

SABBATH FOR THE REST OF US
Woodinville Unitarian Universalist Church
September 17, 2006

I was privileged to attend the installation service on Friday night for Rabbi Mark Glickman who is now the rabbi at Congregation Kol Ami down on Avondale Road at the United Methodist Church. Rabbi Glickman spoke about all the natural wonders here, the wealth we collectively possess in our homes and material goods, and how technology has become an essential part of our lives. Then he said that we are so isolated. We watch our beautiful landscape torn up for houses. Our homes become one more place of work and not play. He said this was one reason that the Sabbath was important. I was sitting beside two others from the interfaith group and asked them what their congregations did on their versions of Sabbath. The Mormon tradition requires that a day off from regular work be a day of good works – helping the ill, checking in on the elderly, and being of help. The Catholic priest said that Sabbath for his congregation was mostly ferrying children to music lessons and soccer games. I asked both of them whether there was time for joy and laughter or meditation. They both said that was for church services but mostly for peoples' spare time.

In my humble opinion, joy and laughter and meditation are essential parts of Sabbath time.

We know the general meaning and history of Sabbath from our religious traditions here in the Western world. The word "Sabbath" of course comes from the Hebrew "Sabbat" which means, "to rest" or "to cease." The Sabbath came from the Hebrew Testament where in Genesis, Yahweh took six days to create all things including the world, humankind, all other creatures, and then finally rested on the seventh day. The Jewish Holy laws prohibited a whole range of tasks on the Sabbath day. These thirty-nine specific tasks were traditionally associated with the building of the Temple in Jerusalem. They included plowing, reaping, hunting and slaughtering, hammering and transporting. We can only imagine what it was like for the Jewish people to have a day when all work had to be put aside.

These people were unlike us in their short life expectancy, their technology, and their theocracy. They were like us in that their days tended to be filled with unending work from sunup through sundown. No one was left out and people of all ages in families did their share to keep the family alive.

As time went on, the Sabbath restrictions became more demanding. Wayne Muller, the author of a book called **“Sabbath: Restoring the Sacred Rhythm of Rest”** speaks of the Sabbath becoming a dreary day where things like laughter, play and even walks in nature were forbidden.

When Jesus began to share his subversive teachings of Judaism, he was confronted for allegedly disobeying the Sabbath laws. The Gospel of Mark speaks to this confrontation and Jesus’ response: **“Jesus said, “By your actions you demonstrate your ignorance about the Sabbath. Man was not made for the Sabbath, but the Sabbath for man...”** Biblical scholars interpret this to mean that Jesus was being critical of the legalistic evolution of Sabbath time from a time of joy and relaxation to a time of restrictions and “thou shall not” rather than “thou shall’s...”

As the young Christian religion evolved in the Roman world, there was a movement away from the Jewish observance of Sabbath on Saturdays. In part, the Christian community was separating itself from its Jewish heritage. Additionally, the churches wished to remind people of Jesus’ resurrection on a Sunday and to use that day as a time of rest and worship. The Emperor Constantine in the year 321 Common Era proclaimed Sunday to be a day of rest throughout the Roman Empire.

The Christian Sabbath over time became as legalistic as the Jewish Sabbath had done. Our New England Puritan, Congregationalist, and Unitarian ancestors all created or endured religious and governmental restrictions concerning the observation of the Sabbath. We probably know the term “Blue Laws” that are still in effect in much of New England, the South and parts of the Mid-west. Stores couldn’t be open, shopping was impossible, and church services ran for hours. The American version of the Sabbath became yet another dreary chore, according to Muller.

Here’s another comment from Wayne Muller, **“In the relentless busyness of modern life, we have lost the rhythm between work and rest. All life requires a rhythm of rest. There is a rhythm in our waking activity and the body’s need for sleep...we have lost this essential rhythm. Our culture invariably supposes that action and accomplishment are better than rest, that doing something – anything – is better than doing nothing. Because of our desire to succeed...we do not rest. Because we do not rest, we lose our way. We miss the compass points that would show us where to go, we bypass the nourishment that would give us relief. We miss the quiet that would give us wisdom. We miss the joy and love born of effortless delight...”**

Does this apply to any of us here - how about to our families, friends, and co-workers? Are we in a race to get things done in order to get on to the rest of the unending list of things to do?

Our own tradition of Unitarian Universalism does not have rigid or even loose legalistic rules about the Sabbath. We aren't required to even dress up for church. Church services don't go on for hours. Has the tradition of the day of rest – the Sabbath – become obsolete for us?

I think not based upon what I hear from you when we talk. I hear of children and youth overwhelmed by assignments and schedules. People tell me of being lucky to have an hour a day to themselves or to family time. Work piles up, the leaves need raking, and the remodeling project never ends. Is it any wonder we seek the solitude of our cars to escape the noise? Fortunately, Wayne Muller and others have a solution in creating moments of rest in our lives. It is called creating Sabbath moments.

Here are several ways to create Sabbath moments even if we can't have a whole day off to rest and put our feet up on the couch.

The first suggestion comes from Fredric John Muir, who is a UU minister in Maryland. He suggests in his book "Heretics' Faith: Vocabulary for Religious Liberals" that actually going to church and entering into the sanctuary of peace, joyfulness, inspiration, and companionship is a part of restoration of our very spirits. How many places can give us on a good day a ration of wonderful music, hopeful inspiration, quiet time, and a respite from the daily grind? I would add to his suggestion another one. Let's try not to talk about church business for 10 minutes after the service. The budget, the five-year plan, the arrangement of the tables can all wait. Meeting people for the first time or the thousandth time is renewal of our connection to other human beings. Church is more than a business. It should be sanctuary from a world of endless speed.

The second Sabbath moment we can create lies all around us but is hidden in plain sight. Rabbi Glickman mentioned the beauty of the natural world around us. How often do we truly take time to stop and see, hear or feel its presence with us? Wendell Berry, the contemporary American poet and naturalist, wrote an entire book of poems celebrating Sabbath moments. The first poem in the book says in part, "**I go among trees and sit still/All my stirring becomes quiet/around me like circles on water/my tasks lie in their places/where I left them...After days of labor...I hear my song at last/and I sing it. As we sing/the day turns, the trees move...**"

That song seems to best be heard and found in the natural world around us. It can be heard in the falling rain after a long dry spell. It can be heard and felt and smelled in the leaves and growth of a forest during a hike.

To be able to hear that song, however, we must create the conditions for quiet and an opening heart. We are good in this part of the country about getting out in nature. Do we make it into yet another task?

Finally, I believe that Sabbath moments are created when we think outside the box of our routines. Berry speaks to this in lines from one of his more subversive poems “Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front.” He warns us that, **“Your mind will be punched in a card and shut away in a little drawer. When they want you to buy something they will call you...So, friends, every day do something that won't compute...”** I like that line. It appeals to the Unitarian Universalist seeker in me and I hope it does to you as well. “Do something that won't compute.” What are some of those things?

Turning off our email or computer might be one.

Reading a real newspaper on Sunday and having the almost sinful feeling of real paper rather than an electronic screen in front of us can be thrilling. Reading it in bed with a cup of tea is even better.

Being able to laugh out loud at a silly skit is another way. Being able to laugh at all with other people is a marvel in itself.

I believe that's an aspect of Sabbath moments that Wendell Berry speaks to in the same poem. He writes, **“Laugh. Laughter is immeasurable. Be joyful though you have considered all the facts.”**

So laughter of a joyful sort is essential and is one reason why I chose to include that skit from Monty Python today in church. Even if it's not our cup of tea for humor, how does it feel when we hear people expressing joy all around us? Laughter is contagious and I suggest is part of church.

Let's stop here but I'd like to end with a short meditation time so we can quietly rest our busyness for awhile. We have heard Sabbath moments of joys, laughter, a little silliness and opportunity for our open hearts.

If, as Jesus said, a day or time of rest is our right and gift, then we have the responsibility to find it. We are not beholden to a deity to have it shown to us. We must find it for ourselves. Sabbath time is right in front of us. Can we see it, hear it, feel it, or taste it?