

All Souls Unitarian Universalist Congregation
Reading and Sermon
January 26, 2020
“Sacred Rest”
by Ann Kadlecek, Ministerial Intern

Story: No Lists on the Sabbath, by Marc Gellman (adapted)

Reading: Across the internet and in our own hymnal, this reading is attributed to Ralph Waldo Emerson. That attribution is probably wrong - diligent people have been unable to find it in any of Emerson's writings. It is, however, in a work by Rabbi Chaim Stern from the 1970's in which Rabbi Stern claimed inspiration from Emerson. So the best attribution seems to be to Rabbi Stern himself.

A person will worship something —
have no doubt about that.
We may think our tribute is paid in secret
in the dark recesses of our hearts —
but it will out.
That which dominates
our imaginations and our thoughts
will determine our lives,
and character.
Therefore, it behooves us to be careful what we worship,
for what we are worshipping we are becoming.¹

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. The fisherman was gazing out to sea, enjoying the breeze, and watching his little fishing boat just riding at anchor.

The businessman asked, “What are you doing just sitting here? Why aren't you out fishing?”

¹ Chaim Stern, *Gates of Understanding* (vol. I [New York: Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1977], p. 216), who claimed inspiration from the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson, to whom it's misattributed in *Singing the Living Tradition* #563 and elsewhere online.

Somewhat taken aback, the fisherman replied, “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 insisted. “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 was confused. “Why would I want to do that?”

“Well, then, when you retire, you could sit in the sun, relaxing and enjoying yourself ...”²

Our world has many ideas about who we are, how we should live, what matters. It lifts up values like self-reliance and dominance. It offers seductive images of the happiness that can be ours, if we do more, have more, and make ourselves more perfect. And it has many ways of reminding us. Sometimes, as in our earlier story, it’s never-ending to-do lists, that appear, unbidden, and yet somehow attached to us. Sometimes the world’s ideas intrude, rudely, on moments of quiet abundance, insisting that we should be doing, achieving, and acquiring.

There’s this understanding, firmly embedded in our history, culture and economy, that as a society 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, and lately I’ve been noticing its impact on me. It’s not just the constant lure of the latest product I didn’t know I needed. It’s the underlying values of productivity and consumption, that seep, beneath my conscious awareness, into my very being - linking my self-worth, even my identity, to that doing, achieving and acquiring. In a world that always demands more, the message is that we never do enough, never have enough, never are enough.

It’s like we’re all in a giant echo chamber, constantly bombarded with this flawed understanding of the world, until we forget that it’s there. It’s the water in which we swim. Whoever discovered water, it is said, it wasn’t a fish.

This societal worship of productivity and consumption affects us all - how we use our time, the injustice we allow to go unquestioned, the sacrifices we make....

And our relationships - The problem with Adam was not the lists. I happen to love lists – 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 of what matters now.

It happens to me too. And I’m not the only one.

² Adapted from Margaret Silf, *One Hundred Wisdom Stories from Around the World* (Oxford: Lion Books, 2003), 80.

A headline from just last week: “The United States is the most overworked developed nation in the world.”³ Of those countries considered developed, Americans work more than anyone else – the equivalent of 3 ½ 40-hour weeks more per year than Japanese workers, 8 ½ weeks more than British workers, 12 ½ weeks more than French workers. And that’s just paid work – some of the busiest people I know are retired or unpaid caregivers.

On top of that, 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 people who are not the ones we’re with, thinking about issues other than the ones that matter to those we love, constantly called back to what the world we’re in expects of us.

Be careful what we worship, for what we worship we become.

We know the things that matter, the things we want to see when we look back on our lives, are not the lists with everything crossed off (satisfying though they may be), not the long hours we worked, the shows we binge-watched, or the stuff we bought. We’ll want to see times of love, beauty, being who we were meant to be, and connecting to others and the Universe. But keeping that focus is hard when we’re immersed in a world with another agenda.

So what do we do?

The solution, says Jewish theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel, is to reclaim time apart from the “profanity of clattering commerce,”⁴ to create a what he calls a “palace in time,” where we can renew the soul and rediscover who we are.⁵ This temporary separation from the material world, and its urgent demands, is 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 that voice still and small, carry it’s message back into our lives.

One way to create a palace in time is, as Rev Carolyn said two Sundays ago, coming to church. Just showing up here is counter-cultural. We can also take time for other spiritual practices – being in nature, meditation, journaling, swimming, prayer, yoga, drawing, gardening - whatever it is for you.

And... 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 – is to with a fierce and loving discipline, create more time away from the clattering commerce. Some call this Sabbath.

³ G.E. Miller, *20Something Finance*, “The U.S. is the most Overworked Developed Nation in the World,” Jan 13, 2020, <https://20somethingfinance.com/american-hours-worked-productivity-vacation/>.

⁴ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath* (New York, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1951), 13.

⁵ Ibid. 14-15.

My first reaction to the idea of Sabbath was resistance. I knew there were modern Jewish and Christian people who keep Sabbath, as well as Unitarian Universalists with Sabbath practices, but to me that seemed like an impressive feat of self-discipline, probably not available to me.

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 properly observe it. The prophet Amos in the 8th century BCE complained that people were eager for the Sabbath to be over so they could get back to selling their wheat.⁶ Apparently, human resistance to Sabbath is also 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.....⁷

What strikes me about this commandment, is way it specifically names those who were at the bottom of the social structure to make the point that the Sabbath was for everyone. Free or slave. Human or animal. Non-Israelite people. Everyone got a day to spend being, instead of doing, and reconnecting with others, the holy, and the truth within themselves.

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 of work every week. But, the ancient Israelites understood that when we focus too much time and attention on the material world, we lose touch with important parts of ourselves.

In Heschel's words, "we need the Sabbath in order to survive civilization: 'Gallantly, ceaselessly, quietly, [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.'"⁸

And so, Heschel invites us into Sabbath, to remember that we are not defined by our place in the material world, that our work – however fulfilling and necessary – is not what matters most, and that the core values in the echo-chamber of our dominant culture are not the only ways of being. And in remembering, and practicing, the possibility emerges to live more fully, every day.

⁶ Amos 8:5

⁷ Deuteronomy 5:12-14 (NRSV)

⁸ Heschel, xiii.

Sabbath is also a reminder of that vision that we can trace back to the ancient Israelites, of a world where everyone, not just the privileged few, can have a day of rest. In a world where many work multiple jobs just to meet their basic needs, those who can practice Sabbath are called, again and again, to work toward that more just world.

What does Sabbath look like for Unitarian Universalists? As you might imagine, it varies. The timing varies, typically somewhere between Friday and Monday. 24 hours is common, but I know one person who practices a 6 hour Sabbath, and others in between. Some step away from electronics; others choose to use them in different ways. Sabbath for families with young children looks different from Sabbath in families without children; for a solo person it looks different than in a large family or social group. It becomes an exercise of our 4th principle (the free and responsible search for truth and meaning) – each of us setting up our own Sabbath in a way that 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 agreeing with the idea doesn't actually get me anywhere – I tried that – it didn't work. The value of Sabbath lies in actually doing it.

I've tried a few times in the past to develop a Sabbath practice. I always succeeded just enough to realize how much my body, my whole being, resists it. How quickly my brain moves from appreciating the gift of time to looking for loopholes. The call of the lists is powerful.

Last fall, I realized it was time to try again. Not because I have the time, but because I don't, and I didn't like the way the values of the wider culture were showing up in me. What's different this time is that I have support and accountability of friends who are working on the same thing. And, of course, I now have the accountability that comes from telling all of you....

My Sabbath is an 18-hour period each week. I aspire to 24 hours, but that still feels like "level 2" Sabbath, and I'm not there yet. I start and end with a ritual that is meaningful for me, and in between I don't do school or congregation work; instead I do whatever I need to bring myself back into balance – to reground in what matters most. One thing I seem to need is sleep. But I also spend time connecting with people who matter to me. Or reading something I don't have to read. Or exercising, walking in the woods with the dogs, watching a movie. It sounds blissful, but I struggle – I find myself trying to redefine work, thinking about my sermon, looking for an excuse to open the book I have to read before class on Monday. Like the ancient Israelites, I resist Sabbath.

And yet, there's something about setting aside this time, with a slower pace and framed in ritual, to do what I need, not what I've scheduled. It seems to deepen the exhale, and - even with my resistance - bring a clarity that continues (at least somewhat) into the rest of my week.

I'm still learning about my Sabbath, but one thing is clear - the value of a supportive community of fellow Sabbathers. And so, if Sabbath is something you'd like explore, I offer you

a conversation with me and anyone else who is interested. If you sign up on this sparkly pink clipboard, up here on the chancel after the service, I'll be in touch with a time to meet to explore what Sabbath might look like for each of us.

We need the Sabbath in order to survive civilization. It's counter-intuitive, and counter-cultural. Heeding the ancient wisdom of time apart from the material world is a bold act of resistance in a world that tries to define us. And it might just bring us back to what matters most, as individuals, and as a world.

For each of us in our own way, and for all of us together, may it be so.
Amen.