

## Sacred Rest

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### Sermon

There's a story of unknown origin in which a businessman walking along a beach comes across a fisherman sitting in the mid-day sun. In many versions, the businessman is from the United States, vacationing in the fisherman's country. The fisherman is gazing out to sea, enjoying the breeze, and watching his little fishing boat just riding at anchor.

The businessman asks, "What are you doing just sitting here? Why aren't you out fishing?"

Somewhat taken aback, the fisherman replies, "I've done my day's fishing. And now I'm relaxing in the sun."

"But why don't you put out to sea again and catch more fish?" his questioner insists. "You could make twice as much money, and buy a bigger boat, and catch even more fish. My word, you could own a whole fleet of fishing boats, and have as much money as you could ever dream of, if you weren't so lazy."

The fisherman is confused. "Why would I want to do that?"

"Well, then, when you retire, you could sit in the sun, relaxing and enjoying yourself ..."<sup>1</sup>

Firmly embedded in our society's history, culture and economy, is a belief that we must always be producing and consuming more. That's the very definition of a healthy economy. And, however we choose to arrange our own lives, we live in this world that equates worth and happiness with doing more and having more. We see it in the never-ending to-do lists, that appear, unbidden, and yet somehow attached to us. Or when that value system intrudes, rudely, on moments of quiet abundance, insisting that we get on with doing, achieving, and acquiring.

That value system, rooted in an ideology of scarcity, seeps, beneath our conscious awareness, into our very being. And it can show up in how we use our time, in the injustice we allow to go unquestioned, in the sacrifices we make....

And in our relationships - The problem with Adam was not the lists. I happen to love lists (I've even been known to make them for other people) – I rewrote the ending of our story because I genuinely believe that the world needs Adam's list-making skills. No, the problem with Adam was the way he came to see himself and others as our society sees us – not as beings in relationship, but as tools for getting things done. He lost track of what matters most in the face of the ever urgent demands to do, achieve, and acquire.

He's not the only one, especially in this country. Of those countries considered developed, people in the United States work more than anyone else – the equivalent of 3½ 40-hour weeks more per year than Japanese workers, 8½ weeks more than British workers, 12½ weeks more

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Margaret Silf, *One Hundred Wisdom Stories from Around the World* (Lion Hudson PLC, 2011).

than French workers.<sup>2</sup> And that's just paid work – some of the busiest people I know are retired or unpaid caregivers - we might lift up a few of you ...

On top of all that work, we have less parental leave, we don't take our vacation time (or we work while on vacation), we're sleep deprived and stressed; and we're connected 24/7 to screens depicting people who are not the ones we're with, or the ones we love. And when we find ourselves at a time in our life when we can't do, achieve and acquire so much, the message from our world is that we don't matter so much anymore.

We know the things that really matter are not the lists with everything crossed off (momentarily satisfying though they may be), not long hours of work, not the stuff we buy. Deep down, most of us want love, caring, beauty, to be who we're meant to be, to contribute what is most ours to contribute, and to connect to others and the Universe. But keeping that focus is hard when we're immersed in a world with very different priorities.

So what are we to do?

The solution, says Jewish theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel, is to reclaim time apart from what he calls the “profanity of clattering commerce,”<sup>3</sup> to create a “palace in time,” where we can renew the soul and rediscover who we are.<sup>4</sup> This temporary separation from the material world, and its urgent demands, is not about deprivation, or laziness, and it's not about making ourselves more productive (although studies have shown that can happen) – it's about shifting our perspective on ourselves and our world, so we can hear our inner voice, and carry its message back into our lives.

That commitment to stepping back, and taking a break, is radical, revolutionary even; and if we return to the wider world oriented toward a different way of being – just imagine the possibilities.

One way to create Heschel's palace in time is... coming to a service! Just showing up here is counter-cultural. We can also set aside time for other spiritual practices – being in nature, meditation, journaling, swimming, prayer, yoga, drawing, gardening - whatever it is for you.

And ... if we add the discipline of some intention and boundaries and ritual, something even more powerful can happen. Some call this Sabbath.

My first reaction to the idea of Sabbath was resistance. I knew there were modern Jewish and Christian people who keep Sabbath, but (at least as I had seen it done) it seemed like an impressive feat of self-discipline, probably not available to me, or helpful for me. And – even as I started to encounter Unitarian Universalists with Sabbath practices - and there are many - I still didn't see myself doing such a thing.

But as I learned more, the idea started to intrigue me.

Sabbath is an ancient practice. In the writings of the Hebrew prophets of nearly 3000 years ago, there are many references to Sabbath - and to the prophets' dismay over the people's failure to

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<sup>2</sup> <https://20somethingfinance.com/american-hours-worked-productivity-vacation/>

<sup>3</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York), 13.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

properly observe it. The prophet in the book of Amos in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE complained that people were eager for the Sabbath to be over so they could get back to selling their wheat.<sup>5</sup> Apparently, both the profanity of clattering commerce and human resistance to Sabbath are ancient.

Sabbath takes up some space in the ten commandments of the Hebrew bible. Here's one version:

Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to ... your God; you shall not do any work—you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you. ....<sup>6</sup>

What strikes me about this commandment, is the way it uses a lot of words to specifically name those who were at the bottom of the social structure. Sabbath was supposed to be for everyone. Free or enslaved. Animal or human. Immigrants. Everyone was entitled to a day to spend being, instead of doing, and reconnecting with others, the holy, and the truth within themselves. Everyone.

It wasn't that their lives were easy. The land they farmed was challenging and the neighbors were not always friendly. Like us, they could have used an extra day to get stuff done. And yet, they chose to commit to this time away from the material world. So much of those early writings were about how to be in community – Sabbath may reflect an understanding that respecting and caring for each other becomes much more challenging if we live only in the world of doing and acquiring.

Their vision of Sabbath was also a call to action – to create a society where everyone, not just a privileged minority, can rest. I have no idea how close the ancient Israelites came to this in practice, but I do know that our society is not yet that society. Sabbath's prioritizing of rest calls us to also commit to making that rest available to all.

Heschel summarizes the importance of Sabbath this way, "we need the Sabbath in order to survive civilization: [he goes on] '[humans] must fight for inner liberty to remain independent of the enslavement of the material world. ... This is our constant problem – how to live with people and remain free, how to live with things and remain independent.'"<sup>7</sup>

Sabbath reminds us that we are not defined by our place in the material world, and there is another way of being. And when we intentionally practice another way, the possibility emerges to live more fully, every day. Even to change the world.

In the words of renowned Protestant Theologian and Old Testament Scholar Walter Brueggemann,

"The market ideology wants us exhausted. Because exhausted people make terrific shoppers and

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<sup>5</sup> Amos 8:5

<sup>6</sup> Deut 5:12-14 (NRSV).

<sup>7</sup> Heschel, xiii.

spectators and couch potatoes. Exhausted people do not make for transformers in the community. Rested people are dangerous.” “[Sabbath days] are acts of resistance,”<sup>8</sup> he says, telling the world that “there is enough.”<sup>9</sup>

In practice, Sabbath is not just taking a nap, or spending the evening watching Netflix. Sabbath has intention, and discipline and boundaries. Judaism and Christianity offer some specific rules. For Unitarian Universalists … as you might imagine, it varies. We don’t have a collective tradition— we create our own.

The timing is often somewhere between Friday and Monday. 24 hours is common; some choose shorter times – even much shorter times. Some step away from electronics; others choose to use them differently. Sabbath looks different for families with young children than in families without children; an individual may practice differently than a large family. Each of us can set up our own Sabbath in whatever way allows us to reconnect to a truth that goes beyond what our world is telling us.

Framed that way, Sabbath is an idea I can get behind. Unfortunately, just appreciating the idea doesn’t actually get us anywhere – I’ve tried that. The value of Sabbath lies in actually practicing it.

Many of you know that Monday is my day off (it says so on the bottom of my emails), but it’s actually more than that. It is, in part, my Sabbath – for me, an 18- to 20-hour period that starts on Sunday evening and extends into Monday. I begin and end with a ritual that is meaningful for me, and in between (unless there’s an emergency) the plan is that I don’t do paid or volunteer work; instead I do whatever will help bring me back into balance – to reground in what matters most. I sleep. Sometimes I connect with people who matter to me. Or read something I don’t have to read. I might exercise, get out among trees, or walk a dog. How I use that time varies from week to week.

It may sound blissful, but I struggle – My brain quickly moves from appreciating the gift of time to looking for loopholes. I find myself redefining work, thinking about work (and then writing down my thoughts so I don’t lose them), or finding reasons to open my computer. The call of the lists is powerful. It can be hard to leave things that matter to me unfinished. Sabbath is the most challenging spiritual practice I’ve ever done. And I don’t always do it well.

And sometimes … there just isn’t time.

But… there’s a Zen saying that you should meditate for 20 minutes every day, and if you don’t have time to meditate for 20 minutes, then you should meditate for an hour. When the call to do more and be more is drowning out what matters most, the answer - counter-intuitively – may be to intentionally and, with a fierce and loving discipline, create more time away from the clattering commerce.

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<sup>8</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rg\\_33ksyeOY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rg_33ksyeOY)

<sup>9</sup> *The Other Side*, November-December 2001, Vol. 37, No. 5. Reproduced in <https://mattanslow.wordpress.com/2012/02/29/Enough-is-enough/>

Some Mondays, my Sabbath is very short, or doesn't happen at all. This past Monday, I was working on this service. The irony of that is not lost on me.

But I keep at it.

And, for me, this regular setting aside of time, framed in ritual, to practice counter-cultural priorities ... is powerful. Even with my resistance I emerge (at least a little) re-oriented. And when I don't do it, I start to see the values of the wider culture showing up in me more strongly. I lose some capacity for awe and wonder. I lose some depth of relationship. I don't like the change I see in me when I let my Sabbath go too often.

Our worship theme this month is faith – which is really a practice of placing our trust in something that is worthy of that trust. We're told to trust in doing and consuming more, in a world that is rooted in scarcity. What if instead, we choose to trust in giving ourselves space to reconnect with deeper truths in a world that might yet offer abundance.

In that spirit I invite you to consider the possibility of some kind of deliberate, regularly scheduled time to quiet the din, recover, and remember what matters. Be clear about the boundaries, and mark the beginning and end. And if you already have something like that, perhaps join me in recommitting. If the language and ancient tradition of Sabbath, don't speak to you, call it something else. Choose any day or time; make it as long or short as you need. Discover just how hard it is, and perhaps do it anyway. And I'd love to hear how it goes.

We need Sabbath to survive civilization. Heeding the ancient wisdom of time apart from the material world is a bold act of resistance in a world that tries to keep us stuck in overachievement and exhaustion. And it might just bring us back to what matters most, and in so doing ... change the world.

May it be so.

Amen.