

THE PRACTICE OF KEEPING SABBATH CULTIVATES JOY

Buried beneath the hum of external notifications lies an internal nagging, an innate obligation to perform, produce and have something to show for our work. Necessary in one sense, it keeps us rooted in what is needed to accomplish a task or goal. Yet, the prodding often comes at inappropriate times — in the middle of the night, at the dinner table, during our “off” moments — which disrupts time set aside to be present and with the people we love.



JILL FISK

However, there is one spiritual practice within our tradition that can lift the curse of human doingness and regenerate our purpose as human beings: the practice of Sabbath.

FINDING JOY IN SABBATH'S RHYTHM

Harvest's gifts, whether sparse or plentiful, arise from the toil of waiting. An inescapable pause must be endured for new life to emerge, when invisible seeds push through the soil and depend solely upon nature's provisions. The farmer knows this unrelenting cycle full well.

Season after season, growth is a product of time, care, calculated risk and faith. There is a hardiness born of waiting that yields timeless nourishment amid parched realities. Like the farmer, ministry affords us abundant opportunities to learn how to trust in the unknown and release our grip on the plow.

In *This Day: Collected & New Sabbath Poems*, poet and novelist Wendell Berry documents the agrarian wisdom gleaned from practicing Sabbath. One favorite piece of mine, *X (1975)*, reads: “Whatever is foreseen in joy must be lived out from day to day ...”¹ Here, Berry frames the harmonious rhythm of a worker's life as an openness to vision, a commitment to labor well, and deep, abiding rest. “When we work well,” Berry conveys, “a Sabbath mood rests on our day, and

finds it good.”² Daily joy awaits the worker who practices the rhythm of the Sabbath.

For more than a decade, I have been a student and practitioner of Sabbath, an intentional time within the week to stop work, receive rest, discover delight and contemplate the beauty and goodness of my relationship with God and loved ones.³ My journey has been equally generative and revealing as it has been clunky.

Any seasoned keeper of the Sabbath can speak to the preparation required for a good Sabbath and the commitment required in keeping it. But it is the anticipation of the Sabbath day each week, the growing recognition of Sabbath moments within each day, and the freedom to live as a human being — not a human doing — that assures me this ancient practice is an antidote to the culture that surrounds me.

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The Genesis narrative recounts that on the seventh day, God rested from all the work that God had undertaken. God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on that day God

rested from all the work God had done in creation. (Genesis 2:2-3) According to our faith tradition, the Sabbath is hallowed, sanctified and set apart. The Sabbath is holy.

'A PALACE IN TIME'

Though it's a commandment of the Torah, Sabbath is easily undermined. It stops the flow of production for 24 hours if one is to follow the letter of the law. Jesus' teachings on Sabbath, however, focus on its essence, not its regulations. He clarifies its purposes. Sabbath is made for people as a gift to be received, not a day to be earned (Mark 2:27). It is a day for praying (Mark 1:35), feeding (Matthew 12:1), returning (Matthew 12:11) and healing (John 7:23).

Jewish theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel's words depict Sabbath as a "palace in time." His description speaks to the importance of blocking out external distractions and embracing the presence of the Sabbath and ourselves:

"He who wants to enter the holiness of the day must first lay down the profanity of clattering commerce, of being yoked to toil. He must go away from the screech of dissonant days, from the nervousness and fury of acquisitiveness and the betrayal in embezzling his own life. He must say farewell to manual work and learn to understand that the world has already been created and will survive without the help of man. Six days a week we wrestle with the world, wringing profit from the earth; on the Sabbath we especially care for the seed of eternity planted in the soul. The world has our hands, but our soul belongs to Someone Else. Six days a week we seek to dominate the world, on the seventh day we try to dominate the self."⁴

Hard-pressed by the tyranny of the urgent,⁵ Sabbath is a healing balm that yields eternal nourishment for our soul and work. As we tend the ground of our being through Sabbath's gift of an

intentional weekly time, we open ourselves to be a conduit for flourishing, serving those around us with a renewed awareness of work/life harmony. Perhaps through a well-ordered life, made possible by God's rhythm of Sabbath, we may be renewed to provide a great treasure: whole-person care to all those we serve.

As lofty as it seems to engage in Sabbath and stop work for one full day each week, we must be honest with the questions that lie under the surface:

- What keeps us from stopping each week for rest and reflection? Is it our schedules, a need to control or a lack of trust?
- What do we believe about rest? Are we free enough to receive it as a gift, or must we first become exhausted in order to earn it?
- What delight brings us more fully to life and joy?
- If contemplation, prayer and wonder are the highest forms of intellect, what prevents us from this kind of cognition?

SPROUTING A SABBATH PRACTICE

To find a weekly rhythm that works for you — whether through the practice of Sabbath or another ritual — consider the following suggestions. They may help you honor this sacred time.

■ **Study the Sabbath.** Talk with colleagues or friends who practice the Sabbath. Learn the history of its traditions. Contemplate Sabbath rituals and prayers, explore it as taught through scripture, and read books on it.

■ **Name your why.** The Sabbath teaches us to stop, rest, delight and contemplate. What is it you desire about a Sabbath practice?

■ **Design with intention.** Engaging in the Sabbath in any form will require conversation and compromise with family and friends as it will likely alter your ordinary rhythms. What day of the week can you commit to? A traditional Friday sundown start may or may not work for you. How long will your Sabbath be? Together, choose a day that works, and don't underestimate the power

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of a consistent four-, eight- or 12-hour Sabbath. Identify what's most important and what you will and will not engage in for your Sabbath to be fruitful and generative.

■ **Beginnings and endings matter.** Allow the ritual of entry and closure to seal your practice. Will you light a candle? Will you say a particular prayer?

■ **Perfect and reflect.** Throughout the week, it may become quickly evident what's working and what needs fine-tuning. Pay attention to the Sabbath fruits that spring up each day. Notice how your desire for the upcoming Sabbath day grows.

TIME TO PAUSE AND RESET

We are not exempt from the demands that clamor for our attention seven days a week. But through Sabbath, we are offered spaciousness — a proper holding place to contain these demands — creating an expansion for us to reprioritize what's most important.

At its best, Sabbath's pause generates a renewed mindset of life's essentials: from tasks to relationships, from an individualistic agenda to a communal one and from a self-concept as a productive worker to an understanding of self as a child of God.

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NOTES

1. Wendell Berry, *This Day: Collected & New Sabbath Poems* (Berkeley, California: Counterpoint, 2014).
2. Berry, *This Day*.
3. Peter Scazzero, *The Emotionally Healthy Leader* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2015).
4. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005).
5. Diarmuid Rooney, "A Spiritual Antidote to the Tyranny of the Urgent," *Health Progress* 99, no. 3 (May/June 2018): 92-95.

Upcoming Events

from The Catholic Health Association

Mission Leaders Seminar
— **United in Mission: Many Voices, One Shared Identity**
Sept. 3, 10, 17 and 24 |
1 - 2:30 p.m. ET each day

United Against Human Trafficking Networking Call
Oct. 2 | Noon - 1 p.m. ET

Deans of Catholic Colleges of Nursing Networking Call
Oct. 8 | 1 - 2 p.m. ET

Community Benefit 101
Oct. 15 - 17 | 2 - 5 p.m. ET
each day

Mission in Long-Term Care Networking Call
Oct. 31 | 11 a.m. - Noon ET

Faith Community Nurses Networking Call
Nov. 5 | 1 - 2 p.m. ET



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