

Remember the Sabbath

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Reading: from *Sabbath: Finding Rest, Renewal, and Delight in Our Busy Lives*
by Wayne Muller

In the relentless busyness of modern life, we have lost the rhythm between work and rest. All life requires a rhythm of rest. There is a rhythm in our waking activity and the body's need for sleep. There is a rhythm in the way day dissolves into night, and night into morning. There is a rhythm as the active growth of spring and summer is quieted by the necessary dormancy of fall and winter. There is a tidal rhythm, a deep, eternal conversation between the land and the great sea. In our bodies, the heart perceptibly rests after each life-giving beat; the lungs rest between the exhale and the inhale.

We have lost this essential rhythm. Our culture invariably supposes that action and accomplishment are better than rest, that doing something – anything – is better than doing nothing. Because of our desire to succeed, to meet these ever-growing expectations, we do not rest. Because we do not rest, we lose our way. We miss the compass points that would give us succor. We miss the quiet that would give us wisdom. We miss the joy and love born of effortless delight. Poisoned by this hypnotic belief that good things come only through unceasing determination and tireless effort, we can never truly rest. And for want of rest, our lives are in danger.

In our drive for success we are seduced by the promises of more: more money, more recognition, more satisfaction, more love, more information, more influence, more possessions, more security. Even when our intentions are noble and our efforts sincere – even when we dedicate our lives to the service of others – the corrosive pressure of frantic overactivity can nonetheless cause suffering in ourselves and others.

A “successful life has become a violent enterprise. We make war on our own bodies, pushing them beyond their limits; war on our children, because we cannot find enough time to be with them when they are hurt and afraid, and need our company; war on our spirit, because we are too preoccupied to listen to the quiet voices that seek to nourish and refresh us; war on our communities, because we are fearfully protecting what we have, and do not feel safe enough to be kind and generous; war on the earth, because we cannot take the time to place our feet on the ground and allow it to feed us, to taste its blessings and give thanks. . .

How have we allowed this to happen?

Sermon

June is here. Summer is upon us. And so it's time for my annual go-out-and-enjoy-yourself-for-the-summer sermon. I know that, for some, the pace of life and work doesn't change all that much for the summer. But that's okay. There's really nothing so special about summer that it should be the only time we think about rest and relaxation. But with school coming to an end for the year, and with church life winding down to a slower rhythm, this seems like a natural time to think and talk about taking back some of our time for the care of our souls. My hope is that we can take the lessons we learn with us into all parts of the year.

Most of my recent sermons have had some connection with my time away on sabbatical leave. This one is no exception. My topic is “Sabbath”, and what is a sabbatical but an extended Sabbath experience? The word Sabbath means rest, and the concept is an ancient one. It goes back at least to the Ten Commandments: “Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy.” Holy, at

its root, simply means separate or set apart. So we are called upon to recognize a special day each week, to set it apart from our regularly daily routines.

To me, the value of the Sabbath concept is clear, even without the extra layers of religious meaning that are often associated with it. A day – or even a part of a day – with no special obligations or responsibilities is a gift of time to be used to celebrate life and tend to your spiritual well-being. Poet Maya Angelou thinks about it like this:

Every person needs to take one day away. A day in which one consciously separates the past from the future. Jobs, lovers, family, employers, and friends can exist one day without any one of us, and if our egos permit us to confess, they could exist eternally in our absence.

Each person deserves a day away in which no problems are confronted, no solutions searched for. Each of us needs to withdraw from the cares which will not withdraw from us. We need hours of aimless wandering or spates of time sitting on park benches, observing the mysterious world of ants and the canopy of treetops.

If we step away for a time, we are not, as many may think and some will accuse, being irresponsible, but rather we are preparing ourselves to more ably perform our duties and discharge our obligations. . .

A day away acts as a spring tonic. It can dispel rancor, transform indecision, and renew the spirit.

I must say that taking five months away from normal routines and responsibilities and worries did have the effect of renewing my spirit, and of preparing me to more ably perform my duties. But one of the lessons I brought back from that experience was the importance of keeping the Sabbath (or Sabbatical) *spirit* alive year-around, of finding ways from day to day, and from week to week to renew my spirit and stay truly alive.

While taking an occasional day of rest can have the effect of enhancing the performance of our duties in our *real* life of work and responsibility, that is not the essence of the Sabbath experience. The great Jewish thinker Abraham Joshua Heschel writes that “The Sabbath as a day of rest is not for the purpose of recovering one’s lost strength and becoming fit for the forthcoming labor. The Sabbath is a day for the sake of life.” Looked at this way, the Sabbath becomes not a time separate from real life, but rather time set aside for as real an experience of life as there is.

In her book, *Sabbath Sense*, UCC minister Donna Schaper writes that “One of the great things about Sabbath’s unlocking the key to our time is an opportunity to fully experience the things that happen to us. Many of us have too many undigested experiences wandering around inside us.” After dashing around on auto-pilot for days and weeks on end, it’s helpful to pause occasionally to reflect on what we’ve been doing and who we are.

Unitarian Universalist minister Robert Fulghum describes his Sabbath practice like this:

My wife and I try to live Sundays as if they were a different kind of day. I take this concept more from the Jewish tradition than from the Christian. We don’t go anywhere; we don’t have any obligations; we don’t do any work. Instead, we listen to music, we read, we go for walks. We try to set ourselves aside from our busy lives on this day, allowing ourselves to simply enjoy being alive. We’ve noticed that having one sane day a week

really makes a difference. We don't always manage to observe the Sabbath in this way, but when we do, it is indeed a special day.

Of course the traditional practice of Sabbath was to set aside a specific day each week. For most Christians that has meant Sundays. For Muslims it's Friday. And for Jews it's sundown Friday to sundown Saturday. Our social world is no longer set up to accommodate that day off. Many people must work at their regular jobs on the traditional Sabbath days, and many of the rest of us use that time off to fulfill our responsibilities at home, tending to chores and shopping, and the like.

But you know what? Sabbath is really a state of mind, not a day of the week. While there is something to be said for having a regular day to keep the beat and rhythm of our life on track, Sabbath can in fact be practiced any time. The reality of Sabbath as a particular day set apart may be lost, but we can still maintain the *sense* of Sabbath as spiritual leisure. One author I read talked about "little Sabbaths" – intentional spiritual pauses, which are something altogether different than organized-religion-designated special days.

It is the spirit of the Sabbath that is important, not some list of nit-picking rules about when and how, and what is and isn't allowed. Sabbath occurs any time we interrupt ordinary time with sacred purpose, when we open ourselves to unplanned enchantment, to moments of grace. I invite you to join me in such a pause right now. Take a few moments to just look around at the other shining faces surrounding you. Soak in the good feeling of being among other good folks. Be fully present to the sense of joy and gratitude that comes with being here, now, together. . . .

This is a sacred hour, and that was a sacred moment. And that is what Sabbath is about. Cultivating the spirit of Sabbath in our lives means creating such moments. Or rather, letting such moments occur. Making time for them and giving ourselves over to them. This is not a new idea. The Sufi poet Rumi wrote, over seven hundred years ago:

Today, like every other day, we wake up empty and frightened. Don't open the door to the study and begin reading. Take down a musical instrument. Let the beauty we love be what we do. There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground.

Similarly, there are hundreds of ways to practice Sabbath. Some take a few minutes, some a few hours or a day, some perhaps months. I'd like to spend the rest of my time with you today mentioning a few of those hundreds of possibilities. And most of those I'll mention will fall in the few minutes or hours category.

If traditional ritual resonates with you, you might want to designate a particular time each week (or each day) to light one or more Sabbath candles. That simple physical act is one way of transforming a normal space and time into a sacred moment and a sacred space. Another traditional practice you may wish to adopt is to prepare a special Sabbath meal, being mindful of the gifts inherent in the event: the food itself, the company with which it is shared, the time to enjoy it.

Speaking of mindfulness, I think that is what Sabbath is largely about. Being mindful of the world around us and experiencing all of its gifts with the deep joy and gratitude and attention that they deserve. And so another practice I'd recommend is one I talked about a few weeks ago in the context of a mindfulness retreat. That is, the use of a mindfulness bell. If you have some kind of bell or chime, you can periodically ring it as a way to begin again, to call yourself back to

the present moment. Take three or four silent mindful breaths, and you may well regain some much-needed perspective on things.

If you have a bit more time to spare, one of the classical ways of meditating is simply to follow the breath, in and out, in and out, feeling its rhythms and bringing yourself into harmony with them. Similarly, if you prefer focusing outward, you might take a Sabbath walk, with no explicit purpose beyond taking in and enjoying nature, and perhaps noticing the rhythms of life about you. And if possible take off your shoes and let your feet touch the earth, so that you can feel your connection to it directly.

You may choose to practice Sabbath by engaging in traditional forms of devotion, such as creating an altar or reading and reflecting on meaningful writings. Your altar should contain items that hold some special meaning for you, so that when you return to it regularly, you are surrounded by and reminded of what is important and meaningful to you. And choose your devotional reading in a similar way. Select scripture passages, or poems, or essays that move you deeply at your core, bringing you once again back home to your spirit's essentials.

Another Sabbath practice that you can do just about any time is to offer a blessing. That might mean blessing your children, your lover, or your friend by placing a hand on their head and offering wishes for their well-being and happiness. Or it might mean blessing a stranger quietly and secretly as you pass them on the street, thinking some words like "May you be happy; may you be at peace." When you do that, notice how it makes you feel.

Some of our best teachers and role models for living the Sabbath spirit might be our children, before they forget how to really play. We should follow their example and regularly set aside time to play. This is an excellent way to enjoy your children, your spouse, or your friends, and to nourish your delight. We must fight the impulse to consider play a waste of time, taking us away from more productive pursuits. What would we rather be producing than joy and delight? Savor those moments.

One way of cultivating the spirit of Sabbath in a more ongoing way is to seek ways of simplifying and un-cluttering your life. Author Donna Schaper claims that "One of the main things in the way of Sabbath is clutter." When we find ourselves taken over by clutter, we're left with little time or space to just live, to just be. And so the important questions become "What can I let go of? What can I give away? What can I donate to the Fellowship Yard Sale?" Wayne Muller, in his book *Sabbath*, asserts that this is the beginning of true wealth. And the late William Sloane Coffin agreed, saying "there are two ways to be rich; one is to have lots of resources; the other is to have few needs." And so another part of the Sabbath spirit is regaining perspective on what we really need and what we only think we need.

So those are some ways of practicing Sabbath in our lives. I'm sure each of you can come up with many more ways of your very own. The important thing is to focus less on *doing* and more on *being*. And if you have difficulty pushing away those feelings of guilt trying to get you back to more productive activity, remind yourself that you have value without your work. And in fact, getting too caught up in the busyness of your hectic working life can actually diminish the value of your life as a whole.

And so, in the words of Wayne Muller, "let us remember the Sabbath. Let us breathe in deeply the rhythms of life, of the earth, of action and rest."

So may it be.