

Sermon Transcript

“Sabbath Moments” Janne Eller-Isaacs

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When Oliver Wendell Holmes was asked why he went to church, he replied that he had a plant called reverence which needed watering each week. He watered his plant by attending the local Unitarian church. I water a plant called reverence every morning by getting up early and engaging in intentional devotional practices. I water a plant called reverence in a communal fashion most every Sunday in the company of this congregation.

This morning I turn my attention to personal Sabbath moments, those times during the day that we set aside to take a breath, take a moment to rest, to listen, to remember, to integrate.

Why is a personal Sabbath or spiritual daily practice so vitally important? Why do we get up so early each day? Why do we willingly (at least most mornings) forego precious sleep in order to run through the same routine day after day?

The practice of this daily routine brings my life back into alignment. Does this mean that every day I emerge from my time of contemplation, prayer and movement with it all worked out? No. Some days my journal is nothing more than a lament of all that I need to do. On those days it looks disgustingly similar to the to-do list on my desk when I arrive at the church. But I work to get beyond that, to look and listen to the deeper issues. Wayne Muller has written an important book on the subject of Sabbath. He writes, “Sabbath is more than the absence of work. It is the presence of something that arises when we consecrate a period of time to listen to what is most deeply true.”

Consecrated time is different than regular time. Regular time was referred to by the ancient Greeks as *kronos*. Consecrated time, however, is a time to listen to what is most deeply true in our lives, in all its potential complexity, ambiguity, pain and beauty. It is time consecrated with our attention, our mindfulness, honoring those quiet forces of grace or spirit that sustain and heal us. Consecrated time becomes what the Greeks called *kairos*, time outside of time, full of possibilities. These possibilities exist because we pause, we pay attention, we rest.

This time of year I begin each morning practicing a yoga developed by our dear friend Douglas Fir Wilson. It is called *sloatha* yoga. The goal of *sloatha* yoga is simply this: don't get out of bed, feel the sheets against your skin, see the growing light, see how the sun hits the leaves outside the bedroom window, remember your dreams, wake slowly. Rest some more. Stay in bed. “Get up,” someone yells from down stairs, “No, honey I'm developing the new spiritual

practice I learned about in church.” Feel the morning emerging in your life. Breathe deeply. Sloatha yoga. A form of yoga everyone can practice. Even you.

Daily Sabbath time provides a rhythm between work and rest. We are so busy in our daily lives, taking time for contemplation or rest can be challenging at best.

Thomas Jefferson suggested that human life and liberty were intimately entwined with the pursuit of happiness. Instead, life has become a maelstrom in which speed and accomplishment, consumption and productivity have become the most valued human commodities. We pause to restore a sense of balance and perspective. We rest to put our business in perspective. The Chinese characters for busy are: heart and killing. We pause to save our hearts and perhaps our very lives. Spiritual teachers from most traditions agree life should not just make us tired; it should be a source of happiness and contentment. Happiness and joy are the fruits of a well lived life. What I know is that joy only grows when we have time to notice and appreciate.

When we act from a place of rest and cultivated restoration, we are more capable of cultivating what the Buddhist call right understanding, right action, right effort and right relationship. Taking time each day provides time to listen to the deeper voices that speak to our essence. Between writing in my journal each morning and entering into contemplative prayer, I look around at all my surroundings. During the warmer months, when it is above 40 degrees, I go outside. During the colder and darker months, Rob and I sit in our sun porch covered with green plants. I take time to notice, to breathe. I look around. I notice not only the lush and beautiful but the worn, the tired, the dying and sick. Most every day I take time to write a brief poem describing an object I have chosen for my particular attention. This encourages kinship with all that surrounds me. It encourages my heart to open in gratitude, to notice what poet Naomi Shihab Nye refers to as the “gleam of particulars.”

Our willingness to open our hearts in contemplation, prayer and meditation depends on what we believe we will find there. In these times of quiet, when we have found a way to quiet the monkey mind that chatters endlessly, we come face to face with the essence of life. We find the goodness and we find the dark, broken places that reside in every human heart and exist mirrored in nature. Sabbath times invite us to step back and to see that it is good. It encourages deep humility, because we step outside the center of the universe and put our own existence into perspective. Jews believe that on the Sabbath day, we are given an extra soul called the Neshemah Yeterah which enables us to more fully appreciate and enjoy the blessings of our life.

Even in the midst of great and tremendous suffering, there are blessings to count. I believe, as someone who has seen and experienced great sorrow, there is deep within each human being an unquenchable resilience. This is what Christian writer and monk Thomas Merton refers to in his writing as a “hidden wholeness.” Buddhists call it a persistent luminosity. I take time each day to remember because I structure my life so that I pretty much forget all these things by the end of the day. My practice is about remembering that wholeness, that luminous spirit of life which is present in all. It helps me hold the totality of the life that I lead. It gives me time to

grieve, to rage against the injustice of seven-year-olds living with cancer, to argue with the way things are, to fume about something. It connects me with all of you, with all of life.

This past weekend I found that I had a very difficult time relaxing. It never comes easily to me. I always fight the initial invitation to slow down. I often find I can relax more effectively if I am doing something: walking, biking, swimming. This is especially true when I am feeling stressed and busy. I also find that I resist the quiet times because I resist encountering the emptiness that is also, paradoxically part of the hidden wholeness. It is true; when we stop we do encounter the broken as well as the whole. Anxieties, fears, pain over slights, will all emerge. If we are terrified by what we will find in Sabbath moments, we will resist them. We will continue to be busy and to fill up our life with doing and consuming.

As Wayne Muller reminds us in "*Sabbath*," All life has emptiness at its core; it is the quiet hollow reed through which the wind of God blows and make the music that is our life. Without emptiness, we are clogged and unable to give birth to music, love or kindness. All creation springs from emptiness." Emptiness provides spaciousness in our lives. As the poet Paul Valery wrote, "God made everything out of nothing, but the nothing shows through." The nothingness from whence we came shines throughout our life. It is there in the quiet. As Americans, we are encouraged to avoid the emptiness, to fill it up.

I know I have talked numerous times about revolutionary acts. Anything that encourages us to jump off the wheel of consumptive behavior is a revolutionary act. If every day we encounter the truth that we are enough, that we have enough and that the most important things in life don't cost money, then we are involved in subversive living.

James Thurber once said that the best thing about being a writer was when you spent time just looking out the window, people thought you were working. The same challenge exists for each of us. When we stop, when we pause for those Sabbath moments, we are working to create a different kind of life here. We are resisting the values of the mass produced, the mass imaged life. Sabbath is a revolutionary challenge. Its challenge? Delight in this life, delight in the gift you have been given. You don't need more. There is a divine relationship that invites you, includes you. Focus on that and you really will have a silent revolution.

Some years ago the Dalai Lama met with Jewish leaders from all over the world. He was concerned about the preservation of the Tibetan spiritual life in the face of their exile from their homeland. He wanted advice from them on creating rituals that could sustain and connect a community in Diaspora. He was most interested in learning about a spiritual life that created a sanctuary in time, a life not dependent on a sanctuary in geographic place. The practice of Sabbath and other weekly rituals that bind a people to a faith inspired him.

We pause during the day, during the week, during the year as the cycles of the seasons come round again. Sabbath is an invitation to breathe, to offer moments of thanksgiving and healing. It is an invitation to be. And to know that it is enough for now. Amen.