

# Confessions of a Recovering Busyness Addict



## *How God's Relentless Love Calmed My Chaotic Life*

By Fil Anderson

**S**ometimes the only way to get a new life is by running your old one completely into the ground. Twenty years ago, that's what happened to me.

For years, I'd been hooked on approval and driven by an insatiable longing to make my mark as a spiritual leader. My life became a whirlwind of activity that garnered praise and admiration, yet bore unintended but horrific consequences. I became a player in the kingdom enterprise and lost myself along the way.

As I reflect on my life back then, I'm reminded of the tragic death of professional golfer Payne Stewart and the friends who died with him. Had I been watching as their plane taxied to the runway for takeoff, I would have without a doubt been impressed with the jet's sleekness and style. Looking up after takeoff, I would have commented on how nice it'd be to travel with such ease. I would also have been unaware that something was dreadfully wrong on the inside of that powerful aircraft.

Departing central Florida, the Learjet flew a ghostly journey halfway across the country, its windows iced over and its occupants apparently incapacitated, before spiraling nose first into a grassy field. Everyone aboard was killed.

This dreadful image serves well as a metaphor of my life 20 years ago. To the casual observer, my life appeared quite good. I was flying high. My work was highly commended, and it wasn't all for show. Good things were being accomplished.

But something was wrong inside me. My life—like the Learjet on autopilot—had become a ghostly journey, as I maintained a deadly course with a debilitated soul. My ability to see clearly had become nil, my family and friends' efforts to get me to change course were disregarded or

denied, and my last bit of fuel was being exhausted. I was obsessed with helping others have the kind of relationship with God I'd never known.

The noise, busyness and hurry that marked my life had slowly but surely dulled my senses, leaving me deaf to God's caring voice and numb to God's loving touch. My life had become ripped apart by the relentlessly competing demands of my career and home, wife and children, friends and family, who persistently asked for more than I ever felt capable of giving.

My hopes for the future were haunted by the blunders in my past. My fretful yearning to get my life right was dogged by the nagging fear that it'd never happen, given the fact that I was hopelessly flawed.

Late at night, while my wife Lucie and our children slept, I'd lie awake fearing I'd come to the end of my rope. My despair was the by-product of the life I'd created for my family and myself. It hadn't emerged overnight. What finally came crashing down was the result of years of persistent striving. While attempting to enable others to encounter God, I'd succumbed to the power of my compulsions and illusions. The lifestyle that appeared to enhance my companionship with God had become instead a terrible threat.

My life was in jeopardy, but most days it was easy to ignore the danger, as I was constantly being refueled by the approval of others. Plus, the warning signs came slowly; however, the results were nonetheless lethal.

My life was plagued by the barrenness of busyness. Yet my crisis was more than a cluster of time-management and boundary issues. Fueling my chaotic pace were deeply rooted and terribly distorted ideas about God, myself, and how to live my life *with* God instead of *for* God.

### **A World Stuck on Fast Forward**

The damaging effect of living in a society teeming with values, stresses and temptations about achievement, security and contentment is enormous. Busyness, one of our society's most destructive and fraudulent virtues, had led me to believe there was always something I needed to be doing. Living

in the illusion that amid the busyness I'd find the approval for which my heart intensely yearned, my life lent credence to Søren Kierkegaard's understanding that "The press of busyness is like a charm...Its power swells." As my addiction to busyness was consummated, my soul was becoming decimated.

The bizarre truth is that as much as I complained about it, I actually craved busyness. Partly because when I was busy, I didn't have to think about deeper matters that haunted me. More than anything, busyness made me feel important, even necessary. Thus my busyness became the basis for my significance

My life was precariously *filled* and *unfulfilled*. The destructive overload expressed itself in a simple pattern:

- Overscheduled at work,
- Underscheduled at home, and
- Unscheduled with God.

Busyness became my identity. How others appraised my work (and consequently appraised me) became the single most essential value in my life. While worrying about how I'd ever be able to meet the expectations imposed on me by others and mostly by myself, I lived with profound loneliness, fear, frustration and disappointment. Always busy, I was rarely content or at home with myself.

My greatest fear became the threat of having the incongruity in my life exposed. The saddest part was that I had no idea where these unsettling feelings were coming from. And even if I'd wanted to explore their origins, the chaotic pace never provided enough time to step back and allow the feelings to fully surface.

### **Flawed Images**

I'm convinced that my need for constant busyness was deeply rooted in my terribly flawed impressions of God, images of my own making. My default nature was set to believe that God's acceptance, love and care for me were directly proportional to my level of activity for God. This belief system—"the more I do for God, the more God will love me"—dictated my busyness more than anything else. And it was effectively destroying my soul.

Looking back, I can see myself grow-

ing up with an image of a God who was at all times angry with me. I concluded that the best way to respond to an angry God was to earn His approval.

Ignorant of God's unconditional love and care, my feelings became the only yardstick for measuring success or failure. I thought of God as someone I controlled. I could make God angry, sad or happy simply by choosing how to act. If I did enough good things, God was happy. If I fouled up enough, God was angry. The truth that God loved me just as I was, without my doing a thing for him, seemed too good to be true.

My life became a collection of symptoms of a soul that had fallen into serious neglect. I was what author Parker Palmer calls a "functional atheist." Although I spoke of God as being powerful and in control, my actions told a different story. Either God didn't exist or was seriously under the weather.

I was living in the illusion that unless I was making it happen, nothing was happening. Not only had my life become grossly misshapen by misguided ideas of a "too-small God," an equally erroneous perception of a "too-big me" made matters worse. Once established, my misguided views made arrogance second nature...and my life dangerously chaotic.

### **Divine "Madness"**

Eventually, I began to recognize how terribly flawed was my concept of God. With unrivaled grace and finesse, God, whose love knows no boundary or breaking point, began ravishing me with an ever-growing awareness of his divine madness. The evidence became overwhelmingly convincing; God is hopelessly in love with me.

Nothing I do will ever cause God to love me more and nothing I do will ever cause God to love me less. The most scandalous reality of my life is that my incalculable value is to Jesus completely unrelated to my performance.

My life has been saved from the killing power of busyness as I've gotten to know God through Jesus Christ. Nothing has more effectively calmed the raging pace of my once chaotic life than knowing the love in God's heart for me. And it's saved others from my hurtful ways, and me from self-destruction.

## My Road to Recovery

Yet, I must be truthful. To this day, I'm as vulnerable as a recovering alcoholic working in a liquor store. I've begun many days with a fresh resolve to resist the lure of busyness, only to discover I'm not as strong as I thought I was. The only road to my recovery is accepting God's acceptance of me. I must remember that God's immense love for me is the sole thing that establishes, governs and maintains my personal worth. Knowing I'm God's beloved is not merely a nice idea, worthy goal or inspirational thought. It's the truest and most important thing about me.

I've also discovered in Jesus a perfect role model. Among the many instructive and encouraging things He's spoken to me, these words are some of my favorite:

*Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay any-*

*thing heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly.* Matthew 11:28-30 *The Message*

Occasionally, those who know my story ask a simple question, "How has your changed heart changed the once chaotic rhythm of your life?"

Immediately, I realize the answer isn't that simple. The most significant changes don't appear on the surface of my life but deep within. My days were once spent impersonating the person I believed I had to be to gain God's approval. Today, my schedule more accurately reflects the person I truly am.

Because I'm less concerned with the approval of others, my schedule is less crowded with things I once relied on to earn their respect and fill my empty heart. I now enjoy the freedom to say "yes" to opportunities that produce gladness in my heart and a greater freedom to say "no," even if it's a good thing I've been invited to do. This doesn't necessarily mean I'm less busy. It simply means there's now time for vitally important things that before were con-

stantly being squeezed out of my chaotic life. Simply stated, my life's become more congruent.

These days my calendar reflects scheduled time for rest, play, family, friends and prayer. There's even time for "wasting time," often useful in exposing the absurd illusion of my indispensability. Today I revel in the truth spoken to me years ago: "Fil, God loves you too much for you to ever become necessary."

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