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The Leader's Sabbatical

A Framework of Rest



The 90% Nobody Talks About

The startup failure rate is roughly 90%. We celebrate the founders who make it: the case studies, the podcast tours, the Series A announcements. We absolutely should.

But nobody asks about the other 90%.

And I'm using that number loosely, because the pattern I'm describing isn't exclusive to startups that failed. It shows up in the executive who quietly carried a division through five years of pressure and is now stepping back. The nonprofit leader who poured herself into a cause until there was nothing left to pour. The operator who has been holding an organization together for longer than anyone realizes. The entrepreneur who exited, or was forced out, or simply stopped, and found that the absence of the work was more disorienting than the work ever was. The category matters less than the pattern: sustained output, high stakes, and a particular kind of tired that doesn't respond to a long weekend.

One thing nobody prepares you for is how lonely the arrival feels, on either side. A founder I know whose company was acquired sat at a dinner with friends celebrating the close and said: "It doesn't matter if it had been a 20X return or a total loss. It's lonely as a celebration, it's lonely as a loss. The Lord feels like the only one you can fully celebrate with." That's not a failure of community. It's the shape of the territory. The CEO finishing a hard turnaround feels this too. So does the nonprofit director who finally stepped back. The loneliness isn't a sign something went wrong. It's what the journey actually feels like.

I know what happened to me. Eden Green, a vertical farming company I co-founded and led for years, wound down in 2025. We made it to the big game and lost. Good team. Right play. Still came up short.

What nobody warns you about is what comes after. Not the financial reconstruction. Not the next thing. The internal wreckage. The kind of tired that sleep doesn't fix.

My spiritual director and coach, Chuck Gschwend, gave me language for it in our first session together: soul-weary. Different from bone-weary, which is what happens after a hard week. Soul-weariness is what accumulates when you've been running at full tilt for years, sustained output, constant justification to investors and boards and yourself, emotional labor without end, and then the engine finally stops.

I wasn't looking for a sabbatical. I stumbled into one. And what I found was that I, as someone who had written about sabbath rhythms, studied rest, advised friends to slow down, had absolutely no idea how to actually do it.

Two weeks after the Eden Green announcement, I showed up at a gathering of operators and investors. Trevor, a dear friend, observed afterward: "You were not about you at all. You were at peace." What was actually true: I didn't feel peace. But I felt permission, permission to stop performing the search, to not gin up conversations that led somewhere, to just be present without it meaning anything. That distinction matters more than it sounds. Sabbatical is not felt peace. It's permission to stop.

This guide is what I wish someone had handed me.

Why you think you can't (and what that's costing you)

The two objections are always the same: I don't have the time, and I can't afford it. Both are worth taking seriously. Extended time away from a business, or from the search for the next one, has real costs. Opportunity cost, financial cost, the cost to a team that's been depending on you. I'm not dismissing that.

But the accounting is incomplete. The real question isn't what the sabbatical costs. It's what it costs you to not stop.

A 2023 Harvard Business Review study on professionals who took sabbaticals found that people 'largely experienced significant, positive changes in their work and life.' The data isn't the argument, but for founders who need permission from evidence before they give themselves permission to rest, it's worth knowing.

For most founders who've been running at full capacity for years, burnout isn't coming, it's already here, managed and deferred and medicated with momentum. The next thing. The next sprint. The next version of the plan. Sustained output without genuine cessation doesn't just deplete you, it changes the quality of your thinking, the texture of your relationships, the range of what you can feel. You adapt to the depletion. You stop noticing it. That's the sign.

And you don't know what you're missing because you've never not been in it.

Here's what I didn't see coming from my own: The first thing that surfaced wasn't clarity. It was grief. Grief I'd been routing through the next project. Naming it made room for everything else. The second was that my identity was more entangled with my title than I'd admitted. I knew it abstractly. I didn't know it in my body until the role was gone. The third surprised me most: what I most wanted to build next didn't emerge from a strategic exercise. It emerged from what kept coming up when the noise finally cleared. Not a plan. A question. Then the same question again. Then the outline of something worth doing. This guide is partly that.

The mid-life crisis that catches high performers in their forties isn't a character flaw. It's what happens when you've been building identity through output long enough that the engine eventually coughs. The only question is whether you meet that moment intentionally, in a container you chose, or reactively, in a way that costs you and your family far more than the sabbatical ever would have.

One more reality worth naming: founders are mimetic by nature. They track what peers are raising, building, pursuing. Choosing rest when everyone in your orbit is sprinting is a countercultural act, not retreat. Luke Burgis, writing on mimetic desire, calls the decision to choose leisure an anti-mimetic act: a deliberate refusal to want what the room appears to want. That refusal is harder than it sounds when your identity has been built on reading the room correctly.

On time and money: the guide that follows addresses both. The short version is that sabbatical isn't one thing. It's a ladder, from one hour a week to a six-month full stop, and almost every leader can access the lower rungs right now. The full version requires financial margin you have to build toward deliberately. Same discipline that made you a good operator. If you don't plan for it, it won't happen.

The Two Kinds of Tired

Before you can rest well, you need to diagnose what you're recovering from. Chuck, my coach, made this distinction in our first session, and it changed everything that followed.

Bone-weary is physical and cognitive depletion. Hard quarter, not enough sleep, distance from the inbox helps. A week in the mountains handles bone-weary.

Soul-weary is different. It's the depletion that comes from years of sustained output, constant justification to investors, boards, and your own conscience, sustained emotional labor, and the grief that follows when something you built with everything you had either fails or simply ends. Soul-weary doesn't respond to vacation. It requires time, and an environment different enough from your normal life that your nervous system actually believes you've stopped.

Most founders I know who've been through a wind-down or an exit are soul-weary and treating it with bone-weary remedies. It doesn't work.

One investor I heard about said something to a founder mid-shutdown that I've thought about since: "I actually think it is good for the human soul to shut down a business. To walk the journey." There's real grieving in that walk. And grief doesn't operate on a productivity timeline.

A practical calibration that circulates among founders who've been through it: plan one month of genuine recovery for every year you ran the company. It doesn't arrive as a sudden lift. It feels like one rock out of your backpack per day: you wake up, and one thing that was weighing on you simply isn't there anymore. Then another. Then another. The full weight comes off slowly, over time, and mostly without your noticing until it's gone.

The guilt about rest

Here's something Chuck surfaced that I didn't expect: the shame.

Even on sabbatical, I found myself carrying guilt about reading in the middle of the day, about playing golf, about lingering over lunch. Even recreation felt like it needed a purpose: a reason to justify the time. Everything still had to produce something.

He called this the "should" framework, and pointed out that even my rest was infected with it. Real play, purposeless, unproductive, unoptimized play, is a spiritual discipline. It is the practice of being a creature rather than a creator. It proves you believe, in your body and not just your head, that the world doesn't require you to hold it together.

One leader I spoke with put it plainly: 'Half of the battle is believing that you are worthy of a season of rest and deconstructing guilt and fear of judgment.' That's the threshold. Not the logistics. Not the money. The worthiness question is the one most founders can't get past, and the one the sabbatical is specifically designed to answer, over time, in your body.

Another friend, Lukas, is writing a book on the theology of play. His central argument: the health of a person and a community can be substantially gauged by the amount of play present. Not productivity. Not accomplishment. Play. Play as a spiritual and relational discipline produces something that performance-driven intensity can't.

For most founders, this lands as an indictment. Because we believed the opposite. 'I'll do fun and play later' is the sentence, well-intentioned, completely sincere, and a total lie. My friend Austin believed it for fifteen years.

Fortunately, he is well on his way to course correcting that. For me, entrepreneurial life went and got real serious, and the damage was quiet: my kids told me their friends found me intimidating. Not mean, just intimidating. 'Dad, you just want to know their ten-year plan.' That's the shape the should-framework takes inside a family. Your capacity for play, or your inability to access it without guilt, is a diagnostic. The sabbatical is where you find out. And where you start to redeem it. (More on "fun with family" later in this guide).

What a Sabbatical Is (And Isn't)

Most founders treat rest as the thing you do between projects. A vacation. A week off. Something earned and then consumed before the next sprint.

That's not rest, that's a recharge. Useful, but not the same thing.

A sabbatical is a carefully planned period of extended time away from your vocation, for the specific purpose of rest, reflection, and the excavation of whatever's been buried under the pace of building.

The word comes from the Hebrew shabbat, "to cease." Not to pause. Not to coast. To cease. To stop the cultivation entirely, and see what comes up on its own.

Benjamin, another close friend of mine walking alongside me during this time, noted that his industry has a name for something adjacent: gardening leave. The term comes from British employment law, the period between roles when an executive remains on the payroll but carries no active responsibilities. It was coined to keep departing employees from immediately joining competitors. But the metaphor is more honest than its origins. What do you do on gardening leave? You tend. Not build. Not optimize. Not manage. Tend. What has been neglected while the main work consumed everything. What has been waiting. The sabbatical is the gardening leave you give yourself, not because a contract requires it, but because the field needs it.

Four distinctions that matter

Vacation is consumption. Sabbatical is cessation. You spend a vacation doing things you don't get to do at work. You spend a sabbatical not doing the thing you always do: working.

Rest is not about efficiency. The moment you try to optimize your sabbatical, to extract something from it, to produce output, you've destroyed it. The output arrives on its own terms.

The goal isn't recreation. The goal is restoration. Restoration to the original design: your own, and your relationships'.

This isn't a sabbatical-as-achievement-list. People mean well. They send recommendations: books to read, retreats to try, practices to establish. Before you notice it, the sabbatical has become another list of things to accomplish. The question worth pausing on before that happens: *Is this supposed to be rest, or is this the next thing I achieve?* Let the list go.

Why sabbatical is not a luxury

The reason most founders resist rest is that rest confronts the structure they've built identity on. Most founders treat rest as optional, something they'll get to eventually, once the company is stable, once the next round closes, once the team is stronger. The stability never quite arrives. The list of preconditions keeps growing.

The book of Ecclesiastes is, among other things, a field guide to this trap. The Teacher works through every category founders instinctively reach for when they're building identity through output:

Pleasure disappoints. The highs of building (the launch, the milestone, the round closed) don't last. They're real. They're not nothing. But they don't satisfy the way you expected, and the next one has to be bigger to produce the same effect.

Wisdom fails. The sharpest analysis in the room, the best mental model, the clearest strategic read: none of it guarantees the outcome. And founders who've built their identity on being the smartest person in the room find this particularly destabilizing when the smart play doesn't work.

Justice breaks down. You built something that should have worked. You did the right things. The market moved, the investors changed their thesis, the timing was off. The universe did not, in fact, reward your effort in proportion to its merit. This is the wound underneath most founder burnout, not just exhaustion, but the particular injustice of an honest effort that didn't produce an honest return.

Legacy is not guaranteed. The thing you built might not outlast you. The name on the door might not mean anything in ten years. The people you poured yourself into might not remember it the way you hoped. This is the hardest one, because legacy is the last refuge: after pleasure and wisdom and justice have all failed, founders often try to make the work mean something through permanence. Ecclesiastes says: that, too, is vapor.

Here's what makes this hard to see in the moment: the "never enough" voice doesn't sound like greed. It sounds like standards. The founder who achieves the exit and finds himself calculating what he left on the table, doing the math at his kids' breakfast table, he's not greedy. He's running the pleasure-disappointment loop on the next target. The exit didn't quiet the voice. It just moved it.

Os Guinness named this failure mode precisely: substitution. When the secondary calling — what you do — takes on the weight of the primary one — who you belong to — the structure eventually buckles. Not because the work was bad. Because no work was designed to carry that load. The Ecclesiastes realities aren't warnings. They're load tests. They're showing you, systematically and without sentiment, what happens when you ask your work to be the source of meaning it was never built to supply.

Jeff, a fellow CEO, sent me a simple line during the period I was working through this:

“*When your identity is rooted in being a child of God, your work becomes worship, not bondage. Success doesn't own you. Failure doesn't destroy you.*”
— Chip Ingram, via Jeff Giddens

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That's the practical summary of the Ecclesiastes argument. The four things founders most naturally reach for as sources of identity, pleasure, wisdom, justice, and legacy, all ultimately disappoint. Not because they're bad.

Because they were never meant to carry that weight.

Sabbatical is the structural practice of putting that weight down and letting something else hold it for a while. Without it, the next thing you build will be built under the same pressure, from the same depleted place, in search of the same unreachable satisfaction.

The Sabbath Ladder

In his book *Playing God*, Andy Crouch identifies four structures, what he calls a "Sabbath ladder," that God embedded in the rhythms of agrarian Israel. Each rung of the ladder asks something more of us. Each creates a different kind of space.

Translated out of the field and into the founder's calendar, they look like this:

Daily — Gleaning

Farmers left a percentage of the harvest at the edges of the field, unharvested, by design. Not efficiency. Not charity. A discipline of restraint: the refusal to always maximize. For founders, this looks like the 1-hour weekly window of uninterrupted quiet. Not every week has to run at full capacity. Leave something at the edges.

Weekly — Sabbath

One full day of cessation. Not productivity. Not catch-up. Not planning. Crouch writes: "Our ability to disengage from the activities that give us identity, meaning and agency in our public worlds tells us volumes about whether our activity is fruitful image bearing or increasingly desperate god playing." One day a week, you prove to yourself that you're not the engine.

Every 7 years — Sabbatical

The field lies fallow. No planting, no pruning, no harvest. The land produces what it produces on its own. For the farmer, this required "advanced planning, storing up sufficient grain in the years preceding the sabbath year." For founders, the sabbatical requires the same: financial margin, distributed leadership, and the discipline to actually stop. The reward: access to parts of yourself that only show up when the work goes quiet.

Every 50 years — Jubilee

Debts forgiven. Land returned. Slaves freed. Crouch calls Jubilee a "once in a lifetime" reset of the entire economic and relational order. Few of us will take a Jubilee year in any formal sense, but the principle matters: some things need more than rest. Some things need release. Some things accumulated over a building career need to be set down, not just paused.

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The Creator God is not an idol who extracts endless work while dangling the promise of eventual leisure — he is an abundant God fully capable of providing everything we need to be faithful to his cosmic pattern of work and rest.

— Andy Crouch, *Playing God*

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The Sabbath is the original antidote to hurry sickness, the pressing of productivity and gain, and the delusion that we're self-reliant. One day in seven, we stop. We do not produce. We do not optimize. We do not improve. We rest in gratitude, and in resting, we remember that the world does not depend on our efforts. We remember that we are creations, creatures, not self-made, but made for a purpose. We remember that there is a God, and we are not Him.

— Brent Beshore, *'The Question We Forget to Ask'*

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Ironically, as early as 2023, I had been thinking quite a bit about the concept of Sabbath for founders and entrepreneurs, and how it is mostly absent from our western, 21st century cadence of life. Little did I know it was the seed for my own practice of an extended sabbatical.

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The concept of Sabbath is absolutely foundational to Judeo-Christian values and beliefs. Sadly, we don't have those in modern times and secular society, so I think we have to carve out the time ourselves, and establish our own rhythms.

— Eddy Badrina, *New York Times*, June 2023

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The practical version of the ladder, what actually fits into a founder's life, looks like this:

1 hour / week

Uninterrupted silence. No devices, no agenda. Cessation. The practice that makes everything else possible.

1 day / month

Different location. Simple structure: slow morning, silence/solitude block, a meal with someone who knows you, unstructured afternoon. No email.

1 week / year

Retreat, not vacation. One location, daily rhythms, actual reflection. Long enough that the default patterns don't auto-load. This could easily be done at home, with you leaving the house during the 'work hours' and coming home in time for dinner.

1 month / 3 years

Long enough to pass through the initial restlessness and find what's actually underneath it. Plan it with a coach.

3–6 months / 7 years

The full sabbatical. Where identity questions, grief, calling, and relationships get the room they need. Requires financial margin, pre-planning, and a guide.

If you are in your 40s, Bob Buford calls a mid-life transition the "halftime threshold": the move from the first half of life (achievement, acquisition, proving) to the second (contribution, legacy, meaning). His point: you cannot run the second half with first-half tools. The intensity, the accumulation, the competitive positioning that got you here are the wrong instruments for what's next.

Similarly, the longer-cadence rungs of the ladder, the sabbatical and the jubilee, are not optional extras for the especially spiritual. They are the structural practice through which the shift from one season to the other actually happens. Not in theory. On the calendar, in your body, long enough that your nervous system finally believes you stopped.

A related question: 'Is it worthwhile to take a year off of your retirement for a year now? No one is guaranteed a retirement, so am I better off recharging so that I can be more intentional about the next step and more energized for it?' That was my friend Lindsay's question, one she asked after six months away from work. The challenge is to write it down, then answer it honestly.

The three-part structure

Whether an hour a week or six months every seven years, every meaningful rest period has the same three movements. I call them Rest, Reflect, Respond.

Rest: No activity designed to distract the mind or satisfy boredom. Uninterrupted. Usually in a location separate from home or work. This is harder than it sounds for someone whose identity has been built around output.

Reflect: A set of questions you bring intentionally, not a to-do list, not goals, but genuine inquiry. What is this season asking of me? What have I been running past? What do I actually want?

Respond: Usually through a journal, prayer, or a conversation with a trusted guide. The response isn't a plan; it's an honest accounting of what surfaced in the reflection. It closes the loop.

The Sabbatical Phases

Within any extended rest, a month or more, expect three movements. They won't arrive on a schedule. But they'll arrive.

Phase 1: Deep Rest

The first weeks are often uncomfortable. You're restless. You check your phone. You have ideas you want to pursue. You feel guilty. This is withdrawal from the productivity loop, and it's normal. Don't fight it, but don't give in either.

The goal of this phase is to let your nervous system actually stop. Sleep. Eat slowly. Move your body. Let the restlessness pass through.

One instruction worth taking seriously: carve out huge swaths of your day to purposefully do nothing. Structured unstructured time: a commitment to open, unscheduled space that you protect with the same intention you'd bring to a board meeting. Not meditation. Not journaling. Not exercise. Nothing with a purpose. Just defended open time, held against the impulse to fill it.

Erin, who spent part of her sabbatical on the Camino, put it more honestly than most sabbatical frameworks will: coming back from Spain, she couldn't do anything, couldn't fold laundry for a week, and she learned to allow it. *"Rest in a way that doesn't even have to be meaningful."* The impulse to make rest purposeful is just the productivity loop in different clothes. Let yourself be lazy for a bit. That was her biggest takeaway from the whole thing.

Pastor David Hanke, writing about his own sabbatical preparation: "I have taught myself how to rest in preparation for entering into the space that this sabbatical season will give." The lower rungs of the ladder are what make Phase 1 shorter and less brutal. If you've never practiced a weekly hour of silence, the first month of sabbatical will feel like withdrawal. If you have, you'll pass through it faster.

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Let no one hope to find in contemplation an escape from conflict, from anguish or from doubt. On the contrary, the deep, inexpressible certitude of the contemplative experience awakens a tragic anguish and opens many questions in the depths of the heart like wounds that cannot stop bleeding.

— Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*

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Stopping doesn't produce peace. It produces access to what the pace was keeping at bay. That's not a malfunction. That's the point of Phase 1.

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When I really slowed down, a lot of emotions came to the surface that I needed to process. Apparently that's normal!

— Andrew L., after a six-week sabbatical

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It is normal. The founder who cries most mornings for four months isn't broken, he's defrosting. The founder who discovers she's angrier than she knew isn't failing at rest, she's finally in a position to notice it. The emotions that surface in Phase 1 were already there. The pace just made them invisible.

One image worth sitting with during this phase: a friend hiking in Glacier, anxious about catching the shuttle back, so anxious she couldn't be present to the hike at all. The word Erin felt from God during her sabbatical: *"You're gonna catch the shuttle. The shuttle's gonna be there. But just enjoy today and what I've given you today."* Phase 1 is, in large part, the anxiety of not knowing where the shuttle is. The sabbatical is the practice of hiking anyway.

Phase 2: Pilgrimage

Once the restlessness settles, and it will, you'll find yourself drawn toward something. A question. A place. A practice. Follow it.

This is the movement of the sabbatical. Not forced reflection, but genuine curiosity. What do I want? Not what should I do next: what do I actually desire? For high-achievers who've been translating every desire into a goal and every goal into a project, this question can feel threatening. It isn't. It's the beginning of honesty.

The QB1/QB2 question

In our first coaching session, I surfaced an analogy that has stayed with me: QB1 versus QB2. The QB1 is the starting quarterback, carrying the offense, the decisions, the vision. QB2 is the backup, supporting the starter, developing, waiting for his moment.

After Eden Green ended, I noticed something in myself: a deep ambivalence about which role I was in. Part of me was longing to lead again: to be QB1. Another part was exhausted by exactly that longing, because the last several years of being QB1 had cost more than I'd expected.

Chuck reframed it: "What does your fatigue reveal about what you actually desire?" Not what you should want. Not what the next chapter requires. What do you actually desire?

That reframe, from should to desire, is one of the most disorienting and liberating moves available to a founder in sabbatical. And it requires more than a vacation to find.

"What do you want Me to do for you?"

— Matthew 20:32 — the question to which Chuck anchored our sessions

Listening As A Discipline

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Before I can tell my life what I want to do with it, I must listen to my life telling me who I am.

— Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak*

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Palmer's own case study: abandoning a prestigious academic career that was slowly killing him, not because it failed, but because he wasn't listening to what his life was actually telling him. He was too committed to the identity the role provided. The Pilgrimage phase is where you begin to listen. What has this season been trying to say? What have you kept explaining away? What desires have you filtered through the question of what they're supposed to be?

Josef Pieper, in *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*, identified two modes of knowing that the medieval scholastics distinguished. Ratio is discursive: analytical, effortful, the mode of problem-solving and building. It's the mode most founders live in almost exclusively. Intellectus is contemplative, receptive rather than effortful. Understanding arrives as a gift rather than a product of labor. The soul, Pieper writes, becomes passive and receptive: things enter without strain or effort on our part. This is why the Pilgrimage phase cannot be optimized. The orientation you're searching for doesn't respond to effort; it responds to receptivity. You cannot ratio your way to intellectus.

Eugene Peterson described the ideal sabbatical rhythm as "a desert time and a harvest time, time for prayer and time for writing, the two times side by side, contrasting, converging, cross-fertilizing." The pilgrimage phase is both: desert and harvest, simultaneously. The rest is not the pause before the next decision. It is the work that makes the next decision worth trusting.

Phase 3: Creative Activity

Toward the end of a well-held sabbatical, something begins to emerge. Not a business plan (resist that impulse), but a new orientation. A sense of what the next season is actually for. Who you are apart from the role you've been playing. What you want to build, and why, when nobody's pressuring you.

The creative activity of Phase 3 is not what you choose to make. It's what keeps coming up when the noise finally clears. During my own sabbatical, I kept returning to the same questions: what happens to the people who wound down quietly? What do the 90% need that nobody is handing them? The field told me what it wanted to grow. This guide is partly the product of that. You probably know what your version is: the thing you explain when nobody asked, the problem you keep seeing that someone should do something about. The sabbatical gives it room to surface without the pressure of having to immediately monetize or justify it.

Arthur Brooks, in *From Strength to Strength*, names the underlying mechanism. The skills that drove first-half success, speed of processing, comfort with novelty, the intensity of building from scratch, are fluid intelligence skills, and they peak in your late thirties. What compounds in your next season and beyond is crystallized intelligence: pattern recognition, the ability to synthesize across years of experience, the wisdom that can only come from having been expensively wrong and surviving it. The creative work of Phase 3 is almost always crystallized work. It is the result only made possible by your particular scar tissue and accumulated understanding.

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It is only in leisure that we are free enough to decide what it is we stand for."

— Luke Burgis, *'Leisure as Anti-Mimesis'*

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What emerges is almost never what you planned for. One founder ended a six-week sabbatical having picked up poetry, painting, and photography, none of which were on any agenda. The field told him what it wanted to grow. That's how Phase 3 works: not through strategy, but through the accumulation of unscheduled attention.

One of the most clarifying lines I heard during my own wind-down came from a peer conversation about what the sabbatical was actually for: "What if who you're becoming is the outcome?" Not what you're building. Not where you're going. Who you're becoming. Phase 3 is where that question gets a provisional answer: not as a declaration, but as an orientation. You finish the sabbatical with a self you know a little better than when you started. That is the deliverable.

One more thing worth saying plainly, because the pressure is real: you don't have to emerge with something amazing. The expectation, from yourself, from your network, from the story you've been telling for years, is that the time off gets justified by a great outcome. Erin (the friend who did the Camino walk and the glacier hike) named it directly: finding identity in who you are and what you're actually passionate about *is* the outcome. That's more important than the next title, the next company, the next anything. The world keeps score. The sabbatical is a chance to stop.

Preparing to Leave

The sabbatical begins before you leave. This is not a detail. Founders who skip the preparation often spend the first month of their sabbatical managing the anxiety of an unprepared departure, which is not rest.

Name what you're recovering from

Be specific. Not "burnout" in the abstract, but the particular kind of tired you are, the relationship or wound you haven't had time to tend, the question you've been deferring. You don't need answers. But naming the wound gives the sabbatical a direction.

Hold a Wake

Before I needed this myself, I'd been suggesting it to other founders going through wind-downs. I was, in that sense, patient zero, someone who prescribes the ritual before understanding why it matters.

The idea is simple: hold a wake for what ended. Not as theater. As a genuine ritual acknowledgment that the thing was real, that it lived, and that it's now gone. The grief of a company wind-down, or an exit, or a forced transition, deserves the same honest marking we give other endings. We just haven't built the cultural infrastructure for it. Nobody hands you a liturgy.

A wake can be small. A dinner with the core team. A letter you write and never send. A walk through the building one last time, noticing things you stopped seeing years ago. The form matters less than the intention: to say, out loud or in writing, this was real, it cost something, and we are naming that it's over. Not to wallow. To witness.

What I found, having suggested this to others before experiencing it myself, is that grief without ceremony tends to go underground. It shows up later, sideways: in the next company, in the next relationship, in the way you introduce yourself and can't quite figure out who you are without the old title. You thought you moved on. You just moved.

The wake isn't closure. Closure is a myth. The wake is honest accounting. It says: this happened. It mattered. We see it. That's enough to begin.

Brief the people around you

Your spouse or partner needs to know this is a real thing, not an extended vacation where you'll still be half-present. Your children need to know. If you have a team, give them structure: clear ownership of decisions, a defined point person, and explicit permission to function without you. The pastoral framework puts it directly: one goal of the sabbatical is for your organization to discover what it's capable of without you. That's a gift to them, not just to you.

The marriage piece is worth its own conversation. One of the most common casualties of intense entrepreneurial seasons is the marriage that got put on hold until the company stabilized. The sabbatical is, among other things, an invitation to pick up what got set down. Consider scheduling intentional time with your spouse before the sabbatical officially begins, a weekend away, a structured conversation, even a marriage intensive with a counselor. The sabbatical works better when the person closest to you is genuinely in it with you. My wife and I did a LifePlanning session with Pete Richardson from The Paterson Institute (more on that below), and while we went through it during my time with Eden Green, I believe it would be a fantastic marital resource during a sabbatical.

The Psalm 127 moment

In some pastoral sabbatical traditions, the departing pastor physically turns in their keys and their phone before leaving. It's a ceremony, small, slightly absurd, and precisely right.

The ceremony enacts something that pure intention can't: the actual transfer of responsibility. Psalm 127 is the text: "Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain." For founders, this moment is the acknowledgment that the world, the company, the work, the people, does not require you to hold it together. It ran before you arrived. It will continue without you. Your absence is not an emergency.

For your sabbatical, this looks like: turn off the work phone (or get a separate number), delete the work email app, and set an out-of-office that doesn't invite people to try you anyway. The digital boundary isn't about discipline. It's about physics. You cannot rest if part of your nervous system is still on-call.

The Six Rs

The pastoral sabbatical framework from City Church (Joey Cook, 2022) offers six aspirations for a well-held sabbatical. They were written for pastors, but they translate directly to the founder context. I've adapted them slightly.

Renew: A fresh devotion to what you were built for. Not a new strategy. Not the next thing. A return to first love: the original reason you started building in the first place.

Rejoice: In the relationships that have accompanied you. Your spouse, if you have one. Your children. Your closest friends. The people who stayed in the room when the company was struggling. The sabbatical is, among other things, time to celebrate them.

Remember: That you are not the source. The work goes on without you, and that's not a threat, it's a relief. You are not indispensable. The universe managed before you started your company, and it will manage after.

Reflect: On what the last season actually cost, and what it produced. Honest accounting. Not self-flagellation and not false modesty. What did you get right? What did you get wrong? What do you want to carry forward and what do you want to leave behind?

Re-learn: Who you are apart from what you do. This is the most disorienting part for most founders. The role has been the identity for years. Sabbatical is the practice of finding what's there when the role is temporarily removed. It's worth knowing.

Rest: Physically, emotionally, spiritually. The kind of rest that doesn't arrive in a long weekend. The kind that requires you to actually stop, long enough that your nervous system stops bracing for the next thing.

Ben, my neighbor who stepped away for a year from a high-profile commercial real estate career, preferred a three part structure of **Detox → Rest → Discernment**. Ben's own counselor gave him this simplified framework. He believed there was both a physical and chemical dimension of stopping, where anxiety and other "negative" emotions surfaced, once performance pressure was removed for the first time. This is a real possibility, and one that many only become aware of once they start paying more attention to themselves.

What To Do With the Time

Many people ask: what do you actually do? The structure below is adapted from several frameworks and my own practice. It is a guide, not a schedule.

A sample day

- Wake when your body wakes you. No alarm.
- Slow morning — unhurried breakfast, no devices for the first hour.
- Silence & Solitude (2 hours) — walk, sit, or be still. Bring a journal. Don't bring an agenda.
- Relational meal (1.5 hours) — lunch with someone who actually knows you. Not to debrief the sabbatical. Just to be known.
- Rest or play (2 hours) — physical activity, fiction, or whatever requires nothing of you.

- Dinner with family. Unstructured evening.
- Brief evening reflection (10 minutes) — a short inventory of what you noticed in the day.

Repeat. For longer than you think you need.

A founder navigating a different kind of loss, the collapse of a 24-year marriage, described what his counselor told him: walk every day. Let your feet hit the ground. Step out the door, and go. Each morning he took a photo of whatever the sky looked like. Rain, dark, sunrise. He had no control over what he'd find. Just that he showed up for it. He said: "For the first four months, I cried on every walk. Then I'd have a day or two that I didn't cry. Now, mostly I don't." That's the sample day in practice. Not elegant. Not optimized. Consistent presence, long enough for something to shift.

“

May God's image in me be restored, and my imagination in God be re-storied.

— Peter Greig, *Sabbath blessing*

”

One specific recommendation worth naming: a silent retreat. Another friend and founder Andrew spent time at the New Camaldoli Hermitage in Big Sur (contemplation.com) and called it his best experience of the entire sabbatical. A structured silent retreat, typically two to five days, at a monastery or contemplative center, with a basic rhythm of prayer, silence, and meals, is one of the most efficient ways to pass through Phase 1 restlessness and into actual stillness. It's not advanced spirituality. It's removing every variable that normally keeps the noise running.

Weekly reflection questions

Once a week, pause for a longer reflection. These questions are adapted from sabbatical coaching frameworks:

- What 2–3 words describe the feeling of your life right now?
- What is drawing you forward — in attention, in curiosity, in love?
- What is pulling you away — or numbing you — from being present?
- Which spiritual practice or activity felt most alive this week?
- Where did you feel most like yourself? Least like yourself?
- What are you grateful for that you might not have noticed if you hadn't slowed down?
- Do you sense any new invitation — a pull toward something — in this season?

With your kids

The sabbatical is an opportunity to redesign your family's relationship to adventure and play. Most founders with kids have been operating in deferred-fun mode for years, physically present, mentally elsewhere. The sabbatical interrupts that pattern if you let it.

One friend, Toby, gave each of his kids a bit of a budget and one rule: you plan it, I drive. His 16-year-old chose Paris and Amsterdam. His 11-year-old chose Fiji and got scuba certified to do it. His 8-year-old Googled "water parks" and ended up with Universal Studios, a convertible road trip to Miami, and a Royal Caribbean cruise to the Bahamas. No devices, no distractions, a full week each. Toby's intention? Deep conversations, and lots of fun. The 1:1 time you have with extended uninterrupted time like that are categorically different, deeper in kind,

not just degree. The kid-planned trip removes you from the director role and puts them in it. That shift alone changes what gets said.

Another frame worth thinking through early: what activities can you do with your kids for the next 30 years? Not what they enjoy right now: what travels cheaply, scales across decades, and gets better as they get older? For one friend, Luke, surfing was the answer. You can rent a board anywhere in the world, or buy one and give it away at the end. Kids pick it up faster than adults. The locations get more interesting as they age. A friend surfed with his kids a total of 30 days during his sabbatical year: Fiji, New Zealand, Australia, Portugal, England, Rhode Island, and the activity became the through-line of the whole year. The specific sport matters less than the logic: identify low-friction, high-portability, long-horizon family assets and start accumulating them.

Finally, another practice worth stealing from Luke: once every week or two, set your phone to record and place it in the middle of the dinner table. Work through seven rotating questions, youngest to oldest. Where did you see God today? What's different about this place? What are you grateful for that you might not have noticed? His family ended their sabbatical year with 30 recordings in their kids' own voices from all over the world. That archive will compound in value in ways nothing else from the year will match.

Who to Bring

A sabbatical coach is not optional for an extended one. You need someone who has held this container before, who knows the shape of the journey and can normalize the disorientation without rushing you out of it.

I worked with Chuck, my spiritual director, who also coaches leaders through liminal seasons. Two things he said early that I've returned to often:

"Don't waste this time of disorientation."

This reframes the sabbatical entirely. Most founders entering rest view the disorientation as a problem to be solved, a sign that the sabbatical isn't working, or that they're doing it wrong. Chuck's point: the disorientation is the thing. It's what happens when the scaffolding of role and output is temporarily removed. You find out what's actually there.

"Your life and career are actually about the people — not necessarily what you did or where you worked."

He said this in our second session. I wasn't ready to hear it the first time.

If you're a person of faith, a spiritual director is the right call. If you're not, a therapist or executive coach who specializes in vocational transitions will serve a similar function. The key is that this person is not coaching you toward performance. They're helping you learn to be present to what's actually happening in you.

Some sabbatical frameworks also recommend a reading coach, someone who helps you identify 3–5 books that are right for the specific season you're in, rather than the books you think you should be reading. The list in the next section came from a mix of coaching recommendations and my own instincts.

A third option, and the one I'd recommend if you're wired for structure: the Paterson LifePlanning process. It's a two-day intensive with a trained LifePlanner, built around a series of guided questions designed to surface your calling, your core identity, and the shape of your next season. Less open-ended than coaching, more rigorous

than a retreat. The process was designed specifically for the liminal moment, the space between what was and what's next, which makes it well-suited for founders mid-sabbatical or just coming out the other side. I went through it before Eden Green ended, and the questions it surfaces, who are you apart from what you've built, what does faithfulness look like in the second half, are exactly the ones the sabbatical eventually forces anyway. LifePlanning just gives them a container and a guide who's held that conversation before.

One more thing most sabbatical guides don't name: let people show up. When my equity went to zero and my exit went rather poorly, a small circle of close friends, most of them founders who had watched the whole arc, quietly pooled money together. Someone called it "a love pat". A friend arranged it through a nonprofit vehicle so it arrived with dignity, not charity. They asked me to propose a passion project to help me reorient and relearn. The project I proposed was this very guide that I've written to you. And they also asked that I unreservedly celebrate the 25th wedding anniversary that came right in the middle of this transition period. So we did.

My kids will not remember the specifics. They'll remember that in the middle of really hard times, their parents celebrated their anniversary, because their parents' friends showed up. The sabbatical doesn't happen alone. The container is partly the people who hold you through it. The time to build those relationships is before you need them.

The Regret Exercise

One of the most valuable practices for a founder in sabbatical is what I've come to think of as the regret excavation.

Make a list of your regrets. Not the small ones, the ones that still have weight. Write down why each one still bothers you. The lingering effects you believe it's had on your life, or on others. Be honest without catastrophizing: note that you hurt someone without assuming you've ruined their life.

Then, and this is the move, commute the sentence.

"I make amends with myself and will not waste another minute of my life reliving a decision that cannot be changed."

Write down what you learned from each experience. What you want it to change in you. What your resolutions are going forward.

This is not therapy, though it can accompany it. It's a clearing. Founders carry accumulated weight from the decisions, the trade-offs, the people affected by the company's arc. The sabbatical creates the container to actually set it down.

The excavation works best when it goes all the way down. There's usually a last 2%, the thing you've been carrying but haven't fully named, to yourself or to anyone else. Not because you're hiding it, necessarily, but because you've rationalized around it. Kept it in the gray, where it doesn't have to be confronted. The sabbatical creates the space to go there. Name the last 2%. Not to perform confession, but because the weight of the unnamed thing is almost always heavier than the thing itself.

The Return

A sabbatical without a structured return is a half-built bridge. The transition back is its own discipline.

Before you go back to work, and especially before you start the next thing, debrief with your coach and with the people closest to you. The questions the pastoral tradition has used for centuries are still the right ones:

- How were you healed, refreshed, or restored?
- What did you learn about yourself that you couldn't have learned while working?
- What books or practices did you encounter that you'd recommend to others?
- What spiritual insight or reorientation did you receive?
- What new vision, or clarified vision, do you carry into the next season?

The answers don't have to be fully formed. But they should be named. Naming them with another person makes them more durable than naming them only in your journal.

One practical consideration that I've found useful: make a commitment about what comes next before the sabbatical ends. Not a business plan, but a direction. A season-long intention. Something you're building toward, and why. The sabbatical gives you clarity that the pace of normal work obscures. Use that clarity while it's still fresh.

The Real Return on Investment

The case for sabbatical isn't that it makes you more productive. It might. But that framing will corrupt the sabbatical before it starts.

The real case is simpler: the kind of tired you're carrying requires more than a vacation. The work ahead of you, whatever it is, will require more than the person you are right now. And the people closest to you, who've been close to the cost, need the version of you that actually stopped.

Human limits are not a deficiency. They're a design spec. The founder who operates as if limits don't apply, to energy, attention, capacity for sustained emotional output, will eventually discover that limits apply anyway. The discovery is just less controlled, and usually more expensive for the people around you. Sabbath is not a concession to weakness. It is the acknowledgment that you are a creature, made with a particular capacity and a built-in need for cessation. The alternative to sabbatical isn't unlimited productivity. It's implosion on a slower timeline.

Thus, sabbatical is not a reward for work well done. It is an investment in the person who will do the next work. And for founders who've been through the fire, who know what it costs to build something real and what it costs when it falls, rest is not optional.

It is the thing that makes the next act worth doing.

Resources

Everything in this guide was shaped by at least one of the following. Listed informally, in the spirit of the guide itself. Not as an academic citation, but as an invitation.

The books I returned to most during my sabbatical didn't fall into a tidy theme. Some were for the soul. Some were for the mind that wouldn't quiet. Some were fiction, which, it turns out, is its own form of rest.

A word on reading during sabbatical: read what your gut pulls you toward, not what you think you should be reading. The should-list is for normal time. Sabbatical reading follows desire, not obligation.

For the waiting

Waiting on God — Andrew Murray

I read this one twice. Active, expectant, patient waiting as a spiritual posture, as opposed to passive drift. The cadence and input I needed most in the early weeks, when waiting felt like failing.

Waiting Isn't a Waste — Mark Vroegop

Covers similar territory from a different angle. Good companion to Murray. Where Murray focuses on orientation, Vroegop focuses on grief, the honest acknowledgment that the waiting costs something.

For the grief and the language

Consolations: The Solace, Nourishment and Underlying Meaning of Everyday Words — David Whyte

A poet takes 52 everyday words, grief, friendship, rest, anger, disappointment, and finds what they've actually meant all along, underneath how we usually use them. In the middle of grieving one season and not quite arriving in the next, I needed someone to redefine the words for where I was. This did it.

Recommended by other founders

Both of the following came up independently from founders who took sabbaticals in the past year. Two independent endorsements is a strong signal.

Embracing Rhythms of Work and Rest: From Sabbath to Sabbatical and Back Again — Ruth Haley Barton

The most practically useful book named by founders who've actually done this. Barton walks through sabbath practice and extended sabbatical with specificity, not theory, but rhythm. Lindsay H. found it 'so useful and practical.' Andrew L. read it as prep and called the sabbatical that followed 'profound and so refreshing.' Start here if you want one book that does the most practical work.

Recommended by the coaching tradition

These came through Chuck or the pastoral sabbatical framework. Not all read during the sabbatical itself, some I've returned to since, but all worth having on the shelf.

***Sacred Pace* — Terry Looper**

On slowing down without losing purpose. Practical and honest about the resistance that comes with deceleration. Terry is a friend, and he is as honest in this book as he is in person.

***The Discerning Life* — Steve Macchia**

A framework for paying attention to what God is doing in and around you, useful for the Reflect and Respond phases.

***Gentle and Lowly* — Dane Ortlund**

The emotional life of Jesus, his gentleness, his compassion, his patience with the weary. A corrective to every founder who has internalized a God who is disappointed in them.

***The Relational Soul* — Richard Plass and James Cofield**

On attachment, healing, and what happens when your identity has been built around performance and production. The chapter on compulsive helping is particularly diagnostic.

***Surrender to Love* — David Benner**

Short, slow, profound. Not a productivity book. The opposite of a productivity book.

Background texts — cited in the framework

These shaped the structure and language of the sabbatical phases without necessarily being read cover-to-cover in sequence.

***From Strength to Strength: Finding Success, Happiness, and Deep Purpose in the Second Half of Life* — Arthur Brooks (Portfolio/Penguin, 2022)**

The fluid/crystallized intelligence framework cited in Phase 3 is drawn from Brooks' central argument about the two curves of human productivity and meaning.

Playing God: Redeeming the Gift of Power — Andy Crouch (*InterVarsity Press, 2013*)

The Sabbath Ladder framework, gleanings, sabbath, sabbatical, jubilee, is drawn from Chapter 15.

New Seeds of Contemplation — Thomas Merton (*New Directions, 1961*)

The warning that opens Phase 1, that contemplation surfaces anguish rather than escaping it, is drawn from Merton's foundational text on the contemplative life.

Leisure: The Basis of Culture — Josef Pieper (*originally published 1948; Ignatius Press edition, 2009*)

The ratio/intellectus distinction in Phase 2 is drawn from Pieper's central argument: that contemplative knowing is receptive, and effort cannot produce it; it arrives as gift.

Working the Angles: The Shape of Pastoral Integrity / The Pastor: A Memoir — Eugene Peterson (*Eerdmans, 1987; HarperOne, 2011*)

The "desert time and a harvest time" framing appears across several Peterson works; both are cited sources.

Articles & Online Resources

Beshore, Brent. *"The Question We Forget to Ask."* brentbeshore.substack.com. Part 3 in a series on AI and human formation. The Sabbath passage cited in §2 appears in his writing's section on counter-formational practices. Brent is also one of my wisest and most generous friends. His writings come from a deep well.

Burgis, Luke. *"Leisure as Anti-Mimesis: Harness the Power of Contemplation to Free Yourself from the Dissembling Fog of Social Media."* *Medium, July 2023.* luke.medium.com. Written by the author of *Wanting: The Power of Mimetic Desire*. Source of the ratio/intellectus frame, the anti-mimetic leisure argument, and the 'thick desires' concept applied to Phase 3.

Butler, Bryce. *"Sabbatical: Why More Companies Need to Embrace Rest."* brycebutler.substack.com/p/sabbath. A practitioner's case for building sabbatical into organizational culture, not just allowing it.

Hanke, David. *"What's a Sabbatical?"* Restoration Anglican, Arlington, VA. January 2016. restorationarlington.org/2016/01/whats-a-sabbatical/. A pastoral reflection on Andy Crouch's Sabbath Ladder framework, written by a pastor preparing his congregation for his own sabbatical. The source of the Crouch quotes in this guide.

Ingram, Chip, and JD Greear. The Ecclesiastes framework, pleasure disappoints, wisdom fails, justice

breaks down, legacy not guaranteed, circulates widely in Ingram's and Greear's teaching. Greear's book *Gospel: Recovering the Power that Made Christianity Revolutionary* (B&H Publishing, 2011) is a good starting point.

Schabram, Kira, Matt Bloom, and DJ DiDonna. *"Research: The Transformative Power of Sabbaticals."* *Harvard Business Review*, February 2023. hbr.org. The study cited in this guide on professionals who took sabbaticals, finding that people 'largely experienced significant, positive changes in their work and life.'

Warren, Tish Harrison. *"Can Everyone Take a Sabbatical?"* *New York Times*, June 25, 2023. The article in which I was quoted on the absence of sabbath rhythms in modern secular life, written before Eden Green ended. The worthiness quote ('half the battle is believing you are worthy of rest') comes from an anonymous source interviewed for this piece.

A note on coaching

The bone-weary/soul-weary distinction, the QB1/QB2 analogy, and the should→desire reorientation all came from my sabbatical coaching sessions with Chuck Gschwend, a spiritual director who works with leaders in vocational transition. The ministry he is attached to is Eden Project (theedenproject.com) If you're looking for someone to hold the container for an extended sabbatical, a spiritual director or transition coach is worth finding before you leave, not after.

The pastoral sabbatical framework cited throughout is adapted from a document prepared by Joey Cook and the elder team at City Church (2022), shared through Adam Breckenridge, a former coach of mine, also at Eden Project.

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