

Rhythms of life

An awareness of rhythm is central to our existence—biologically, socially, and spiritually.

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [August 2026](#) issue

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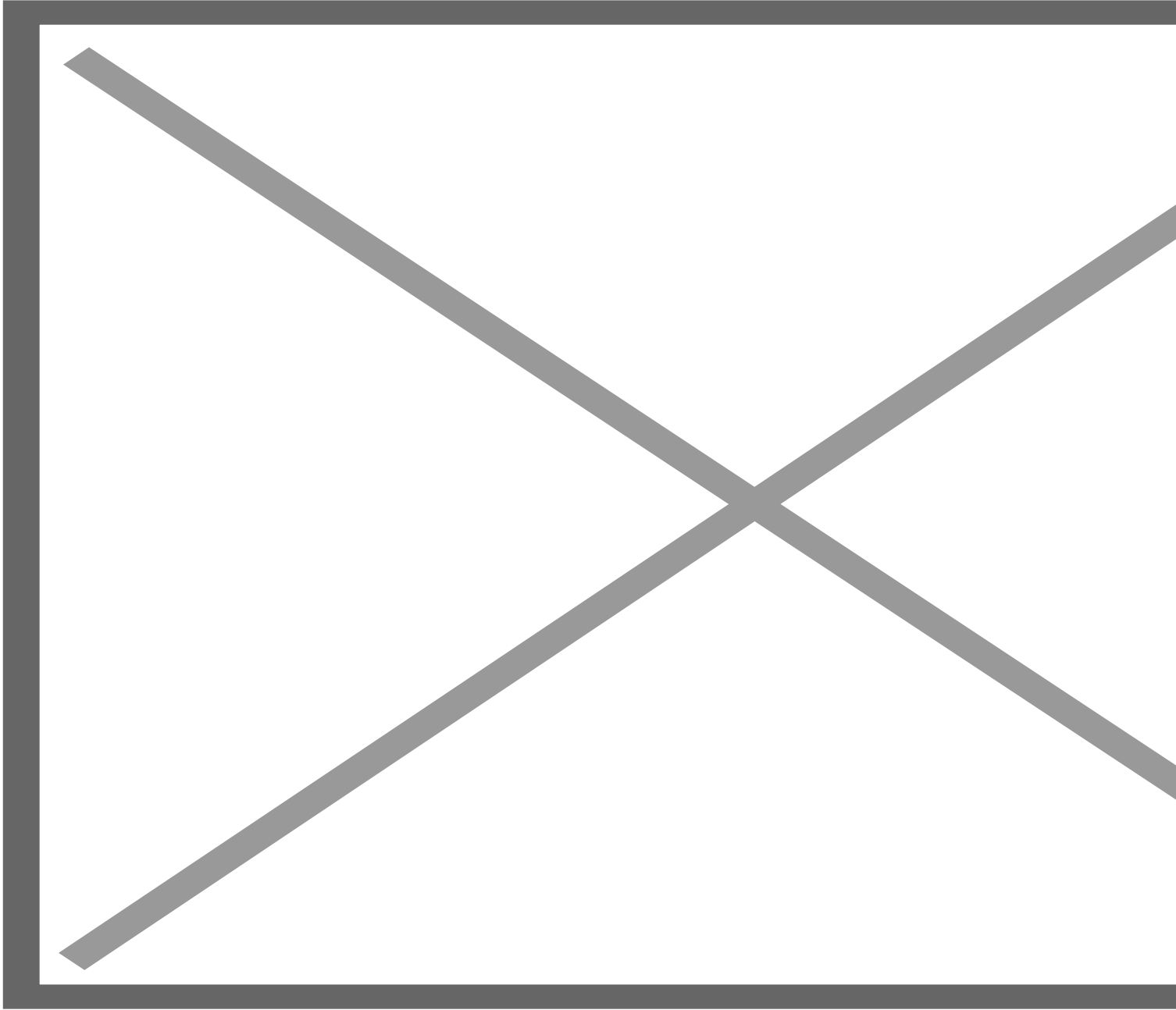


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I imagine your parents deciding to kickstart your life with Baroque music by playing J. S. Bach sonatas for your first 48 hours after birth. Earlier this year, Italian and Hungarian researchers did just that, outfitting 49 sleeping newborn babies with tiny headphones through which Bach's music was played. By measuring the brain waves of each infant through electroencephalography, these scientists revealed a striking discovery: Human newborns innately understand rhythm. Like miniature maestros emerging from the womb, infants are hard-wired to perceive the beat in music and, even more startling, to anticipate changes that arrive with shifting rhythmic patterns. This intrinsic sense may well stem from exposure in the womb to the mother's heartbeat, breathing patterns, and walking habits.

It's heartening to know that we have rhythmic awareness built into our brains and bodies from the get-go, since we're more reliant on rhythm for surviving (and thriving) in life than we often recognize. Every living organism has rhythm central to its existence. And, in our human state of being, circadian rhythms are vital for managing everything from our wake-sleep cycle and body temperature to digestion, respiration, heart rate, and hormone cycles.

Beyond biology, our interpersonal relationships develop certain rhythms as we learn to give and receive or draw close and pull away. Religiously speaking, too, most traditions structure life and meaning around rhythmic cycles that are based on the created order, sacred texts, or calendars that prompt daily, weekly, or seasonal rituals.

We don't pay much attention to most of these rhythmic essentials in life until something goes awry and what has been a predictable pattern gets upended or even disappears. Then we face realities like insomnia, indigestion, heart arrhythmia, labored breathing, cognitive decline, or worse. Or a social awkwardness creeps into our relationships. Or our spiritual life collapses under the weight of internal neglect or external threat.

Terry Waite, the former Church of England envoy held hostage in dark, solitary confinement by the Islamic Jihad Organization from 1987 to 1991, has talked about the value he found in creating new spiritual rhythms as his life hung in the balance. In a 2019 interview, he recalled hearing the daily prayer calls from the local minaret: "[They] gave me structure, a sense of identity, a sense of purpose, a sense of order." Listening to the five summons a day allowed Waite to avoid what he called "fragmenting within." Each call to prayer prompted him to recite a simple, rhythmic line he treasured from the Book of Common Prayer: "Lighten our darkness, we beseech thee, O Lord; and by thy great mercy defend us from all perils and dangers of this night, for the love of thy only Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen."

Dependable spiritual rhythms in life ground us in remarkable ways. Sometimes they morph into powerful habits that help hold life together and evade that inner fragmentation. My friend Arlene is a case in point. A stroke seven years ago stripped her of significant cognitive ability and speech. Yet every morning after waking up and getting dressed, she makes her bed and then sits atop it, happily opening her Bible to a random page. Arlene can't read the Bible any longer. But since she started every day of her pre-stroke life reading scripture, this habit of sitting with the Bible draped across her lap provides enough grace to open each new day. Reliable rhythms matter biologically, relationally, and spiritually. Life can turn quickly sour without them.

There's a technical term in music for such a dependable beat: *tactus*, the implicit pulse that underlies a piece's explicit rhythm. In church music, the *tactus* governs a congregation's song: If the lead musician has learned how to breathe with the people, the *tactus* will be dependable, and the congregation will sing well. This is why it's often said that a congregation that trusts its musician sings well. I'd argue for expanding this idea to include people who live rhythmically in sync with a reliable God: A people who trust their Creator live well.