me back to my ocean of tasks, with promises of crossing things off lists and bolstering my self-worth with proof of productivity.

□Unfortunately our psychological weaknesses are fed by our unmitigated access to the work stream. It's an old story now: we thought our technologies — laptops, smartphones, email — would free us from being stuck to the office but it's backfired: the office is now stuck to us.

□We have lost our boundaries. Space used to be a natural demarcation; when you left your office you left your work. But our work spaces have lost their walls.

□We need new walls.

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□The table is set beautifully — our nicest white tablecloth, silver candlesticks, braided bread, silver cups (some filled with wine, some with grape juice), and a delicious-smelling meal.

□It is Friday night, and we are ushering in the Jewish Sabbath with Kiddush.

□The Kiddush prayer tells the story of God creating the world in six days and resting on the seventh. When we light the candles and sing Kiddush, we mark a shift — from mundane time to holy time — as we commit to resting on the seventh day too.

□As I sit at the festive meal with my family and friends, I don't even consider checking email or taking a phone call. Finally, after a busy work week, I begin to relax. During the 24-hour period of the Sabbath, observant Jews disconnect 100% from anything even remotely related to work. And one thing I've noticed is that while the world goes on, it's never hard to catch up.

□Friday night Kiddush is like punching in the Sabbath time clock. Then, on Saturday night, another ceremony, called Havdallah (meaning separation), marks the end of the Sabbath. Havdallah is like punching out the Sabbath time clock.

□These time-based rituals are necessary because the Sabbath is a time-based experience unrelated to space. It's observed wherever you happen to be when the Sabbath starts.

□In other words, physical walls are irrelevant. Instead, Jews rely on symbolic walls, marked not by stone but by ceremony, separating time from time, work from rest, mundane from holy.

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□Whether or not we go outside to a physical office, our physical work walls have collapsed.

□Which has made me realize that I need a marker — a ritual that punches my time clock — to delineate work from non-work.

□To acknowledge the start of my work day, I will light a candle and say a short prayer asking for guidance and strength to act with integrity.

□At the end of the day, I will light a candle again, and, as I go over the day in my head, I will offer a prayer of thanks.

□I won't "clock in" until after my children have left for school. And after I "clock out" I won't touch work until I light my candle the next morning. If you email me after my prayer of thanks, I won't get the email until my prayer for guidance the next morning.

□If you want to do this with me, I would suggest that you perform your ritual religiously,

though it doesn't have to be religious. It could be something you say to yourself, a song you listen to, time you take to write in your journal, a meditation, a mark on a piece of paper, an object you move, or anything that, for you, signifies a separation between work and not work.

After you have ritually left work, have the courage to really leave it. Let your computer and phone idle while you live a little. And there's even a work upside too: You'll be fresher when you get back to work, more productive knowing you have to be because work will stop, and more creative as you integrate non-work ideas into your work life.

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A few days ago, I walked into Daniel and Sophia's room where Daniel was typing on a pretend laptop that Sophia had made out of construction paper.

"Hey Daniel, whatcha doin' buddy?" I asked him.

"One minute," he said to me as he continued to type without looking up from the paper computer, "I'm almost done."

I felt like laughing and crying at the same time.

"I'll wait," I finally said, "and when you're done, let's both shut our computers and put them away for the night, OK?"

Our lives depend on it.