



SABBATH AS SELF CARE: PERMISSION TO REST!

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Finding a healthy balance between work and life outside of work is difficult in any field. For social workers and other related professionals, striking this balance is unique in its difficulty. The passion that often drives individuals into the field at times blurs the boundaries between self-care and care-of-others. For Christians in the social work profession, there is an innate spiritual tool that is often forgotten amidst the flurry of helping professions: Sabbath rest. Scholars agree that for Christian social workers, there is great opportunity to integrate spirituality into self-care practices (Pooler, 2011; Collins, 2005). Unfortunately, many hard working professionals succumb to the myth that resting and taking time for one's self will somehow "let people down." This is particularly true for those who work in protective social work roles (Robb, 2004). A brief religio-historical survey will establish a conceptualization for the essence of Sabbath and facilitate a framework for incorporating Sabbath into the every day lives of helping professionals.

The first Sabbath occurs in the Genesis narrative when God finishes the work of creation and sets apart the seventh day for rest (Gen. 2:2, *New Revised Standard Version*). In a sermon exploring the fourth commandment of Sabbath observance, Rev. Patrick Gray notes nuances in the Decalogue accounts found in Exodus and Deuteronomy (2014). Though similar, there is one difference in the commands for Sabbath. In Exodus 20:8, God's people are to, "Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy. For six days you shall labour and do all your work. But the seventh day is Sabbath to the Lord your God." In Deuteronomy 5:8, an *additional* command, "Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there...therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day." Notions of rest, creating holy space and remembrance culminate in the Jewish practice of Sabbath-keeping.

Conceptions of Sabbath evolved throughout history moving along the spectrum of maintaining strict observance of cessation of work to not resting at all. In Jewish history, early understandings of Sabbath found in Jeremiah and Nehemiah, exemplify Sabbath as “a weekly holiday...to interrupt any trade related work. Observing the Sabbath was not a private but a public matter...for a certain period of time, Jews would detach themselves from the rhythms and schedules of the cultural environment” (Andreas, 2006, p.5). Full rest through Sabbath observance was central to Jewish identity. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus’ actions on the Sabbath are juxtaposed against Jewish Sabbath law. The frequent struggle between Jesus and the Pharisees calls into question the essence of Sabbath. In Luke 14: 1-6 and Mark 3: 1-6, Jesus challenges the Pharisees regarding the *work* of healing on the Sabbath asking, “Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to kill?” (Mark 3:4). Jesus affirms the purpose of Sabbath observance is to do that which renews, that what restores and that which brings remembrance to the sanctity and blessing of life in sync with the Divine.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, conceptualizes Sabbath, “itself [as] a Sanctuary which we build, a *sanctuary in time*” (1995, p.29). To set a part a day that opposes society’s demand for constant work is to create sacred space. The intentionality of creating holy time has periodically created moments in history when the life-giving nature of Sabbath was difficult to identify. Walter Brueggemann writes, “It is unfortunate that in US Society, largely out of a misunderstood Puritan heritage, Sabbath has gotten enmeshed in legalism and moralism and blue laws and life-denying practices that contradict the freedom-bestowing intention of Sabbath” (2014, p.20). Echoing Jesus’ call to reflect on the purposes of Sabbath, Brueggemann asks readers to not lose the essence of Sabbath in a set of rules but to identify the practices of Sabbath that lead to life. For this paper, Sabbath is conceptualized as any day, hour or moment

that is set apart to reflect on The Holy in thought, spirit or action. This conceptualization is not in conflict with traditions that are faithful to observing a Sabbath *day* but rather allows space for those beginning or struggling with their Sabbath journey.

The importance of self-care for social work practitioners is not a new concept and is preached in social work classes, field placements and workspaces. Christian social workers are not immune to the demand for perpetual productivity and the societal expectation to be available at all times. Resistance to such powerful presumptions for work without cessation requires intentional action. The consequence for attaching to the mainstream mode of operation easily manifests in burnout, which is common to social worker practitioners (Gray-Stanley & Muramatsu, 2011). Studies reveal that burnout among social workers culminates in a variety of symptoms affecting physical, emotional and mental health (Kim, 2011). In one longitudinal study, results showed that, “social workers with higher initial levels of burnout reported more headaches, gastrointestinal problems, and respiratory infections” (Kim, 2011, p.264). These findings confirm that self-care practices cannot be lost in the every day realities and intensities of social work life. As Christians, Sabbath is a tool, a command and a voice that echoes the Creator’s whispers of, “My children, you have permission to rest.”

Often the knowledge of self-care and Sabbath exist in the minds of Christian social workers. However, there is often a lingering barrier to creating restful spaces. In a group titled, “Summer Sabbath Study,” this author led a Boston-area congregation through a book study exploring Wayne Muller’s, *Sabbath: Finding Rest, Renewal and Delight in Our Busy Lives*. A chapter of this book, *Fear of Rest*, explores the internal worries of permitting silence in a chaotic face-paced world. Muller explores the fear individuals hold that sitting in silence results in facing inner thoughts. Apprehensive of this deep exploration the human response is to keep moving and

avoid silence. Muller states, “While our speed may keep us safe, it also keeps us malnourished. It prevents us from tasting those things that would truly make us safe. Prayer, touch, kindness, fragrance—all those things that live in rest, and not in speed” (2000, p.53). Fear of rest and ultimately fear of confronting one’s humanity is a scary place to sit and so movement becomes a way of coping.

For social workers in particular, the fear of rest may stem from a distorted notion of caring for others. Muller recounts a narrative of a massage therapist for patients with HIV/AIDS. This individual put her whole self into her work and never rested fearing that by resting she was letting others down (Muller, 2011). Muller states that, “Our reluctance to rest—our belief that our joy and delight may somehow steal from the poor, or add to the sorrows of those who suffer—is a dangerous and corrosive myth, because it creates the illusion that service to others is a painful and dreary thing” (2011, p.49). A difference exists between fulfilling ethical responsibilities and creating an unrealistic level of obligation of care, which ultimately threatens the original mission of the work. Sabbath enters in these moments to remind those in service to others that denying one’s body the vital need for rest is to deny the very source of life-giving energy required for service.

To take complete control of one’s life is to remove God as the Source, Creator and Sustainer. Anxiety easily creeps in until a collision occurs between the limits of one’s humanity and the impossible demands of “Pharaohs” in the present age. The concept of “end” counters the pulse of the 24/7 world. God rested on the seventh day and, “finished the work that he had done” (Gen. 2:2). God placed an, “end” to the season of creation. In no way were God’s eternal works fully complete but simply a season finished. It is tempting to work until all is complete but the

reality is, there will *always* be items on the checklist. Sabbath is the creation of “ends,” even in the absence of completed work.

Members of the “Summer Sabbath Study,” focused on new ways of understanding and applying Sabbath. Participants represented social workers, teachers, non-profit workers and pastors. Several individuals expressed that as children Sabbath was a day to dread. Not permitted to play or leave their home, Sabbath became *only* about cessation from *doing*. Throughout the study reclaiming Sabbath intentions of “renewal” and “delight” created new frameworks for praxis. Study participant and director of a homeless shelter, Ed DiSante stated that by the end of the study he, “understood more of the Biblical idea of Sabbath as I understood the broader concept of rest and being with God” (personal communication, September 20, 2014). In addition, incorporating Sabbath was discussed in light of the role of those committed to full-time parenting. Mother of three, Heidi Parker stated, “To me, as a mother, Sabbath means rest whenever I can get it. Often, I find that, if I want times of rest, I have to be very intentional about carving out that time for myself. The intentionality always pays off because even a little Sabbath leaves me feeling so refreshed” (personal communication, October 16, 2014). Lastly Angelica Wilson, social service provider noted that she came to understand Sabbath as, “not about escaping current worries or our busy schedules, but taking things to the Father, giving them to Him & entrusting that He holds it all for us” (personal communication, October 19, 2014). With the essence of Sabbath recaptured, participants began to seek ways in which holy Sabbath moments could enter their daily lives, for each day-required acts of surrender.

Integrating Sabbath rest into the daily lives of social workers requires purposeful planning. The high level of priority for incorporating such restful practice must increase as the consequence for neglecting its necessity can lead to pure exhaustion. Though Sabbath is first and

foremost a religious practice/command, its meaning can serve as guiding light throughout the week toward the Sabbath day. To assist in applying Sabbath application, various authors and researchers have compiled tools, practice and exercises. The “Summer Sabbath Study” focused on activities that bring life and joy such as making a meal or going for a walk. Other authors encouraged the practice of silence and contemplative prayer (Collins, 2005). In addition, others suggest the practice of mindfulness throughout the workday allowing the opportunity to center and refocus (McGarrigle & Walsh, 2011). This author suggests that slowly reading poetry and gazing upon art aimed toward the Holy is a particularly simple avenue for cultivating Sabbath moments. Ultimately, planning and consecrating one day each week to nourish the soul and remember the Giver of Life is the goal and the command. However, in seasons where such a reality appears distant and intangible allowing daily Sabbath breath to enter in, provides the sustenance necessary for maintaining a healthy body, mind and spirit.

Sabbath practice as religious individuals and as social workers is not an ancient understanding or an entity reserved for only some traditions, it is a call for everyone. Modern society refuses to acknowledge the limits of humanity and quite oppositely demands, *more* and *more* working under the assumption that onward is inevitable. Perhaps this is why the Deuteronomic Decalogue offers the additional command to take time to *remember*. Thomas Merton beautifully speaks to the everyday experience of those involved in social justice work,

To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many demands, to commit oneself to too many projects, to want to help everyone in everything, is to succumb to violence. The frenzy of our activism neutralizes our work for peace. It destroys our own inner capacity for peace. It destroys the fruitfulness of our

own work, because it kills the root of inner wisdom which makes work fruitful. (1966, p.81)

Truly, making space for Sabbath is a matter of life or death. Christians in the social work profession are not bound to the Western, individualistic understandings of perpetual productivity to the point of exhaustion. Instead, Christian social workers are bound by the modeling of the Creator, the command, the permission and the ultimate invitation to rest. It may require barricading the lunch hour or learning to say “no” to activities that slowly tax the limited mental and physical energy allotted each day. For the sake of the clients, rest. For the sake of the family, rest. For the sake of the community, rest. For the sake of you, rest. For the sake of God, enter rest. In the end, “The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath,” so, rest (Mark 2:27).

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