

“Deep Breaths”  
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UUMSB  
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Readings:

Deuteronomy 5:12-15

12 Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you. 13 For six days you shall labour and do all your work. 14 But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD 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. 15 Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day.

Shabbat as a Sanctuary in Time

By Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel ([myjewishlearning.com](http://myjewishlearning.com))

When history began, there was only one holiness in the world, holiness in time. When at Sinai the word of God was about to be voiced, a call for holiness in man was proclaimed: "Thou shalt be unto me a holy people." It was only after the people had succumbed to the temptation of worshipping a thing, a golden calf, that the erection of a Tabernacle, of holiness in space, was commanded. The sanctity of time came first, the sanctity of man came second, and the sanctity of space last. Time was hallowed by God; space, the Tabernacle, was consecrated by Moses.

The meaning of the Sabbath is to celebrate time rather than space. Six days a week we live under the tyranny of things of space; on the Sabbath we try to become attuned to holiness in time. It is a day on which we are called upon to share in what is eternal in time, to turn from the results of creation to the mystery of creation, from the world of creation to the creation of the world.

“Spiritual Practice for Our Time” –Rebecca Parker (in *Everyday Spiritual Practice*, ed. Scott Alexander)

“To keep Sabbath means, once every seven days, to step outside the dominating culture and enter another space. On a regular basis stop participating in life as it is defined for us...Give yourself time to notice.”

“To keep the Sabbath is a radical act of resistance to a culture that has lost track of the meaning of life. From this place of Sabbath keeping, I become more capable of entering into sustained engagement with the culture of which we are all a part and which needs our active creative witness and our work for change.”

Sermon:

When I was growing up I spent a lot of time at my best friend’s house. Her parents are wonderful people who I love. My friend’s mom is the kind of person who is always carrying too much on her back. When I was younger, I remember speaking with her about how she was stressed out about de-stressing. She had very high expectations for herself, and was frustrated

when confronted by the limitations of things like the number of hours in a day and what one human being can accomplish. I remember thinking at the time that I wanted to be sure that I never got to that place. That I was never so busy that I got stressed out about getting less busy. I did not want to ever be in the place where doing the work to take care of myself was too much additional work to be able to handle. Well, I, like most of us I am sure, have done better at that at some points in my life than others. It is often said that ministers preach what they themselves most need to hear. I can assure you that today, this is most definitely the case. Today in our worship we are considering Sabbath and what that means in Unitarian Universalism. I am a fellow traveler in the process of finding a way to hold Sabbath time in our lives.

Sabbath is the day of rest. In some traditions it is a day filled with spiritual practices like worship and prayer. In many traditions it includes family and food. In Unitarian Universalism, there are of course many interpretations of what Sabbath means and how it can be a part of our lives. At its most basic, Sabbath is about rest. It is an opportunity to take time to recharge our spiritual batteries. For some people this happens through religious community or family. For others it is about getting outside, or having time alone. Some of us might consider this worship service part of our Sabbath, whereas others may think of it as a separate spiritual practice.

Since I began to work with congregations in seminary, really up until this fall, I was very good about keeping a Sabbath day. Sometimes it was in two parts, maybe a half of Friday and half of Saturday, but my husband and I had TV marathons, read books, went to dinner, the movies, or for walks around town. We took time to just be people together, to recharge and see each other after working all week and before beginning our work week again on Sunday. Well, as you know this fall my step-kids moved in with us and our schedules have gotten much busier. I have changed my expectations for days off and what happens on days off.

For a while I was stressing out about this. Because the way I experienced Sabbath was not meeting my previous expectations, I was frustrated with myself. I thought that I should be able to get my work done faster or differently so that I could continue to have Sabbath time in the way that I was used to. I stressed out about de-stressing. Well, this week and just in time for this sermon, I remembered something that I have told many other people in the past. Our spiritual practices can change over time. We do not have to find the one magical thing that will make us fully integrated human beings for all time. Rather, as life is an ever changing and evolving process, so too are our ways of managing our spiritual lives.

We have talked before about spiritual practices. Taking care of our spiritual health is vital to support the work that we do in the world, be it working for justice, peace, or simply going to work and taking care of ourselves and our families. Observing Sabbath time is one of the most ancient, fundamental and basic spiritual practices we can engage with.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote the short article on Sabbath we heard an excerpt from earlier. Heschel suggests that through observing Sabbath, we become attentive to the holiness of time. He points out that, “The sanctity of time came first, the sanctity of man<sup>1</sup> came second, and the sanctity of space last.”<sup>2</sup> In the first creation story in the Bible, after six days of work, God rested. Out of this tradition our Jewish, Christian, and Muslim neighbors developed practices of Sabbath rest. In the book of Deuteronomy in the Hebrew Bible, God also commands the Jewish people to keep Sabbath, honoring their deliverance from slavery in Egypt.

The sanctity or holiness of time is important because it is a force in our lives over which we have no control. We cannot control the passage of time, but we can control how we use and

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<sup>1</sup> Sic.

<sup>2</sup> Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, “Shabbat as a Sanctuary in Time”, [myjewishlearning.com](http://myjewishlearning.com)

understand it. Rebecca Parker suggests that keeping Sabbath time is a radical departure from not only the day to day of life, but broadly from our culture. She states in her essay “Spiritual Practice for our Time”, “I have come to understand that if I am to recover from violence, live in love, and contribute to healing and transformation, I need to engage in spiritual practices that preserve knowledge beyond what the dominant culture tells me about who I am.”<sup>3</sup>

What does the dominant culture tell us about how we should be spending our time? What are we supposed to be doing? Working, spending money on eating food other people prepare, looking beautiful, smelling different, being entertained, driving a new car and so on. What other things does the dominant culture say are we supposed to be doing with our time? \_\_\_\_\_ (be afraid of change, be afraid of not changing) Parker suggests that spending all our time in these ways can lead to spiritual numbness. If we were to be open to all of the beauty and the pain there is in the world at all times, we would be overwhelmed. So we need to manage our feelings and how we interact with our experience. However, if we hold these feelings at bay, we are spiritually numb. We are numb to our experience and the experience of others. The practice of observing Sabbath gives us the tools to help us relate to our experience in productive ways. As Parker says, “We need to recover our abilities to think and feel. Anesthetization needs to end in our lives.”<sup>4</sup>

So how does observing Sabbath do this? Parker explains, “To keep Sabbath means, once every seven days, to step outside the dominating culture and enter another space. On a regular basis stop participating in life as it is defined for us...Give yourself time to notice.”<sup>5</sup> Developing spiritual practices to help develop our attention shapes our experience and through it our spiritual life. When we are attentive to time and how we engage with time, we cultivate our spiritual development.

Heschel wrote, “The meaning of the Sabbath is to celebrate time rather than space. Six days a week we live under the tyranny of things of space; on the Sabbath we try to become attuned to holiness in time. It is a day on which we are called upon to share in what is eternal in time, to turn from the results of creation to the mystery of creation, from the world of creation to the creation of the world.”<sup>6</sup> Heschel encourages us in the practice of observing Sabbath, to move away from the “results and world of creation”, what Parker describes as the dominating culture.

The trick of developing Sabbath as a spiritual practice is not to let the expectations of the dominating culture shape the practice. What I mean is to not let our societal expectations of doing as much as possible in every moment, that we won’t age, change, or fail, (or alternatively that we will always fail and must always change) shape our Sabbath time. Sabbath is about using time differently and it is about process not product. In Unitarian Universalism we do not have rules and guidelines we must follow for observing a Sabbath. We can develop what makes sense for our lives, and what will help us to be attentive to our experience and spiritual development. If one were to decide to spend their Sabbath time one week working on art, they don’t have to do that forever. If one holds Saturdays as Sabbath space and then needs to change it, that is okay. If one needs to move from looking for whole days for Sabbath to portions of days, that is also not the end of the world, nor does it need to remain the same for all time. It is about process not product.

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<sup>3</sup> Parker, “Spiritual Practice for our Time” in *Everyday Spiritual Practice*, 141-2.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 142

<sup>5</sup> Ibid 142

<sup>6</sup> Heschel, *ibid*

If you already have practices that you do on a particular day of the week, but do not call it Sabbath, consider framing it in this way. What would it mean if your Sunday hike, worship, and diner with a friend became known in your heart as a spiritual practice, as Sabbath time? How does that frame change your attitude toward the practice? I know for myself that in order to have a successful Sabbath I need to include time for me to be by myself, with my family, to be both still and to move around. I don't need to know that every Saturday I will have time to read a book, see a movie, and go for a walk. Rather, I know that in every week, I must allow myself time to recharge in more than one way. A day that I spend at the Museum of Science with my family might be a day off of work and fun, but it is not Sabbath time for me. It will not help me to reconnect with my center, focus my attention, or encounter feelings that I might not have paid attention to during the week. By holding time for Sabbath as a spiritual practice, and not simply time off, I am keeping what I do in that time in a particular spiritual context.

In our reading today Parker said, "To keep the Sabbath is a radical act of resistance to a culture that has lost track of the meaning of life. From this place of Sabbath keeping, I become more capable of entering into sustained engagement with the culture of which we are all a part and which needs our active creative witness and our work for change." Observing Sabbath is a spiritual practice, and therefore about the process, not the particulars of how we do it. It is an opportunity to recharge our spiritual batteries and to be attentive to the holiness of time and how we use it. A Unitarian Universalist Sabbath is flexible and open, but also a potentially vital part of how we hold ourselves in relationship with each other and the world. By framing our practices in a spiritual context, we build stronger community. My prayer for all of us is that we find a way to hold some time as separate and sacred. Attention to this time can help us as individuals and as a community to be spiritually open rather than numb, and to be fed so that we might do the work of building a beloved community and caring for one another and the world.

So may it be.

Amen.