

Family Sabbath practice

Carrie Martens

When I was a child, our family kept the Sabbath. We did not keep it in any particular way, although there were some activities that happened only on Sundays and never on weekdays. One of these was a light Sunday supper, which Russian Mennonites traditionally referred to as *faspá*. At times we went visiting, but at other times I had extra-long figure-skating practices that could not conveniently be held during the busy work/school week. Generally, the Sabbath was a space, more or less. It was a space that we kept open, at least most of the time, for something that was not part of our weekday space.

The Bible does indeed invite and instruct us to create space.

We are told to remember the Sabbath, to keep it holy, not to work, but to rest. In short, to create a space that is different, a space that is set apart. But set apart for what? This I believe was the struggle of navigating the Sabbath for my family of origin. We understood that we should not work, but then what should we do? Was it permissible to do things that caused others to work? What did it mean to

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keep the Sabbath when one had a job that required shift work on Sundays? What qualified as work? And what did it actually mean to rest? Certainly going to skating practices was fun for me, but I am fairly certain that watching four-hour practice sessions was not a particularly holy and restful experience for other members of my family.

Scripture gives us what might be considered clear and adequate instruction about keeping the Sabbath holy. The people of Israel are plainly instructed not to work. They are provided with a detailed list of who should not work, from sons and daughters to oxen and livestock. And they are to remember. Israel is invited to

remember God's creative work—and more specifically, God's seventh-day rest period (Exod. 20:11). And they are told to remember that they are no longer slaves in Egypt (Deut. 5:15). Thus we extrapolate that good churchgoing people in contemporary society should not work on Sundays; instead they should rest and they should remember that they are not slaves to their jobs.

Letting our children lead us

It is easy to read the Old Testament texts about keeping Sabbath with an eye to the concrete instructions and not to the impulses behind those instructions. It is easy to read with an eye to the law and not to the spirit of the law. This focus on the concrete is especially typical of our attempts to make these teachings clear for our young ones. We distill; we simplify; we condense God's

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teachings into sound bites that can be memorized and understood. But I doubt that the benefit of this approach is any greater for the church's children today than for my family years ago. We are left with the lesson that we are to stop and rest but with little wisdom about what that stopping and resting might entail.

And here I think our children can lead us. The Old Testament instructions about remembering the Sabbath are embedded in story, and few can delve as deeply into story as children can. Here is opportunity to imagine, to wonder, and to become immersed in the life-giving possibility of keeping Sab-

bath. The invitation to Sabbath is inextricably linked to creation, to God's creative acts and in particular to God's rest after creating. What would it mean to rest after creating sun and moon, stars that twinkle, fish that swim, skunks that gambol, and people who love and laugh with abandon? I am not a child, but when I consider the creation narrative, I wonder if resting might look a lot like delight, like the profound joy that grows out of connection and creativity.

The invitation to Sabbath is also deeply woven together with the Exodus narrative. What would it mean, many years after being

saved from a life of slavery, to remember that day of liberation, to remember the mighty act of God's deliverance? I wonder if this remembering might have looked a lot like gathering together around a fire, sharing stories and objects that survived the jour-

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ney, as an ongoing means of discovering identity, a means of being reoriented as people in covenant relationship with God.

For me, this is the spirit of Sabbath keeping. I sense that undergirding the law is an invitation to delight and to reorient ourselves week after week. This is an invitation that requires not only space but a spirit of creativity and discovery as we seek to be the people of God in our time and place.

Receiving permission to stop striving

I do not mean to underestimate the daunting task of setting aside space in our culture. We

live in a society that demands constant movement, constant production, constant striving. Finding space to stop and rest is no small feat within complex family systems. A gift I hear for us today is that we are not only being instructed or invited to keep the Sabbath holy but we are also being given permission to do so.

It is okay to stop. It is not failure to opt out of extracurricular activities or to say no to an invitation, even a good one. It is not failure to have a small birthday celebration with no Pinterest-inspired ideas. It is not failure to achieve less or to do less. In fact, it is often in doing less that we discover the space to become more—more whole, more grounded, more able to delight, more in step with the divine.

I wish I could say there is a sure-fire way to help families make Sabbath space in their lives, but I cannot. Making space for Sabbath is something each family has to navigate in ways that suit their needs, through priorities and realities that are particular to them. But I do think that having a sense of how we might conceive of Sabbath-keeping activity might help inform how we manage our time.

Considering focal practices

When I consider Sabbath as invitation to delight and to be reoriented, I am drawn to the work of Arthur Boers in *Living into Focus: Choosing What Matters in an Age of Distractions*. In particular I resonate with Boers's discussion of focal practices, terminology that he borrows from philosopher Albert Borgmann.¹ All of us are shaped by what we have placed at the center of our lives. Focal practices are activities that give us life and that share the characteristics of "commanding presence, continuity, and centering power," according to Borgmann.² These practices are not simply pastimes but experiences we need in order to live well.

Practices that include the characteristic of *commanding presence* are those that require effort. They can be strenuous and involve giving our attention.³ Many of the activities advertised for families

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are about consumption, can be completed with little thought, and are quickly forgotten. We scarf down hamburgers from drive-through restaurants or take in movies at theatres or in our homes. Focal practices, in contrast, entail repetition and discipline, requiring more from us than mere passive consumption.

These activities include elements that are beyond our control, and as such, the practices do not have predictable results. Hiking, canoeing, running, gardening, and playing the piano—all these require focused attention, commitment, and energy, and the outcome is not guaranteed, which can increase our satisfaction in doing them. We may make mistakes or encounter inclement weather, but the process brings lasting enjoyment, delight in accomplishment, and increased understanding of our abilities and our limits.⁴

Focal practices are also characterized by *continuity and connection*. They have qualities that draw us both inward and outward, connecting us to various parts of ourselves, to those around us, and to creation. These activities help us unite our bodies, minds, and spirits, creating a sense of wholeness and well-being. They also affect how we relate beyond our own likes and dislikes, helping us avoid self-preoccupation and inviting us into rich

relationships.⁵ My nieces and I have enjoyed times of baking together, an activity that gets us involved up to our elbows! Through mixing cookie dough or forming pretzels, we connect with one another and also to the long history of food preparation

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and hospitality that runs in our family. We also connect with the tradition of farming and love of the land that is deeply a part of our story. Often the result is something we want to share with others, which is not always the case when we buy treats at the store!

Finally, these practices have *centering power*, the ability to orient us toward something greater than ourselves. Through these activities we have the opportunity to learn important truths that can direct our lives, and we have space to breathe and remember what we value most, what is lasting.⁶ A friend of mine grew up in a household that regularly allowed space during meals for laughter. They

told stories and exchanged jokes, and they laughed until their bellies ached and tears ran down their cheeks. Mealtime laughter still is a focal practice for these children who are now grown and forming families of their own. Through laughter they let go of the stresses of the day, find joy in one another's company, and learn to delight in the moment.

Keeping Sabbath as focal practice

Worship is a primary activity that serves this purpose of centering or reorientation.⁷ I understand that attending weekly worship can be a challenge for families who may be experiencing sleepless nights; working long work hours; and feeling overwhelmed by many tasks at home, by extracurricular activities, and by the demands of school. But we are oriented not only when seated neatly on pews in holy silence. Rather, we participate in the orienting and reorienting focal practice of worship through the intention to be part of that journey—the journey in which we walk, run, dance, trip, and stumble our way into the divine presence each week, whether in the pew or elsewhere.

Focal practices also have the power to call us back to ourselves when we feel scattered, which is a common occurrence in family life. A mother told me that each time her young son came home from kindergarten, she asked him what he had done that day, and each day he could not remember. One afternoon she volunteered in his classroom, and then she understood. The class was rushed from one activity to another, never completing a task before the time was up. By the end of the day, my friend felt lost too. The Sabbath invites us to stop and reorient ourselves so that we can find our way again. Focal practices can help us in that process.

Middle-class North American children tend to have lives full of planned activities. For such children, discovering focal practices that provide commanding presence, continuity and connection, and centering power may mean letting go of programs and

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plans in order to move more slowly and learn how to play again. It may mean leaving space for nothing at all, so moments of awe and wonder can break into our lives.

I have noticed that children have a natural inclination toward focal practices. They will enthusiastically and at times stubbornly rest in God's presence, noticing a bug slowly passing by on a sidewalk, or glimpsing a rainbow. It is adults who seem to train out of our children this attentiveness to the minute and the profound.

In connection with keeping Sabbath, focal practices can be activities that move us to genuine delight and offer significant reorientation. Practices that command presence, provide continuity, and center us invite us to enter into what gives us life, what feeds us deeply, and what calls us back to God and back to our true selves. Seen in this light, Sabbath—in whatever shape it takes for a family—opens a space for creativity and discovery. In this space all the children and adults in a home can explore what gives them life as individuals and together as a family.

Such Sabbath space is an opportunity for parents and caregivers to notice what brings their children back into focus and

what brings out their best, the essence of who they've been created to be. It is an opportunity for children to learn to know their parents and caregivers as spiritual beings with interests and passions, as people apart from their roles. It is an opportunity for each member of the family to see the heart of the other, sharing in what brings them life.

Sabbath keeping enriched by focal practices is a gift we can offer our children as they move into adulthood and start creating their own families and households. Through these practices our children can receive the knowledge that they are created for communion with God and that they can be drawn into God's love through particular practices that call out the core of who God made them to be. Through practices that invite us to delight and to be reoriented, we can invite our children into the life-giving ritual of keeping Sabbath.

Notes

¹ Arthur Boers, *Living into Focus: Choosing What Matters in an Age of Distractions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2012), 11.

² *Ibid.*, 24.

³ *Ibid.*, 26–27.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 26–29.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 35–45.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 47–49.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 59.

About the author

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