

The Sabbath
Delivered by Rev. Margie King Saphier on 9/7/03 at
United First Parish Church, Quincy, MA

It is good to be together again! Did this summer seem like a sabbatical from church? Sabbatical comes from the word Sabbath. Presently Sheldon is on sabbatical. By definition a sabbatical comes every seven years and is a time for solitude and renewal. The Sabbath on the other hand is on the seventh day of the week every week of the year. It, too, is time for solitude and renewal.

When you hear the word “Sabbath,” what are the mental images that come to mind? Do you think of the Puritans or of Orthodox Protestants with their strict observances that seemed to kill the spirit rather than renew it? I have a funny story about the strict legalistic rules that once defined the Sabbath. There was a Protestant minister who served two congregations. One was down the river from the other. In winter after leading worship at the first service he would ice skate down the frozen river to lead worship at the second service. The minister was brought before the Judicial Committee for skating on Sunday. He explained that it was an expedient way to get from one congregation to the other. BUT the crucial question for the committee was: “Did you enjoy it?”

In sharp contrast to the strict orthodox Protestant observance of the Sabbath, maybe you remember attending confession and weekly Holy Communion of the Roman Catholic. It was in 321 Common Era, when the emperor Constantine, newly converted to Christianity, declared a day of rest. It is on Sunday that Christians believe the resurrection of Jesus occurred. As a result of Constantine’s declaration, Sabbath-keeping was mandated by the state and lost the emphasis that the Sabbath-keeping was an inner experience of joy and delight.

Or Maybe your family did not attend church. If you are over 30, you can remember living with the expectation that most stores and offices were closed on Sunday. There were no sports games scheduled. For many those quiet Sunday afternoons offered a socially sanctioned break from the demands of the week.. “For the secular, as well as the religious, The Sabbath is to the week what the line break is to poetic language. It is the silence that forces you to return to what came before to find its meaning.”¹

¹ Judith Shulevitz, “Bring Back the Sabbath,” in New York Times Magazine (March 2, 2003), p.53.

Most of us know that the Sabbath originated with the early Israelites; but I am not sure we understand its full significance. This morning I will explore the origins of the Sabbath, its meaning in Judaism and what it means to us today and how Unitarian Universalists can bring the practice of observing the Sabbath into their lives..

In the Hebrew Bible the concept of the Sabbath is attributed to God when he commanded the Jews to observe the Sabbath. Some of you here may have memories of observing Shabbat, the Hebrew word for Sabbath. At sundown to mark the beginning of this holy day, Shabbat began with the lighting of the candles, the saying of the prayer and the breaking of the bread called Challah. It is a joyous celebration that takes place in the intimacy of the home.. According to the late Abraham Heschel, rabbi and theologian, The Sabbath is about TIME and how we are in time, moment by moment. Heschel reminds us, “To observe the Sabbath is to celebrate the coronation of a day in the spiritual wonderland of time, the air of which we inhale when we ‘call it a delight.’” The Sabbath is a delight to the soul and a delight to the body. According to Jewish tradition, the Sabbath is to be sanctified with all our senses: by choice meals, by beautiful garments; by delighting your soul with pleasure.” The Sabbath is a day of rest that includes eating good food, worshiping at the Temple, reading the Torah, taking a nap, and even making love with your beloved. In Jewish teaching the coupling of man and woman is the imitation of God coupling with the Shekinah, the feminine spirit of God.

What this! The Sabbath promotes love-making with your beloved, eating good food and drinking wine, taking walks, enjoying nature! WOW!! What about all those rules observant Jews have to follow? What about that poor Protestant minister who was being questioned if he enjoyed skating on the Sabbath? We humans are a peculiar species. We are given the gift of time, but we have a strong tendency to fill that time with work. This was true of the early Israelites. So rules were put in place to give structure and guidance. Often the rules depleted the spontaneity and delight in the practice of Sabbath-keeping, so the early Israelites often broke them. This explains why The Prophets of the Hebrew Bible were always reminding the Israelites to observe the Sabbath.

Like the early Israelites, we often feel uncomfortable when the Gift of Time is given to us. How many times do you hear yourself saying to someone, “I am so busy.” As you say it you can feel a sense of self-importance filling your chest.. At times, I know I can catch myself doing this. Our culture invariably supposes that action and accomplishment are better than rest.. In our drive for success we are seduced by the promises of more: more money, more recognition, more

satisfaction, more love, more information, it is endless! I believe we, as a culture, have lost the alternating rhythm of rest and activity.

If we do not rest, we lose our way. If we dedicate our lives to serving others and do not rest, we will “burn out or up.” The corrosive pressure of frantic over-activity ends up causing suffering to ourselves and to others: our families, our friends and those whom we are trying to help. **Sabbath time is a revolutionary challenge to the violence of overwork, because it honors the necessary wisdom of dormancy.**

In Genesis after six days of creation, “God blessed and made holy the seventh day because he rested from all the work that he had done in creation.” Note that it is the **DAY** that God blessed and made holy. **TIME** is blessed and sanctified.

Why sanctify time? It is in the arena of time that we experience our one-ness. According to Heschel, “The higher goal of spiritual living is not to amass a wealth of information but to experience sacred moments: where the goal is not to have but to be, not to own but to give, not to control but to share, not to subdue but be in accord.”² In a religious/spiritual moment, a moment of grace, or revelation, it is a spiritual presence that imposes itself on us transporting us beyond the confines of measured time. So here is a commandment that provides us with the opportunity to experience spiritual moments – the kind of spiritual moment that Emerson suggested in this morning’s reading: “When it (meaning the Over-soul) breaks through our intellect, it is genius; when it breaths through our will it is virtue; when it flows through our affection, it is love.”

Creating the concept of Sabbath was **RADICAL**. During the time of the early Israelites, other Near Eastern creation stories usually portrayed gods deciding to create humans in order to free themselves (the gods and goddesses) from the drudgery and hard work of running the universe. With people to serve them and replace them in their labor, the gods were able to rest. So these gods had little interest in allowing the people respite. **But it is in the Torah that the deity’s day of rest becomes a source of rest for humans, for their animals, and even for their soil.** Why soil? Because if soil is not given the opportunity to rest it will lose its nutrients and life-giving properties.

² Abraham Heschel, The Sabbath. (Canada: HarperCollinsCanadaLtd., 1955) p.3.

It is in the book of Exodus that the Israelites are given The Sabbath when Moses receives the Ten Commandments. In Exodus the Shabbat Commandment reads:

“Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of the Eternal God: you shall not do any work – you, your son, your daughter, your male or female slave, or cattle, or stranger who is within your settlements. For in six days the Eternal made heaven and earth and sea and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day; therefore the Eternal blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it.”

Almost forty years later, as the Israelites stand poised to enter and conquer Canaan, Moses recounts to them the events and laws of those wandering years. In Deuteronomy, his words include the Ten Commandments, but there are some variations, particularly the Sabbath Commandment. Instead of commanding the Israelites to “Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy,” Moses commands, “**Observe** the Sabbath day and keep it holy.” Adding the word “observe” makes the Sabbath a day of intentional participation. Another difference is how the Sabbath is linked to God. In the Exodus account God connects the Sabbath to creation, but in Deuteronomy, Moses links the Sabbath to the Israelite’s history – that it was God who freed the Israelites from bondage. For the Israelites who had been wandering in the wilderness, God the Creator would have seemed remote, whereas God as Redeemer affirmed their experience.

Both versions command the Jews not “to work, **as well as your daughter, your male and female slave, or your cattle, or the stranger** who is within your settlement.” But in remembering their bondage in Deuteronomy, Moses explicitly adds, “**so that your male and female slave may rest as you do.**” **Moses assures the equality of the commandment is extended to all.** It is now clear the The Sabbath Commandment is also about **social justice.**

The Fourth or Sabbath commandment deals with both our relations to God and our relations to one another. The Sabbath Commandment serves as a bridge bringing God into the lives of humankind. By commanding the people to rest on the Sabbath as God rested, was equivalent to conferring royalty on humanity. In observing the Sabbath we are invited to transcend our humanness and reach for the regal and godly in ourselves. As we reach for the godly within ourselves we are asked to see the regal and godly in those around us. This early Israelite Sabbath institutionalized an astonishing undreamed-of notion: that every single creature has the right to rest, not just the rich and the privileged, but women, slaves, strangers, animals and even soil.

Here is where social justice enters the Sabbath because the Sabbath treats the poor and the downtrodden as equal to kings, masters, the rich. From Shabbat come the humanitarian laws that govern the sabbatical and jubilee years. During a sabbatical year social justice dictated one year respite in seven for debtors and free food of uncultivated fields for people struggling for subsistence. After seven cycles of Sabbatical years, in other words in the fiftieth year, known as the jubilee year, social justice dictated that all who had bound themselves in slavery and/or had sold their ancestral homes because of overwhelming financial burdens were to be released from slavery and have ancestral homes returned to them. It is not clear that the jubilee attempts were ever enforced but their purpose was to equalize wealth to some extent. (Just an aside: The purpose of Jubilee year reminds me of the purpose of the Estate Tax: to equalize wealth). It has been suggested that we, today, have the Sabbath Commandment to thank for labor legislation and for our belief that it is wrong for employers to drive employees until they drop. But many would say in our very competitive capitalistic country in which shopping has been extolled as our patriotic duty, labor legislation is slowly being chipped away. People are working longer hours for less pay.

Sadly much of modern life is specifically designed to seduce our attention away from the Sabbath rest. DISTRACTIONS are ENDLESS! There are hundreds of channels of cable and satellite television, phones with multiple lines and call-waiting, begging us to talk to more than one person at a time; mail, e-mail and over-night mail, fax-machines, magazines and newspapers, and radio. For those of us with children, there are the endless soccer practices, baseball games, homework, laundry, housecleaning and errands. Every responsibility, every stimulus competes for our attention.

With all these distractions, how do we as Unitarian Universalist remember and observe the Sabbath? I am not recommending that we return to some forced, legalistic Sabbath full of life-inhibiting rules. We need to intentionally return to rhythm of rest and activity that is a part of life and creation. “There is the rhythm in our waking activity and the body’s need for sleep. There is the rhythm in the way day dissolves into night, and night into day. There is the rhythm as the active growth of spring and summer is quieted by the necessary dormancy of fall and winter. There is a tidal rhythm between the land and the sea. In our bodies the heart perceptibly rests after each life-giving beat; the lungs rest between the exhale and the inhale.”³

³ Wayne Muller

Wayne Muller, a minister, therapist and author, has a suggested list of “Ten Practices for a Simple Sabbath.” These practices are helpful to anyone who wants to incorporate Sabbath-keeping as a regular practice in his or her life

Light a candle.

Set aside sacred time for a family meal, for prayer or meditation or simply quiet reading. Set a candle before you, offer a simple blessing and let the world fall away.

Practice Thanksgiving.

Give thanks before meals, upon rising, when going to sleep. During Sabbath, we are less concerned with what is missing and more grateful for what has already been given.

Bless your children or the children in your life.

Place your hand on their heads or give them a hug and offer your blessing. What do you most wish for them? Self-knowledge, courage, safety, joy? Let them hear your prayers for their happiness and your gratitude for them being in your life.

Make a Sabbath pause.

Choose one common act – touching a doorknob, turning on a faucet, hearing the phone ring. Throughout the day when this occurs, stop and take three silent, mindful breaths. Then go on.

Take a walk.

Stroll slowly to nowhere in particular for 30 minutes. Let your senses guide you. Stop and observe deeply whatever attracts you – a tree, a flower, a stone. Breathe.

Pamper your body.

Take a guilt-free nap. Take a leisurely bath with music, special scents, candles. Make love with your beloved. Walk barefoot in the grass or the sand. Remember the Sabbath is a day of delight.

Create a Sabbath box..

Put your to-do list, your keys, your wallet – anything you don’t need in Sabbath time – into the box. Or write down a particular worry or concern and drop it in the box. Just for now, let it go.

Turn off the telephone.

Or the computer, the TV, the washer and dryer. Create a period of time when you will not be disturbed or seduced by what our technologies demand of us.

Prepare a Sabbath meal – or a Sabbath cup of tea. Even if you are alone, you can choose foods you love, put flowers on the table, take time to enjoy every morsel of food or sip of tea. Give thanks for the bounty of the earth.

Seek companionship.

One of the most precious gifts we can offer is to be a place of refuge, a Sabbath for one another. Ask for companionship when you lose your way. Give quiet time and attention to others.

Reset your inner compass.

Make a list of the values and principles that guide your life – both those you follow and those you would like to follow. Speak them aloud, alone and with friends and/or loved ones.

Surrender a problem.

The Sabbath reminds us that forces larger than ourselves are at work healing the world. Imagine that these forces already know how to solve your problem. Be open to the possibility that the Universe in its infinite wisdom may have a message for you. Be open to creative possibilities in which the message may be packaged as a gift for you.

Muller's list of Sabbath practices provide us various ways to regularly incorporate the spirit of gratefulness into our hearts. Life and all of creation is a gift. The gift of life is not without its challenges, but it is NO LESS a glorious gift. Also we are given the gift of TIME in the form of the Sabbath to experience the full wonders of creation and to say "thank you." Gift giving is a celebration of the bond that unites giver and receiver in a song of gratitude, as this each frees one from alienation. Gift-giving requires a give-and-take relationship. Giver and thanks-giver belong together. Because of the interdependence that is inherent in all creation, each one of us are called to be givers and receivers or Thanks-givers.. As a result each one of us belong. in this beautiful tapestry of life. We are not alone.

Although Beethoven became deaf and had great difficulty in his relationships with others, he truly believed that creation was a joyful wonder. So with hearts full of gratitude and thanks giving, may we join together in hymn #29, Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee.