Too much delight

Marlene Kropf

While waiting for an appointment, I picked up a magazine for business leaders. Two articles caught my eye: "How to Become Insanely Efficient" and "How to Build a Killer Team." Scanning the pages, I was dismayed at the brutal tone. Who would be attracted to such advice?

For many weary and harried people today, a frantically busy, competitive existence is a fact of life. In order to survive in the contemporary world of commerce, technology, medicine, or education, they must become ever more productive, more sleep deprived, and more often absent from their homes and families. Setting aside a day every week for rest and worship seems at best quaint or perhaps unintelligible.

For harried people today, a frantically busy, competitive existence is a fact of life. A Sabbath-keeping rhythm is foreign to a world where stores stay open all night and computers and phones beep and blink endlessly.

Yet the Genesis story that introduces Sabbath paints a different picture of God's dream for the world. Into the chaos and darkness of the beginning comes the first light. Day and night take shape, a rhythm of work and rest emerges—and then the Sabbath is created. It is a blessed day of rest, in which the Creator pauses to take full delight in all that has been made.

For the children of Israel, this rhythm of work and Sabbath keeping became the mark of their identity, their covenant relationship with God (Exod. 31:12–17). But such a life-giving rhythm is foreign to a world where stores stay open all night and computers and phones beep and blink endlessly. In his book *Sabbath: The Ancient Practices*, Dan Allender declares, "Few people are willing to enter the Sabbath and sanctify it, to make it holy, because a full day of delight and joy is more than most people can bear in a lifetime, let alone a week."[1]

Perhaps the underlying reason so few take delight in the Sabbath is not just our frenzied lifestyle. It may be that our capacity for joy and rest in God's presence has been all but obliterated by constant sound and motion. A malaise so deeply seated will likely not yield to a quick fix. Simply tacking on Sabbath observance to an already crowded life is almost sure to fail. Without ongoing practices to nourish and make space for the human-divine relationship, people cannot be expected to consider celebrating the Sabbath a priority.

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So what practices are essential and foundational for experiencing Sabbath? Of the many potentially useful spiritual practices, two pillars undergird the Sabbath experience: silence and sacred pauses. If we desire to restore the Sabbath, we can begin by encouraging congregations and individuals to engage these two universal spiritual practices.

The practice of silence

The first pillar undergirding Sabbath is silence. "Nothing in all creation is so like God as silence," observes Meister Eckhart. And since silence is where God dwells, every faith tradition agrees that we must pause, cease doing, and enter silence if we want to encounter the living God. That practice may be engaged in solitude or it may be engaged communally. What is required is that it become part of the life of every seeker after God.

Gordon Cosby, beloved founding pastor of the Church of the Saviour in Washington, DC, wrote in his foreword to Elizabeth O'Connor's book *Search for Silence*:

> *The one journey that ultimately matters is the journey into the place of stillness deep within one's self. To reach that place is to be at home; to fail to reach it is to be forever restless. At the place of "central silence," one's own life and spirit are united with the life and Spirit of God. There the fire of God's presence is experienced. The soul is immersed in love. The divine birth happens. We hear at last the living Word.*[2]

The tragedy of human experience, however, is that many of us have forgotten our true home in God. As fugitives from our native soil, we no longer remember our deepest identity. Beyond and beneath the roles we fulfill in our homes, workplaces, churches, and communities, we fail to realize that we are God's beloved children, known and held forever.[3]

It is a terrible thing to be alone in the universe, cut off from the love at the center of all things. Being cut off makes people do hurtful and destructive things. We become addicted to substitutes for God: work, food, sex, glitter, power, violence—anything that will obscure the deep loneliness within.

What neuroscientists are discovering is that the practice of silence is necessary for healthy relationships to thrive—with ourselves and others, let alone with God. When we are not grounded in God, our ordinary awareness—instinct, feeling, thinking—is cluttered with trivia and clogged with judgments and negative thoughts. One spiritual teacher says that most North Americans cannot go three minutes without making some sort of critique, evaluation, or judgment. (If you don't believe this, try it yourself.) Such habitual, destructive patterns get in the way of authentic relationship. We cannot love God and others, cannot be truly present and hospitable, when our neurocircuitry is overloaded with debris. Our energy is consumed in protecting our wounds and shielding ourselves from genuine encounters. Caught in this trap, we lament with the apostle Paul, "I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate" (Rom. 7:15).[4]

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Contemplative practices change our brains. They create new neural pathways that enhance social awareness and expand our capacity for empathy. With a unique quality known as neuroplasticity (the Creator's gift for ongoing conversion), our brains use these practices of quiet openness to God to transform our old destructive, defensive, judgmental, and violent patterns. We stop talking *to* God or *about* God and simply *listen* to God. What we perceive renews our minds (Rom. 12:2), opening up fresh aware-

ness and sustaining our capacity to love, give, and serve with abandon, without counting the cost.[5]

Could the church offer brief tutorials in silence in settings where most people are already present? For example, the ordinary Sunday morning worship service offers a spacious opportunity. In one Mennonite congregation I know, worshipers enter into a couple minutes of quiet reflection immediately after the sermon. A profound silence descends as children, youth, and adults pause to listen to God. In another congregation, people are invited to arrive early before business meetings. About twenty minutes before the meeting begins, someone offers a scripture and a prayer to guide these moments of meditation and open people to the Spirit's voice of discernment. Silence ensues until the meeting starts; latecomers slip in quietly and join those already at prayer. In still another congregation, a weekly small group begins with five minutes of centering prayer, a prelude to conversation about their encounters with God during the past week.

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Introducing congregations to communal silence can begin slowly. A minute is enough to get started, with an increase in time as people discover that communal silence can be as precious and profound as singing together. With practice, people catch glimpses of the blessing of entering fully into God's presence—the heart of Sabbath.

The practice of sacred pauses

A second pillar undergirding Sabbath is related to the first. Just as silence opens our hearts and minds to intimacy with God, so the practice of pausing for prayer throughout the day tunes our hearts and minds to God's desires for us and for creation. It brings the spirit of Sabbath into the everyday world.

Sabbath might be understood as the great pause, the day on which we take a deep breath and remember God's deeds and celebrate God's faithful presence. Smaller pauses for prayer throughout the day can also renew our awareness, hour by hour,

of God's gracious presence. Together, the great pause and the smaller daily pauses form and shape us as people who abide in the true vine and bear abundant fruit (John 15). They keep us from forgetting who God is and who we are, and they thereby transform us more and more into the loving, creative, and generous people we are called to be.

The Psalms speak of offering prayer at morning, noon, and night (Ps. 55:17). Monastic communities have historically taken their cue for the daily hours of prayer from Psalm 119:164: "Seven times a day I praise you for your righteous ordinances."

A remnant of monastic practice still exists in homes where time is set aside both morning and evening for scripture reading and prayer. Another echo of the monastic tradition is mealtime prayer, the pause to give thanks and make our requests to God before we eat.

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In her beautiful and inspiring book, *Seven Sacred Pauses*, Macrina Wiederkehr suggests that the monastic practice of seven daily pauses for prayer is not out of reach for ordinary folk. She translates the main themes of the monastic hours of prayer into brief pauses throughout the day.[6] "No matter what you are doing," Wiederkehr says, "you can pause to touch the grace of the hour."[7] The purpose of these pauses, she says, is *mindfulness*, defined as "the art of living awake and ready to embrace the gift of the present moment."[8]

Perhaps nothing so characterizes the ministry of Jesus as his capacity to live mindfully, to be fully present to each individual or group he encountered. To become like Jesus, his followers must learn and live the same rhythms of solitude and moment-by-moment prayer that Jesus practiced.

Not only individuals but families and communities can practice intentional sacred pauses throughout the day. I vividly remember spending time with a Christian community in Northumbria (England), entering into their practice of the daily hours of prayer and being challenged by the way communal prayer transforms the spirit of ordinary weekdays into Sabbath time.

Three things especially impressed me about the daily rhythm of work and worship. One was the energetic and joyful spirit in

which work was accomplished, and how much got done. Another was how hard it was to interrupt our work at noon and go to the chapel to worship and pray. I was so habituated to keeping at a job until it was done that it took great effort to lay aside my tools at midday and walk away from a half-weeded row of garden vegetables. But the struggle to pause showed me how upside-down my attitudes had become. Did I really think my efforts would keep the world turning? The third thing I noticed was how refreshed we were at the end of a day in which worship and work had truly become one.[9]

One small way to begin creating sacred pauses in our work lives is to take a moment to bless the day before turning on the computer. Another is to pause at lunchtime to pray for peace in our communities and world. Technology might even aid us in making these pauses; an app could send us a reminder of these calls to prayer throughout the day. To pause prayerfully and breathe the spirit of Sabbath throughout the day prepares the way for the weekly Sabbath to become rich and full, a true celebration of God's goodness.

The practice of Sabbath

Having established two pillars on which Sabbath rests, we turn to look more closely at the practice of Sabbath itself. With its magnificent potential for refreshment and renewal, the Sabbath should be wildly popular and regularly enjoyed—right? Probably not, if one acknowledges the decline of Sunday as a day of rest.

Biblical scholars find a striking variety of themes embedded in Sabbath theology: rest, joyful celebration of creation, liberation from captivity, justice for all, the relativizing of work, the renewal of community, feasting and play, trust in God's provision.[10] The weekly day of rest is meant to be a blessing for both the human community and the nonhuman world. For one day we cease all our striving and trust that (in the words of the old hymn) "God is working [God's] purpose out."

Yet such astonishing beauty and peace are regularly bypassed in favor of driven and dangerous choices. In the face of our peril, Walter Brueggemann urges us to recognize that Sabbath observance is a bold act of prophetic resistance. He asserts:

> *In our own contemporary context of the rat race of anxiety, the celebration of Sabbath is an act of both resistance and alternative. It is resistance because it is visible insistence that our lives are not defined by the production and consumption of commodity goods. . . .*
>
> *It is an alternative to the demanding, chattering, pervasive presence of advertising and its great liturgical claim of professional sports that devour all of our "rest time." The alternative on offer is the awareness and practice of the claim that we are situated on the receiving end of the gifts of God.*[11]

Certainly congregations would benefit from biblical teaching about both the generous gifts of Sabbath and its countercultural potential for forming us as people of grace and peace. Along with such efforts, guidance for small steps to reclaim the Sabbath could be modeled and taught—practices that open our hearts to God and one another, making more space for awareness of God's presence.

One practice is choosing a special way to inaugurate and end the Sabbath, thereby setting it apart from other days. Just as Jewish families enjoy a candle-lit dinner as Shabbat begins, some Christian families serve a festive breakfast on Sunday to announce the day of rest. In our home, my husband regularly plays a particularly glorious set of recordings while we get ready for church. When I hear that music, my heart turns toward God and I begin to anticipate the gathering of the faithful.

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In his book *Sabbath Time*, Tilden Edwards describes the Sunday morning practice of silence his family observed as his children were growing up. After a special breakfast, each family member spent an hour alone before worship—the younger ones in quiet activities with a "Sabbath box" of toys available only on Sunday mornings, and the older ones in quiet reading, reflection, or walking. Adults read and meditated on the Sunday scripture passages.[12]

Then comes worship, breathing the generous spirit of Sabbath. On this day, God opens hands of grace to us, "satisfying the desire of every living thing" (Ps. 145:16). In the beloved community, we inhabit a circle of prayer and praise, singing of God's wondrous deeds and experiencing the fullness of God's gift of Sabbath.

The Sabbath is God's gift to us for our ongoing renewal and deepening. Sabbath is also a gift to the world, for when God's people observe Sabbath, the reign of God comes near.

Today, in an effort to reclaim the day of rest, many people are choosing to observe Sunday as an electronics-free day. Instead of listening to what's stored on their iPods, people make music themselves. Instead of watching television, children sketch and paint, play games, or take long walks with their families. Instead of working at the computer, people invite friends over for a simple meal.

Because few things enable people to get in touch with God more quickly than nature, an invigorating way to observe the Sabbath is to spend time outdoors. An afternoon stroll in the woods or along a lake, a bike ride in the country or a city park, or a pause to gaze at the stars in the night sky can refresh and restore us, opening our hearts more fully to the divine mystery. And lest we forget, a Sunday afternoon nap is surely one of the most blessed ways to honor the God who created a day of rest!

The Sabbath is God's gift to us for our ongoing renewal and deepening. "If you call the sabbath a delight and the holy day of the LORD honorable," the prophet Isaiah reminds us, "if you honor it . . . then you shall take delight in the LORD" (Isa. 58:13–14).

Sabbath is also a gift to the world, for when God's people observe Sabbath, the reign of God comes near. Neither an insane efficiency nor a killer work ethic is what the world needs or longs for. Instead, as Wayne Muller points out in *Sabbath: Restoring the Sacred Rhythm of Rest*, "Once people feel nourished and refreshed, they cannot help but be kind; just so, the world aches for the generosity of a well-rested people."[13]

Whether we are engaged with the pillars undergirding Sabbath—silence and sacred pauses—or the observance of Sabbath itself, we are participating in the world's healing. Nothing could bring more delight.

Notes

[1] Dan Allender, *Sabbath: The Ancient Practices* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2010), 5.

[2] N. Gordon Cosby, "Foreword," in *Search for Silence*, by Elizabeth O'Connor (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1972), 11.

[3] This awareness is what makes the story of Jesus's baptism so potent. Before Jesus has accomplished anything, before he has preached or taught or healed anyone, he encounters the unconditional love and blessing of God at his baptism. In the strength of that blessing he withstands the fierce temptations of Satan in the wilderness and returns to fulfill the call he has received from God (Mark 1:9–15).

[4] Scripture quotations are from the NRSV.

[5] For an intriguing discussion of current brain research and its implications for prayer and meditation, see *How God Changes Your Brain: Breakthrough Findings from a Leading Neuroscientist*, by Andrew Newberg and Mark Robert Waldman (New York: Ballantine Books, 2010).

[6] Macrina Wiederkehr, *Seven Sacred Pauses: Living Mindfully through the Hours of the Day* (Notre Dame, IN: Sorin Books, 2008). Wiederkehr suggests the following titles and focus for the daily "hours" of prayer:

Night Watch—Matins (pre-dawn): Deep listening, surrender, and trust
Awakening Hour—Lauds (dawn): Praise for the coming of light, resurrection
Little Hours—Breathing spells for the soul
Blessing Hour—Terce (midmorning): Invoking the Spirit's blessing on our work
Hour of Illumination—Sext (midday): Prayers for peace and healing in the world
Hour of Wisdom—None (midafternoon): Confession and forgiveness
Twilight Hour—Vespers (evensong): Gratitude and praise
Great Silence—Compline (night): Trust, intimacy, completion

[7] Ibid., 2.

[8] Ibid.

[9] For more information about the daily prayer practice of the Northumbria Community, see *Celtic Daily Prayer: Prayers and Readings from the Northumbria Community* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2002).

[10] In *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), Marva J. Dawn summarizes these themes as ceasing, resting, embracing, and feasting.

[11] Walter Brueggemann, *Sabbath as Resistance: Saying No to the Culture of Now* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), xiii–xiv.

[12] Tilden Edwards, *Sabbath Time: Understanding and Practice for Contemporary Christians* (New York: Seabury Press, 1982), 102–4.

[13] Wayne Muller, *Sabbath: Restoring the Sacred Rhythm of Rest* (New York: Bantam Books, 1999), 11.

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