

Let the sunshine in

Life-giving rays can give much-needed health boost



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Some of my fondest childhood memories are of bright summer days when Mom and Dad piled us all into the family station wagon for a day at the beach. We'd spend the whole day playing in the water and the sunshine and arrive home happy, tired, and sunburned.

These days we're horrified that parents would allow their children to play in the blazing hot sun for a whole day without any attempts to protect their skin from sun damage or future problems with skin cancer. There's truth to that, but I also think Mom and Dad might have been on to something. Sunshine is life-giving and offers many therapeutic benefits. We've become so afraid of cancer that we deprive

ourselves of the necessary healthy doses of sunshine.

Moderate sunlight is an effective, and definitely one of the cheapest, preventative and curative therapies we have. The sun's UVB rays, interacting with the cholesterol in our skin, manufacture vitamin D3 in our kidneys and liver. Vitamin D3 promotes calcium absorption for teeth and bone health, protects against immune system disorders, and lowers our risk of colon, breast, and prostate cancer. It seems sensible sunlight exposure prevents some cancers.

Sensible sun exposure implies healthy lifestyle habits such as exercise and relaxation, both helpful for pain management, stress reduction, and lower levels of anxiety.

Remember those carefree times of youth, running and playing in the sun and sleeping deeply at night? It turns out that 20 minutes of daytime exposure to sunlight increases our production of the sleep hormone melatonin

at night. Low levels of melatonin are linked to poor sleep, especially as we age. Try foregoing a few nights' sleep to discover how essential sleep is to your mental and emotional health!

"Studies have shown that sunlight eases mild depression."

During sun-starved Canadian winter months, our risk of depression increases. For many of us, working hours occupy the few hours of daylight available. Nor are most work schedules conducive to time spent outdoors daily. Some of us don't have windows near our workstations and may not even see the sun for days.

Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) is likely caused by a lack of sunlight, which may interrupt our usual sleep and wake patterns. In the late fall and winter people

with SAD often experience low mood, irritation or anxiety for no apparent reason, increased appetite for carbohydrates, excessive sleep, and low energy during daylight hours. Severe symptoms can be debilitating.

Studies have shown that sunlight eases mild depression by increasing our levels of serotonin, a natural anti-depressant produced by our brains. SAD's depressive symptoms are treated with sensible sun exposure, regular exercise, medications if necessary, and counselling support. Regular, daily exposure to a therapeutic lamp that mimics the sun's UVB rays can fill in for our lack of real sunlight.

Now that it's winter, I'm using my light therapy lamp for 20 minutes every morning and can hardly wait for the real sunshine next spring and summer.

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A measure of success



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DAEJON, SOUTH KOREA—It was on the 10th floor café of a megachurch of 10,000 in this South Korean city, beside a floor-to-ceiling window, where a young man greeted me with a "sir," and oh, by the way, did I have a word for him, any nugget, anything to help his future?

He knew I was involved with a missions' conference some floors below and his spirit was so genuine—this is the beauty of Korean culture—that I was and wasn't surprised when he asked particularly what I thought "success" was.

He shared that he had just failed to get into medical school and this was the difficult state of his life.

I listened and told him he already had some good notions on it all, then added that he needs to

keep thinking it through himself, that what others—his girlfriend, his parents, certainly his culture—tell him may not have anything to do with who he is in his soul.

I told him my own story, how at his age I had left home against my father's will, how I planned to go one direction but was led in the opposite, and how my vocation eventually came with as much planning as that of a man who turns a corner and falls into a manhole.

I said something about holding life with loose hands, and also something about farming, how a seed needs to die, how growth is often unseen, and that the hard truth is that this all takes time.

He was appreciative and we saw each other once more before, with my wife, I flew back to our African home. But his question followed me to Africa because I suppose it's the sort of question that chases any of us, including the Church itself. What is success?

Certainly this is the question in front of the South Korean Church. After centuries of Confucianism and Buddhism in Korea, Christian missionaries tilled the spiritual soil in the late 19th and early 20th century. One, American nurse Ruby Kendrick, said, "If I had a thousand hearts, I'd give each to Korea."

Korea, at least the south, has since emerged remarkably anew in various ways. One church, Yoido Full Gospel in Seoul, apparently the world's largest church, is attended by, conservatively, tens of thousands during seven Sunday services translated into 16 languages. When I walked in it was promoting an international conference on, no surprise, church growth.

But is this success? Or do we know that going to church doesn't make you a Christian any more than parking yourself in a garage makes you a car?

This is the rub of it. Jesus changed the world by suffering,

exiting early and leaving the keys with a few scrubby followers. We, on the other hand, want much more.

As one South Korean mission director told me, "There's now debate here about how healthy it is with all these mega-churches." He lamented, for one, the infighting. Or consider the national uproar caused by a minister at one such church after he faked his PhD.

So it's followed me a long way, this question from a youth in a café at the top of a high-rising church.

It's as good a place as any to be asked about something like success. But the answer, it seems, is better worked out on ground-level because that's where the truth is often clearest.

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