

Keeping Sabbath

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*Anybody can observe the Sabbath,
but making it holy surely takes the rest of the week.*
— Alice Walker
In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens

First Reading from "Sounds" in *Walden* by Henry David Thoreau

There were times when I could not afford to sacrifice the bloom of the present moment to any work, whether of head or hands. Sometimes, in a summer morning, having taken my accustomed bath, I sat in my sunny doorway from sunrise till noon, rapt in a reverie, amidst the pines and hickories and sumachs, in undisturbed solitude and stillness, while the birds sang around.

I grew in those seasons like corn in the night, and they were far better than any work of the hands would have been. They were not time subtracted from my life, but so much over and above my usual allowance.

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Second Reading
from *Teaching a Stone to Talk*
by Annie Dillard

At a certain point you say to the woods, to the sea, to the mountains, the world, "Now I am ready. Now I will stop and be wholly attentive." You empty yourself and wait, listening. After a time you hear it: there is nothing there. There is nothing but those things only, those created objects, discrete, growing or holding, or swaying, being rained on or raining, held, flooding or ebbing, standing, or spread. You feel the world's word as a tension, a hum, a single chorused note everywhere the same. This is it: this hum is the silence ...

The silence is all there is. It is the alpha and the omega. It is God's brooding over the face of the waters; it is the blended note of the ten thousand things, the whine of wings. You take a step in the right direction to pray to this silence, and even to address the prayer to "World." Distinctions blur. Quit your tents. Pray without ceasing.

Chant

When I breathe in, I'll breathe in peace.
When I breathe out, I'll breathe out love.

Sermon
by Duane Fickeisen

Keep on breathing! Breathe in peace. Breathe out love. Breathe in. Breathe out.

At its best, the commandment to remember and observe the sabbath day is an instruction to cease from work for a time and to pay full attention. The command calls us to listen, to hear the world's hum, the single note of unity that reminds us of our connection with the cosmos, of our interdependence.

It is a call to pay attention so that we might understand our power to effect transformation, to care for the world, to make a difference, to be agents of justice. At the same time we are called to recognize our inability to be in control, the finite nature of our existence, and our inevitable death.

Breathe in. Breathe out.

Keeping the sabbath helps us to remember to be humble *and* to recognize our call to be agents of creation. Yes, that represents a paradox. One of the definitions of liberalism is the ability to hold both sides of a paradox simultaneously. Action *and* reflection. Power *and* dependence. Humility *and* agency.

I do have a regular sabbath day. Because Sunday is a major workday for us, Judy and I set aside Monday as our sabbath, a time to cease from the work of ministry. Actually we typically begin our sabbath on Sunday evening unless there we have a scheduled event related to our ministry, which sometimes happens, and we return to work on Tuesday morning.

And of course we would never hesitate to respond to an emergency that called for our presence on Monday. We usually screen calls on Mondays, but if you have an urgent need for assistance, don't hesitate to call us and leave a message indicating the urgency.

But even with Mondays free from most ministerial duties, they quickly fill up with the other tasks of living — chores, errands, and projects seem to expand to fill all the available time. The to-do lists spill over from day to day and week to week.

So I long for something different — for my sabbath to become more meaningful. It's not that I don't enjoy many of the activities that fill the time, but it feels like much of the time is overcommitted and over-programmed, with not enough devotion to simply paying attention wholly.

I am jealous of Jewish Shabbat observations that begin at sundown on Friday with prayers, candle lighting, leisurely meals, connection with family, and worship. There are specific prohibitions that provide a structure for the time.

I think that all of us need quality time for personal restoration and for our families and friends that isn't filled with tasks, but represents a pause from them in order to experience a deeper connection with life itself. And we probably need it on a regular and fairly frequent basis. Judy and I and the Worship Associates strive to create opportunities for deeper connection in our worship services.

Breathe in. Breathe out.

I've been reading a newly published book, *CrazyBusy*. The author, Dr. Edward Hallowell, teaches at Harvard Medical School and has specialized in diagnosing and treating ADD for 25 years. He compares the symptoms that many of us have with those of untreated ADD. Even if we don't have diagnosable ADD, many of us rush around, feel impatient, lose focus, fail to complete things we start, juggle multiple tasks and projects, and feel powerless in the face of managing the overload of inputs and demands.

It is as if we were suffering from a severe case of modern life as he writes. We hope for a cure, but often simply multiply the problem by adding new tasks and commitments that we hope will help. Is it any wonder that fundamentalisms of all stripes are so attractive with their allurements to escape modernism?

Dr. Hallowell's prescription includes focusing more clearly on the things that matter most to us, creating a positive and supportive emotional environment, finding your unique daily rhythm and investing your time wisely, turning off the extraneous inputs, and playing more.

Keeping the sabbath is about slowing down, tuning into what matters most, pausing some of the distractions, playing, and renewing your rhythm. It's about paying attention to what really matters and finding your soul again.

I think we need that on a regular basis, and a day devoted to paying attention in a different way and reconnecting once a week seems about right, particularly when it is combined with less frequent, but longer periods of vacation.

It is tempting to dismiss the sabbath as an old idea not at all suited to the busy pace of life in the 21st century. But in the midst of living with the volume cranked up, we need the pause more than ever.

Breathe in. Breathe out.

The practice of keeping sabbath traces its origin in the Abrahamic religions to the very beginning of creation. In the first creation story told in Genesis, God created for six days, then ceased from creating on the seventh day, setting the example for blessing and hallowing one day a week as a time of rest.

Moses came down from Mt. Sinai with the Decalogue — the ten words — inscribed on tablets. One of the rules was the instruc-

tion from God to both remember and to observe the sabbath. Moses later interpreted the rule to mean that you, your sons and daughters, your slaves, alien residents, and your livestock should all cease from work one day a week.

In the rabbinical tradition, the rule was interpreted to be an injunction against performing any of the 39 types of work involved in building the temple. These have been extrapolated to apply to modern life. For example, the prohibition on kindling or extinguishing a fire is extended to prohibit turning on or off a light or an electrical appliance. Sometimes elaborate means to work around the rule have been devised, so for example, an elevator can be programmed to stop at every floor on the sabbath in order that no one need press a button in order to use it. A preset timer can be used to turn on the lamp.

Jesus was criticized for breaking the rules by doing things that were prohibited on the sabbath. He broke the rules to show that care for human needs had a higher priority than absolute, legalistic adherence to the rabbinical sabbath prohibitions.

Among the prohibited acts on the sabbath is any work related to growing, harvesting, and processing grains, making flour, or making bread. But Jesus, walking through a field of ripe grain, picked the heads of the grain and removed the kernels. When he was challenged, he responded that human need came first and feeding the hungry was more important than the prohibition against harvesting and winnowing.

And when he called a man with a withered hand to come to him on the sabbath, critics waited to see if he would heal the man so that they might accuse him and seek punishment. Jesus became angry and was grieved by the hardness of the hearts of his critics. He asked if it was lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath. He was making a case that the sabbath rules shouldn't prevent charity and compassion.

Jesus said that the sabbath was created for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath. The commandment to remember and observe the sabbath is not in order to appease God, but to satisfy a deeper human need.

Breathe in. Breathe out.

You don't need to look far to find passionate arguments about which day of the week is the 'real' sabbath. Is it the seventh day

(Saturday)? Or the Lord's Day (Sunday)? Does it begin at sundown on Friday? All of these ignore the fact that the calendar has an arbitrary starting point.

Surely the day chosen is not of such great divine concern. If it is, we clergy are in big trouble, since after all, the prime day of our workweek is on the designated sabbath day. What matters more than the chosen day is that there be one.

So set all the rules aside. At its best keeping the sabbath is an intentional, regular practice of designating (and observing) time for stopping work and attending to matters of the soul and spirit. It is a time for respite and renewal, for restoration.

Breathe in. Breathe out.

How would you design a sabbath that was personally meaningful? What would help you cease from work, focus your attention, and renew your soul and spirit? You could block out time on your calendar and treat this as a very high priority appointment. Perhaps you would mark the time by turning off the phones, your computer, the television, the radio, and your pager.

Maybe you would prepare by cleaning the house and setting out pictures of family members and close friends. Perhaps you would shop for favorite foods, making sure to include some fresh fruits and vegetables, and do some of the cooking ahead of time.

Maybe you would set aside time for meditation, making or listening to music, prayer, reading poetry or scripture. Maybe you would plan a bike ride, a walk in the park, or a visit to a public garden. Perhaps you would include attending a worship service.

You get to invent what would work for you. You can draw on many resources. While others think syncretism — the combining of parts of two or more religious systems — is a sin, I think it offers us creative possibilities for deeper connection. The danger lies in dabbling in many different practices without going deeply into any of them, but if you respect the sources and practice with integrity, it is fine to combine yoga, Buddhist meditation, and reading Christian scripture, for example.

What might *you* do to keep the sabbath? Give it a try. Perhaps like Thoreau, you'll find mornings lingering in the sunny doorway, rapt in reverie are not time subtracted from your life, but a gift over and above your usual allowance.

Breathe in. Breathe out. Breathe in peace. Breathe out love.
Breathe in. Breathe out. — May it be so, amen.

Closing Words
Isaiah 58:13-14

If you refrain from trampling the sabbath,
from pursuing your own interests on my holy day;

If you call the sabbath a delight
and the holy day of the Lord honorable;

If you honor it, not going your own ways,
serving your own interests, or pursuing your own affairs,

Then you shall take delight in the Lord,
and I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth;

I will feed you with the heritage of your ancestor Jacob,
For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.