



Journey Through the Rat Race

by Amy Ruth Bartlett

"Being an adult means saying to yourself, 'After this week things will slow down,' every week for the rest of your life."

I don't know who originally coined this saying, but it's funny because of how instantly we all relate. If you're reading this, chances are good you've been where I was when I first read this quote. I laughed and read it to my husband who chuckled, "Well, isn't that the truth." We connected momentarily in our amusement, but underneath the laughter, I felt a bit like I was drowning.

Having the truth of our constant busyness—what you might call the "rat race"—spoken so plainly, exposed a few things that I wouldn't have admitted to myself otherwise:

1. The day in and day out was taking a toll on my health.
2. Our family relationships were struggling because of the unforgiving pace of our lives.
3. The rat race depended on our self-deception to keep it going.
4. The busyness of life was covering deeper longings and disappointments that I didn't want to acknowledge or confront.

How am I supposed to deal with these truths as a Christian? On the one hand, I know that God has saved me from my sins. He sent His Son, Jesus, to die as a sacrifice for my sins. As Jesus put it, "I am the door. If anyone enters by Me, he will be saved" (John 10:9a). Even in the midst of the rat race, I know that I am saved—and there is great assurance and peace that comes from that knowledge.

But I also know that God wants good things for me in my life. Jesus also said that He was "the Good Shepherd" (John 10:11a) who knows and loves His sheep, clarifying, "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly" (John 10:10b). Jesus wants me to live an abundant life. While I know this doesn't mean life will be easy or without difficulties, we're assured in Scripture that among the fruits of the Spirit God wants for us are joy, peace, patience, and self-control (see Galatians 5:22-23). I long for these fruits, and I wonder if the rat race is somehow keeping me from fully experiencing them as God intends.

Perhaps you are wondering the same. Regardless of your reasons for examining your journey through the rat race, if you attempt to make actual changes in your life, you may experience inner conflict around certain competing values. This is a healthy and normal part of any growth process. While uncertainty is uncomfortable, it takes space and time to process the emotions it produces, and jumping ahead into false certainty is not the answer. As you read on, allow yourself to take time for contemplation, curiosity, and the general messiness of the unknown.

Sometimes just hearing that we are not alone in our struggle is enough. If, however, you are committed to forging a different quality of life, I will suggest exercises along the



*I have seen the burden God
has laid on the human race.
Ecclesiastes 3:10 (NIV)*





Exercise 1:

BE STILL AND NOTICE

What happened in your ...

BODY—Physical Sensations

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

MIND—Recurring Thoughts

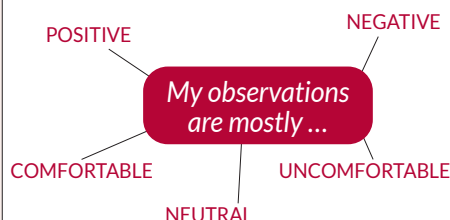
1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

HEART—Feelings That Surfaced

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

ENVIRONMENT—Things You Noticed

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____



way to help you make distinctive progress, as we journey through the rat race together. If you're open to trying some of these exercises, don't go it alone. Talk to someone: a spouse, friend, pastor, co-worker, counselor, or even your own journal can help to highlight what each exercise reveals.

I hope that as you wrestle with the specifics of your own work/life recipe you find an invitation to the beauty and mystery of eternity that God has placed into your design. I pray that the Spirit nurtures more of His fruits like joy, peace, patience, and self-control in the soil of your life.

What Is the Rat Race?

I looked up “rat race” in the dictionary. I found some descriptive definitions for the stressful existence when work has taken over, when it's no longer the means to an end, and when it has become the ALL in and of itself. No one, or at least very few, set out to indenture themselves to such an unforgiving and unsatisfying way of life. In the rat race, the all-consuming nature of our work far outweighs the meager perks, raises, and recognition for which we are competing. Yet the consequences of not meeting those goals keep us stressed out and critical of ourselves. So we yet again resolve to try harder. This allows even the meaningful parts of our service to take more from us than is healthy for us to give.

In *The Second Mountain: The Quest for a Moral Life*, David Brooks puts it this way:

“The Meritocracy is the most self-confident moral system in the world today. ... It organizes society into an endless set of outer and inner rings, with high achievers at the Davos center and everybody else arrayed across the wider rings toward the edge. While it pretends not to, it subliminally sends the message that those who are smarter and more accomplished are actually worth more than those who are not.” (p. 23)

Think how socially acceptable and almost praiseworthy it has become to answer the question “How are you?” with the single word, “Busy.” Since we've decided as a society that it's good to be busy, for many of us, our personal and professional lives have flattened into one long continuum, with the single goal of productivity. And we suspect that our worth depends upon how well we perform, because we know that our status and financial security certainly do.

Revelations indicating how significantly we have swallowed our society's idolatry of busyness can be found in simply being still. Psalms 46:10 says, “Be still, and know that I am God.”

Exercise 1:

Find a beautiful place to be still (preferably without distractions) for an hour or more. (If an hour or more is prohibitive, choose the longest block of minutes you can commit to this activity and make it happen.) Without any agenda or distraction to fill your time, notice what bubbles to the surface. AFTER your time of stillness, record what you remember. Are your observations mostly positive, negative, comfortable, uncomfortable, or neutral?

The Way It's Supposed to Be

Before delving into the pitfalls of the rat race, I want to affirm the realities and good longings that can keep us stuck in seemingly meaningless sprints. We want good things for ourselves and the people we love. Caring for the people God has put in our lives is quite literally the most Christ-like thing we can do. As Jesus put it, “This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you” (John 15:12). Loving others and contributing to the care of society's more vulnerable members is significant, self-sacrificial work.

Further, the desire to leave an impact on the world around us is a beautiful display of God's creative impulse woven into our design. When we see chaos into which we can bring order, or needs that we have a vision of meeting, our willingness to move with strength and tenderness is a significant expression of God's heart to the surrounding world.

Work was part of God's perfect plan for us even before Adam and Eve ate the fruit and things went awry. In Genesis 2:15 we read, "The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it." The New Testament goes so far as to say that "by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Ephesians 2:8-10). So work itself cannot be the problem.

NOT the Way It's Supposed to Be

If the story ended before Adam and Eve were deceived into trying to become like God by eating the fruit, I imagine we would each know a beautifully balanced and fulfilled life of joy, peace, patience, and self-control. Our unique gifts would express themselves in meeting the needs of the community who would then acknowledge and appreciate what we had to offer. Yet, sadly, since the fall, nothing has been as it was intended.

The endless thorns and thistles we encounter while endeavoring to leave our mark will always call for more time and attention. Even in relational jobs and volunteer positions, those we serve can be so desperate for help that we don't feel free to walk away at the end of a reasonable workday. Thus, the good work we feel called to do as part of caring for our loved ones can drain us before we even get home to be with the ones for whom we are working so hard.

Laboring as a church worker, I experienced this frustration while responding to a call that was significant to my personal growth and desire to make a mark in my profession. In one of my busiest seasons, I was not home for my children's bedtime routine several nights in a row. While tucking in my daughter the next evening, her words broke my heart. "Mom, your job is so important, telling people about Jesus. Is it bad that sometimes I just wish you didn't have to do that job, so you could be home with me?"

The tension when we're stuck in the rat race is real, even when it's for the best of causes. The needs are not made up. And that's all true *before* adding the specifics of your own situation. Do you have health issues, family dysfunction, financial strain, substantial loss, something I haven't mentioned, or all of the above? Each of these adds particular pressures that can increase the stakes of running well.

If this resonates with you, it may seem hopeless at times—as if there is no way off the treadmill. Perhaps you have found your calling, but the demands are ever increasing with decreasing satisfaction. Maybe you're slogging away at seemingly meaningless work on the job or at home just to make ends meet. Either way, I invite you to come along with me on a journey of self-discovery—not to merely discover yourself, but to uncover the slice of eternity that God has set in your heart. "He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end" (Ecclesiastes 3:11, NIV).

Exercise 2:

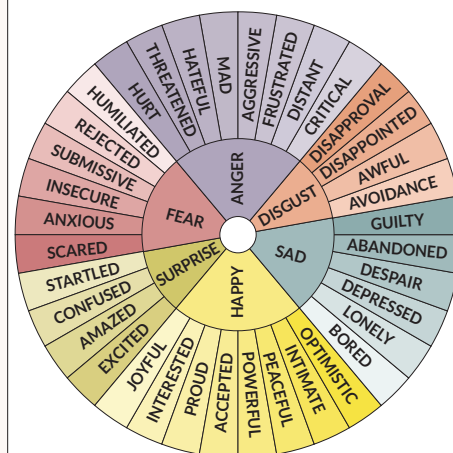
What keeps you trapped in the rat race or feeling like your time is not your own? Make two columns: put the demands at home in one column and the struggles at work in the other. Using the Feeling Wheel, note what feelings surface around each list. Once you've finished each list, note any predominant feelings that show up on both lists.

Exercise 2: HOME/WORK DEMANDS

Home	
Demands	Feelings
1. _____	1. _____
_____	2. _____
_____	3. _____
2. _____	1. _____
_____	2. _____
_____	3. _____
3. _____	1. _____
_____	2. _____
_____	3. _____

Work	
Demands	Feelings
1. _____	1. _____
_____	2. _____
_____	3. _____
2. _____	1. _____
_____	2. _____
_____	3. _____
3. _____	1. _____
_____	2. _____
_____	3. _____

Feeling Wheel



Predominant Feelings
1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Exercise 3:

NAMING THE STRUGGLES

Various Symptoms and Causes

PHYSICAL

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Caused by:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

MENTAL

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Caused by:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

EMOTIONAL

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Caused by:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

RELATIONAL

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Caused by:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

SPIRITUAL

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Caused by:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

FINANCIAL

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Caused by:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

VOCATIONAL

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Caused by:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Negative cycles

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Possible ways to disrupt the cycle:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

My Best Idea

The Physical Toll

Research in this area is unambiguous. You probably don't need to be convinced the rat race is not good for you. But in case you haven't heard, psychologist Dr. Carolyn Aldwin tells us, "Stress increases cortisol levels, which in the short term can be really good, but in the long term can impair the immune system's ability to respond. Blood pressure, heart disease, autoimmune disorders, and cholesterol levels in the blood are all exacerbated by chronic stress."

But the rat race is not just taking a physical toll. Mental health issues for which we may be predisposed (which are technically also physical) are much more likely to surface and become problematic in the face of chronic stress. Without the proper time and space to unwind, our internal rubber band becomes less elastic, less resilient, and begins to fray. Anxiety, depression, and addiction are especially triggered by times of significant ongoing stress.

For me, the health descent looked something like this: "It's been a long day, so I don't feel like cooking. We're on a budget in order to make ends meet, so let's go out for dollar tacos." Not a bad choice every now and then, but the long days kept coming and pizza was an easy option for another night. This snowballed into lots of less-healthy eating choices to ease the strain. Less nutrition led to deeper fatigue. This brought further stress, with me running on adrenaline. While my heart was in the right place, the results were not kind to my body.

If you are indeed struggling with the rat race, I am not going to recommend that you do one more thing to make it better. Your tiredness is ample indication that you need to slow down, not ramp up more. However, it is equally possible to get into negative cycles that fuel a downward spiral and, alternatively, positive cycles that fuel more energy and more health. Healthy choices in those pivotal moments are worth their weight in gold. Sometimes asking a friend to support us in those healthy choices by making a healthy dinner or taking a walk with us can make all the difference.

Exercise 3:

List any struggles you are experiencing in the following areas: physical, mental, emotional, relational, spiritual, financial, and vocational. List any causes you believe contribute to that struggle on the line next to it. If you don't know what causes a struggle, leave room for curiosity. Once the grid is complete, read through and notice any time a symptom in one area is listed as a cause in another area. List these cycles below and brainstorm ways to disrupt these negative cycles. Choose the best idea you generated.



The Relational Toll

Long hours and juggled responsibilities often increase irritability. Relationships already strained by our unwillingness or inability to slow down may suffer even more damage as patience with one another runs thin. Spouses and children usually bear the brunt of our inattention. However, whether we are married or not, relationships take time to build depth, safety, and connection. And if we let it, the rat race will eat up all the time and energy required to build the supportive relationships we need to be healthy.

When loving connection decreases, self-confidence often goes with it. Clouded by self-doubt and fear of what others would think if they got close enough to see our internal struggles, we may pull back from relational vulnerability. We then justify our isolation as increased *dedication* to whatever cause we're working on. Of course, the reality is that relationships take work, and the energy left over from a long, stressful day may not be enough to engage deeply. So we turn instead to mindless distractions that we think will help us to unwind.

Eventually, the things we do to cope with the stress of the rat race as we stay engaged in the day-to-day sprint can become their own source of life stress. Untended relationships can erupt, requiring even more time and attention to heal, and triggering other potential issues. Social media, media in general, drinking, smoking, eating, gambling, shopping, sex, and other outlets each carry their own perks and perils. But seasons of prolonged stress increase the likelihood of innocuous coping skills that can grow into addictions with full-blown consequences.

Not everyone goes this far down the rabbit hole. However, it can get much worse than this—and for some it does. As pressures mount and matters get worse, some experience the closing in of despair. Don't wait for that moment to confirm that things are bad enough to get help. If you see yourself in any of these stages of the rat race, take stock and consider if it's time for a change.

Thankfully, in my own story, my job ended before the toll became irreversible on my family relationships. However, many are not so lucky. When you listen to the regrets of people on their deathbeds, "I didn't earn enough money" or "I didn't work enough hours" is almost exclusively absent from the list. When we look at our lives through the lens of those who have already faced their deathbeds, it can bring some much-needed clarity. Psalm 90:12 says, "Teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom."

Exercise 4:

At the end of your life, if you were able to attend your own funeral, what three characteristics do you hope would rise to the top of others' experiences of you as a human being? List them with a brief description of what they mean to you.



Exercise 4:

A LITTLE PERSPECTIVE

I want to be remembered as ...

1.	
2.	
3.	



Exercise 5:
TAKING STOCK

	Sun.	Mon.	Tues.	Wed.	Thur.	Fri.	Sat.
12 am							
1 am							
2 am							
3 am							
4 am							
5 am							
6 am							
7 am							
8 am							
9 am							
10 am							
11 am							
12 pm							
1 pm							
2 pm							
3 pm							
4 pm							
5 pm							
6 pm							
7 pm							
8 pm							
9 pm							
10 pm							
11 pm							

Hrs/min for intimacy per day a week

Is this sustainable? Y/N? _____

Hrs/min for power per day a week

Is this sustainable? Y/N? _____

Hrs/min for freedom per day a week

Is this sustainable? Y/N? _____

Hrs/min for fun per day a week

Is this sustainable? Y/N? _____

The Self-Deception

For some, the rat race includes long hours, large ambitions, and inevitable burn out. For others, it's the mundane repetitive tasks of daily life that never lead to the meaningful, joyful life one hopes to live. In both scenarios, we cope by telling ourselves that it won't go on like this forever. In essence, we pretend that it will be different much sooner than we have any real right to expect. But why keep up the pretense? Why pretend it won't go on like this ad nauseum if we don't really believe it?

I believe we stay stuck in the rat race because we don't realize we're running as hard and fast as we are. The rat race depends on our self-deception to keep it going. That's a pretty strong statement. However, when I consider the way I was spending my time in the glory days of my own rat-racing, I would never have agreed that it was healthy or sustainable. So I told myself the lie that I just had to get through the next week, month, or year. Not surprisingly, the end of that season failed to deliver a new pace of life—much less the rest or recreation I so desperately needed.

Thus, I geared up for yet another busy season. I told myself and my family that we just had to get through Christmas, or Easter, or back to school, and then we'd be able to slow down. I was not intentionally lying. I just knew the cost of slowing down would be more than I was prepared to pay. So I used the imaginary incentive of that next season—when we could all relax and be together more—as a tool to justify working even harder and longer in the present moment.

An honest assessment of how we spend our time can be a sobering step to discerning how deeply embedded we are in the rat race. Initially, it can be embarrassing to realize just how far our actual time stewardship is from the values we hope to embody. However, the invitation is to be kind to yourself.

One way of assessing your current schedule is to reflect on how the activities of your life are (or are not) affecting your well-being. According to Dr. William Glasser, every human being has four basic psychological needs: intimacy, power, freedom, and fun. In order for your lifestyle to be sustainable through the lens of psychological health, each of these needs must be met regularly. After mapping out a typical week in this next exercise, you may want to specifically identify when and where these needs are being met to ensure you are not fooling yourself into continuing an unhealthy pace of life.

Exercise 5:

Use the enclosed grid to map how your time is spent in a typical week. Be as accurate as you can as you mark down which activities meet your need for intimacy. For intimacy, use ("I"), power ("P"), freedom ("Fr"), and fun ("F"). Then add up the totals and reflect on how sustainable your current schedule is for your overall well-being.



More or Less

We know from research that long-term stress takes a huge toll on our bodies and minds, but we don't need research to tell us stress is not beneficial. Our lives are already telling the story. So why do we continue to run so hard and fast after things that don't satisfy and, in the end, are actually harming us? I have asked myself this question so many times!

For starters, I don't think we really know that the meager prize will not satisfy us. There is a false promise embedded deeply in our North American culture that success will satisfy our souls. It's a lie, but a very difficult one to discern when many around us seem to be happy and successful. (This is not to dismiss the real impact that poverty has on individuals and entire communities where it has been experienced for generations. Yet speaking to the majority, in some ways, our wealth as a country has blinded us to the joy and gratitude that many impoverished cultures experience as a simple byproduct of existence.)

Chances are good you know this already, but clever advertising doesn't simply promote the services we need. It also instills a sense of discontent if a perceived "need" is not met. Implicit promises of instant beauty and belonging are made that cannot be delivered by any product or service.

If however we are not finding joy and meaning in our day-to-day life already, regardless of what we know to be true, we are motivated to pursue even empty promises because they at least offer some temporary relief. As we read in Ecclesiastes, "the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing" (Ecclesiastes 1:8b). And the cycle repeats itself as the need for more requires earning more which adds more stress while draining more joy from our day-to-day life. This in turn leaves us more vulnerable to the next empty promise that comes along. It's a vicious cycle to fight inside yourself, much less a whole family, or community.

The practice of saying no to ourselves can be a wonderful place to begin exercising freedom from the meaningless rigors of an unfulfilling life. Not only can we build more margin into our lives by saying no to unhealthy desires and wants that extend us beyond our ability to provide, we also build the muscles required to begin saying no to others.

Exercise 6:

Without spending too much time analyzing it, what are three things you could be saying no to in your life? Extra dessert? Screen time? A membership that could give you more time if you cancelled it? For each thing you could say no to, what might be a corresponding gain? Circle the one that has potential to give you the most in return for what you are giving up.



Exercise 6:

LESS IS MORE

Saying no to ...	Frees up more ...
1. _____ _____ _____ _____	_____ _____ _____ _____
2. _____ _____ _____ _____	_____ _____ _____ _____
3. _____ _____ _____ _____	_____ _____ _____ _____



ning, the temptation is to see

When we are least satisfied with life, we are most vulnerable to habitual

This may be the hardest part to break in the whole cycle. It is human to want to

Obviously, not all activity is a form of distraction. Sometimes a good book feeds

As we become more familiar with our own patterns—both in running and

In the midst of a particularly stressful season of transition at the church where

What activities

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Beauty

It's interesting that at the height of my frenzied running—when I felt like I didn't have time for anything else—it took a connection with my spouse, beauty, and literal re-creation to slow down the roll of the hamster wheel in a way not to send me sprawling. Beauty in the context of the rat race is often a luxury, if not a complete afterthought. However, it is beauty that most reliably arrests our attention and leaves us with a sense of awe, a heightened perception of reality, and a mysterious joy that is sorely missing when running at full speed.

While we are all working hard to control outcomes, the essence of joy is beyond our grasp to manipulate. And somehow that joy, awe, and gratitude come from an experience of beauty that we cannot control, because it has been given to us as a gift. I wonder if this is not the beginning of all true worship and, therefore, a worthy pursuit beyond even the joy that it gives us in the moment.

Dana Gioia's interpretation of Thomas Aquinas is that "beauty leads us by pleasure to wisdom and through wisdom to love and love transforms us." As beings who were made to long for loving connection and powerful impact, it is interesting that Gioia, former chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, also notices that "the people who change the world generally make their impact by embodying their message." In other words, they have been led by beauty and transformed by love!

Is there room in your rat race for beauty? Is beauty a luxury? What role does beauty play in your everyday life? If you're longing for impact, consider that God created the whole universe, the earth and all that is in it. Apparently, beauty was not an afterthought with our Creator. The expanse of the sky with its lights, vast mountains with cascading waterfalls, wide plains and canopied forests, vibrant colored fruits and flowers—all of creation is indeed saying something of importance about God. And the common denominator in all of its presentation is beauty!

Psalm 19:1-4a (NIV) says, "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of His hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they reveal knowledge. They have no speech; they use no words; no sound is heard from them. Yet their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the end of the world." How's that for impact?!

Exercise 8:

Find a beautiful place to be still. Without any agenda or distraction to fill your time, notice what bubbles to the surface. Record what you remember. Continue this practice over time, and it will become a source of great joy and transformation in your life.

Remember, these exercises are designed to bring out valuable information that can assist you in discerning the best path forward. Things you have circled and written may give you ideas for how to proceed, but please don't try them all at once, or beat yourself up for being unable to make them work. God is working, through His Spirit, to nurture good fruits within you over time. Joy, peace, patience, and self-control are fruits of the Spirit that may take time to grow, but they are God's very good gifts to you.

If the changes you are seeking continue to evade you after completing these clarifying exercises, please seek out a pastor or counselor. Each of our situations is different, and you deserve the care of a supportive person as you journey through the rat race. Always remember:

For He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end. Ecclesiastes 3:11 (NIV)



Exercise 8:

BE STILL AND NOTICE

What happened in your ...

BODY—Physical Sensations

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

MIND—Recurring Thoughts

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

HEART—Feelings That Surfaced

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

ENVIRONMENT—Things You Noticed

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____



AmyRuth Bartlett is a licensed professional counselor who roams the Missouri countryside with her husband and two kids in their recently purchased RV. Homeschooling their 11-year-old daughter and 7-year-old son, she revels in exploring the beauty of creation and making history come alive for them. She uses her spare moments to paint landscapes, write on biblical anthropology, and read about United States' presidents.



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