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Urban Meyer and Finding Margin in Life
February 12, 2015

If Urban Meyer was not a famed coach before this year, he certainly is now. In the last three years at Ohio State, he is amassed a record of 38-3, and is 24-0 in conference play. This year he took the Buckeyes to the national title despite having to do so with their third string quarterback. But I would not say this is the most impressive part of his recent success. The most impressive part is that he has been able to do so with margin in his life to care for the ones he loves.

This, of course, was not always the case. Meyer, as many of you know, had found success before his recent tenure at Ohio State. He led the University of Florida to national titles in 2006 and 2008. But in 2009 he took a leave of absence and by the end of 2010 he resigned as head coach. You see, for years Meyer had been all about football and success. His obsession over every detail meant that his family was in bad shape and his body broke down. It took admission into the hospital and his daughter telling him he had not been there for her in years to finally break through. He simply could not keep on coaching as he had done.

I am an avid reader, and to date, I have yet to read one book where the words went right up to the edge of the page or were hanging of the page. If I ever pick up a book like that, I will think that something is wrong. And my guess is, so would you. The print on a page just looks better when there is some margin on the page. Today, I want to suggest that the same is true for our lives. Our lives look best with margin. When the events of our lives fill up every blank space, when we try to cram too much on the page, it is no longer attractive. And beyond being unattractive, it usually lends itself to some kind of breakdown, like what Urban Meyer experienced.

Sean Johnson, who is on the faculty of Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University, has this memory:

When I was in college, I was a TA for a class called Profiles in American Enterprise. Every week the CEO of some large corporation (Nissan USA, Flextronics, etc.) would come talk to the class, and the TAs would get to grab dinner with them after. During dinner the

subject of work/family balance often came up—and it wasn't pretty. Divorce was common. Missing kid's events or games was the norm. Men and women who prided themselves on their ability to move mountains got sheepish describing the fissures and faults in their home lives. They had constructed their lives in a way that lacked margin.¹

And this has been what I have seen in my years of ministry as well. People may be very successful in their professional lives, but their personal health or their marriage and family crumble, because margin has been crowded out.

Now, what I find interesting about the lack of margin in our lives is that we often don't recognize its absence until things get pretty out of kilter. We can see in an instant that margin is lacking in a book, but we don't read it too well in our lives. So here are some signs that point to the lack of margin in our lives:

- Physical breakdown. Most of us have some weak point in our body. For me it is asthma, for others it is stomach issues, or headaches, or joint problems. When we are living without margin, our body often tells us.
- A growing lack of simple virtues like patience and kindness, and even honesty. When we have a life without margin, we are no longer patient with people, kind words are forgotten, and we can even be tempted to be dishonest to move things along.
- A savorless life. When we are without margin, we don't remember how the food we just ate tasted. We can't remember the last time we sat in our yard and watched the sun set or the neighborhood kids play. Or in the case of [this photo](#), we don't even notice a humpback whale that has surfaced next to our boat.
- Important relationships have grown distant. That was certainly the case with Urban Meyers prior to 2010, and it is perhaps the most important sign that we have lost proper margin in our lives.

So the question is how do we gain and maintain margin in our lives? There is probably lots of good advice on this matter. I will offer a few possibilities:

First, I would say that it is important to **keep the end in mind**. A life without margin is often a reactive life. It is aimed at keeping the next ball afloat, not creating a sustainable life. If we want to have a life margin, we must not make decisions as to whether we should pursue or participate in something based on the merits of that activity alone. If we do that, we will always find reason to add one more item to our overcrowded lives. Instead we need to evaluate opportunities in light of the whole. Does taking on something leave the right amount of space for family and friends, a reasonable amount of time for sleep and exercise, and chances to hear from other voices through reading books or being part of a church community? If it doesn't, we either need to say no or take something of equal commitment off the schedule. There will be seasons when we operate in the margins, but if we don't recognize that the aim must be to have a life of margin on average, we will never get there.

The second suggestion for creating margin is to **pursue it in on both an annual basis and a daily basis**. Gary Keller, the Chairman of the board for Keller Williams Realty whom I quoted last week, suggests that when mapping out one's calendar for the year, the first step should be to block out time for vacation.² That might seem a little strange for some. How can one think of time off before the work is done? But if we don't map it out in advance, it's too easy for it not to happen or not to happen well.

But scheduling for margin should not just happen on the yearlong calendar, it needs to happen in the daily calendar as well. Why is that we must always leave just in time to make it to the airport or the show or to meet friends or to go to church? And be stressed all along the way. Why not leave fifteen minutes earlier? If there is traffic, no sweat, there is time. And if you get there earlier, you are able to enter relaxed rather than hurried. I know that when I add that extra fifteen minutes, life is much less stressful.

Third, to help keep margin in our lives, find a friend who is enough outside of your world and will give you honest feedback and ask them what they think of your load, or of what you are planning to add to your plate. If they say you're crazy, that might be a sign you need to pare back in order to keep reasonable margin in your life.

Fourth, it seems to me there is one very significant source of much of our lack of margin, and it ties into some very ancient words handed down to the people of Israel. In fact, it is the last words of the Ten Commandments. They read like this: “**You shall not covet** your neighbor’s wife. You shall not set your desire on your neighbor’s house or land, his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.” You might say, “What does this have to do with margin of our lives?” Well, it seems to me that so much of what encroaches on the margins of our lives stems from the peek we take at those around us. We see that others have something bigger or better or different than we do, and we often go filling up our margin in pursuit of it. Of course, we may get what we are after, but always at a cost.

So back to Urban Meyer. He took a year off from coaching. But he did more than that; he changed his way of life. His schedule is no longer crammed only with football. It has margin for other important things in life. Tim Tebow, who played under Meyer, and knows him well, says this of the new Meyer:

When he left Florida, he knew it was for the right reasons, that he needed to look at his priorities and get right....Every Wednesday night, he’s taking Nicki to dinner. He’s going to Nate’s baseball and football games. He’s taking Shelley out for dates. He’s able to communicate with his friends more often. Not only is that making him a better coach, it’s making him less stressed so he can deal with more things.³

Sometimes people believe that margin and success don’t go hand in hand. I am convinced that is not true. Meyer is an example of that. And even if it is true to some degree, I think we do well to trade a little success for a good bit of margin.

¹Sean Johnson, “[Why You Need Margin in Your Life](#)” (accessed February 8, 2015).

²Gary Keller and Jay Papasan, *The ONE Thing: The Surprisingly Simple Truth Behind Extraordinary Results* (Bard Press, 2013), 162.

³Kevin Van Valkenburg, “[How Urban Meyer Found his Balance](#),” January 11, 2015.

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