KEY FACTORS IN JOHN WESLEY'S LONGEVITY: AN APPLICATION

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The problem: In these days of fast-paced life (fast food, email, voice mail, Fax, modes of transportation, the World Wide Web, etc.) we may find ourselves far-removed from some important matters regarding “wholeness.” A review of the life of John Wesley reveals some important factors for our lives in the 21st Century.

My interest in the topics of personal stress and health as they pertain to work productivity began about 6 years ago. It became apparent to me that I had become over-committed, falling into the trap of saying “Yes” to requests far too often. I had created for myself undue stress that left me void of energy to meet the demands of each day, while simultaneously feeling so overwhelmed that I would physically, emotionally, and mentally shut down. It was as though I was removed from myself and watching as my life passed by me.

A second issue that enhanced my interest in this subject was family health events that focused on cancer and coronary disease. Nearly 8 years ago my father died of cancer and three years later his only sister passed away from the same disease. In the 1940s their mother died from the same cause when she was in her early 50s. Then in November my mother passed away due to complications from coronary disease (clogged arteries and elevated blood pressure), something that genetically existed in her family history. These were wake-up calls for me, as a middle-aged man, to be diligent regarding physical exams and recommended tests. Simultaneously, I began to focus on lifestyle factors that could promote better health.

It is difficult to ignore the two leading causes of death in America, especially when they strike that close to you.

Likewise I have friends and acquaintances who have faced or are yet to face major health issues, many of which should have or could have been avoided. From more
than one source I have heard about pastors who continue to work 80-90 hours per week, rarely take a vacation or consistent day off each week, and who have no hobbies. Many of these same persons may not vigorously exercise 3 or more times per week, nor eat a diet conducive to good physical health, two factors that may potentially help fight disease.

Excessive illnesses, in part a by-product of lifestyle, are also a factor in the rampant rise of health care costs, including insurance premiums being paid by church conferences and pastoral families. The sentiment that is often heard is, "What can we do about these exorbitant costs?" Potentially frightening perspectives have been offered in various sources, including a recent on-line article from the United Methodist News Service and the Pulpit & Pew from Duke Divinity School. In a March 2002 posting in the UM News Service, Bishop Kenneth Carder of the Mississippi Area, spoke in support of a recent survey regarding health problems of the clergy. "It's an issue of energy, health... It's even a financial issue," which was stated with reference to the increasing costs of providing health care insurance for the clergy.

In a recent presentation, Becky R. McMillan, Associate Director of Pulpit & Pew, referred to the same survey conducted by her association, and noted that one of the major areas of concern was the issue of clergy health and well being. Just more than 76 percent of the clergy surveyed rated their general health as "excellent" or "very good" and a similar percentage noted that neither their physical nor emotional health had caused them to limit their work. But there was cause for concern that countered such results. Over 40 percent reported feeling depressed or worn out most of the time. And based on a Body-Mass Index 46 percent of clergy are overweight and 30 percent obese. Speaking on behalf of the administrators of the survey, McMillan notes, "We believe that this is a serious problem that should concern us all...."

How does one cope and heal from the past and/or lessen health problems, for now and the future? Let's build the case for answers to these and other questions by taking a brief look at the life and habits of the Reverend John Wesley.

In the classical sense health means "wholeness." Other derivatives from the Latin, Old English and German connote integrity, completeness and wholeness. Wesley's medical reading material was significantly based on this classical model. Thus due to the influence of such reading one can readily understand that for Wesley health meant wholeness or what he termed "well working." He further postulated that the concept of well working was a gift from God and a discipline for fostering.

As one explores the life of Wesley it soon becomes apparent that he read broadly, including material in theology, the classics, English literature, natural sciences, and medicine. In this latter area he was widely read, but significant influence of his views came from the literature of two medical doctors of the time, Thomas Sydenham and George Cheyne. He became concerned with changes in 18th century medical care as it moved away from the experimental approach to a theoretical discipline. Wesley reasoned as this discipline became more popular simple remedies which he espoused and practiced were being replaced with compound medicines. Wesley was convinced that the common sense, home remedies that he sometimes personally tried or offered to friends and acquaintances were appropriate and often successful. In some fashion or other many of these ideas were offered in the writings of Sydenham and Cheyne.
Wesley was quite adroit at applying medical concepts to his writing and preaching. He had read the work of Sydenham who emphasized the Hippocratic tradition in which the physician is to give attention to the total person. Philip Ott notes Wesley's support of the Hippocratic method. "When one's physical well-being is disturbed, an effort must be made to establish once again an equilibrium and allow the natural powers to affect the healing process." (46, 1991)

Wesley viewed his ministry as embracing the total well being of the individual. He spoke of the goodness of the body, seeing it as an "exquisitely wrought machine." Wesley was convinced of the biblical imperative that we are stewards of our bodies. We should care for them as we would any precious gift. (Holifield, 13)

Emanating out of Wesley's readings in medicine and his life experiences came the unwavering conclusion that there was a strong correlation between what he termed "sensible regimen" and health. Wesley believed his own life depicted the relationship (Ott, 54, 1991). His mother, Susanna, influenced the pattern for daily routine early in life, and then his rigorous years at Oxford completed the foundation for following common sense daily practices.

The efforts of Wesley concerning daily regimen were important factors throughout his life. Four areas to which he paid careful attention were food and drink, exercise, sleeping and waking, and solitude. He wrote of these in his Journal and published many of his practices in the "Plain and Easy Rules" section of his 1747 publication *Primitive Physick*.

Wesley believed intemperance in food and drink slowly destroyed the body, and he based these beliefs on his own experiences and those of his friends. Therefore, he ate and drank sparingly throughout his lifetime. He was also committed to exercise in the open air at every possible occasion, often walking to appointments when feasible. Wesley may have been most rigorous concerning his routine of sleeping and waking and finding daily time for solitude. Not unlike many other themes in his life Wesley spoke of this routine in a sermon, "On Redeeming Time." In this sermon, he discussed the natural rhythm of these elements. In the discussion that follows these four areas: food and drink, exercise, sleeping and waking, and solitude will be presented in more detail.

Wesley wrote a great deal about all four of these areas of regimen or routine. As noted a moment ago Wesley's choice of food and drink was greatly influenced by his mother and by his Oxford University experiences. His mother was the chief architect in her children's routines for living concerning education, piety, sleep and diet. Charles Wallace states ...the origins of John Wesley's life style are to be found in his early formation at home, they surfaced into consciousness during his fifteen year stay at Oxford. (It was here) his motivation toward simple living and his first adult attempts at practicing it were made explicit." (198) His readings from the medical texts of the day, particularly of Cheyne's work, encouraged him to partake of a "spare diet" in which he ate minimal quantities of meats and larger amounts of vegetables. In Wesley's sermon, "The More Excellent Way," he speaks to this area of diet. "As to the quantity of their food, good sort of men do not usually eat to excess." (Outlier, 516)

The second area to which Wesley paid particular attention was exercise. He relied upon it both as a curative, as well as a preventative. He had written a letter to a Mrs. Dickinson in 1789 encouraging her to improve her health by walking in fresh air. He received word that she was indeed improving and posted a letter to one of his associates
at New Chapel in London in which he commented, “It gives me such satisfaction to hear that sister Dickinson’s health, both of soul and body, increase. Certainly exercise is the best medicine for both.” (Maser, 123)

Wesley was in agreement with Dr. Cheyne that exercise is indispensably necessary to health and long life. He believed everyone should walk every day “not less than an hour before dinner or after supper.” (Ott, 1980, 581) In *Primitive Physick* Wesley offers the following “plain easy rules” concerning exercise. (20, 21)

1. The open air, when the weather is fair, contributes much to the benefit of exercise.
2. We may strengthen any weak part of the body by constant exercise.
3. The studious ought to have stated times for exercise, at least two or three hours per day; one-half of this before dinner, the other before going to bed.

A third area of daily life in which Wesley applied his concept of sensible regimen is that of sleeping and waking. He very much disdained the idea of persons sleeping late into the day, to eight or nine in the morning, after having slept nine hours or more. In his sermon, “The More Excellent Way,” Wesley reminds his listeners, “Take just so much sleep as experience proves our nature to require; seeing this is indisputably most conducive both to bodily and spiritual health.” He further commented in that same sermon about the need to rise early on a regular basis. “You must begin at the right end: if you rise early, you must sleep early. Impose it upon yourself... go to bed at a fixed hour. Then the difficulty of it will soon be over; but the advantage of it will remain for ever.” (Outler, 514, 515)

Wesley’s daily routine began during his years at Oxford where he endeavored to rise daily at four in the morning. He found six and a-half hours was sufficient for his nightly sleep. (Wallace, 203) Samuel J. Roshel completed an interesting study regarding Wesley's daily routine several years ago. Among his findings: (49, 50)

For 1790, Wesley’s last full year of life, he rose on or before 4 A.M. 248 days; retired at 9:30 P.M. 303 days; and for 197 days he was about his daily routine from 4 A.M. until 9:30 P.M.

When comparing an identical one-month period from Wesley’s life for June of 1740 and June 1783, his 37th and 80th years respectively, little or no change can be noted in his daily routine. In fact, at age 80 Wesley rose and retired about one hour earlier than had been his practice at age thirty-seven.

At first glance it may not appear Wesley was concerned with solitude because of his extensive writings regarding exercise and his amazing daily schedule. Maxie Dunnam may have put his finger on Wesley’s use of solitude when he notes, “...we are not thinking simply of aloneness or absence of involvement with others... we are using aloneness purposefully. We are pondering who we are, what life is all about, where we are in our quest for meaning, and how we are related to God and others.” (114) The words of Thomas
Merton, as quoted by Dunnam, could have as easily been those of Wesley. “Solitude and silence teach me to love my brothers for what they are, not for what they say.” (123)

The stewardship of time was of great importance to Wesley and within this aspect of living he refers to various aspects of solitude. He encouraged his preachers to follow his example of rising at four to meditate, pray and read Scripture until six. He also found time each day to recollect himself in solitude without neglecting his ministry. Wesley’s life reflects a modern day concept I call the rhythm of rest. This represents the balance required between activity and rest. Life is filled with such examples: day and night, the change in seasons, and the momentary rest of the heart after each beat. Wesley’s solitude interspersed with his work seems to be a deterrent to potential stress in his life. It is certainly an excellent example for us in the 21st century. Wesley’s own words, in a 1777 correspondence, are a prime example of this aspect of solitude. (Wallace, 204)

Though I am always in haste, I am never in a hurry; because I never undertake any more work than I can go through with perfect calmness of spirit. It is true, I travel four or five thousand miles a year. But I generally travel alone in my carriage and, consequently, am as retired ten hours in a day, as if I was in a wilderness. On other days, I never spend less than three hours (frequently ten or twelve) in the day alone. So there are few persons in the kingdom who spend so many hours secluded from all company. Yet I find time to visit the sick and the poor... When I was at Oxford, and lived almost like a hermit, I saw not how any busy man could be saved. I scarce thought it possible for a man to retain the Christian spirit, amidst the noise and bustle of the world. God taught me better by my own experience.

Wesley believed in the soundness of his basic approach, which advocated healthy diet, exercise in the open air when possible, adequate sleep, and solitude. He believed these elements to be the natural means God used to produce good health for his life and ministry. Wallace provides an excellent summation, “At least in the case of this one eminent practitioner of an alternative ‘simple and recollected’ life-style, his (Wesley’s) healthy regimen seems to have sustained him to a long and productive life.” (206)

The question that arises for us is “What is it about Wesley’s daily regimen that is applicable for us in the twenty-first century?” First, one must admit that Wesley’s genetic constitution may have played a part in his eighteenth century longevity. That unknown is beyond the scope of this paper, but there is evidence that suggests Wesley struggled with physical ailments as did others and as we do. As one peruses Wesley’s journals several entries can be found relating to fevers, coughs, and consumption, and yet he prevailed in ministry until his eighty-eighth year.

Wesley’s commitment to daily regimen or what he termed “the more excellent way” was based on his conviction regarding stewardship. Says Ball-Kilbourne, “For John Wesley, stewardship is the appropriate lifestyle for the Christian... (Humans are to be) stewards of their souls, their bodies, their material goods, and their intangible talents—all of which belong ultimately to God.” (43)

Wesley’s lifestyle speaks with greater authority when filtered through current statistical data. Tansay states, “The Alban Institute in Washington, D.C. reports at least 17 percent
of clergy suffer from stress or burnout... Brooks Faulkner, a LeaderCare counselor, estimates that nearly 100 SBC (Southern Baptist Convention) pastors leave their ministry every month. Sunscape Ministries of Colorado, which serves clergy in crises, reports that in all denominations nationwide, 1600 ministers per month... resign their pulpits." (1, 2)

In conclusion perhaps the most challenging words come from Wesley himself, when he states in his sermon, "The More Excellent Way," (Outler, 513)

From long experience and observation I am inclined to think that whoever finds redemption in the blood of Jesus, whoever is justified, has then the choice of walking in the higher or the lower path. I believe the Holy Spirit at that time sets before him the more excellent way, and incites him to walk therein, to choose the narrow- est path in the narrow way, to aspire after the heights and depths of holiness, after the entire image of God.