

Keeping the Sabbath

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In the late 1940's, in the wake of World War Two, a group of Quakers began an experiment in citizen diplomacy. They reasoned, quite rightly, that if the nations of the world were ever going to get along it had to start somewhere. And that that somewhere was probably around the dinner tables of regular folks like you and me. Keeping the hard-won peace in mind they established an organization called SERVAS. The formula is very simple. After an interview with a Quaker elder whose job is make sure the applicant is appropriate for the program, one joins up and is given a list of host families around the world who welcome visitors. One then contacts potential hosts who live close by one's intended route and visits are arranged. No money changes hands. The hosts provide bed and breakfast for one or two nights, a warm welcome and sometimes dinner. Beyond that there is only one obligation, and that is to take time to engage in a deep and serious conversation.

We discovered SERVAS as we prepared for our first sabbatical. We planned to be on the road with our children for more than six months. Given both our values and our scant resources at the time, finding SERVAS was a Godsend. We stayed with SERVAS families in France and in Great Britain. Once accepted

into the organization one receives lists of hosts, each of whom provides a brief description of their interests as well as contact information. One, in particular, aroused our curiosity.

They lived in the Outer Hebrides, on the Isle of Lewis, a barren, windswept place, fifty miles off the northwest coast of Scotland. Their listing said they enjoyed making wine and music, good conversation and cutting peat. How could we resist. What we didn't know was that the Isle of Lewis harbors one of the most conservative Christian communities on earth. We arrived on a Saturday. "You know," Michael said, "they chain the swings on Sunday. Play is after all, children's work, and there will be no working on the Sabbath here."

We've set aside the month of June for services on Sabbath. The Hebrew word *Shabbat* is from a root that means *to desist* or *to rest*. Scripture tells us at the very beginning of Genesis that God made the world in six days and on the seventh day God rested. And so, to recognize God's wondrous works we also rest. The chained-down swings on the Isle of Lewis seem to us a quaint, if somewhat repressive anachronism. But they do reflect a world-view worthy of consideration.

The New Yorker's, Adam Gopnik, gives us a glimpse into a world where Sabbath time has all but disappeared in an article entitled "Bumping into Mr. Ravioli." He writes:

My daughter Olivia, who just turned three, has an imaginary friend whose name is Charlie Ravioli. Olivia is growing up in Manhattan, so Charlie Ravioli has a lot of local traits: he lives in an apartment on Madison and Lexington, he dines on grilled

chicken, fruit, and water, and, having reached the age of seven and a half, he feels, or is thought, "Old." But the most peculiarly local thing about Olivia's imaginary playmate is this: he is always too busy to play with her. She holds her toy cell phone up to her ear, and we hear her talk into it:

Ravioli? It's Olivia...its Olivia. Come and play? OK. Call me. Bye? Then she snaps it shut and shakes her head. "I always get his machine," she says. Or she will say, "I spoke to Ravioli today." "Did you have fun?" my wife and I ask. "No. He was busy working."

On a good day, she 'bumps into' her invisible friend and they go to a coffee shop. "I bumped into Charlie Ravioli." She announces at dinner (after a day when, of course, she stayed home, played, had a nap, went to the Central Park Zoo and then another nap). "We had coffee, but then he had to run." She sighs, sometimes, at her inability to make their schedules mesh, but she accepts it as inevitable, just the way life is. "He cancelled lunch. Again." She would say.

Last week Janne provided us with a powerful reminder of the need to pause and breathe, to make time, even if all you can manage is one conscious breath before answering the phone, do it, one has to start somewhere. But Sabbath needs to be more than a purely personal practice. When understood as purely personal, Sabbath becomes at best a kind of calming meditation and at worst a pious conceit completely disconnected from its deeper purposes.

We're amused that little Olivia Gopnik has an imaginary friend too busy to play, but it isn't really very funny is it. Our nervous laughter points to the spiritual bankruptcy of our frenetic, overscheduled lives. I am convinced that carving out time for personal practice is essential. But it's not enough. A New York Times reporter asked Robert Iger, the CEO of Disney: *"What are some things you do to manage your time effectively?"* Iger replied: *I get up at 4:30 every morning. I like the quiet time. It's a time I can recharge my batteries a bit. I exercise and I clear my head and I catch up with the world. I read papers. I look at e-mail. I surf the Web. I watch a little TV, all at the same time. I call it my quiet time but I'm already multitasking. I love listening to music, so I'll do that in the morning too, when I'm exercising and watching the news."*

Mr. Iger's morning practice leaves me breathless and chagrined. Breathless at how very noisy quiet time can be and chagrined at how often the voices in my head that drive me to distraction interrupt my hours of devotion. What I need, what I've come to believe we all need, is encouragement. The Shabbat tradition is far from purely personal. In fact, the Sabbath is intended to be shared. Everyone, no matter how high or how low is asked, no, is required to take refuge from the workaday world. Sabbath then is a collective act of liberation. To embrace the Sabbath is to embody the understanding that despite every disparity, beyond every manifestation of worldly success, we are all truly equal in God's sight.

Don't get me wrong friends. I have no desire to chain down the swings. I love that special quiet which still reigns on a Saint Paul Sunday morning but I have no wish to restore the old puritanical blue laws. It still seems strange to me that neither liquor nor automobiles may be legally purchased on Sunday here in our home state. But all the same there is a powerful need for the whole community to pause and breathe and so to be restored.

Wayne Muller ends the introduction to his lovely book on Sabbath with these words:

So let us remember the Sabbath. Let us breathe deeply in the rhythms of life, of the earth, of action and rest. Traditionally, Sabbath is honored by lighting candles, gathering in worship and prayer, blessing children, singing songs, keeping silence, walking, reading scripture, making love, sharing a meal. Just as we must wait until the darkness falls before we can see the stars, so does the Sabbath quietly wait for us. As darkness falls, as the light of the world fades and disappears, we light the inner lights, the lights of home and refuge. Our steps take us home and the light draws us in.

Home my friends, is every place you've ever prayed. Home is where we gather, to pause and breathe, to quiet our minds and open our hearts, to rest and to be strengthened. We need to find new ways to make and keep the Sabbath. Unchain the swings. Let play be part of how we pray but don't forget we do need time away, time set aside for summoning the quality of attention that inspires and restores us.

We stayed with our friends on the Isle of Lewis for only forty-eight hours. But we made the most of it talking late into the night. And though we didn't sing old hymns or pray in the old ways we did indeed have those deep and serious conversations we had promised we would have, and so we found ourselves again in that "wide (and) restful heart of Sabbath."

May it be so and Amen.